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## Expanding the Role of Teacher Leaders: Professional Learning for Policy Advocacy

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**Abstract:** Teacher leadership is important both within and beyond the school. Teacher leaders have the potential to expand their role beyond policy implementation in the classroom to influence educational policy development. However, few teachers receive explicit preparation or guidance for contributing their voice and providing first-hand knowledge of policy's classroom impact. This study investigated the perceptions and experiences of educators who had completed a year-long fellowship designed to inform and guide teacher participation in state policy. The results indicate that participants perceive themselves as strong policy advocates with local stakeholders but believe they face barriers to influencing state policy leaders. The findings suggest that (1) barriers to policy advocacy must be examined and removed so that teachers can expand their expertise beyond the classroom and that (2) professional learning opportunities can develop teacher leadership skills for influencing policy formulation and adoption resulting in benefits for students.

**Keywords:** teacher leadership; state policy; advocacy

**Ampliar el papel de los líderes docentes: Aprendizaje profesional para la defensa de políticas**

**Resumen:** El liderazgo docente es importante tanto dentro como fuera de la escuela. Los maestros líderes tienen el potencial de expandir su rol más allá de la implementación de políticas en el aula para influir en el desarrollo de políticas educativas. Sin embargo, pocos maestros reciben preparación u orientación explícita para contribuir con su voz y proporcionar conocimiento de primera mano sobre el impacto de las políticas en el aula. Este estudio investigó las percepciones y experiencias de los educadores que habían completado una beca de un año diseñada para informar y guiar la participación de los maestros en la política estatal. Los resultados indican que los participantes se perciben a sí mismos como fuertes defensores de las políticas con las partes interesadas locales, pero creen que enfrentan barreras para influir en los líderes de políticas estatales. Los resultados sugieren que (1) las barreras para la promoción de políticas deben ser examinadas y eliminadas para que los maestros puedan expandir su experiencia más allá del aula y que (2) las oportunidades de aprendizaje profesional pueden desarrollar habilidades de liderazgo docente para influir en la formulación y adopción de políticas que resulten en beneficios para los estudiantes.

**Palabras clave:** liderazgo docente; política del estado; la defensa

**Expandindo o papel dos líderes de professores: Aprendizagem profissional para defesa de políticas**

**Resumo:** A liderança de professores é importante dentro e fora da escola. Os líderes de professores têm o potencial de expandir seu papel além da implementação de políticas na sala de aula, para influenciar o desenvolvimento de políticas educacionais. No entanto, poucos professores recebem preparação ou orientação explícita para contribuir com sua voz e fornecer conhecimento em primeira mão do impacto em sala de aula da política. Este estudo investigou as percepções e experiências de educadores que concluíram uma bolsa de um ano destinada a informar e orientar a participação de professores na política estadual. Os resultados indicam que os participantes se consideram fortes defensores de políticas junto às partes interessadas locais, mas acreditam que enfrentam barreiras para influenciar os líderes de políticas estaduais. Os resultados sugerem que (1) as barreiras à defesa de políticas devem ser examinadas e removidas para que os professores possam expandir seus conhecimentos além da sala de aula e que (2) oportunidades de aprendizado profissional possam desenvolver habilidades de liderança de professores para influenciar a formulação e adoção de políticas, resultando em benefícios para os alunos.

**Keywords:** liderança de professores; política estadual; defesa

## Introduction

Many researchers have documented the various ways in which teachers contribute their knowledge and skills to implementing school initiatives (Eckert, Ulmer, Khachatryan & Ledesma, 2016; Muijs & Harris, 2007; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Teachers can, moreover, contribute their expertise and influence beyond the classroom and school by participating in the initial design of school-supportive educational state policies. As a result, teachers' classroom perspectives and first-hand knowledge of policy effects will inform the development of sound educational policy. Teacher input in state policymaking is a timely strategy brought about by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015), whereby the United States federal government allowed each state to drive educational reforms which impact teachers and classrooms. Little evidence, however, indicates that teachers have had opportunities to influence or contribute to the design of state policy (Good, Fox Barocas, Chávez-Moreno, Feldman, & Canela, 2017). This study contributes to the limited knowledge base examining teacher professional learning for policy advocacy and adds to previous research findings describing the results of a policy fellowship for teacher leaders in the U.S. Department of Education (Eckert et al., 2016). This study also builds on training program concepts of the Teaching, Learning and Leading with Schools and Communities (TLLSC) designed to prepare teachers to become policy actors (Heineke et al., 2015).

