

# EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: October 21, 2014

Published in Print: October 22, 2014, as **Building the Capacity for Teacher Leadership**

## COMMENTARY

# Clearing the Way for Teacher Leadership

By **Barnett Berry**

America's public schools face a future of rapid change, intensifying complexity, and growing uncertainty. All high school graduates must be ready for college and careers, and to be successful in a globalized economy. [← Back to Story](#)

Yet, despite school reforms fueled by the No Child Left Behind Act and the Race to the Top initiative, even **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has noted** that American students' performance on international tests is characterized by "stagnation."

The biggest challenges facing principals include managing shrinking resources, serving learners who have special needs, developing the skills and finding the time to meaningfully assess teaching effectiveness, and engaging parents and community. No wonder that, in a 2013 survey conducted by the MetLife Foundation, the vast majority of today's principals reported that their jobs have become "too complex."

It is time for a bold brand of school leadership, for principals to collaborate with expert teachers who still teach regularly, but who also have the time, space, and incentives to develop their own ideas. Sound evidence backs this shift: In their research, **economists Clement (Kirabo) Jackson and Elias Bruegmann have made a strong case** for how teacher-led professional learning fuels student learning.

Other researchers—including **Yvonne Goddard and her colleagues, in a 2007 study**—have found that students are more successful in mathematics and reading when they attend schools with higher levels of teacher collaboration.

And we now know that top-performing jurisdictions, such as Singapore and Shanghai, support student learning by investing in and elevating teachers as leaders.

Unfortunately, as researcher Mark Smylie pointed out in a 1990 article in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, while teachers in the United States have been "looked to with increasing regularity as agents of school and classroom change," the stark reality is that their leadership is recognized only when supervisors either "anoint" or "appoint" them.

The concept of distributed leadership is not new. Yet the practice of this distribution assumes a



—iStockphoto

principal or other "school leader" (not a teacher) is the source of authority, who then delegates or shares authority to make specific decisions or off-loads myriad instructional and administrative tasks.

My organization, the Center for Teaching Quality, or CTQ, recently surveyed 50 administrators from more than 30 school districts and nonprofits, mostly those that had recently won federal grants to advance teacher leadership. Although the focus was supposed to be on cutting-edge career pathways and performance pay, the vast majority of interviewees could not envision teachers leading in roles other than instructional coach or, perhaps, peer evaluator.

These organizations supported over 500 teacher leaders, but only a handful of the administrators managing the grants had identified strategies to sustain the leadership roles after the federal dollars dissipated. Most of the interviewees struggled to "imagine" a teacher in a hybrid role, assuming that teachers could lead only if they were released fully from the classroom or took on extra responsibilities after their typical teaching day.

Unfortunately, even in 2014, school schedules allow little time for teachers to design and lead lesson studies, conduct action research, launch virtual learning communities, advance school-community partnerships, and develop and score new student assessments. Little space is available for teachers to lead inside their schools and districts—or to spread their expertise across their states and nation (and the globe).

**"All too often, principals are wary of teacher leaders, primarily because of uncertainty about how to identify and utilize them."**

The CTQ has supported 23 "teacherpreneurs" over the last four years, actually paying school districts to reduce teachers' loads and free up their time to incubate and execute their own ideas and advance their profession. We have also encouraged them to use their time to enhance teaching and learning in their districts.

For example, teacherpreneur Jessica Cuthbertson, a highly effective middle school language-arts teacher in the Aurora, Colo., public schools, has led a virtual community of teachers nationwide to implement college- and career-ready standards, helped the Denver-based Rose Community Foundation bridge policy and practice in a contentious reform environment, and published widely (**including on the *Education Week Teacher* site**). Meanwhile, she has created a learning lab in her classroom to facilitate lesson-study opportunities for her district colleagues.

We have worked with many administrators, policymakers, and foundation officials who are supportive of this bold brand of teacher leadership. We have also run into some serious roadblocks, however. What follows are the top three barriers to building a school's leadership capacity, and some practical steps for overcoming them.

*Principals' unease with teacher leadership.* All too often, principals are wary of teacher leaders, primarily because of uncertainty about how to identify and utilize them. District leaders should develop programs that ready principals to identify teachers' strengths and establish school conditions that promote the spread of expertise among classrooms and schools. University-based preparation programs have a role to play here, too: For at least some portion of their training, principals and teachers should be prepared together to collaborate as leaders.

*Narrowly defined professional learning communities.* As researcher Joan Talbert has pointed out, most professional learning communities, while well-intended, obsess over data and spreadsheets of student test scores and ignore "the social nature of learning" among teachers.

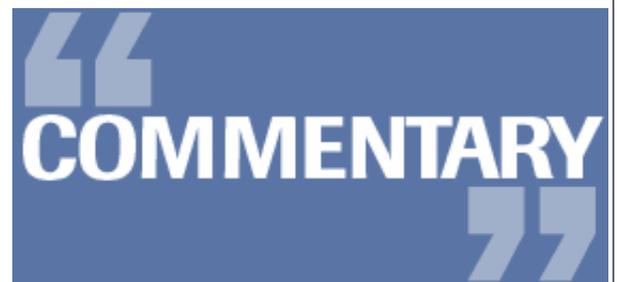
Rachel Evans, a Seattle teacherpreneur, pointed out to me that PLCs in Shanghai focus more on inquiry: the "why" and "how" of effective teaching. In her district, even well-functioning PLCs have tended instead to fixate on the "what" of teaching. It is time to ensure that teachers know how to conduct action research aimed at solving problems, and that principals understand how to support such inquiry to drive school improvement and accountability to the public.

*Rigid teacher-evaluation systems.* Recent reports consistently conclude that the prevailing approach to teacher evaluation, with its lock-step approaches to classroom observations and rigid focus on student test scores, is inadequate. What if teacher-evaluation systems placed a premium on teachers' ability to spread effective practices among colleagues within and beyond their schools? Imagine what could be possible if—rather than driving witch hunts for bad teachers—policymakers designed evaluation policies to hold all teachers accountable for student learning, while incentivizing effective teachers to share their practices far and wide.

We can move beyond the current rhetoric of teacher leadership. The **2013 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher** found that nearly one in four teachers in the United States reported being very or extremely interested in serving in hybrid roles that combine teaching with leadership responsibilities.

It's time for district leaders, preparation programs, and policymakers to take action that builds the leadership capacity of teachers and administrators—and does so in the best interests of students and tomorrow's schools.

#### MORE OPINION



[Visit Opinion.](#)

---

*Barnett Berry is the founder, a partner, and the CEO of the Center for Teaching Quality, a national nonprofit organization based in Carrboro, N.C. He is the author of *Teacherpreneurs: Innovative Teachers Who Lead But Don't Leave* (Jossey-Bass, 2013). He is on Twitter: @BarnettCTQ and @teachingquality. As part of an editorial partnership, writing by members of the Center for Teaching Quality Collaboratory is regularly featured on Education Week Teacher.*