

Growing Teacher Leaders from the Ground Up

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Until recently, Elkhart Community Schools lacked formal teacher leadership district-wide. The closest implementation historically was department chairs and/or school improvement team members, whose main responsibility was to transfer information between the teaching faculty and administration. In this article, the authors, who are district technology coaches, share their process for creating and adapting professional development in a large urban district facing significant technological and instructional changes. Through an iterative process, the authors developed their own leadership capacity and ultimately advocated for building-based teacher leaders to help support and coach staff members in their use of technology in instruction. The success of the initial teacher leader program has led to an expansion of building level committees across the district's 19 schools.

Addressing the Culture of Learning

Elkhart Community Schools (ECS) is an urban district in northern Indiana. In 2016, the Board of School Trustees began working with district administration to develop a strategic plan, which would, ultimately, revitalize the district and create new programs to better serve the students and parents of the community. Three new instructional leadership positions were created that year as a precursor to formal adoption in 2018 of the strategic plan. Two Instructional Coaches and a Director of Technology Integration were tasked with preparing ECS teachers and other instructional staff for the digital teaching and learning focus of the overall strategic plan. This focus included funding for all ECS students and staff to receive an iPad. The authors were selected from a pool of internal and external applicants to become the new Instructional Coaches for ECS. Our previous experience working in one-to-one districts (i.e., one technological device to one student) and our instructional practices were assets recognized by the Instructional Leadership team in their search to fill these new roles.

In order to affect institutional change, our team started by addressing the culture of learning in the district. We identified specific instructional and planning skills teachers would need to develop in order to be successful teaching in a one-to-one environment. We worked to develop a sustainable system that maximized impact on student learning with minimal resources. This required redesigning the delivery of district professional development (PD) to a more internal system. Historically, these trainings had come from an outside presenter in single sessions with limited audiences, or information had been disseminated through department chairs or school improvement team members. This model was, in essence, a string of "initiatives" loosely geared toward improving instruction, but lacked long-term goals or support structures to check for actual implementation. In response, our new programs focused on broadening access to PD, ensuring supportive follow up, and has since expanded to include ongoing, site-based, teacher leader-led PD.

Intentionality in Planning

We are the only Instructional Coaches for our district, which means we each have a caseload of nearly 600 teachers if we were to split the district evenly. Needless to say, our time with teachers is very limited. Without intentional planning and preparation, it would be near impossible to reach personal or institutional goals. Although we refer to them as teachers in this article, it is important to note that we view them as our teacher-students in our job role. We differentiate our trainings, model best instructional practices, deliver large and small group instruction, as well as interventions throughout our training and mentoring sessions. We are still teachers at heart but our teacher-students are just a bit older and have degrees.

Unfortunately, the “district-level” label often comes with the implication that we have evaluative powers over our colleagues, which can hinder active and willing participation (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). To address this, we identified ourselves as “teacher leaders” to convey that we are *teachers first* in that our roles were “nonsupervisory” (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010), even though we were based in the district offices. We frequently visited buildings and worked with principals to do building-based PD with entire staffs rather than single out individuals for coaching. By showing we were there to help develop skill and foster reflective practices around instruction, we were able to set ourselves up for targeted coaching with individuals.

Coaches and teacher-students need to be partners in learning (Fullan, Quinn & McEachen, 2018); working as partners with [the instructional staff] develops a sense of shared responsibility for learning. This is especially true when a teaching staff has a mix of new and veteran teachers with different backgrounds and experiences in using technology in their classrooms. Our challenge was to devise a method of reaching *all* staff members and bringing them to a place of general proficiency in systems and tools to use with students. Looking ahead to the day when all students would be equipped with an iPad to use in school, we outlined instructional methods, technical skills, and background knowledge teachers would need in order to be effective instructors. This list was far-reaching, including everything from working efficiently with Google Suite (our productivity tools) to managing and engaging a classroom full of students who each have a device for personal use. This outline became our guiding document as we planned our initial training sessions with buildings.

Teachers need to use introspection when planning as much as they do in instruction. Gini-Newman and Case (2018) ask helpful questions for any teacher: “Is the design of the course expecting students to engage in meaningful ways?” (p. 149), or are we designing busywork “that looks like engagement in learning?” (p. 111). We needed to be sure that our approach was relevant and timely for our teaching staff in order to build a strong base of knowledge before they had to jump into one-to-one classrooms with students. Consequently, we were able to tailor models and resources for each department and grade level based on their own instructional goals rather than enforcing one single instructional method.