## Purpose and Research Questions

While the literature is replete with research regarding the roles and responsibilities of teachers as policy *implementers*, a gap exists in the literature addressing how teachers influence policy *development*. This study adds to the knowledge base of teachers influencing policy by assessing and describing perceptions following participation in the Tennessee Educator Fellowship (TEF), a fellowship designed to increase educators' knowledge of the educational policy process and to equip them to advocate effectively for their students.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do participants who have completed the TEF perceive their advocacy and communication roles in state policy?
2. How do participants who have completed the TEF use their knowledge and skills for influencing educational policy development?
3. How do participants who have completed the TEF advocate for educational policies?

## Review of Pertinent Literature

The literature review first examines teacher leadership in schools, then teacher leadership in the context of policy development and implementation.

### Teacher Leadership in Schools

The literature on teacher leadership in schools is robust and illustrative of teachers' many roles in school success (Lumpkin, Claxton, & Wilson, 2016; Muijs & Harris, 2007; Schrum & Levin, 2013; Welcher, 2018). Teachers can serve as change agents in developing a positive school climate and a viable standards-based curriculum serving as experts on pedagogy and curriculum (Schrum & Levin, 2013). In addition, teachers can work to improve student outcomes, such as engagement and achievement using their experience and expertise with students (Schrum & Levin, 2013). These roles encompass many types of responsibilities, including participation in decision-making and opportunities to implement initiatives or to lead school improvement (Muijs & Harris, 2007).

Moreover, teacher leadership can effectively support state and district reform agendas (Levenson, 2014; Little, 2003). Indeed, teacher leaders can serve students beyond the classroom, and many want to use their expertise and expand their influence (Levenson, 2014; Zepeda, Mayers, & Benson, 2003).

The definition of teacher leadership varies and includes a wide variety of perspectives in the literature (Eckert et al., 2016; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Wenner and Campbell (2017) defined teacher leaders as “teachers who maintain K–12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom” (p. 140). It is important to note that according to this definition, the continuing connection to students and classrooms keeps teachers current in their understanding of educational complexities. Eckert et al. (2016), defined teacher leadership as “the practices through which teachers—individually or collectively—influence colleagues, principals, policy makers, and other potential stakeholders to improve teaching and learning” (p. 700). Our working concept for this study includes components of these definitions and adds the policy process perspective. Thus, our working definition of teacher policy leadership became teachers who can both influence and support policy change and development through ongoing advocacy practices with colleagues, policy makers, and other stakeholders while maintaining classroom-based responsibilities.

A teacher’s progression to teacher leader might be gradual as Hunzicker’s (2017) Teacher Leader Progression and Influences conceptual model posits. This model includes indicators or acts of demonstrated teacher leadership such as student advocacy extending beyond the classroom. As teachers progress in their careers, they are often tapped as teacher leaders to serve as role models and effective facilitators of learning (Lumpkin et al., 2016). Likewise, experience and expertise might influence teacher aspiration for policy process participation. For example, newly qualified teachers are more likely to focus on implementing policy by ensuring all required material is taught (Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011). On the other hand, teachers with more experience, or perhaps teachers entering the field following a previous career, may work to plan policy implementation or enact policy change (Ball et al., 2011). Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) suggested that prior experience and knowledge also influences teachers’ policy implementation. Teachers draw on this prior experience and classroom knowledge that can be used to influence other policy steps, such as development and design. Teaching or previous career experience might challenge teacher policy thinking and desire to champion particular policies (Ball et al., 2011). Ball and colleagues (2011) identified and labeled this policy role as an entrepreneur who is personally invested in a policy idea and willing to produce something original to challenge assumptions. Policy entrepreneurs “recruit others to their cause” (Ball et al., 2011, p. 628).

