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Promising Practices in Professional Growth & Support:

Case Study of Teach Plus

One of a series of ERS publications and tools on teacher Professional Growth & Support, this case study explores how one education reform organization implements a strategic approach to improving teaching effectiveness at the system level. It is part of a set of four case studies of organizations with promising practices in this area.

Four organizations with promising practices in teacher Professional Growth & Support have significantly raised outcomes for low-income students. The charter management networks, Achievement First and Aspire Public Schools, and the two reform organizations, Teach Plus and Agile Mind, have successfully increased student achievement with a sustained focus on teaching effectiveness and capacity. In this publication, we will focus on Teach Plus' innovative teacher leader program, which builds the capacity of staff school-wide through teacher teaming and data analysis. In the sister case studies, we explore how Achievement First holistically integrates professional growth with key human capital and teaching support functions; how Agile Mind's Instructional Guidance Systems for math and science provide school systems with a cost-effective way to gain expertise on Common Core standards; and how Aspire Public Schools emphasize teacher teaming around regular student data with support from content experts and teacher leaders. All four of these organizations leverage information and technology to identify priorities for students and teachers.

As these organizations respond to the challenges of Common Core standards, invest heavily in teaching capacity through teacher leadership and collaborative planning time, and capitalize on assessment and evaluation data and technology, they exemplify best practices in Professional Growth & Support. They reinforce what Education Resource Strategies (ERS) terms the Eight Principles of a Strategic Professional Growth & Support System. The eight principles below summarize ERS research and work with partner school systems and are the foundation for ERS' white paper, *A New Vision for Teacher Professional Growth & Support: Six Steps to a More Powerful School System Strategy* and related tools.

In each case study, we describe the mission and background, strategic approaches to Professional Growth & Support, performance results, program costs, lessons learned, and next steps. The distinctive approaches, success factors, and challenges that each organization faces illustrate these principles and the steps that school systems and educational leaders can take to make the most of Professional Growth & Support activities and spending.

Eight Principles of a Strategic Professional Growth & Support System

A strategic Professional Growth & Support system...

1. Integrates all human capital and teaching support functions to support the school system's broader improvement strategy and context
2. Invests primarily in job-embedded teacher growth through school-based content experts, teacher leaders, and time for teacher teams
3. Links results of performance evaluations to opportunities for growth that are ongoing and occur at key career junctures
4. Supports growth throughout a teacher's career by restructuring compensation and career path
5. Organizes sufficient teacher time to meet both individual growth and organization needs
6. Differentiates investments based on school and educator needs and performance levels
7. Ensures accountability and continuous improvement by assigning responsibility and measuring impact
8. Pays for ongoing costs with sustainable funding and leverages external resources, partners, and technology to promote quality and efficiency

Teach Plus & Orchard Gardens Pilot School: *Improving Instruction with a Core of Experts*

Overview

Dedicated to transforming education for urban children, Teach Plus has seen 10- and 12-point increases over Massachusetts cohort schools in ELA and math proficiency in a two-year period. Teach Plus’ success is rooted in the Turnaround Teacher Teams (T3) Initiative, which recruits, trains, and places a core of teacher leaders in low-performing schools to develop teachers across subjects and grade level teams. As they work to implement improved practice consistently across schools, these embedded teacher leaders extend the reach of principals and administrators. They maximize investments in professional growth and collaborative planning time and use ongoing assessment data to guide teacher teams in improving and adjusting content and instruction.

Teach Plus Background	
Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nonprofit attracts, develops teacher leaders • Helps teachers expand impact as leaders in their schools and in national, state, and district policy
Student Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant MCAS two-year % growth in MA cohort (Elem: ELA +6, Math +12 / MS: ELA +32, Math +25)
Reach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs in six cities • T3 in 13 schools in Greater Boston & Memphis • Teacher network of 12,000 • 250 Teacher Policy Fellows
Student Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PreK-12 Turnaround Schools
PGS Strategy Highlights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placement of teacher leaders to build teacher capacity in turnaround schools • Team analysis of assessment data during weekly collaborative planning

Mission & Program

The mission of Teach Plus is “to improve outcomes for urban children by ensuring that a greater proportion of students have access to effective, experienced teachers. It is founded on the premise that teachers want to learn and grow in the profession, and want to ensure that their development results in increased learning among their students.”¹ Incubated at the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Teach Plus launched as a pilot program in fall of 2007 and became an independent 501(c)(3) in August 2009. Teach Plus runs three programs. The Teacher Policy Fellows Program and the Teach Plus Network provide training and forums for teachers

to connect and advocate on innovative policies. The T3 Initiative, the focus of this case study, was launched in 2010. It provides school systems with ways to attract, retain, and reward teaching talent and create team structures that are critical to using resources well. The T3 Initiative creates cohorts of highly effective and experienced teachers, supports them in becoming turnaround specialists, and places them in teams in the highest-need schools. These teachers are called “teacher leaders” and ideally compose 25 percent of the teaching staff at each school partnered with the T3 Initiative. In order to succeed, the teacher leaders must be distributed across the school, so that they can lead teams of less experienced teachers within various grade levels and subjects. It is also important for the teams to have sufficient collaborative planning time (CPT) and access to formative assessment data to shape their teaching strategies.

