Teacher Leadership Toolkit: Principals
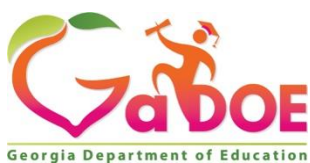
Growing and Sustaining Your Teacher Leaders

Introduction

This guidance document is provided to encourage the broad practice, cultivation, and effective deployment of teacher leadership in schools and districts across Georgia. Over the past two decades, there have been canons of research and thought leadership produced on this topic. The seminal works guiding the field and the thinking behind this document are listed in the References section.

Despite the prevalence and clarity regarding the importance of optimizing teacher leadership in effective schools, when we convened a cross-section of Georgia's education practitioners including teachers, principals, superintendents, higher education and professional learning partners, we heard that the practice of teacher leadership is not mature or broadly implemented in Georgia. Teachers early in their careers do not routinely encounter clear opportunities to take on meaningful leadership roles. Likewise, teachers late in their careers have too few opportunities to be recognized, utilized, or rewarded for their efforts and wisdom.

There are bright spots across the state where teacher leadership is thriving. Those places are distinguished by school leaders with a clear vision for sharing leadership with teachers, understanding that the most ambitious goals for student achievement can only be realized if leadership, decision-making, and action are distributed broadly throughout a school. Indeed, there are some school systems where teacher leadership thrives across schools and in those districts, central office leaders recognize, encourage, scaffold, and reward school leaders who successfully deploy teacher leaders in the day-to-day leadership work of the school.

Whether you are a teacher aspiring to become a teacher leader, an underutilized teacher leader, a principal, a superintendent, or a policy maker, this guidance document is for you. In it, you will find recommendations and resources that will help you engage others at your school or district in dialogue and planning to optimize the untapped teaching and leadership talent already inside your school buildings. Together, with other instructional leaders, we can bring about strong school cultures that connect every child with a bright, successful future.

Organization of the Documents

In each of the toolkits you will find guidance and resources targeted to specific groups: teachers, principals, central office leaders, and policy makers and funders. As resources are added and updated, the toolkits will expand. Version numbers will be included in the footer, along with publication dates.

Acknowledgements

This document was developed by members of the Teacher Leadership Task Force, convened and facilitated by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC), the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), and the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI). We are sincerely grateful to these Georgia educators, educational leaders, and teacher and leader educators who contributed significant time and professional expertise to this project.

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Other Teacher Leadership Toolkits:
- **Teacher Leadership for Teachers**
- **Central Office: Encouraging and Supporting Principals and Teacher Leaders**
- **Policy Makers and Funders: What is Teacher Leadership and Why is it Important**

Common Definitions of Teacher Leadership & Our Beliefs

There are several commonly accepted definitions of teacher leadership within or informed by relevant literature, including the following:

> *Teacher leaders are defined as highly effective teachers who take the initiative to serve (or are appointed) at their schools to educate and encourage their colleagues with the goal of enhancing student achievement and teacher satisfaction.*

> *"Teacher leadership is the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of the school community to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, pp. 287-288).*

From these definitions, as well as other findings from within the literature, we believe the following about Teacher Leadership and have developed this guidance document according to these beliefs:

> *Teacher Leadership is the process by which highly effective and empowered teachers serve as catalysts to facilitate continuous improvement resulting in an enhanced culture of teacher engagement, student learning, and achievement.*

We believe Teacher Leadership:

- Encourages collaborative and distributed leadership;
- Allows teachers to maintain focus on classroom teaching while enabling contributions to other leadership roles;
- Enables teacher leaders to step out of the classroom to lead, if desired;
- Creates opportunities for teacher leaders to influence colleagues toward collective action that promotes student growth; and
- Recognizes teacher leaders as a critical part of continuous school improvement.

Principal Guidance Document

The Teacher Leader Role

Teacher leaders:

- Are individuals who self-identify as a teacher leader

- Are intrinsically motivated to come forward to share ideas

- Seek opportunities to implement research-based practices

- Collect, analyze, and effectively use data to improve student achievement

- Demonstrate professional demeanor (positive, calm, flexible, reliable, punctual)

- Communicate professionally to students, parents or guardians, district and school personnel, and other stakeholders

- Build relationships with students, parents or guardians, district and school personnel, and other stakeholders

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Examples of Teacher Leadership roles include but are not limited to the following:

- A teacher who encourages colleagues without an intimidating approach

- A teacher who bridges gaps between teachers (veterans, inexperienced)

- A teacher who shares resources and knowledge with other colleagues (requested by administration or recognized by colleagues)

- A teacher who acts in an official role, such as a mentor, instructional coach, grade-level chair, department chair, etc.

