

How Teacher Leaders Can Help Principals Achieve a School's Goals and Improve Student Learning

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Abstract

It is extremely difficult for principals to have expertise in the areas needed to competently fulfill all the expectations of their job. The effective use of teacher leaders will provide assistance to principals in successfully meeting such job expectations. Teacher leaders provide collaborative and shared leadership to enhance the capacity of their school, team, and colleagues to improve student learning. Creating a positive influence on teachers to achieve important goals can be greatly increased through the efforts of teacher leaders. Coupling this positive influence with the leadership efforts of the principal will result in more effectively achieving building goals and improving student learning. Teacher leaders need to be skilled in building positive relationships with staff, collaborate effectively, and be oriented to aiding the principal in achieving building goals. Principals need to support the efforts of teacher leaders and facilitate their development for their present role and future leadership positions.

Keywords: teacher leaders, shared leaders, collaboration, improving student achievement

1.0 Rationale for Teacher Leaders

- “The demands of the modern principalship are practically impossible to meet” (Danielson, 2007, p. 14).
- The effective use of teacher leaders will allow principals “more time for dedication to other responsibilities which may result in increased student interaction, instructional leadership, and home-school connect” (Kleinaitis, 2017, p. 25).

The job expectations for principals are presently overwhelming and seem to increase each year. It is extremely difficult for principals to have expertise in all of the areas needed to competently fulfill these expectations. The effective use of teacher leaders provides assistance to principals in successfully meeting these expectations, while simultaneously developing potential administrators (e.g., assistant principals and principals).

1.1An Example

Leadership deals with influencing people to work toward accomplishing goals that represent improvement targets. The key terms here are “influencing” and “goals.” A goal for a school might be to improve teacher-parent relationships so that homework is more meaningful and improves student learning. While using influence to achieve this goal through formal authority and leadership skills, principals can provide assistance to teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in developing a program to improve teacher-parent relationships so that homework is more beneficial to student learning. Another option for principals is to utilize distributive or shared leadership by identifying and developing teachers who work cooperatively with them to accomplish the homework goal through peer influence. Using teacher leaders to influence other teachers is a powerful leadership approach and can be more effective than the “top down” approach often used. It also reduces the principal’s workload and frees up time for other responsibilities.

Teacher leaders are collaborative and supportive and use shared leadership in enhancing the capacity of their school, team, and colleagues to improve student learning. Teacher leaders are problem solvers who are motivated by challenges and seek out the best practices for the targeted improvement. The core of their work is influencing other teachers so that these teachers can perform more effectively by achieving important goals and, thus, increase student learning (Wilhite and Tomal, 2015). Teacher leaders “work toward improvement and change for the whole school organization” (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 146).

2.0 Roles of Teacher Leaders

Many of the activities conducted by teacher leaders can occur while they are serving as regular classroom teachers through actions in team meetings, as committee members, and interacting one-on-one with other teachers. Teacher leaders also work with parents, the administrative staff, and other stakeholders on an informal basis to improve student learning.

Examples of more formal roles for teacher leaders are:

- Curriculum Specialist (aiding with identifying, designing, and implementing content across multiple curriculum areas and helping teachers infuse new content into everyday practices for school/district improvements)
- Coach (assisting other teachers/staff on implementing general instructional practices [[instructional coach](#)]; analyzing assessment data to improve student learning [[data/assessment coach](#)]; utilizing technology effectively [[technology coach](#)]; and infusing into practice state-of-the-art curriculum and accompanying teaching techniques for mathematics [[numeracy coach](#)] and literacy [[literacy coach](#)])
- Mentor Teacher (helping new teachers with psychological and technical support so that they can “be their best” and are more likely to succeed)
- Grade Level Team Leader
- Content Specialist (specializing in leading curriculum change and implementation in one particular content area such as mathematics, literacy, or science)
- Special Programs Leader (e.g., required federal and state programs) (Soglin, Hunt, & Reilly, 2015)

3.0 Skills Needed by Teacher Leaders

Leadership development that focuses on how to influence others is key to being an effective teacher leader. Transformational leadership, which is aligned with change and improving teaching and learning for the future, should be emphasized in training programs for teacher leaders. Transformational leadership stresses: (1) challenging the status quo; (2) emphasizing new ideas to “transform” the present culture; (3) continually improving through setting goals to measure improvement targets; (4) assisting with establishing an agreed upon and worthwhile direction for teachers’ efforts; (5) motivating teachers to support implementing change; (6) team building; (7) stressing collaboration among staff members, administrators, and other stakeholders; (8) assisting staff members with time and resources for professional growth; and (9) using data to improve future learning for students (Bass & Bass, 2008).

It is essential that teacher leaders learn how to set goals collaboratively with other teachers when attempting to improve student learning. The evidence-based approach to establishing goals is important and usually “data-driven.” Getting other teachers to “buy in” to a goal means showing how accomplishing the goal will improve student learning and be personally rewarding for the teachers. Data, such as students’ assessment results, serve to identify needs for student subgroups as well as individual students.

Other important skills for teacher leaders are:

- Understanding the basic principles of change that can be used with other staff members and how to implement these principles.
- Creating an environment where other staff members want to collaborate and work as a team.
- Utilizing communication skills to clarify expectations for other staff members and effectively solve problems.
- Motivating other staff members for performance improvement in achieving school initiatives to improve student learning.
- Understanding how to interpret and explain student assessment data to teachers and help them match students’ needs to curriculum and instruction.
- Understanding specific curriculum content in a discipline and knowing how to assist teachers to infuse content into daily instruction.
- Accessing and using research regarding best practices and interfacing this information with teachers to improve classroom practices.
- Identifying specific activities for individualizing staff development for teachers, including individualized technology-based competency training (micro-credentialing).

