

A Culture of High Expectations

Teacher Leadership at Pritzker College Prep





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Introduction

Relying on teachers as culture leaders is a solution embraced by many high-performing charter schools. In this profile, we focus on the design of the Grade Level Lead roles at Pritzker College Prep, a member of the Noble Network of Schools in Chicago. The successes of this school and network are well-documented: Of non-selective public high schools in Chicago, the Noble Network had the nine highest scores in the city on the ACT test, a marker of college readiness. Ninety-one percent of the Noble Network's student body receives free and reduced lunch, yet 100 percent of its graduates go on to college or post-secondary school.^{1,2}

Much has been written about the “no excuses” culture and extended instructional time of high-performing charter schools. Less, though, has been written about the staffing structure of these schools and the ways in which teacher leaders play a critical role in their success. Many high-performing charters rely on teacher leaders to construct and maintain the culture that is crucial to improving student outcomes. Because the creation and maintenance of a strong aspirational culture requires constant monitoring and reinforcing of expectations throughout a school, it is an impossible task for a principal alone.

The principal of Pritzker College Prep, Pablo Sierra, credits the school's success largely to its strong culture and the role played by its culture leads. His vision of the principalship is less focused on instructional leadership and more focused on school culture and leadership development. His view is supported by the school's 5Essentials score, calculated by the University of Chicago for all schools in Chicago Public Schools. The reports are based on extensive student and teacher surveys and assess schools on 22 measures of school climate and practice.

Despite its strong achievement results for students, Pritzker scores surprisingly low on indicators associated with strong instructional leadership. The school scores “neutral” on Effective Leaders and “weak” on Principal Instructional Leadership and Principal and Teacher Trust. The school excels, however, on measures that relate to teacher leadership and school culture. Pritzker scores “strong” on the Essentials' Collaborative Teachers and Supportive Environment registers. And on several measures the school earns the highest possible scale score, 99 out of 99. These include Collective Responsibility, Student Responsibility, Socialization of New Teachers, Classroom Disruptions, Student Safety, and Parent Involvement, with many other scores following close behind.³

The school's success is not based on a singular principal exercising most of the leadership in the building. Instead, the school has succeeded because there is a strong sense of shared ownership among both teachers and students and because exceedingly high cultural expectations lead students to tackle ambitious work, maintain focus, minimize disruptions, and aspire to post-secondary education. How did the school's leadership create this strong culture? What roles do teacher leaders play in the creation and maintenance of culture? And most importantly, what lessons can we learn from this model and what are the limitations of these lessons? This paper analyzes how teacher leader roles were developed as a mechanism for shaping and driving culture in this high-performing school.

Design for Impact

Pritzker College Prep has two goals: student growth and college graduation. Despite students arriving several grade levels behind, the school sets the expectation that all students will go to college or another post-secondary institution and aims to establish a strict culture to minimize distractions. Pablo Sierra, the founding principal at Pritzker, tasks the school's Grade Level Leads (sometimes referred to simply as "Leads") as culture leaders with responsibility for maintaining high academic and behavioral expectations for students and staff.

Pritzker has built significant responsibility into the Grade Level Lead role. Grade Level Leads drive the goal-setting and achievement agenda for their grade level. They work in concert with the Dean of Culture, Dean of Instruction, and Assistant Principals to ensure that student and faculty actions align with the values laid out in the school handbook. Within their teams, they are responsible for driving their grade's distinct culture, making adjustments as students mature and expectations change. For example, freshmen function under a strict code of conduct whereas seniors are allowed more independence. Grade Level Leads also have a voice in administrative decisions, participate in new teacher onboarding, and help look for candidates when a position opens. Sierra describes them as "mini principals."

