Selecting and Supporting Teacher Leaders

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Teachers learn best from other teachers, and teacher leaders play an essential role in job-embedded professional learning through the vision they articulate and model, the content and skills they demonstrate inside and beyond the classroom, and the processes they design, facilitate, and evaluate to support the learning of educators within the school. It stands to reason, then, that the criteria used to select teacher leaders are critical, and support for their continuing learning is essential.

Selecting Teacher Leaders

The selection of teacher leaders requires clear criteria (e.g., What are the characteristics of the teacher leaders we need?). Moreover, a process for identifying appropriate teacher leader candidates must be articulated (e.g., Who will be involved? How will the decisions be made?). In the past, teacher leaders have been identified by simply asking for volunteers. Disadvantages to this approach become clear when the same people hold multiple leadership roles. Often there is a less than optimal match between the person selected and the needs of the role. Accepting volunteers can also result in an underrepresentation of divergent points of view.

The desired attributes of teacher leaders can be identified by considering these questions:

- What characteristics of teacher leaders have been identified by research and best practice?
- What are the roles the teacher leader is expected to play?
- What content and skills are at the heart of the implementation(s) to be supported by the teacher leader?

Characteristics of effective teacher leaders have been identified by groups such as the Math and Science Partnership’s Knowledge Management and Dissemination Project (2010) and the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, which has developed Teacher Leader Model Standards (May 2008). The Teacher Leader Model Standards identify six domains in which candidates should display competence:
• Domain I: Fostering a Collaborative Culture to Support Educator Development and Student Learning
• Domain II: Accessing and Using Research to Improve Practice and Student Learning
• Domain III: Promoting Professional Learning for Continuous Improvement
• Domain IV: Facilitating Improvements in Instruction and Student Learning
• Domain V: Promoting the Use of Assessments and Data for School and District Improvement
• Domain VI: Improving Outreach and Collaboration with Families and Community

The above domains serve to frame the expertise needed by any teacher who holds a leadership position. When selecting teacher leaders, evaluate each candidate based on their degree of proficiency in each domain.

Administrators need also to think about the responsibilities inherent in performing particular roles, such as coach, staff development specialist, curriculum designer, assessment expert, or some combination of all of these. Thus, the second consideration is to look carefully at the actual job functions of the role and what these will entail.

Third, it is important to consider the specific knowledge and skills required to implement specific efforts or initiatives, such as working with Common Core State Standards, taking differentiated instruction to truly routine use in all classrooms throughout a school, or implementing an IB Program within or across schools. Each implementation is defined by identifiable knowledge and skills that the teacher leader must possess or be able to learn in order to be fully effective.

Together, these three areas—standards, role, and implementation—guide identification of the criteria for selection of teacher leaders. According to Math and Science Partnership Knowledge Management and Dissemination Project (2010), “…the process for selecting teacher leaders should involve input from school administrators, as opposed to relying on self-selected (i.e. voluntary) appointments to teacher leader positions.” (A school or district leadership committee can use the three questions above to define the necessary characteristics for each teacher leader to be chosen.)
In the end, as we are reminded by Tripp and Platt (n.d.), it is easier to train for competence than to change beliefs, so it is essential to hire with convictions in place. For example, does the prospective teacher leader believe that

- all children and adults can learn well?
- intelligence and expertise are not fixed?
- the best work is accomplished through collective effort?
- the work to be done is both urgent and possible?

The mark of a strong teacher leader is one with strong beliefs about learners and learning. Additionally, teacher leaders need to have strong conceptual, technical, and procedural knowledge and skills regarding leadership and learning. The goal is to select the best person to assist teachers and administrators in bringing best practices into routine use in classrooms throughout a school.

Supporting Teacher Leaders

Job-embedded school leadership development consists of cultivating, developing, and continuously supporting individual leaders in real, on-the-job settings.

—Michael Fullan

Once teacher leaders have been identified or hired, they need clearly identified expectations, scheduled time to work with other teacher leaders and administrators, and opportunities to continue learning about the practices and initiatives they are charged with supporting. In any setting where teacher leaders have been selected, processes for support need to be in place to help them succeed. Consider five I’s of support for teacher leaders when making plans for ongoing, job-embedded professional learning that will meet their needs:

**Induction:** What needs and questions were identified during the selection process that should be addressed during the induction phase?

**Implementation:** What expectations and aspects of implementation of each initiative in the school require ongoing new learning for teacher leaders charged with helping colleagues move essential practices to routine use?
Information: Is additional information needed about emerging practices, recent research, or new directions for curriculum, instruction, and assessment?

Interaction: Is support needed for facilitation of groups and processes? For dealing with challenging issues? For designing engaging professional learning experiences for teachers and administrators?

Institutionalization: What needs exist around progress monitoring and evaluation of implementation to help teacher leaders and their colleagues know what is working, what results students are achieving, and what changes are needed?

The five I’s provide stages of an initiative in which teacher leaders might need support. Given the stage of an initiative or implementation of a program, administrators can identify areas of professional learning that will support teacher leaders. Providing teacher leaders with opportunities for self-assessment during each of these stages will prove beneficial. Equally important to supporting teacher leaders is to allow time for ongoing dialogue with fellow teacher leaders about strengths and needs.

References