- Giving feedback to other teachers based on the teachers' performance of the criteria composing effective classroom instruction and management.
- Developing skills for working effectively with parents, community members at-large, and other stakeholders in the context of improving student learning (Soglin, Hunt, & Reilly, 2015; Wilhite & Tomal, 2015).

4.0 Factors That Inhibit Effective Use of Teacher Leaders

Research by Wenner and Campbell (2017) identified four general themes that impede teacher leaders in performing effectively: (1) lack of time, (2) poor relationships with peers and/or administration, (3) climate and structural factors, and (4) personal characteristics (p. 154). Specifically, they concluded:

- For many teacher leaders, an overwhelming workload or little time for teacher leadership duties was a significant factor that inhibited their effectiveness.
- When principals are unsupportive, teacher leaders are often unable to fulfill their duties because: (a) there are not structures or resources in place to assist them, (b) the principal does not allow them the authority or autonomy to complete their work, (c) they do not feel appreciated or recognized for their efforts, or (d) the faculty as a whole does not feel compelled to support the work of the teacher leaders.
- Resistant or resentful colleagues impeding the teacher leadership's efforts.
- Schools that are resistant to change overall had problems accepting the teacher leader's pursuits.
- Schools that did not have a unified vision inhibited teacher leaders' effectiveness.
- Staff in schools with a tradition of strict hierarchical structures resist leadership coming from someone other than the principal.
- A lack of clear communication—either between the teacher leader and the principal or among the staff at large—interferes with the work of teacher leaders.
- Teacher leaders unwilling or unable to disturb traditional hierarchical structures and who did not feel comfortable “being the boss” had difficulties fulfilling their roles efficiently.
- Teacher leaders who lacked confidence, either because they were uncomfortable with the subject matter or were still novice leaders, often struggled to lead (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, pp. 154-155).

5.0 Development

Development pertains to teacher leaders continuing to grow and expand their expertise while serving in their roles. It deals with teacher leaders acquiring skills they presently do not possess, but need in order to continue to grow on the job and become more effective. Development also focuses on mastering knowledge and skills a teacher leader needs to become an administrator. An individualized development plan should be established for teacher leaders that includes traditional face-to-face development through conferences and workshops. Additionally, competency-based professional learning programs that require the demonstration of measurable mastery of content should be used (referred to as micro-credentialing).

Another avenue for developing teacher leaders is through university graduate programs. In practice, effective teacher leader development is often the result of on-the-job development, traditional conferences, micro-credentialing, and a university-based training program. Numerous universities have teacher leader programs that result in successful participants receiving state recognized endorsement, licensure, or certification—depending on individual state requirements.

5.1. Mentoring. Mentoring is considered a part of a teacher leader's development. The keys to effective mentoring are the rapport and trusting relationship between the mentor and mentee, and the mentee's perception of the mentor's knowledge credibility. The mentor must provide psychological support and specific expertise to meet the practical job issues and concerns of the teacher leader. The mentor should emphasize the teacher leader reflecting on issues and concerns in the context of viewing the “big picture.” The mentor may also assist with the teacher leader's developmental endeavors. It is preferable for someone other than the principal to be the mentor because the teacher leader may want to share and get perspectives that deal with the principal.

5.2 Coaching. Usually the principal (or an assistant) serves as the coach for teacher leaders to help them “be their best.” Coaching assumes that clear expectations have been established for the teacher leader through a job description and specific job targets.

Coaching provides formative feedback to the teacher leader that is specifically linked to expectations and job targets. Feedback to the teacher leader should answer the question, “How am I doing?”

Much of the feedback from the principal is likely to be positive reinforcement for what the teacher leader has effectively done. When performance does not meet expectations, coaching takes place by the principal interacting collaboratively with the teacher leader to identify suggestions for improving performance. Coaching needs to identify what specific behavioral changes are needed and the assistance (including resources) that will be given to help the teacher leader effectively meet expectations.

6.0 Evaluation

Summative performance evaluation is based on the teacher leader’s job description and specific expectations identified in job targets. The evaluator (principal or designee) provides data and information pertaining to the teacher leader linked to expectations and performance targets. This is done in a collaborative environment that stresses self-reflection on the part of the teacher leader. The result is a clear identification of areas in which the teacher leader met or exceeded expectations and job targets, and any areas where more work needs to be done to improve performance. For these needed improvement areas, the evaluator and teacher leader collaborate to determine what actions the teacher leader will take to improve future performance and how the evaluator will assist. The evaluator has the final decision on the actions to be taken. An end result is the identification of individual developmental goals for the teacher leader to pursue in the future.

7.0 Concluding Thoughts

The teacher leader approach represents a new career path for exemplary teachers that is both motivational for them and enhances the likelihood of increasing the retention rate of these outstanding educators in the profession (Bakken, 2016; Garica-Mathewson, 2016). As Danielson (2007) notes, “teaching is a flat profession” in the context of having a career path in the profession (p. 14). There is also the possibility of increased annual earnings for teacher leaders that may encourage them to continue in the profession. These teacher leaders can serve as a leadership pool for consideration as future administrators, assuming they have attained the required license, certification, or endorsement.

The teacher leader approach represents distributive or shared leadership that, when properly implemented, prompts improved student learning. A principal who retains all of the leadership authority by serving as the “point person” for all of the building’s improvement goals cannot be totally successful. Creating positive influence in teachers to achieve these important goals can be greatly increased through the efforts of teacher leaders. Coupling this positive influence with the leadership efforts of the principal will result in more effectively achieving building goals and improving student learning.

8.0 References

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