### **Teachers and the Policy Process**

Before further examining the role of teacher leaders in policy influence and support, we define how policy is viewed in this study. Policy is a governmental statement such as a law, regulation, ruling, or order (e.g., a law articulating the requirements of a teacher evaluation process) (Birkland, 2015). The stages of policy making begin with setting the agenda, then designing and adopting formal legislation, and finally resulting in school implementation (Birkland, 2015; Fowler, 2008). Once policy is adopted, teachers are often charged with implementing policy in schools and classrooms (Coburn & Stein, 2006). However, there is little evidence that teachers, other than through organized unions, influence other policy stages such as policy design (Heineke, Ryan, & Tocci, 2015). Policy design, according to Good and colleagues (2017), refers to the stage in which policy agendas and discourses are shaped resulting in the creation of actual policy text. We believe that teachers have the potential to participate in all stages of the state legislative process.

While teacher leaders are essential and have been involved in policy implementation, they have not been included routinely in the *development* of state educational policies in Tennessee. Teacher involvement has been largely limited to implementing policy mandates. For example, teachers are often involved in determining the content of student-based standards but may not be involved in determining if the standards will be mandated or in choosing the policy language related to standards. Because of their limited role in policy development, little is known about the impact teacher leaders could have on student success by playing a more active role in state policy processes. This is important to consider, as state policy makers have driven much of the recent school reform affecting teachers and students.

Teacher influence is a function of “what they do and say, what they present in written products, and other forms of representation” (Hatch, White, & Faigenbaum, 2005, p. 1007). Applying this model to teacher involvement in policy development, teachers might interact with many different audiences and exert influence by forging networks and sharing ideas that lead to change or modification of a policy. Indeed, studies indicate that teacher leaders can (and do) influence policy at the school and district level (Hatch et al., 2005). Support, unlike influence, is evidenced by activities intended to adhere to, not change, state accountability mandates. Support is the process of putting an adopted policy into practice (Fowler, 2008). Examples of support include assisting policy implementation through mentoring or coaching other teachers and leading professional development based on a mandated or adopted policy.

Levenson (2014) argued that effective policy solutions addressing seemingly intractable school challenges require collaborative work between teachers and legislators. While policy implementation in the classroom is important, teachers can extend their knowledge and expertise to influence *all* aspects of the policymaking process.

As Eckert et al. (2016) noted, the intersection between the literature on teacher leadership and educational policy development is rare. Although policy advocacy roles appear feasible with training and support, research has found that teachers believe policy implementation is the only role available to them, and that a disconnect exists between classroom teachers and policy makers (Good et al., 2017; Hinnant-Crawford, 2016). Teachers believe that policy makers disregard their experience or concerns (Levenson, 2014). Yet, teachers have first-hand knowledge of students and classrooms, and their insights and experiences can become part of the state policy making process. Furthermore, teachers in Hinnant-Crawford’s study (2016) reported limited knowledge of the way policy is formed. The state policy process is typically the responsibility of elected officials and those with positional authority, and teachers are not routinely included in that process.

Evidence suggests that teachers are becoming increasingly interested in engaging in educational policy development (Eckert et al., 2016; Levenson, 2014); however, barriers must be removed before teachers can effectively serve as state policy influencers and advocates. Teachers, for example, have reported difficulties and limitations when attempting to make a policy difference beyond the school (Hinnant-Crawford, 2016). In addition, teachers perceive that they are not viewed as having the expertise to be heard in the legislative policy process (Levenson, 2014). Other barriers to teachers’ policy opportunities, particularly in state leadership, result from a lack of administrative support, time limitations, limited understanding of the educational policy processes, or inadequate training (Can, 2009; Good et al., 2017). To reduce these barriers, teachers must be given opportunities to learn and serve beyond the classroom. Professional development focusing on the legislative policy process can prepare and involve teachers in all stages of policy making (Eckert et al., 2016). Knowledge is insufficient, as resources, such as time and funding, are also necessary to involve teachers in policy decisions (Durias, 2010; Smylie & Eckert, 2018).

Our belief, and thus the focus of this article, is that teacher leaders can effectively play a more active role in the policy process, thereby improving the educational system and increasing

student learning. Arguing for teacher leaders in policy involvement, Eckert et al. (2016) supported a new “wave” of teacher leadership in which, “teacher leaders drive the policies that solve challenges in twenty-first-century schools” (p. 690). They suggested that teacher leaders, who influence colleagues, principals, and policy makers to improve teaching and learning, are the needed link between policy and practice. Although changing a hierarchical political system is not easy, the complexity of school improvement mandates that all voices are heard, especially those closest to students, the teachers (Levenson, 2014). Teachers can influence policy in many ways, from being a member of an advocacy group on social media to contacting legislators about issues. Furthermore, these social connections increase the likelihood of enabling change, as explained by the power of social networking and social capital theory (Coburn & Russell, 2008).