The desire to change often overwhelms those under external pressure. For us, this was manifested in teachers feeling frustrated or discouraged because a skill was “too hard” or taking “too long.” In reality, most institutional changes happen on the scale of school years, not a scale of hours spent in PD (Hawley & Valli, 1999). Personal change requires knowledge and training along with support from other professionals *and* an opportunity to practice the skill in context (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Richardson, 1990). Extrapolating the time it takes for one teacher to change practice, it is no surprise that school reform timelines are long-term

projects. We constantly reminded teachers that the skills they were developing were iterative and required significant time in practice before they felt “normal.” With coaching, teachers would develop the appropriate skills at the appropriate time if they engaged with the process.

Learning a new skill puts significant strain on the participants. Simply attending a workshop is not enough to put a skill or idea into the teacher's instructional repertoire (Taylor, 2008). Instructional coaching is a powerful factor in supporting shifts in instruction (Joyce & Showers, 1980). The role of the coach is to guide the teacher through a reflective process, asking questions rather than offering solutions (Joyce & Showers, 1980). Prompting teachers to synthesize meaning from their learning makes the process active instead of passive, resulting in a more meaningful experience. We knew that our training should prompt teachers to reflect on their practice as we introduced and supported new instructional ideas afforded by technology in the classroom.

Gini-Newman and Case (2018) warn against wholesale rejection of old practice, particularly when it comes to changes in curriculum and instructional practice. While we focused on improving instructional practice, we wanted to validate the vast body of knowledge, wisdom, and skill present in any group we worked with as part of the training process. It is easy to “throw out” old resources or methods in an effort to improve, but this tendency ignores the power of working slowly through the elements of teaching to identify where changes should be made to impact students the most.

We encouraged our teacher-students to process their thinking as they clarified meaning in current and newly introduced skills. This process allowed them, and by extension when put into practice, their students, to inquire more fully into an aspect of an issue or topic. We pushed teachers to make creative, critical, and collaborative processes the norm in their classrooms (Gini-Newman & Case, 2018) by modeling that type of instruction in our workshops. We rejected the old model of prescribing change through “initiatives” and resisted the participants’ requests to “just tell them” what to do in these workshops. Instead, we listened and prompted for their thoughts on an activity or model lesson we prepared as a case study on an instructional method or tool. Through continual encouragement, teacher-students were able to go through the same transformative process that their students experience, but with new teaching methods which incorporate technology.

Developing Culture Through Shared Experiences

Our first workshops were held in a central location with open invitations to teachers and staff in the district. At the time, we had just switched to Google Suite as a district so there was a high need to get people up to speed before the switch. These initial trainings allowed us to build relationships and get to know teachers and staff across the district. Our relationships remain to this day and have allowed us to have deeper instruction-level discussions that are impacting classroom instruction in meaningful ways.

Staff took a large interest in these trainings, which opened the door for other opportunities. At this point, we were not helping participants define and progress toward long-term growth goals as the trainings were standalone and had no specific follow up, but our early workshops were a necessary foundational step. Without consistent, coaching-focused interaction, once teachers returned to their home school, we knew that growth would stop at the skill level (Kennedy, 1990). We were aware that we needed to shift focus as a team to develop a culture of learning among the teaching staff, which would then transfer to their interactions with students.

In other words, we had defined our goals and identified skills to teach to reach those outcomes, but our actual methods would not be sufficient to reach those outcomes. To address this deficiency, we took a deeper look at our PD opportunities and identified ways to improve.

Our initial training model of PD was effective in building technical skills in new tools from hardware to the new learning management and productivity systems. However, skill building does not necessarily lead to long-lasting institutional change (Kennedy, 1990). As we ran more and more workshops, we realized that our growth was stalling; fewer people were attending and the feedback we received was surface-level and lacked the instructional depth we were hoping to see. We had achieved technical proficiency, but we needed to move to a model which incorporated technical skill with instructional methods. We had exhausted the benefits of a pure training model and in response, we refocused on ways to build instructional capacity for teaching in a one-to-one environment with students. Instead of technical skill alone, our next phase of training would focus on cultural development.