Currently, T3 works with 10 schools in Massachusetts and three schools in Memphis, and is seeing notable results in these schools. For example, Boston-area schools partnered with the T3 Initiative “produced substantially greater student achievement growth than other Massachusetts schools, including other turnaround schools in Boston, across most grades and subjects tested” in 2010–2011.² Teach Plus has plans to expand T3 into five additional schools in Boston and DC in 2013–2014.

Teach Plus at Orchard Gardens Pilot School

Orchard Gardens Pilot School (OGPS), a K-8 school in the Boston Public Schools (BPS) district, is currently (2012–2013) in its third year as a Level 4 or “Turnaround” school, as categorized by the state of Massachusetts. Since the school first opened in 2003, OGPS was one of the lowest-performing schools in BPS and Massachusetts with students who were as many as five years behind grade level. The overwhelming majority (90 percent) of the 800 students qualifies for free or reduced lunch, 25 percent are English language learners, and 25 percent have Individual Education Plans (IEPs). The school also has a history of staff instability: five principals in seven years, more than 50 percent teacher turnover every year, and a teaching force consisting primarily of novice educators.

In 2010, OGPS began the turnaround process using funds from the Federal School Improvement Grant. The turnaround model stipulated replacing 50 percent of the school staff. Andrew Bott, a recruited Turnaround principal and current principal at OGPS, began by replacing 80 percent of his teaching staff. Bott and his school are approaching Turnaround with a three-pronged theory of change: 1) improved effectiveness of the school’s people, 2) relentless use of data to differentiate and improve instruction, and 3) significantly increased learning time (via an extended day). Together, these key elements ensure that each student receives the time and quality of instruction necessary to achieve proficiency.

In order to tackle the first prong of this theory of change, improved effectiveness of the school’s talent, Bott decided to work with Teach Plus’s T3 Initiative to recruit a strong team of teacher leaders. The teacher leaders joined the OGPS staff in fall 2010, each with a formal responsibility of leading a specific team during non-instructional time (see Teacher Leader team assignments in **Appendix**, page 9). In

addition to these formal responsibilities, the teacher leaders have been crucial to the turnaround plan in other ways. For example, teacher leaders are responsible for the implementation of the positive behavior system and for developing and strengthening community partnerships. According to Bott, the team is able to provide leadership capacity beyond that of the principal and COO, which helps to create lasting change at the school.³

A Strategic Professional Growth & Support System

Having carefully researched what it takes to support significant teacher development on a system-wide level, Teach Plus utilizes the key elements of effective Professional Growth & Support in its T3 program. With the help of Teach Plus, OGPS is leveraging investments in leadership, collaborative planning time, and student performance data to support the challenges of teaching in a chronically low-performing school.

ERS KEY PRINCIPLE

Invests primarily in job-embedded teacher growth through school-based content experts, teacher leaders, and time for teacher teams

OGPS' improvement strategy revolves around a corps of T3-provided teacher leaders, whose primary responsibility is to build teaching capacity by supporting grade and content-based teams throughout the school. The team of 18 teacher leaders at OGPS⁴—all recruited and placed by the T3 Initiative—are distributed across grade levels and subject areas, with at least one teacher leader per grade level (K–8) and middle school content area. Each teacher has a regular teaching load (equivalent to that of other teachers) and a formal teacher leader role that includes leading a grade-level team (e.g., third-grade teachers), a subject area team (e.g., middle school math), a vertical team (e.g., ELL), or a school-wide initiative (e.g., incorporating a new curriculum). These teams each have 150 minutes per week of collaborative planning time, in two separate blocks—one is 100 minutes and the other is 50 minutes. (The extended school day makes it possible to have these significant blocks of CPT.) During this time, teams analyze assessment data and make plans for adjusting instruction as a result of that data; teacher leaders are seasoned in the use of data to inform instruction and model this behavior for other teachers.

Spanning all grade levels and middle school content areas, each teacher leader has deep expertise that is relevant to the team s/he leads. Because these teacher leaders are fully integrated into the teaching staff—with regular teacher loads—they are supporting instructional improvement through both their own teaching and their formal guidance of other teachers. (See **Appendix**, page 9, for details on roles of teacher leaders at OGPS.)

