

# Fostering Teacher Leadership in North Syracuse

Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

BY JOHN KURYLA

**N**estled in the middle of central New York is the village of North Syracuse in Onondaga County, where I have lived all my life. Our area's claim to fame is that we are the "snowball capital" of the United States. Each winter, we typically get more snow than just about anywhere else in the country. For a small town, the snow here packs quite a punch, and as a longtime educator, I like to think our teachers do, too.

For the last nine years, I've been the president of the North Syracuse Education Association (NSEA). With 790 members, NSEA is among the smaller locals of the American Federation of

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Teachers. But despite our lack of size, we're pretty powerful in terms of getting work done as a profession and as a union. We have a long history dating back to the early 1970s of being one of the only locals in the area going on strike to improve learning conditions for students and working conditions for teachers.

The last several years have been quite tumultuous. We've gone through an economic downturn and three superintendents. At one point, the school district had to deal with a multi-million-dollar deficit owed to the state for failed paperwork filing. But we've worked through these issues and now enjoy a strong degree of labor-management collaboration, in which our teacher leaders play a significant role.

## Enabling Teachers to Grow

I could not have predicted that one day I would be helping teachers become leaders in our district. In many ways, I used to see myself as an accidental teacher leader. Twenty years

ago, I began teaching in North Syracuse. I started out as a health educator teaching Cicero-North Syracuse High School students about themselves as well as social and community issues. Early on in my career, I learned of a grant our district was eligible for that was focused on developing a systemwide wellness program for students and faculty. I brought it to our district leaders, and the message I received from them at the time was, well, this is valuable, but it's not something we can support. The grant was really not lucrative; it was only \$10,000. Although I was disappointed by the district's response, I was not deterred.

So I went to our union president, at the time Sylvia Matousek. I explained how the grant would help us address the needs of students and teachers. She took hold of the idea, and we presented it to our district steering committee. From that point, it actually took off because the union supported me and was able to really push through the red tape of the district.

With the grant, we conducted a wellness survey that found we were doing pretty well meeting the students' needs in terms of wellness, but there was a dearth of information around supporting teachers and *their* wellness. As a result, the union helped the district create a wellness committee that did a great deal of work helping our members reach their health goals and manage stress.

Back then, I didn't understand that my advocacy on behalf of my colleagues was part of what is now broadly called "teacher leadership." But Sylvia did. She showed me how my pursuit of this grant tied into the bigger picture.

When Sylvia retired and I succeeded her as NSEA president, I continued looking for ways to advocate for teachers. And after the AFT established the Teacher Leaders Program (TLP), I jumped at the chance for our members to develop the leadership skills Sylvia had seen in me all those years ago.

In 2014, I attended a teacher leadership meeting sponsored by our state affiliate, the New York State United Teachers, where Marjorie Brown from the AFT's national office discussed the TLP. She spoke to us about the need for classroom teachers to inform policymakers about what works—and what doesn't work—in the classroom. She explained how the AFT had created the program to support local unions in building networks of classroom teachers who would research specific issues or policies they wanted to improve. My colleagues and I on the union's executive board saw this as a wonderful opportunity to connect classroom practice to education policy, so we submitted an application to join the TLP.

During the first two years, we had two cohorts of 15 teachers participate. The AFT provided training and materials, and our teachers conducted action research on topics of their choosing. In the third year, we decided to broaden the group beyond just our union. So we started pulling in members from unions in neighboring school districts, such as Chittenango and Jamesville-DeWitt. Learning about our differences and similarities in

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terms of where we work, and the values we all share, was very enriching.

Developing teacher leaders is one of my most important roles as a union president. Because when people are passionate about something, you want to open up avenues for them. This program provides those opportunities. What teacher leaders have in common is the passion for the work they do. I think it really comes down to the passion that they have for their profession, for their colleagues, and for their kids. They are striving to make the lives of children better. Too often in education, people spend their time acting as goalies and blocking options for improve-

ment. It's much more productive to be a facilitator allowing people to take risks, learn from them, and then grow.