Developing (or revising) a culture of learning requires reflection on practice with other teachers, not just replication of training. At the onset, our immediate opportunity was to build capacity for institutional change using a training model of PD. While the culture of learning among teaching staff has improved because of frequent high quality workshops, we promoted a culture of replication rather than creation. Hargreaves and Dawe (1990) advise against a training mechanism for this reason: it reduces "questions about ends, goals, and values in teaching to questions of means, techniques, and procedures" (p. 234). Fullan, McEachen and Quinn (2018) provide guidance in combating against this tendency by coaching teachers to reflect at the point of implementation by asking what evidence they will have after the task of student learning (p. 102).

Research has repeatedly shown that new skills, particularly complex skills, are rarely implemented by teachers without long term, in-class support from an instructional leader (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Joyce & Showers, 1980; Taylor, 2008). For institutional change, we needed to train teachers to commit to deep reflection and shift from a feeling of satisfaction to developing competencies.

The Power of a Phased Rollout

In planning the next stage of PD, we considered which factors would help us be successful. Our team determined that a phased rollout of technology was preferable to a wholesale approach because we could provide ongoing support, hands-on coaching, and discrete connections to student learning, which have been shown to support changes in practice (Frey, Fisher, & Lapp, 2015; Schrum & Levin, 2013). This phased method allowed us to better support and leverage teachers who were motivated to learn. This helped to ensure teachers were ready to teach with technology while creating a structure that supported varied levels of learning. Table 1 shows the primary focus, length, and technology component of each Phase.

Table 1

Phased Technology Rollout Sequence

Phase	Description	Length	Devices
I	Basic hardware use. Instructional strategies are introduced and discussed, particularly with a focus on how technology can enhance student interaction and demonstration of learning.	Four weeks	1 (teacher)
II	Lesson modeling and critical feedback. A final project was assigned in which teachers design and implement a new activity or lesson.	Four weeks	10 (shared in class)
III	Critical focus on pedagogy and reflective practice. The topics were open-ended, driven by the group of teachers participating in the master class (secondary only).	One semester	Class set (up to 30)

In planning, we made several strategic decisions about this new sequence of workshops:

- Phases are longitudinal and build on previous work
- Reflection and relationship are critical components of building and self-assessing skill
- Teachers elect into the workshops to reduce the number of reluctant participants
- Satellite meeting locations are defined strategically to reduce travel time and promote collaboration

To support the learning goals of each Phase, teachers were equipped with hardware scaled to meet the goals of the particular step in the sequence. Participants developed skills in each meeting which were subsequently put into immediate practice within their given contexts.

Smythe (1989) found that reflection on instruction is beneficial for teachers, particularly if they do not have others to talk with about their teaching. Thus, rather than assuming teachers would reflect on their learning, we made it a core component of the Phase model. Focusing on collected, observed behaviors from an entire group helped relieve an individual teacher from feeling like the center discussion and moved the group into a safe space to discuss teaching as a practice. Teachers were encouraged to register for each Phase workshop with colleagues from their building to reinforce the positive benefits of internal collaboration, reflection, and shared practices. As teachers became more prepared and enabled to reflect on personal growth, collegial relationships began to take shape and improvement shifted from the classroom sphere of influence into whole-building or district growth (Fullan, Quinn & McEachen, 2018).

As facilitators, we watched relationships develop and grow among each cohort. Participants were more willing to be vulnerable with one another, which led to more reflection about their own practice. This became particularly important as specific instructional aims were explored and teachers were asked to implement and reflect on ideas they practiced as part of the

workshop sequence. We prompted and asked questions instead of providing answers, reinforcing the importance of self-reflection (Kuijpers, Houtveen & Wubbels, 2010). We encouraged participants to identify emergent patterns in the group based on evidence to be addressed in practice. Participants left with a clear understanding of how to implement ideas in their context based on these conversations.

The Phase workshops became immensely popular, partially due to the excitement about receiving classroom technology, but also because of the discussions starting district-wide about what could be done with students once everyone was equipped. These participants became de facto teacher leaders in their buildings as colleagues saw the devices in use day to day as a result of the workshops.