Teacher leaders at OGPS are compensated an additional \$6,000 for their leadership responsibilities. This amount was negotiated with the union based on an estimated additional 25 days of work per year that teacher leaders undertake—for summer training, extra professional development, and planning for leading their teacher teams. Bott believes that he would be able to build a core of quality

teacher leaders even without extra pay, but the extra compensation provides an incentive and a way of recognizing hard work. Teacher leader roles also provide opportunities for regular teachers to advance in their profession. When OGPS’s student enrollment expanded in fall 2011⁵, the school needed three additional teacher leaders to fill new roles. All three of these new teacher leaders were promoted from within the school, providing professional growth opportunities for promising teachers.

The capacity of teacher leaders is bolstered by a school-based coach⁶ who is an employee of the Boston Public Schools and selected, trained, and embedded in a school by Teach Plus. Coaches join collaborative planning time, run by teacher leaders, to observe and give feedback. Coaches also meet each week with each teacher leader to debrief and plan for the next week’s collaborative planning time. Furthermore, coaches plan and deliver the summer institute and lead recurring professional development sessions for the school’s cohort of teacher leaders. In addition to the school-based coach, the T3 Initiative employs link coaches, each of whom works with 6–10 schools across the initiative to provide general guidance, work with principals, and share best practices across schools.

Funding

Implementing the T3 Initiative at any given school requires upfront and ongoing costs, as detailed in the table below. OGPS has used SIG funds to pay for the Teacher Leader stipends. The expiration of these funds in summer 2013 is putting pressure on OGPS to find alternative sources to sustain their model.

Type of Cost	Cost Item	Cost for Average Sized School (~400 students, 32 teachers, and eight teacher leaders)
Upfront	Recruitment and selection of teacher leaders	Approximately \$28K, includes marketing and outreach, selection sessions, and selection committee stipends
Ongoing	Additional compensation for teacher leaders	\$6K per year per teacher leader Total of \$48K per year for eight teacher leaders
Ongoing	School-based coach for teacher leaders (0.5 FTE for every eight teacher leaders) + management and support	Approximately \$112K
Ongoing	Professional development for teacher leaders (e.g., summer institute, monthly PD sessions)	Approximately \$29K

Partnerships can lessen the costs of meeting certain student and teacher needs, and OGPS harnesses the expertise of external partners in implementing this Professional Growth & Support system. For example, Achievement Network provides data that teacher teams use to inform their instruction. Also, a partnership with Citizen Schools enables an even more extended school day for the 6th and 7th grades. City Year volunteers in the classrooms provide additional capacity for addressing needs of individual students and small groups.

Results

In December 2012, Teach Plus released results for the first two years (10/11 and 11/12) of its work in Massachusetts. Cohort 1, including OGPS⁷, has shown significant increases in student achievement, as detailed in the table below.

Change in percent of Cohort 1 students earning advanced or proficient status on the MCAS ⁸				
Level	Subject	2010 to 2011 (Baseline to Year 1)	2011 to 2012 (Year 1 to Year 2)	Total
Elementary	ELA	+0.3	+5.8	+6.1
	Math	+7.7	+4.6	+12.3
Middle	ELA	+16.8	+15.2	+32.0
	Math	+12.6	+12.8	+25.4

T3 Initiative schools are also improving more rapidly than other turnaround schools in Massachusetts. For Cohort 1, student achievement gains (the increase in percentage of students in grades 3–8 achieving advanced or proficient status on MCAS) have outpaced Massachusetts turnaround school gains by 9.7 percentage points in ELA and 12.2 percentage points in math.⁹

At this point, only school-level data on student achievement is available to Teach Plus. Once the sample-size is significant enough, student assessment data at the teacher level will enable Teach Plus to assess the impact of Teacher Leaders on the capacity of all teachers. Teach Plus wants to ensure that gains in student achievement are not solely attributable to the teacher leaders, but rather that *all* teachers are showing gains.

Lessons Learned & Next Steps

In reflecting over the T3 Initiative to date, Teach Plus sees this as hard, sophisticated work. To succeed, Teacher Leaders must possess certain attributes, including a laser-like focus on growth and data and a drive toward sustainable change and improvement. They benefit from being a member of a cohort that is realizing the school vision together, supporting one another. In addition, teacher leaders need the support of a coach and the principal.¹⁰ This formula has succeeded at OGPS, where the vast majority of teacher leaders have chosen to remain at the school for the full three-year turnaround period.¹¹

Meghan O’Keefe, National Director of the T3 Initiative, notes the successful implementation of the initiative at OGPS in part due to Principal Bott’s approach: “He has been great at truly sharing leadership and giving a lot of responsibility to the teacher leaders. That’s not easy to do as a principal—and to do skillfully.” The principal’s role—in establishing the structures and culture of distributed leadership—fosters teacher leader development.