At the beginning of the year, grade-level teams meet to decide on the appropriate response to each problematic behavior in their code of conduct. Every infraction, from coming unprepared to swearing in class, has established consequences for misbehavior. Teacher leaders align these expectations across their grade level teams at the beginning of the year and ensure that students are trained and invested in these expectations. For example, for student interruptions during class, the team decides at the beginning of the year whether students will receive a warning, a certain number of demerits, or detention. This alignment ensures that students receive consistent responses no matter whose class they are in. Grade Level Leads then report these policies to the deans, who enforce culture expectations in hallways and at lunch, while grade-level teams are responsible for behavior in the classroom. Throughout the rest of the year, Leads ensure fidelity to these decisions through constant observation, feedback, weekly team meetings, and one-on-one coaching as needed. According to Pam Johnson, Dean of Culture, all Grade Level Leads use their planning period for these responsibilities. The school is currently experimenting with offering some Leads additional release time in exchange for increased responsibilities.

Grade Level Leads are also ultimately responsible for monitoring student growth within their grade level. When "a student of concern" is identified, he or she is flagged and discussed at the weekly meetings. One Grade Level Lead, Matt McCabe, said that by monitoring student data on a regular basis, students of concern are identified early enough for the school to intervene effectively. McCabe adds, "Kids who fall through the cracks at other schools—they don't fall through the cracks at Pritzker." Principals and deans only step in for particularly challenging or recurring problems. Otherwise, Leads have the freedom to run their team as they choose.

The increased responsibility of Grade Level teams represents a departure from many other schools, where grade level chairs are largely administrative roles and where most decisions come from

more senior school leaders. In these schools, grade level leaders serve a “top down” function as they implement initiatives from above. At Pritzker, Grade Level Leads may take on responsibilities for delegated tasks, but they also play a “bottom up” function, actively informing the school’s overall strategy while leading their teams.

Know Your Context

Pritzker’s Grade Level Lead roles are well-suited to its context in several ways. From its founding, the school had a collaborative and distributive culture. Like many new charters, Pritzker started as a single grade level and grew into a full high school by adding grades year by year. In the early years, the whole staff met as a team to make key decisions, and they set cultural expectations for students at assemblies. However, as the school expanded, there were too many students across too many age groups to address all their needs at once. The staff, too, had grown so much that the full-staff meetings were inefficient.

Grade Level Leads were established to ensure that the school could maintain its collaborative culture while increasing efficiency and meeting the unique needs of each cohort of students. As new teachers arrive, Grade Level Leads are responsible for inducting them into the school culture, which still allows each grade-level team to have its own approach to innovation and experimentation.

Pritzker decided to use Grade Level Leads instead of more administrators based on its context. Why teachers rather than administrators? “There is strength—and credibility—in living it day in and day out,” said Pam Johnson, Dean of Culture at Pritzker. Leads are in their own classrooms every day and identify with their colleagues’ experiences there, which is critical to their credibility and success. Similarly, the leadership team at Pritzker depends on the insights that the Grade Level Leads bring from their classroom perspective; Grade Level Leads can often predict the effects initiatives will have on students and teachers better than the full-time administrators.

Lauren Boros, a former Grade Level Lead and current Assistant Principal, describes how this might work in practice. “We were implementing an ACT boot camp with juniors,” says Boros. “We met with the Junior Grade Level Leads to look at data, figure out what to target, and developed a plan for the boot camp with the Grade Level Leads as the leader in the conversation. The administration was saying we need to do this, but the Grade Level Lead was constructing the plan.” Similarly, Grant Erwin, a former Grade Level Lead and current Dean of Students, describes his role as a “middle man.” He sometimes takes the lens of the administration, talking to teachers about the bigger picture and the administrative perspective, while at other times he advocates for teachers to the administration. He understands both perspectives and serves as a key liaison.

On a practical level, Pritzker was able to attract teachers to the leadership role with only a modest salary increase because of the elevated status and improved future career opportunities it offered them. At Pritzker, Grade Level Leads receive a \$1,000 stipend per semester, which both the leadership team and the teacher leaders themselves see as mostly symbolic and not commensurate with the added workload and responsibilities they shoulder. Moreover, Leads do not receive extra release time, meaning they must carry their leadership duties in addition to their teaching load. The real incentive

then, as Pablo Sierra sees it, is that Leads garner leadership experience in a highly successful school. “Help me build a school,” he tells staff, “and I’ll help you become a leader and build your career.”