### Conducting Action Research

Engagement in the Teacher Leaders Program not only has produced positive changes in classroom practice and school district policy, but also has been professionally transformative for individual educators. I remember meeting a ninth-grade Spanish teacher who wanted to participate in the program. At our first meeting, she came right out and said, "Look, I am not the person who likes to go and speak in front of a crowd or go to a legislator." And I said, "Well, public speaking is part of this program." We really had to encourage her to stick with it, and she did. Her research project focused on a school policy that promoted students who barely passed Spanish in eighth grade and then moved them into ninth-grade Spanish without the necessary instructional supports. The school's policy was just to place the struggling students all in one class, but the teachers did not receive any additional supports to help these students catch up.

Through her research, this teacher showed the district that if additional supports were provided either over the summer or at the start of the school year, and if the students who barely passed eighth-grade Spanish were distributed evenly across the ninth-grade Spanish classes, then they would achieve much higher levels of success by the end of the year. Based on her work, the district changed how struggling students were assigned to classes. District officials also gave teachers greater latitude in their work with classroom pacing guides, more training around working with struggling students, and additional time to review student growth and plan lessons.

## What makes this program worthwhile is that research projects don't just sit on a shelf.

As part of the TLP, participants present their research to other teachers, school administrators, and legislators and policymakers. Initially, this teacher struggled with the public speaking piece. But she overcame her fear so that she could do the right thing for her students.

Another teacher leader, who taught high school science, focused her research on multitasking with technology and its impact on student achievement. She worked with her students on a project showing them the dangers of multitasking, which included learning important life lessons, such as not texting while driving. Her work also explored how being mindful and focusing on one thing at a time contributes to student success.\*

The feedback she received from her students showed her that they were not only understanding the dangers of multitasking with technology, but also, according to self-reports they completed after the project, changing their behaviors. As a former health teacher, that to me is huge.

Another memorable project went beyond the classroom to affect district policy on special education. Last year, three of our participants did independent work and then aligned their focus on our special education program and the need to modify it. In special education, we have a full inclusion model where consulting teachers, who are special education experts, meet with our classroom teachers to talk about the needs of the students and to coteach certain content. When it's done well, you can't tell the difference between the consulting teacher and the classroom teacher.

The challenge we were facing in our district was that our consulting teachers were split between multiple grade levels and needed to teach multiple curricula. As a result, they didn't have time for the coplanning required for coteaching at various grade levels, because the minute you split your time between two grade levels, you've really just doubled not only the amount of content you have to learn but also the amount of time you have to actually coplan.

Our teacher leaders presented research showing that enabling teachers to have quality planning time can help student learning. That data highlighted for the district the need to reduce the number of consulting teachers who are spread across grade levels so that they could effectively coplan with teachers at the same grade level. Based on the teachers' research, our district is now making an effort to implement dedicated coplanning time for consulting teachers at each grade level to bolster the coteaching experience in special education.

### Putting Research into Practice

What makes this program worthwhile is that these research projects don't just sit on a shelf. Instead, our teachers' research is often used by district administrators. For the research presentations, various directors and even the superintendent attend to hear what the teacher leaders have found and to take notes and make sure that certain administrators or parent groups know about this work. So we've been able to take the data and then distribute it to key decision makers and other stakeholders.

The beauty of this program is that we can adapt it to local needs. However, in the beginning of the year, before we discuss those needs, our teacher leader meetings focus on action research. We review several how-to guides and watch

videos of past teacher leaders presenting their research. And then we discuss the intended and unintended consequences of policy. We ask each other: How does that policy impact our work? What do we see in our classrooms and in our school communities? What do we see in our county and in our state?

Once they decide on a topic, some participants work on their project consistently throughout the year. Others start researching right away and then work nonstop on their project until they get it done, which could take three to five weeks.

We try to honor how participants choose to do their work, but we've put in some safeguards. For instance, by January, we need to have a very clear idea about each teacher's topic, and we collect some of their drafts to see that work is being completed.

Each September, I ask for a volunteer to facilitate the group. And every year, I get four or five people who are interested, and then I meet with them individually for a conversation about their vision and goals, and how they believe this program fits in with their own philosophy and how it connects to unionism.

The support from the AFT for this program runs deep. I know AFT President Randi Weingarten values the program, not only through the professionals dedicated to running it but through the stipends all participants receive. Expecting people to come in and do this really important, rich work simply because it's the right thing to do isn't enough; they need to be compensated for their time. The amount is small, though, so we know people here aren't doing it because of the money. They're doing it because it helps them grow and helps their schools and students.