To expand the influence of teachers on policy, professional development opportunities related to the legislative policy process could increase teachers’ understanding and knowledge of strategies to engage in communication with policy writers and state legislators. Considering the leadership role that teachers might play in policy, the current study examines the effects of a program designed to support and promote the professional development of teachers as advocates and communicators in state educational policy initiatives. We believe that teachers can serve in a more active role in the state policy process, thereby improving the educational system.

Participation in policy decisions begins with understanding how policies are created (Fowler, 2008). Consequently, teachers need professional development opportunities to learn about the policy process, to network with peers and other policy stakeholders, and to exchange ideas while still fulfilling their teaching responsibilities. This study examines the teacher leadership role in policy advocacy through participation in the TEF, a professional development program intended to prepare teachers for involvement in state and local educational policy.

### **The Tennessee Educator Fellowship (TEF)**

The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) was founded in 2009 by former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, MD (“About SCORE,” n.d.). SCORE is an independent, nonprofit, and nonpartisan advocacy and research institution, the mission of which is to work collaboratively with local, state, and national partners to improve state policies and practices for increased student success. As an illustration of its involvement, SCORE worked with Tennessee legislators to obtain one of the first Race to The Top grants, which provided \$501 million to implement a comprehensive school reform plan across the state. Per the *Tennessee Teacher Leader Network 2015-16 Guidebook*, the Tennessee Department of Education does not include policy work as a responsibility of teachers (Department of Education, 2016). The guidebook outlines teacher leaders’ roles and responsibilities, such as school leadership, content mastery, collaboration, practice, and reflections.

In 2014, SCORE launched the TEF, designed to increase educators’ knowledge of the policy process and empower them as student-centered advocates. The fellowship aims to inform teachers and classroom support specialists (such as school counselors) about educational policy and to equip them to advocate effectively for their students and their profession (SCORE, 2014). The fellowship provides unique opportunities and experiences for teachers to learn about education policies, practices, and systems affecting academic achievement and educator effectiveness. Through participation, fellows serve as liaisons between their faculty and community to improve student success through policy.

The goal of the fellowship is to for teachers to develop leadership in policy advocacy and communications while continuing to work with students. TEF considers communication as “sharing a message with an audience” and defines advocacy as “bringing people along to your cause” (L. Cooksey, personal communication, December 16, 2019). Fellows participate in advocacy activities

after initial training and develop an advocacy plan related to a state or local policy or education priority that is tailored to the fellows' interest. TEF promotes the idea that the policy should lead to good practice as the following example illustrates. A fellow discovered that the school board was voting on a resolution to replace the statewide assessment with a test not aligned to the state standards. The TEF fellow attended the board meeting, got on the agenda, and presented evidence showing that the current state assessment best supported student learning and thus should remain in place. When the issue was voted on, the school board did not pass the resolution and retained the state assessment. The fellow subsequently shared her experience with other TEF program participants as an example empowering others to actively play a part in policy advocacy.

TEF participants are selected for the yearlong fellowship based on certain criteria, including a minimum of three years of classroom experience in a Tennessee public school. A rigorous and competitive admissions process begins with a written application and also includes interviews which involve current or former fellows. A previous or current formal role as a teacher leader is not required for selection. A strong candidate must demonstrate the potential for leadership skills, effective communication skills, and an interest in learning policy advocacy. Due to the highly selective nature of the program, additional details of the selection criteria are not made public (L. Cooksey, personal communication, May 20, 2019).

Selected fellows must be school employees that spend the majority of the day in direct service to students, which includes teachers, librarians, counselors, and interventionists (L. Cooksey, personal communication, May 20, 2019). Thus, the SCORE definition of "teacher" includes those who work in a direct student service capacity but might have a title other than classroom teacher. The selected fellows represent schools across Tennessee and are chosen from various subject areas, grade levels, and a variety of public school settings (SCORE, 2014).

