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Identifying Teacher Leaders: Getting the Right People in the Right Positions

GLISI Research Brief

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Most new principals learn quickly that their new job is simply too big for one person. While the principal's role is taking on ever-increasing complexity, research is clear that instruction and student learning improve most when leadership is distributed effectively throughout a school, beyond formal, titled leaders.[i] Yet many principals – even experienced ones – struggle to effectively activate teachers as partners in driving instructional improvement. Building on the foundation of the first brief[ii] in this series, which provided tools for principals to self-assess their own readiness to develop teacher leaders, this brief is for principals who are ready to make the leap and begin building a corps of teacher leaders in their building. Principals will find here a series of doable steps and resources to identify teachers with the greatest potential[iii] to fill leadership needs in the school. Bringing discipline to the practice of deploying teacher leaders, rather than "winging it," is critical to avoid the traps of relying only on those teachers who are most senior or have a preexisting relationship, since there may not always be a match between their skills and the needs of the school.

Defining Leadership Needs

Research suggests that conceptualizing leadership (whether exercised by teacher leaders or individuals in formal administrative roles) in terms of key functions can help principals better match the needs of the school to the skills of the individuals in the building.[iv] More specifically, viewing the work of the organization through the lens of key functions—coupled with a strong understanding of teacher strengths—can help principals identify the most promising individuals to assume more leadership responsibilities. The process of identifying promising individuals could be accomplished through a brief needs assessment where principals quickly (and effectively) assess their school's leadership gaps and determine which teachers have the right blend of skill and will[v] to fill those gaps (see **Table 1**).

Often, titled leaders are expected to support teaching. In an expanded understanding of teacher leadership based on key functions, teacher leaders also support the titled leaders. In this way, teacher leadership becomes a reciprocal endeavor. Examples of key functions include systems thinking, relationship building, and problem solving.

Click table to access the full tool

Table 1. The Game Plan: Where Are the Leadership Gaps and How Will We Fill Them?			
Where are the gaps in organizational conditions or instructional practices that hinder the school's efforts to achieve its goals?	What knowledge, skills and/or dispositions are needed to fill the gap?	Which teachers should be initially considered to lead this focus, based on the knowledge, skills, and/or dispositions needed? Why?	What additional data (or resources) are needed to address the gap?
Example: We need to increase teachers' effective use of instructional technology. To do this, we need leaders who can support colleagues in various grade levels and subject areas.	Example: We need faculty who are able to effectively use instructional technology and explain/demonstrate to peers. These faculty will be most effective if they have their colleagues' respect.	Example: Ms. Johnson, Mr. Moore and Ms. Wilson have the skills and knowledge to lead in this area. They have been pioneers in learning new technologies. They teach different subjects on different grade level teams. They already help others informally.	Example: We need to know the faculty strengths and needs in using instructional technology. We need data that inform how technology can be used to support instruction.

Simultaneous to defining school needs, the principal should be intentional in developing a *leadership-supportive culture*,[vi] giving teachers identified through the needs assessment the greatest opportunity for success in their hybrid roles of teaching and leading. Principals can foster this type of culture by establishing a safe context in which teachers are (1) trusted to take calculated risks, (2) encouraged to share knowledge and effective practices with others, (3) afforded opportunities to lead the learning of their peers, (4) expected to engage in purposeful collaboration with colleagues, and (5) given timely feedback on their performance and contributions.

Filling the Leadership Gaps

How then can principals use formal and informal means to identify teacher leaders? Teacher evaluation instruments such as Georgia's [Teacher Keys Effectiveness System](#) (TKES)[vii] are an obvious response, as they document content expertise and instructional effectiveness—both critical if a teacher leader is to be credible. However, evaluation instruments often miss the intangible attributes that contribute to strong teacher leadership: taking initiative, mobilizing people around a common purpose, marshaling resources, building trust and confidence among peers, sustaining the commitment of others, anticipating negativity, and contributing to a learning organization.[viii]

Informal methods such as staff feedback help uncover the professional capital[ix] embodied in the staff , especially those "hidden gems" who have potential to emerge as leaders. For example, principals could solicit information about teacher strengths from their colleagues.[x] This might occur through face-to-face conversations focused on questions like "Whom do you respect the most among your colleagues and why? Whom do you go to for help? Who are our school's experts in _____?"

In addition to talking with individuals, a principal could gather information from the whole staff. **Table 2** offers a tool designed to engage the entire faculty (possibly in a staff meeting where responses could be submitted anonymously through an electronic survey) in identifying emergent teacher leaders by having them match individuals with key functions. Each function has the potential to fill existing gaps, while also complementing and extending the work of the titled leaders (e.g. principal, assistant principal, department chair) in the school.[xi]

While this information is anecdotal and could be influenced by staff members' openness or resistance to change, principals can triangulate staff input with other sources of data to identify teacher leaders and determine who would be well-received by their peers. Fortunate indeed is the principal who identifies people who fit in multiple categories. Such versatility in leadership both addresses the needs of the school and exposes effective teacher leaders to practical career-building leadership experiences.

Table 2. Professional Capital		
Instructional Leaders	**Systems Thinkers**	**Communicators**
Example Who: Ms. Brown	Example Who: Mr. Jones	Example Who: Dr. Lee
Why: Curriculum expert who helps teammates understand, adopt, and implement new standards	Why: Technology-adept teacher who helps colleagues monitor the relationship between teaching, learning, and technology.	Why: Expert at helping others understand the reasons for change initiatives
Relationship Builders	**Collaborators**	**Problem Solvers**
Who: Ms. Brown	Who	Who
Why:	Why:	Why:

Note: Adapted from Danielson (2007).[xii]

Finding Out by Digging In: Who Will Help Lead?