- A teacher who acts in an unofficial role as an expert in a specific content (i.e. cooperative learning, differentiation, subject content, flexible grouping, data analysis, classroom management)

Advice for Principals to Optimize Teacher Leadership

- Tame your fear of sharing leadership decision making with teachers. Reflect on the reasons why you feel hesitant or anxious about distributing leadership responsibility. How are those fears holding you back as a leader?

- Cultivate curiosity about who your teachers are and what they know. Practice asking questions of teachers to seek to understand rather than telling them what you know.

- Reimagine teacher leadership as a vehicle to drive your school to heights you haven't conceived - not to optimize the school as it is today. You need them to help you co-craft that picture.

As the duties and responsibilities of a school principal continue to expand, administrators are often looking for new ways in which to more effectively manage their workload. Recent paradigm shifts amending the role of the principal from a managerial leader to that of a transformational one have left many principals drowning in a mound of responsibilities; indeed, this has caused many principals to look for new answers beyond bearing all of the load themselves. Teacher evaluation, school safety, climate and culture, instructional demands, digital technology implementation, accountability, human resources, and the like have all left many principals wondering how any one person can possibly handle all of those responsibilities effectively without dropping a ball in the process.

Download this toolkit to access guidance aimed at helping principals optimize teacher leadership. Topics addressed include:

- Distributed leadership,

- Barriers to leadership distribution,

- How to grow teacher leaders,

- How to sustain teacher leaders, and

- Enacting transformational leadership.

Distributed Leadership

A growing body of literature suggests that expecting one person to effectively manage all of those responsibilities is impossible. Instead, researchers are suggesting that distributed leadership may be the answer. While distributed leadership shows promise in helping principals manage the multifaceted aspects of their day, researchers are finding that the unintentional benefits of distributed leadership extend far beyond the positive results for the principal. Instead, distributed leadership also increases teacher efficacy and morale and builds positive buy-in from the staff to the mission of the school. The results have significant implications from a pragmatic standpoint as well as from one centered upon school improvement.

According to Harris and Spillane (2008), distributed leadership "acknowledges the work of all individuals who contribute to leadership practice, whether or not they are formally designated or defined as leaders (p. 31)." Schools are full of well-educated hard working individuals who are completely capable of assisting with the leadership of the school. With a clearly defined vision of teaching and learning espoused by the leadership team or administrative team of the school, many teachers and support staff can effectively assist in making that vision a reality.

Spillane (2005) asserts that interactions between "leaders" in the school (formal and informal) become much more important than the actual designation of individuals as leaders. Although positional leaders, such as grade level chairs, department chairs, committee chairs, etc. are important, many other leaders emerge in a distributed leadership model, many of whom hold no such formal designation. He further suggests that as informal leaders play off one another, that an interdependency emerges between their actions. Trust builds as each staff member looks to their colleagues for support and guidance.

Natsiopoulou and Giouroukakis (2010) propel the idea of distributing leadership one step further in suggesting a fully distributed and democratic model of school governance.

- For their study, they engaged with a high school in Greece implementing distributed, democratic leadership and they found that this model "advanced the efficient implementation of decisions, maximizes the range of knowledge and experience that go into administration, makes all key administrative decisions visible to all, holds everyone accountable for the effective management of the school, promotes harmonious administration, cultivates civic goals of schooling, and may likely increase teacher retention" (need a citation here).

- In their model, the principal shares authority and power allowing teachers to take the lead in assuming responsibility either independently or as a group. Teachers participate in mandatory assemblies aimed at informing the school's population on educational and administrative agendas and then a vote is taken for the common good. Teachers assume responsibility for various tasks such as organizing and scoring school wide exams, ordering and distributing textbooks, maintaining and digitizing student records, completing statistical analyses of student data, and responding to parent inquiries.

Although schools in the United States are not typically organized in this fashion, the idea of including teacher leaders in the governance of the school will go a long way in effectively distributing the leadership of the school to those on the front line with the students.

Barriers to Leadership Distribution

Although distributed leadership shows great promise in assisting schools in reform, obstacles also exist and they must be addressed before distributed leadership can effectively be used. Harris (2004) identified several barriers that impede effective leadership distribution.

- First, for distributed leadership to work, those in formal leadership must relinquish

power to others in the organization. Such a release of control can be very difficult to some leaders.
- Secondly, "top-down" hierarchies must be broken down in order to allow more "grassroots" efforts within the school. Again, the leader must relinquish control to allow internal efforts to grow.
- Finally, for distributed leadership to be effective, authority must be stretched over groups of individuals for decision-making, and not merely a delegation to responsibility to a select few.