As Bott believes:

The results achieved at Orchard Gardens over the past two years demonstrate what is possible for any failing urban school in the nation if that school is given the autonomy, supports, and extra time needed to succeed. Orchard Gardens is proving that the right policy in line with outstanding teachers can transform a school without changing the student body. With the exact same students who were here before the turnaround work began in 2010, along with an additional 120 students we absorbed from a nearby failing school, Orchard Gardens is a case study in the extraordinary difference that amazing teachers can make in the lives of their students.¹²

Despite recent improvement, OGPS is at a critical point in the process: the final year of turnaround, meaning that SIG funding will end at the conclusion of the current school year. Teach Plus is working with OGPS to determine how the T3 strategy will look next year, given the conclusion of funding and turnaround. O’Keefe notes, “At this point, we just know that year four will not look like years one through three, but this strategy is meant to be focused on turnaround and is not intended to be sustainable on an ongoing basis.” With reduced funding, OGPS is looking carefully at options to shift existing resources in order to sustain its work with Teach Plus and other outside partners that have been critical to raising teaching effectiveness along with student achievement.

Sources

- Teach Plus website. www.teachplus.org
- Orchard Gardens website. www.orchardgardensk8.org
- ERS interview with Meghan O’Keefe, National Director of T3 Initiative, in November 2012.
- Suescun, M., Romer, T. & MacDonald, E. (December 2012). “Supporting Teacher Leaders.” *JSD*. National Staff Development Council. 33(6).
- ERS interview with Celine Coggins, Founder and CEO, and Monique Burns Thompson, President, Teach Plus, in October 2012.

APPENDIX: OVERVIEW OF T3 TEACHER LEADER-LED TEAMS

What Is the Work of T3 Teacher Leader-Led Teams?

The most common role for T3 Teacher Leaders is to lead a grade-level or content-area teacher team. Individual schools schedule their grade-level and content team meetings facilitated by a T3TL based on their own needs. Teams typically meet for 1–2 hours per week, though schedules and duration of meetings may vary.

T3 Teacher Leader-led team meetings are anchored in the **data inquiry cycle to achieve high impact on student learning**. For example, on any given day a team might accomplish one of the following outcomes:

- Develop short-term, teachable, assessable learning targets for student growth to guide instructional planning.
- Create common assessments.
- Obtain effective teaching strategies from professional texts.

What Are Team Leaders' Responsibilities?

T3 Teacher Leaders lead either:

- **Grade-Level Team**—e.g., grade 2 team.
- **Vertical Team**—e.g., grade 1–2 team. Common in a small school.
- **Content Team**—e.g., ELA 6, 7, 8. Common in secondary schools. This team often varies working as a department and in grade levels.
- **Multi-Disciplinary Team**—e.g., Language Acquisition Team, Student Support Team.

In addition to facilitating teams, Teacher Leader assignments might also include aligning, coordinating, and implementing curriculum; providing observations and feedback to after-school providers; developing programs in community service, community inclusion and outreach; preparing professional development in particular topics such as cultural competency; supporting new teachers.

Endnotes

- 1 Teach Plus website. www.teachplus.org
- 2 Source is www.teachplus.org. Additional detail: Versus comparisons (similar students in other BPS turn-around schools), the average student in a T3 school gained 1 percentile point more in elementary ELA, 10 percentile points more in elementary mathematics, 16 percentile points more in middle school ELA, and 29 percentile points more in middle school mathematics.
- 3 There are many other key elements of the OGPS turn-around strategy (in addition to teacher leaders).
- 4 There were 15 teacher leaders in year 1 (2010/11), because this constituted 25 percent of teaching staff at that point. Given school and staff growth after year 1, three additional teacher leaders were added for a current total of 18. Approximately 1/3 of the teacher leaders were recruited from the OGPS staff prior to turnaround, another ~1/3 from other schools in the district, and the remaining ~1/3 from outside the district.
- 5 Due to OGPS absorbing a program from a closing school.
- 6 A total of 1.0 FTE at OGPS, consisting of two part-time individuals.
- 7 Additional schools included in Cohort 1 (starting in 10/11) are Blackstone Elementary and Trotter Elementary.
- 8 http://www.teachplus.org/uploads/Documents/1355156579_T3ClosingtheGap.pdf
- 9 http://www.teachplus.org/uploads/Documents/1355156579_T3ClosingtheGap.pdf
- 10 Suescun, M., Romer, T. & MacDonald, E., December 2012. "Supporting Teacher Leaders." *JSD*. National Staff Development Council. 33(6).
- 11 A few teacher leaders have departed for personal reasons, but none for job dissatisfaction.
- 12 Orchard Garden website. <http://orchardgardensk8.org/>

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