Outside of workshops, we were able to set a schedule to meet the needs of teachers and buildings as necessary. The Phases were based on larger contexts of change and the individual meetings were designed to address culture development and capacity for technology deployment. We solidified our roles as members of the community even though we belong to no single building or team. Conversely, as district-level employees, our workshops were received by some with skepticism and reluctance to engage. Hargreaves and Dawe (1990) call this phenomenon “contrived collegiality,” in which participants engage on the surface but under the pretense that their engagement will not really mean anything in the end.

While successful, there were some technology frustrations that led us to conclude the Phase workshops as a primary model of training. In particular, classrooms that were sharing devices among students faced limitations with device storage, app installs, and user profile conflicts. These issues were not insurmountable, but proved to be significant challenges for even our most capable teachers. We needed a strategy to reach the next tier of individuals, who may be uncomfortable or unwilling, to receive coaching. We believed that if the remaining teachers felt coerced to participate in PD, then we would not be able to work as effectively with those individuals. After all, although our rapport with teachers has been an asset, we are still limited by time and space when it comes to large-scale support. For example, our tiered rollout structure has segmented the district into low, intermediate, and high implementation zones. Schools which had access to one-to-one technology early on are ready for more advanced PD. On the other hand, buildings where technology was recently added need more scaffolding and support with functional skills. Geography, staff aptitude, and administrative involvement in instructional leadership make broad-spectrum PD difficult provide. More importantly, our influence extends only as far as teachers were willing to be taught. This brought us to our current iteration of identifying and supporting building-level Technology Ambassadors.

From District Leaders to Building Leaders: The Technology Ambassadors

At the start of the 2018-19 school year, we were faced with the huge task of supporting all secondary buildings (two high schools and three middle schools) starting their full one-to-one instructional year. We also had several elementary schools preparing for their distribution days. This meant our coaching role was being spread thinner than ever by so many simultaneous locations needing in-person support. The teachers in each of these locations had been through their initial implementation training, but had not had the face-to-face practice with students on such a large scale. In-building teacher leaders would become a cornerstone support mechanism for the district.

“Teacher Leaders” as a term is amorphous as institutions implement these roles loosely. Mangin and Stoelinga (2010) note that these assignments are “nonsupervisory” and “school based,” and include responsibilities from data analysis to informal observations focused on instructional feedback (p. 49). Nappi (2014) adds that although the area of teacher leadership has been widely researched, the definition of teacher leader remains widely diverse because the activities teachers take part in involve varying types and degrees of leadership. Regardless of activity, teacher leaders’ primary role is to improve student learning (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010), and the particular blend of responsibilities is largely up to the individual district or school and their priorities. Our needs were to identify teacher leaders who were instructionally sound and had high capabilities in using our classroom technology to improve students’ experience with technology and overall learning.

This iteration of coaching has been developing in-building support structures by identifying and building up teacher leaders. Bae, Hayes, O'Connor, Seitz and Distefano (2016) note that teachers are more likely to attend workshops or meetings if there is an opportunity to learn from other teachers. Designing PD that puts teachers at the focus of discussion rather than the skills they are learning, or the district or school policy influencing the change can encourage staff to spend time with one another in a supportive, focused environment (Kennedy, 2005). Additionally, Bae et al. (2016) found that diverse leadership can improve problem solving within schools. Through intentional relationships, we believed we could establish new teacher leaders capable of sharing the load at the building/zone level.

If teachers are more willing to listen to other teachers because of context (Leana, 2011), then it would follow that building-level leaders will be able to support their colleagues through what Burton (2014) simply calls “being there” (p. 20). In other words, an ear down the hall for any reason, instructional or not, helps build true collegiality that can open doors to deeper discussions of practice in the future. These relationships support administrators’ instructional goals and growth can be seen across the student population as a result.

Our approach to developing in-building teacher leaders had three components. Our goal was to identify teachers who:

1. Demonstrate strong technical skills with district technologies,
2. Have open minds for new initiatives and willingness to be the “first contact” for experimentation and,
3. Can build strong, supportive relationships with teachers in their buildings.

In short, Technology Ambassadors serve as an extension of the Instructional Technology Coaches. An application was created for interested individuals to take on an additional formal role within their building to support and coach colleagues in using technology for instruction. Using federal Title II grant money, we are able to pay our Ambassadors a stipend for the time they spend coaching their peers. As a result, our role as Instructional Coaches has broadened into equipping building-level Ambassadors to be successful. We look at current issues in the district and build support materials for coaching and training. We also coordinate the Ambassadors and share best practices among the group. In addition, we arrange tours of different buildings in the district so Ambassadors can see how different locations function. Gathering perspective and coaching from the group up (rather than the top down) has helped us build a cohesive group of teacher leaders distributed throughout the district.