Research is clear that distributed leadership can have both a pragmatic and school improvement benefit when properly implemented. As some of the leadership burden is lifted from the principal, positive effects on pedagogy, school culture, and educational quality are also realized (Harris, 2004). Distributed leadership may very well be the key to effective educational reform for which leaders have been searching for decades.

How to Grow Teacher Leaders

Principals looking to adopt a model of distributed leadership within their organizations should consider the following action steps toward fostering teacher leadership among colleagues:

1) **Implement a culture and practice of distributed leadership:** Brooks, Scribner, and Eferakorho (2004) and Heck and Hallinger (2009) recommend principals practice distributed leadership, which requires principals to empower teachers to work collaboratively toward the goal of school improvement. Distributed leadership leads to "a sustained focus on strategies aimed at the improvement of teaching and learning (e.g., fostering curricular standards and alignment, developing instruction, providing tangible support for students, improving professional capacity, sustaining a focus on academic improvement)" (Heck & Hallinger, 2009, p. 681).

2) **Emphasize the role of teacher leaders in professional learning communities (PLCs):** Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) emphasize the role of teacher leaders in PLCs with the overarching goal of student learning. The success of PLCs requires principals and other school administrators to share power, authority, and decision-making with teachers. A supportive culture for PLCs requires time, financial resources, constructive feedback, recognition of improved professional practices, and training to develop an

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understanding of the purpose and power of the PLCs. When empowered teacher leaders facilitate the implementation of PLCs, schools can be transformed and student learning increased. PLCs lead to participatory decision-making, a shared sense of purpose, collaborative work, and joint responsibility for outcomes (Muijs & Harris, 2003), which further support a distributed leadership culture. Reason and Reason (2007) assert that "creating a professional learning community encourages teams of teacher leaders to help one another grow and evolve as leaders and learners" (p. 39).

3) **Develop and implement training to build teacher leaders through coaching and feedback:** Lieberman and Friedrich (2010) emphasize the ongoing development of teacher leadership through lateral means among colleagues: "The mentoring process involves coaching and feedback, modeling, provision for leadership experiences, training, and participation in arenas outside of the classroom and school" (p. 427). Through these developmental activities, teachers build their identities as leaders and demonstrate these informally and formally (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010).

How to Sustain Teacher Leaders

Educational reformers have long claimed school leadership is a crucial component to any reform of education, secondary only to the very act of teaching (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). This same research suggests good teachers will eventually leave schools where there are ineffective school leaders, especially in urban educational environments. Therefore, developing effective leaders becomes a vital part of the process in recruiting and retaining the best teachers. Leaders must promote and sustain an environment stable enough to attract, maintain, and support the further development of good teachers.

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Daniel Pink in his 2009 book *Drive* synthesized research from across several disciplines that help us understand human motivation. In professions like teaching that require high cognitive demand to be successful, the most impactful combination of factors that motivate high performance are autonomy, mastery, and purpose. That is, when people have the opportunity to self-direct their work, when they have continued opportunities to refine their craft toward achieving mastery, and when their work has purpose, those factors are more motivating and rewarding than financial incentives.

As a school leader, you have control over all three levers:

- Is your school one where teachers have balanced autonomy in making decisions about instruction?

- Do they have opportunities to pursue mastery - to be constantly improving their craft - as part of their day-to-day work routines?

- Do they know and are they reminded of what the larger purposes their work serves? If not, it is the leader who is responsible for creating that environment.

If you answered "Yes" to those questions, have you double-checked your answers with teachers who will tell you the truth?

Enacting Transformational Leadership

Transformational leaders focus their efforts on the capacities and motivation of classroom teachers, thus improving the quality of teaching. Teacher self-efficacy can be defined as 'individual teachers' beliefs in their own ability to enact certain pedagogical practices that are required to attain given educational goals.

Transformational leaders do four things:

1. **Set direction**: Develop a shared vision, foster the acceptance of group goals, and communicates high expectations.
2. **Develop people**: Provide individualized support and intellectual stimulation, and model valued behaviors, beliefs and values.
3. **Optimize the organization**: Implement practices focused on strengthening the school culture, build structures that allow collaboration, and engage parents and the wider community.
4. **Improve the instructional program**: Prioritize effective staffing, provide instructional support to teachers, monitor school activities, and buffer staff from distractions to their work.

Resources for Principals

- How to Best Use Your Effective Teacher Leader Self Assessment – Rubric for Teacher leadership – Self-assessment for principals

- How to Identify Teacher Leaders – Research Brief from the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI): Identifying Teacher Leaders: Getting the Right People in the Right Positions

- Teacher autonomy https://www.edutopia.org/discussion/administrators-empower-your-teachers

- Teacher autonomy https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/39491

- Principal autonomy https://tntp.org/blog/post/empowering-principals-in-the-right-ways

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