Fellows attend an initial two-day workshop, which includes instruction in Tennessee education policy history and its implications for current educational issues. Training also includes sessions with policy makers on the structure of educational governance and the process of legislative decision-making. In addition, SCORE staff teach, present on educational priorities, discuss policy case studies, and assist with strategies to influence and reach various audiences including peers, parents, administrators, and state policy makers. In addition, former fellows share their expertise and experience on topics such as building an effective professional network. Throughout the workshops, fellows are given readings and assignments designed to support and deepen their learning on the policy process and current legislative priority areas.

During the fellowship year, fellows convene in Nashville, the state capital, and meet through regional and virtual-learning opportunities. During these conferences, fellows engage with state and local leaders and participate in advocacy and communications training ("About SCORE," n.d.). SCORE subsidizes fellows' travel expenses to the required trainings and fellows earn a \$5,000 stipend during their fellowship year. Each year, 30-50 fellows are selected. Since the fellowship's inception in 2014, more than 200 fellows have participated.

## Method

### Participants and Setting

The participants were members of four cohorts of the TEF who spent a full year in policy training and at the time were classroom teachers or support specialists. Of 138 total fellows, 49% responded to the online survey questionnaire ( $n=68$ ). Due to attrition, 57 respondents completed the survey and reported demographics. The respondent group consisted of 10 fellows (14.7%) from the first cohort of the fellowship program (2014-2015), 6 fellows (8.8%) from 2015-2016 cohort, 18 fellows (26.5%) from the 2016-2017 cohort, and 23 fellows (33.8%) from the 2017-2018 cohort.

Over 60% of the respondents' educational experience ranged from 6-15 years, with 24% at 16 or more years of experience. Mean scores on the survey ranged from 1.29 to 3.73. The survey responses were highly reliable ( $\alpha=.945$ ). The responses of the participants are detailed below.

### **Survey Development**

The Educator Fellowship Survey was developed by the researchers with input and clarifications from SCORE staff responsible for TEF training. It consisted of 13 items based on existing literature, SCORE's objectives, and TEF policy activity following fellowship completion. TEF's objectives and policy activities were listed in SCORE documents and used to generate survey questions. A quantitative survey was selected as the most appropriate data collection tool to gather the perceptions and experiences of a large number of respondents scattered across a vast geographic area (Wang, 2015). The survey questionnaire was designed to be effective and efficient, with Likert items offering different levels of agreement or disagreement (Robson, 2011). Items were written on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from "never" to "often" (frequency rating) or "not at all" to "significantly" (strength rating). In order to compare means, Likert scale options were converted to numerical options, with 1 as least frequent ("never") or least powerful ("not at all") and 4 as most frequent ("often") or most powerful ("significantly"). Although treating Likert scale responses as interval data can be problematic (Bishop & Herron, 2015), doing so allowed for an evaluation of trends, program effectiveness, and comparisons for the purposes of this study. The survey design included multiple response options per question, which allowed respondents to evaluate their advocacy in regard to each applicable stakeholder group. The survey was initially reviewed by researchers and subsequently modified to increase clarity and applicability.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

After receiving permission from the University's Institutional Review Board to conduct this research, the survey was sent to 138 fellows who had completed the yearlong fellowship. The survey was delivered electronically through QuestionPro, an online survey program, in October 2018. Participants had 2.5 weeks to respond; a reminder was sent a week before the survey closed. All responses were anonymous and no compensation was provided to participants. The researchers have no financial interest in or formal connections with the TEF or the participants; the authors of this article received permission from SCORE to pursue this research. Data examining descriptive statistics were utilized as well as multivariate analyses of variances (MANOVAs) to compare differences between cohort years and years of experience in education.

## **Results**

The results are reported in groupings of related content. The subsections are ordered as follows: (1) how participants who have completed the TEF perceive their advocacy and communication roles in state policy, (2) how participants who have completed TEF use their knowledge and skills to influence educational policy development and implementation, and (3) how participants who have completed TEF participate in ongoing advocacy for policy development.