Coaching the Ambassadors has allowed each building, in conjunction with administration, to define local goals and priorities. Ambassadors either already have the technical capabilities to solve problems using existing systems or they are among early trainees (in the event of changing systems) to provide feedback and perspective. The benefits are immense as buildings are able to implement policy in a local manner, with Ambassadors serving as the face of instructional goals with their colleagues. The task of building relationships, instead of being a barrier for entry like it was for us, has been greatly simplified because Ambassadors are already embedded and have insight that the district-level team is lacking.

Future Plans

We have taken nearly four years to develop a culture and expectation among all the teachers in our district that growth is a process. Given the size of our district, we cannot meet the entire demand for staff development on our own; two coaches are simply not able to provide the support necessary to implement one-to-one technology district-wide in a timely manner. Cultivating teacher leaders through the Ambassador program will be a major factor in our long term success or failure.

Now that the Ambassador program is becoming more established, we are starting to face structural problems in how to define and promote the teacher leaders. At a practical level, we are working with the Ambassadors on building trust and rapport across their buildings, particularly to establish credibility, as suggested by Lieberman, Saxl and Miles (2000). As the roles become more clearly defined and the individuals serving gain credibility, we can expand training opportunities for staff members that are focused on building goals within larger district constructs and priorities.

Developing local leadership is a continual process. Consistent coaching from a colleague helps form collegial relationships that can foster meaningful growth (Leana, 2011). We expect buildings to take more control over their professional priorities to meet their local populations through the Ambassadors. In fact, some buildings have started to identify their own building level leaders to work as partners with the Ambassadors. These grassroots technology teams are collaboratively planning with the Ambassador to implement goals in a consistent manner.

Additionally, to truly develop a powerful, local leadership team, our efforts are shifting toward building relationships with administrative teams. Given the scope and scale of improvement efforts at the building and district level, it is unrealistic to expect a single principal to plan, lead, and enact reforms (Nappi, 2014). Up until this point, administrators have been more informed than involved; administrative input is considered when planning workshops and setting goals, but administrators have not traditionally been the instructional drivers. We want to form strong ties with administrators as instructional leaders, guiding their teachers to meet goals and supporting those initiatives with an embedded group of teacher leaders.

Our work with the Technology Ambassadors still includes technical training, but we are beginning to focus on leadership skills, which can be helpful when working with colleagues; we need to start developing the identity of Ambassadors as teacher leaders. Regular meetings with the Ambassadors allows us to provide specialized skills training and has recently led to more opportunities to debrief and reflect on work in their respective buildings, support one another in discussion about challenges, and share insight gained as they work with their staff. Our leadership development is focused on developing coaching mindsets; Ambassadors participate in observing one another leading PD, organizing work sessions with their building staff, and

attending specialized, leadership-focused PD built for teacher leaders. We are also placing more responsibility on the Ambassadors by handing off what was traditionally the responsibility of the Instructional Coaches to the buildings and their internal support teams. These methods, according to Sinha and Hanuscin (2017) are strong factors in building leadership identity among teacher leaders.

Conclusion

Prior to the Instructional Coach positions being created, Elkhart Community Schools had stagnated in terms of instructional change and professional growth. PD was initiative-based and did not produce instructional improvement due to a lack of long-term support at the building or district level. Since 2016, ECS has undergone dramatic change in a short time relative to previous district initiatives. The Instructional Coaches were given freedom to develop a viable and sustainable plan for preparing teachers to teach in a one-to-one technology classroom starting in 2016. Through iterative PD and a focus on meeting as many stakeholders' needs as possible, a local teacher leader program developed, which has changed the way staff perceive and participate in professional growth. Local growth is supported by building level Technology Ambassadors who work with peers to solve problems and improve practice. The Instructional Coaches are better able to develop and implement district-level goals by coordinating the Technology Ambassadors and allowing their local expertise to inform implementation and support growth of teachers and students. Our Technology Ambassadors are integral in continuing to develop a collaborative and supportive culture among teaching staff. As teachers become more accustomed to having in-building support, we expect to see instructional gains as practice is adopted in a supportive environment.

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