Sierra repeatedly described his teacher leaders as competitive and ambitious individuals—which means that they may not stay in their position long, drawn as they are into other school leadership positions. It is an attractive value proposition for high-achieving professionals: ambitious individuals are hired based on their commitment to excellence and promoted based on their instructional and collaborative skills. The Noble Network, and Pritzker in particular, is known for developing teachers who move into leadership roles in the network or go on to lead schools in other systems.

While some of these aspects are unique to Pritzker, others offer useful insights for other systems. Inducting teacher leaders may be a means for systems to balance collaboration with efficiency, and alignment with overall vision and culture, while respecting autonomy and encouraging innovation. In situations where leadership is based on observed teaching skill, teacher leaders may have more credibility than traditional administrators. Teacher leaders may also be better poised to predict the perceptions of their colleagues and alert school leaders to concerns before they become crises. Finally, some ambitious teachers may be willing to forgo release time and larger compensation if opportunities exist for career advancement. Pritzker’s approach is unlikely to be adopted wholesale in many systems, but it may serve as an inspiration and a template to be adapted by systems that want to encourage innovation and attract ambitious talent.

Define the Measures

Unlike the other teacher leadership models featured in this series, the Grade Level Chair roles at Pritzker were created and implemented without clear definition at the outset. Instead, the program began organically as a way to address the needs of the young school. As time progressed, the role has developed metrics similar to those used throughout Pritzker—college readiness, student growth, and consistency in meeting high behavioral expectations—but they are applied to the grade level as a whole when assessing the Leads’ performance. Boros shares, “We evaluate Grade Level Leads in similar ways to how we evaluate teachers. There are two matrices: One - cultural alignment ...and two—quantitative growth. We look at Grade Level Lead scores and the entire grade level. Are we seeing growth versus when someone else was in that position?”

Build Strategically

The structure of the Grade Level Lead role shows the principal’s willingness to take risks and be flexible. As Pam Johnson said, “It took an incredible amount of flexibility on Sierra’s part to train his best teachers up and possibly out of the classroom.” This approach requires a principal who is willing to give up some control and who can trust that teachers will be up to the challenge. It also requires a long-term perspective on investing in teachers’ leadership development not only as a way to address current needs, but also to make the job attractive to top talent and to create a pipeline for leaders who will advance beyond school-level roles. Pritzker and Sierra took the risk—and while the school

does lose Leads to other leadership positions, it also elevates their status and amplifies their impact while they remain at the school.

In selecting Grade Level Leads, Lauren Boros, an Assistant Principal, said that the administrative team looks for “teachers who have a way of inspiring people but are not afraid to have difficult conversations. They have proven themselves in the classroom, with quantifiable data to show it, and they’re super culturally aligned.” Sierra said that he looks to “bring in smart and competitive people who will work hard and create a constant sense of urgency around data.”

The selection process for Grade Level Leads also has evolved over time. Initially, there was no application process at Pritzker College Prep—teachers were chosen based on who had the greatest student growth and longest tenure. Eventually, an application process was developed; anyone on staff can apply, but school leaders usually have an idea of who they want to fill the roles and encourage those teachers to complete the application. This informal approach at times receives criticism within the school, Sierra says, but overall the selection process yields good results. This may reflect the challenge of transparently selecting and promoting teacher leaders, even in aligned environments like Pritzker College Prep. Teacher leaders are often promoted on a range of qualitative and quantitative data, including student achievement, leadership potential, and culture fit. These data may not be readily visible to other classroom teachers who have fewer opportunities to observe their peers.

At Pritzker, training consists of a two-week summer professional development for all staff, during which Grade Level Leads determine their grade-specific goals and develop norms around culture. Throughout the year Leads meet every other week with the administration and follow a high-level scope and sequence of topics. A Lead can also see agendas and minutes from previous years’ meetings, so past practice serves as a resource for setting priorities and planning for the year. Grade Level Leads are observed leading meetings and are given feedback, and members of the leadership team are available to coach them through challenging situations.