### **Perceptions of Advocacy and Communication with Stakeholders**

Fellows were asked to report how they perceive their advocacy and communication effectiveness as a state policy communicator with various stakeholder groups. During the TEF year, fellows received guidance on contacting stakeholders, such as school and district administrators, sharing information related to the state policy process, and advocating for policy support or needs. Respondents reported they were most effective when communicating state policy with school

administrators (94.1% rated “moderate” or “significant” effectiveness). Closely followed was with peers (92.7%), community members (91.2%), parents (86.7%), district administrators (85.3%), and state legislators (75.0%). Respondents believed that they were recognized as an effective state policy advocate “somewhat” or “a lot” by peers (92.6%), school administrators (86.7%), parents (70.6%), community members (70.6%), district administrators (70.1%), and state legislators (50.7%).

### **Influence on Educational Policy Development and Implementation**

Influencing state policy development includes providing input or feedback that results in a change in policy prior to adoption. Fellows were asked to report how they perceived their influence on the previous year’s development and implementation of state policy. Respondents reported influencing state educational policy development “sometimes” or “often” at the school level (74.1%), district level (62.1%), and state level (34.4%). Fellows were also asked about their role in policy implementation at the various governance levels. Respondents reported taking action in response to state policy implementation “sometimes” or “often” at the school level (82.8%), district level (77.6%), and state level (51.7%).

Respondents provided some clarity as to why perceived effectiveness was not high with some groups or levels of policy making by indicating barriers to advocacy and participation. Fellows indicated that the following barriers “moderately” or “significantly” affect their advocacy: lack of time (80.8%), district policies (24.6%), school climate (24.5%), state policies (19.3%), relationships with administrators (17.5%), relationships with peers (10.6%), and personal characteristics (8.9%). Participants were asked to rate their perceived effectiveness in areas of school leadership responsibilities. Respondents rated their leadership as “moderate” or “significant” in all areas: mentoring (96.5%), professional development (94.7%), curriculum development (91.0%), and school improvement (89.4%).

### **Continued Advocacy Actions**

Across all cohorts, participants continued to participate in state policy advocacy actions following their year of professional development although frequency varied by stakeholder groups and method of contact. Respondents reported initiating conversation on state educational policy in the past year “sometimes” or “often” with peers (95.1%), school administrators (87.1%), community members (72.6%), district administrators (69.4%), parents (62.9%), state legislators (45.1%), and the state department (40.3%).

While fellows’ contact with individual policy makers was limited following the fellowship year, their participation in public opportunities was frequent. Respondents reported communicating state educational policy “sometimes” or “often” through presentations, conversations, and panel discussions (91.9%). Respondents indicated their use of electronic outlets (such as district or local newsletters, emails, online blogs, and social media) and rated taking these communications avenues “sometimes” or “often” (45.2%). Respondents indicated that they “sometimes” or “often” influenced policy through news outlets (20.9%), such as radio, television, or printed media (i.e., newspapers). They “sometimes” or “often” sought to influence policy through outlets such as journal or magazine articles (11.3%). During the fellowship year, a goal was that participants would develop and use networks. Respondents reported varied levels of continued use of networks to advance state educational policy as “minimally” (29.8%), “moderately” (42.1%) or “significantly” (21.1%).

Legislators, state department officials, and local administrators interacted with fellows during their fellowship year. To learn if policy makers sought out participants’ opinions following the fellowship, a survey question was included. Respondents reported being contacted for their opinion on state policy “sometimes” or “often” at the local level by peers (88.7%), school administrators

(72.6%), community members (56.4%), district administrators (54.8%), and parents (45.2%). Participants reported less contact from state officials as “sometimes” or “often” by the state department (37.1%) and by state legislators (29.0%).

### Additional Data Analysis

Means and standard deviations for individual variables are reported in Table 1. In addition, a series of multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted to compare survey responses across cohort years and years of experience in education. Although some associations varied, findings revealed non-significant associations between the perceptions and years of experience among respondents across all items ( $p > .05$ ). Overall, the data suggest that participants perceive themselves as effective policy advocates with peers, parents, and administrators, but to a lesser degree with state officials. These findings also indicate that TEF program effectiveness is sustained over time across participants.

