

FINDING A NEW WAY:

Leveraging Teacher Leadership to Meet Unprecedented Demands

By Rachel Curtis | February 2013



Executive Summary

Given our newly refined ability to distinguish between teachers and their effectiveness, and the imperative brought on by the Common Core standards to deliver instruction at a more sophisticated level, it is no longer reasonable or tenable to keep treating teachers the same. Instead, school systems should provide their highest-performing teachers with leadership roles that both elevate the profession and enable them to have the greatest impact on colleagues and students.

It is not easy to implement new forms of teacher leadership meaningfully and effectively; doing so involves some profound changes to the status quo. Developing teacher leadership systems require us to rethink evaluation, compensation, distributed leadership, and even what we see as the role of teachers. Examples already have emerged, though, to show that such transformation is possible. This paper addresses what is necessary for change and how school systems might be able to achieve it.

Broadly speaking, teacher leadership is defined as specific roles and responsibilities that recognize the talents of the most effective teachers and deploy them in service of student learning, adult learning and collaboration, and school and system improvement. This paper explains why systems pursue teacher leadership strategies and why it is important to embed that work in a specific vision of what the system seeks to achieve more broadly. The vision for teacher leadership and what it can facilitate can be quite varied across school systems and may include any of the following:

- A culture of collaboration, shared accountability, and continuous improvement among adults;
- Greater capacity and commitment to differentiate instruction to meet students' needs;
- Recognition, through status and compensation, that excellent teachers can be on par with school leaders;
- New ways of organizing and delivering instruction that increase the number of students highly effective teachers reach.

What does that mean in schools and classrooms? To increase the impact of the most effective teachers, they might be put in front of the greatest number of students or the students with the greatest learning needs. They might be called on to conduct teacher evaluations and provide coaching to colleagues, which would ease the burden on principals. A teacher leader might supervise and support groups of teachers and make instructional and staffing decisions, with ultimate responsibility for the achievement of all the students the group of teachers collectively teach.

Great teachers want, and deserve, such opportunities for growth. They also deserve to be paid for them. Now that some school systems are tackling what have historically been untouchable compensation structures, pay can be aligned to teacher performance and differentiated roles. But school systems tend to graft new teacher leadership roles and compensation strategies onto old systems in ways that fall far short of meaningful transformation and are unsustainable in the long term. Thus they have trouble recruiting and retaining smart, high-achieving young adults. The job is perceived as low-status, excellent performance is not recognized, the working conditions are unsatisfying, and opportunities for greater impact and advancement are limited.

Overcoming this requires an ambitious and cohesive change agenda. Systems must define the processes that are most critical to student learning and then design teacher leadership in service of them, rather than defining teacher leadership roles first and then figuring out how they can support the most important work. School systems share the same ultimate goal: increasing student achievement. But they aim to solve different problems, through different teacher leadership strategies. This paper examines a few examples:

- Denver, concerned with the insufficient capacity of teachers to increase student success, focuses teacher leadership efforts on effective teachers leading their colleagues in improvement strategies.

- Washington, D.C., concerned about being unable to recruit and retain the best teachers, focuses teacher leadership efforts on opportunities for advancement inside the classroom, additional responsibilities, and increased recognition and compensation.
- The Achievement First Public Charter Schools network, aiming to celebrate excellence in a way that keeps great teachers in the classroom, where they want to stay, designed its leadership system as a set of professional development opportunities and increased compensation.
- Singapore, facing teacher shortages and low education quality, developed an entirely new approach to human capital, including a leadership system that rates teachers' potential as part of evaluation and provides high performers opportunities around three distinct pathways: master teacher, curriculum specialist, or school leader.

Reconceptualizing the roles of and incentives for teachers—much less leveraging teacher leadership to redesign the instructional delivery model and the design of schools—is transformative. But public education is an inflexible, bureaucratic institution where change tends to be incremental, piecemeal, and strongly resisted. This paper discusses how this tension can be addressed strategically—how systems can create space for innovation while pursuing incremental systemic change that removes the barriers to innovation in differentiated teaching roles, instructional delivery, and aligned incentives.

It elaborates on strategic issues that school systems creating new forms of teacher leadership will have to address as they begin the work. Among the issues:

- The criteria by which teachers will be identified as leaders, and what they must do to retain that designation
- What roles will be developed for teacher leaders, and how that will be decided
- How teachers will be engaged in the conversation as a leadership system is developed
- Ways to recruit and train leaders
- How teachers can be provided the time they need for collaboration and leadership
- How teacher leaders will be compensated for their skills and efforts
- How principals will be trained to foster school cultures amenable to leadership and held accountable for teacher leaders' success
- Ways to measure whether teacher leadership is improving student achievement
- Ways to pay for teacher leadership that are financially sustainable over the long term
- How innovative experiments will be balanced with systemic approaches

There is not a singular, right approach to addressing any of these issues. What matters, in this time of unprecedented expectations, is that systems get started as soon as possible, and that they pursue the work intentionally and strategically, guided by an inspiring vision.