Pritzker is still trying to strike a balance between supporting Leads and giving them autonomy. There have been some years in which the leadership team has prescribed too much structure, making the Leads feel stifled; other years, they have given too much free reign and Leads have felt unsupported. The ultimate goal is to empower teacher leaders to make the right decisions on their own with the guidance and support of the administration.

At the same time, Grade Level Leads and others say that the role isn’t sustainable over the long term if they aren’t given sufficient release time in their schedules. “The administration must figure out a way to make it work,” said Grant Erwin, because with too heavy of a workload, “either (my own) instruction will suffer or you won’t get quality observation and feedback” without enough time allowed for both. In addition, while Leads don’t take the role for the financial compensation, a stipend that more closely matches the hard work and expertise required would make it more attractive and rewarding. This would make the program more expensive, which needs to be addressed in any system trying to adapt this approach.

Conclusion

What can we learn from the example of Grade Level Leads at Pritzker College Prep? It is significant that strong cultural leadership by a school leader can spur high academic achievement for students without the principal serving as a heroic leader, involved in all aspects of the school. Because of both the strong sense of shared responsibility by teacher leaders and consistent implementation of strict student expectations, Pritzker achieves outstanding results despite surveys indicating lower scores for instructional leadership.

In the Pritzker model, teacher leaders are the roles best positioned to lead culture. Because of their proximity to other teachers and to students, they are ideally suited to align and monitor expectations. They have credibility with their peers and can help guide school leaders to choose the most effective strategies. An important feature to keep in mind is that Pritzker's Grade Level Leads are an explicit steppingstone towards future career opportunities (so the goal is not to keep teacher leaders in place as long as possible after they are trained). The possibility of advancement somewhat mitigates the need for substantial compensation and generates interest among teachers who aspire to lead.

These lessons, however, are not without their limitations. The teacher leader roles at Pritzker were established without the constraints of traditional policies or collective bargaining agreements. Principals at Noble Street have significantly more autonomy over staffing, schedule, and school policy than their district counterparts. As a new school, Pritzker was able to build a mission-aligned and collaborative culture from the beginning. At established schools, these roles would require significantly more change management to implement. Likewise, the teacher leader roles at Pritzker benefit from an aggressive talent strategy that permeates the Noble Network. As the network continues to expand, new leadership opportunities become available, increasing the attractiveness of the Grade Level Lead as an intermediate step towards further career advancement. These opportunities are less common in more established, bureaucratic systems. Finally, many Grade Level Leads identified the role as unsustainable over time without more release time and compensation. Thus, the role as currently structured may not be an attractive alternative for systems prioritizing the long-term retention of teacher leaders.

The essential role of teacher leadership is a largely overlooked feature in the success of many high-performing charter schools. While the aspirational, performance-oriented culture often is discussed, the critical role of teacher leaders is not always acknowledged. Teacher leaders at Pritzker College Prep in the Noble Street Network run their teams with greater autonomy than in traditional systems—setting policy, analyzing data, and holding other staff accountable. They serve as a useful model for the level of teacher leader responsibility required to maintain a strong culture, and a powerful image of teacher leadership in service of student learning.

Endnotes

- ¹ “25 Doing the Most with the Least: Best of the Changemakers,” The Daily Beast, (August 27, 2014) <http://www.thedailybeast.com/galleries/2014/08/27/25-high-performing-low-income-changemaker-schools.html#259dcbab-0837-482a-9432-6ab528ef74c7>.
- ² Student Demographics & Achievements, the Noble Network, <http://noblenetwork.org/students-families/student-demographics-achievements>.
- ³ 5Essentials School Reports, Chicago Public Schools, <https://cps.5-essentials.org>.



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One Dupont Circle • Suite 700 • Washington, D.C. • 20036
EducationInfo@aspeninstitute.org

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