When Ed Shaddix became principal of North Gwinnett High School (Suwanee, Georgia) in August 2008, he knew he needed to gain the trust of the staff, support the existing collaborative structures, and maximize shared leadership. Moreover, a new high school would be built within a few years, taking about one-third of North Gwinnett's students and staff, so Mr. Shaddix had the additional challenge of ensuring the school did not lose momentum in the face of major change.

The school was running smoothly when Mr. Shaddix took the helm, so the first months of his principalship gave him a chance to observe the staff and school operations, and identify how to proceed. He believed innovation, problem solving, program development, and instructional support would be more crucial than ever in the next few years. Not only would the school be losing students and staff due to redistricting, but the school system was experiencing difficult financial times, and resources were going to be much more limited than in the past. Teacher leadership for these key functions would be imperative.

The first summer after Mr. Shaddix became principal was pivotal—he spent most of it meeting individually with the staff. As he recalled: "I wanted to get the perspective of everyone—teachers, counselors, lunchroom team, custodians—about what was going well and what needed improvement. I was looking for people with innovative ideas. I wanted to find out how teams were functioning. I needed to know who was interested in building leadership capacity. Ultimately, I wanted to build trust by establishing personal relationships." The questions were wide-ranging and tailored to the person's position in the school:

- Tell me about yourself.
- How long have you been here? Tell me about your experience here—the work you do, what you've taught, activities you are involved in.
- What are the strengths of the school? What do we need to improve?
- Tell me about your team. How well do you work together? What are the priorities for your team? What goals did you work on last year? What are some things your team accomplished?
- What do you hope to accomplish in the next few years? Are you interested in taking on a leadership role?
- How can I support you in your work?

Through observations and conversations, Mr. Shaddix identified teachers who thought beyond their own classrooms and had a vision of innovative instruction. As he later joked, "My summer project was one of those things that seemed like a good idea at the time but was starting to seem like a bad idea by the time the summer was half over.

I knew this was important, but I wondered if I could actually accomplish it because time was going fast." But he met the goal and gained understanding he applied immediately and in the following years.

In continuing discussions with groups of these teachers, he encouraged them to pursue their ideas. He learned several teachers were interested in becoming team leads and encouraged them to contribute as much as possible to the work of their teams. Over the next couple of years, Mr. Shaddix observed the work of these individuals with special attention, assessing their readiness to take on additional teacher leadership responsibilities and providing feedback when he could. When North Gwinnett lost teachers to the new school and new team leads were needed, he tapped individuals for these positions who had demonstrated passion for instruction and for helping their colleagues.

The spring before the opening of the new high school, Mr. Shaddix asked those remaining at North Gwinnett to meet with him if they had ideas for strengthening any aspect of the school or were interested in a leadership position. More than fifty individuals came forward. For example, a social studies teacher proposed forming a team for all Advanced Placement teachers so they could assist each other with common issues; he helped facilitate the new team in the fall.

Without the trust Mr. Shaddix had already built and the confidence he demonstrated in the staff, he may have faced a leadership deficit when losing so many people from the school. Instead, the readiness of staff to step up and Mr. Shaddix's knowledge of their capabilities and interests allowed him to fill leadership gaps, solve problems, and develop new ways to serve students.

Mr. Shaddix reflected on the experience, stating, "Talking with each staff member was time-consuming, but there was real value in the process. I learned so much about the strengths of the school and each person. Later, I noticed people were willing to come to me with ideas and concerns. This was good because we needed everyone's creativity to thrive. Making those personal connections helped develop ownership. When teams in any area of the school truly own the work, leadership capacity increases and the work becomes about all the kids, not just 'the kids I teach.' That sense of responsibility has an impact on overall school performance. We saw incredible growth in student achievement. It had to start with trust and making the most of each person's contribution. After all, we are in the people business."

Conclusion

It is clear that teacher leadership contributes to school improvement. In fact, research shows that the commitment and support of teacher leaders helps accelerate progress toward school improvement goals.[xiii] But choosing the right individuals to fill leadership gaps is not as simple as 1-2-3. Identifying potential teacher leaders requires a thoughtful approach that makes use of multiple sources of data, aligned to the leader-identified key functions, to ensure the right people are in the right positions. A careful approach can provide a sophisticated understanding of each individual's perceived strengths and allow teachers to lead formally and informally in ways that evidence ownership in the school's goals. And once teacher leaders begin their work, they will undoubtedly need ongoing learning and support to be effective in their hybrid roles of teaching and leading. The next brief in this series will focus on the specific actions principals can take to set teacher leaders up for success.

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[ii] Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement. (2015, October). Cultivating teacher leadership: GLISI research brief. Retrieved from http://glisi.org/resources/cultivating-teacher-leadership-glisi-research-brief/

[iii] See defining teacher leader roles for additional resources: http://teacherledprofessionallearning.org/steps/defining-teacher-leader-roles/

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[vi] Childs-Bowen, D., Moller, G., & Scrivner, J. (2000, May). Principals: Leaders of leaders. NASSP Bulletin, 84(2), 27-34.

[vii] The Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) is Georgia's comprehensive teacher evaluation system based on Teacher Performance on three categories (1) performance standards, (2) student growth, and (3) professional growth; Georgia Department of Education. (2016, July). Georgia teacher keys effectiveness system implementation handbook. Retrieved from https://www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/Teacher-and-Leader-Effectiveness/Documents/Finalized%20TKES%20Handbook%20with%20district%20feedback%202016-2017%20(3).pdf

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[xii] Danielson, C. (2007, September). The many faces of leadership. Educational Leadership, 65(1), 14-19; Danielson, C. (2007). Enhancing professional practice: A framework for teaching (2nd Edition). Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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