Table 1  
*Means and Standard Deviations of Items*

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. To what degree did participation in the Tennessee Educator Fellowship change your ability to effectively communicate state policy with the following stakeholders?			
Peers	68	3.68	.609
Parents	68	3.40	.794
Community Members	68	3.62	.713
School Admins	68	3.65	.540
District Admins	68	3.54	.762
State Legislators	68	3.69	.526
2. To what degree do you currently feel that you are an effective state policy communicator with the following stakeholders?			
Peers	68	3.51	.680
Parents	68	3.29	.734
Community Members	68	3.35	.728
School Admins	68	3.53	.657
District Admins	68	3.29	.754
State Legislators	68	3.12	.820
3. To what extent do the following stakeholders recognize you as an effective state policy advocate?			
Peers	68	3.59	.717
Parents	68	2.79	1.001

Table 1 (Cont'd.)  
*Means and Standard Deviations of Items*

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Community Members	68	2.81	.950
School Admins	68	3.41	.833
District Admins	67	2.93	1.063
State Legislators	67	2.42	1.047
4. In the past year, I have been contacted for my opinion on state policy by:			
Peers	62	3.29	.797
Parents	62	2.34	.922
Community Members	62	2.60	.877
School Admins	62	2.95	1.015
District Admins	62	2.52	1.020
State Legislators	62	1.97	.905
State Department	62	2.16	1.403
5. In the past year, I have initiated conversation on state policy with:			
Peers	62	3.60	.689
Parents	62	2.76	.918
Community Members	62	2.87	.896
School Admins	62	3.29	.857
District Admins	62	2.92	.997
State Legislators	62	2.39	.947
State Department	62	2.31	1.034
6. In the past year, I have communicated state policy through the following mediums:			
Face to face	62	3.40	.689
News outlets	62	1.73	.908
Other electronic outlets	62	2.40	1.063
Other print outlets	62	1.44	.738
7. In the past year, I have influenced the development of state policy at the:			
School Level	58	2.86	1.067
District Level	58	2.53	.995

Table 1 (Cont'd.)  
*Means and Standard Deviations of Items*

Item	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
State Level	58	2.07	.876
National Level	58	1.28	.586
8. In the past year, I have taken action in response to state policy implementation at the:			
School Level	58	3.31	.959
District Level	58	2.95	.944
State Level	58	2.45	1.012
National Level	58	1.50	.778
9. To what extent do you consider yourself a teacher leader in the following domains?			
Mentorship	57	3.60	.563
Curriculum Development	57	3.60	.651
Professional Development	57	3.63	.587
School Improvement	57	3.47	.734
10. To what extent are the following issues a barrier to your advocacy?			
Lack of Time	57	3.21	.750
Relationships with Peers	57	1.53	.734
Relationships with Administrators	57	1.70	.925
School Climate	57	1.98	.973
Personal Characteristics	56	1.61	.705
District Policies	57	1.93	.842
State Policies	57	1.81	.743
11. How informed are you on the following current state policies?			
3.209 Timing of Standards Review	57	2.86	.693
5.504 Tennessee Educator Preparation	57	2.81	.611
5.201 Teacher and Administrator Evaluation Policy	57	3.07	.593
12. To what degree have you continued using networks to advance state policy?			
Self	57	2.77	.866
13. How connected do you believe state policy advocacy has been to student outcomes?			
Self	57	3.37	.723

## Discussion and Future Research

Teachers, and those whose primary responsibility is working with students, such as counselors, interventionists, and librarians, have first-hand classroom experience and could be a part of state policy development in the initial stages thereby providing a strong link between policy and practice. The first research question sought to investigate how participants who have participated in the TEF perceive their advocacy and communication roles in state policy. Responses indicate that participants viewed their advocacy and communication as strongest with the groups closest to them and weakest with more distant policy makers. This perception might be driven by teacher beliefs that policy makers do not listen to them and are less inclined to contact them (Eckert et al., 2016; Hinnant-Crawford, 2016). Results also indicated that legislators rarely contact teachers for policy development advice further substantiating the teacher perception that they are not listened to at the state legislative level.