But Randi also makes room for us and invests personally in this program. I know the pace she keeps. And when we start talking about valuing the idea of time and listening and giving



\*For more on technology, multitasking, and student learning, see "Have Technology and Multitasking Rewired How Students Learn?" in the Summer 2010 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/willingham-summer-10.pdf](http://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/willingham-summer-10.pdf).

back, that personal support is important. Even at the highest levels of this organization, there's this idea of building capacity not only with your mega locals but with smaller ones like North Syracuse. Randi values all AFT members, and we know it. On top of that, we get her feedback. She talks to us once a year and specifically calls out the individuals for the work they do. That goes a long way.

Something else that makes the TLP special is how it brings people who don't know each other together. By the second or third meeting, these people are a team. They are spread throughout our district and neighboring districts. Oftentimes, they have not met each other beforehand, and now they're here talking about education and what students need and where schools can improve. After the program, participants repeatedly thank me for giving them the ability to meet with colleagues and talk about important education issues.

The program has helped participants begin to see themselves not just as teacher leaders but as union leaders. A facilitator this year told me she never saw herself as a unionist or a union-minded person, which is funny because her mother was one of our building chairs for a number of years. But the TLP helped her see the value of her union in leading on issues of professionalism.

In fact, teacher leaders build our union capacity and member engagement. I see it most predominantly with our newer teachers who come on board. They really don't have a solid understanding of what the union is or does. Through the TLP, the union enables a number of like-minded people to come together and discuss important issues in the school. When you're teaching kids, you don't have the opportunity to do that. And neither do you often have the chance to speak with school board members or county legislators.

In the winter, I make sure that our teacher leaders and I visit our state legislative offices. There, we discuss issues that pertain to public education. And these teacher leaders are credible. The legislators here already know me, but when I bring in my teacher leaders, it provides them with a different perspective. Through such meetings, teacher leaders can see the power of their own voice and the power of their profession. They see firsthand how they can share what they know with people who have the ability to create change.

Besides talking with legislators, our teacher leaders speak with teachers outside the program to share what they're learning. In fact, our teacher leaders have homework assignments in which they must go back to their school buildings and discuss topics from teacher leader meetings. We also make it a point to welcome visitors to our meetings. For example, at an upcoming TLP meeting, two school board members will come to talk about our school board, how it functions, and the issues that the board currently finds pressing. This is a really rich topic for our teachers to hear.

A lot of times, people see unionists as fist-pounding individuals focused on the contract. But when we start talking

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about policy and its implications for the work we do in our classrooms, they tell me they didn't realize teachers had the power to inform policy or that it is part of our work. Informing policy and advocating for our students is absolutely our work, and it is how we're going to change the system. This program gives us the platform to explain that we know what we're doing because we're in the classroom with students, and by the way, here's the research that proves that what we're advocating for works.

For teachers who have been in an environment where they know they have a voice, and for teachers looking to share more of themselves and learn more in the process and be a support for their colleagues, the TLP is the place to go. It's going to give them not only an idea of how the school system works and how the union works, but also a road map to help create real change in the system. And it will help them to recognize that for any school system or corporation or business, there's a path and a process. This is the best model to develop those leadership characteristics across the board.



In our district, teacher leadership extends beyond the Teacher Leaders Program. Since 2011, our educators have participated in a successful Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program—a hallmark of strong labor-management collaboration—in which veteran teachers mentor and coach probationary teachers for three to four years before they come up for tenure.<sup>1</sup> In fact, a facilitator in our TLP is also a consultant teacher in PAR. Through both PAR and teacher leaders, it's clear that our union values improving the system through the contributions of educators.

In today's climate, being progressive when it comes to professionalism is how we're going to move our union forward. I continue to hear teachers say we need to be treated like professionals. Everything that we've done to empower teachers through the Teacher Leaders Program and PAR shows that we truly are taking care of our profession. □

<sup>1</sup>For more on Peer Assistance and Review, see "Taking the Lead" in the Fall 2008 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/goldstein.pdf](http://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/goldstein.pdf).