The second research question examined how participants who have completed TEF use their knowledge and skills to influence educational policy development and implementation. Respondents reported that they influenced the policy process through presentations, conversations, and panel discussions more often than readily accessible media tools, such as district or local newsletters, or social media. Because of how few respondents indicated that they used media for policy advocacy, we believe that these outlets have advocacy potential if used more frequently. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the power of social networking could increase the likelihood of enabling change (Coburn & Russell, 2008). An increased use of those tools would continue policy work and not require travel or additional funding. However, using media for such advocacy requires time, making it difficult for educators who have a full schedule in the school and classroom. Moreover, school and district administrators may not be proactive in providing teachers time for policy work, preferring instead that teacher leadership focus on coaching or mentoring peers.

The third research question sought to answer if, and how, participants continued their policy advocacy as time elapsed after their initial professional development. While it was encouraging to see that fellows from all cohorts reported continued policy advocacy actions, responses indicated that the communication link between practitioners and policy makers is strong at the local level but weak at the state level. Proximity and access to others are likely contributing factors (Coburn & Russell, 2008) because teacher leaders easily communicate with and influence those they see regularly but lack a consistent structure for accessing state officials. Opportunities for communicating with policy makers must be built into teachers' schedules if teacher leaders are to play a more active role in state policy development. Although the teachers in our study remained in the classroom during their fellowship year, they received some compensation, recognition, new learning opportunities, and connections. Through the support of the fellowship, activities were incorporated into teachers' schedules. Similar structures could be applied whereby school and district administrators incorporate policy work into teachers' schedules. A policy-training program such as TEF offers the benefit of allowing participants to merge policy advocacy with their work routines. Following fellowship completion, however, independently sustaining such effort requires that teacher leaders have the support and recognition of their supervisors, additional training, designated time, and ongoing communication opportunities with policy makers.

We agree with Eckert et al. (2016) that a new wave of teacher leadership is needed and that the definition of teacher leadership should be expanded to include "the practices through which teachers influence colleagues, principals, policy makers, and other potential stakeholders to improve teaching and learning" (p. 700). Using this definition, we examined the perspectives of participants

after a yearlong policy fellowship designed to increase their understanding of, communication regarding, and influence on state policy. This research suggests that teacher leaders could work within the state policy process and assist to address challenges that schools face. Specifically, teachers' potential influence on colleagues, principals, and policy makers could improve teaching and learning, thereby providing a needed link between policy and practice.

While TEF met its professional learning goals as responses indicated, comparing these perceptions with those who did not participate in a fellowship would be informative and promote further understanding of the impact of the TEF program. Future research could examine whether the participant and non-participant groups' perceptions were similar or different in policy advocacy. Future research could also delve deeper into the reasons some teachers continued policy activities and others did not so that additional barriers to policy participation might be identified, explored, and minimized. Additionally, research in other countries on the beliefs and actions of teacher involvement in governmental policies would be an interesting comparison.

### **Limitations**

The findings are limited in several ways. First, the data are drawn directly from survey respondents and may not be reflective of all participants in the fellowship. Second, participants who responded to the survey might have continued policy activity while participants who did not sustain that activity may have chosen not to respond. Third, the unequal number of fellows responding from various cohort years might have influenced the results (i.e., cohorts may be under- or overrepresented). However, the results provide a beginning understanding of teacher perceptions of advocacy and communication roles possible in state policy development following a professional learning program.

### **Conclusions**

The analysis of self-reported survey data led to the following conclusions. Teachers who participated in TEF believe that their advocacy and communication roles in shaping state policy influenced peers, school and district administrators, and community members. Their perceived influence on state policy, however, was limited. If teachers are to be an effective part of the state policy process, the barriers to policymaker accessibility must be removed, and more time allocated to policy work. Our belief, and thus the focus of this article, is that teacher leaders can serve in a more active advocacy role in state policy development thereby improving the educational system and increasing student learning. The findings suggest that teachers formally trained in policy through the TEF program might be motivated and appropriately informed to participate in advocacy actions. Furthermore, the results indicate that motivation and participation are sustained across cohorts and years of experience in education, indicating that the fellowship experience and training received through TEF is sustainable.

With continued policy work, teachers and those whose primary work is with students have the potential to significantly influence state educational policy. The knowledge and skills educators gain through advocacy can build a bridge between policy and practice and inform support and effective educational policy. In order to achieve these benefits, policy makers and district and school administrators must first recognize and value how teacher input in the policy process could influence student achievement and then provide the necessary structure and resources to support such actions.

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