



# Teachers Taking the Lead: Increasing Teacher Retention Through Leadership Opportunities

BY LESLIE M. GRAHN

*“When teachers feel their voices are heard, their efforts are recognized, and they have a vested interest in their [classroom], they will be much more likely to stay in the profession.” (Levin & Schrum, 2017)*

**As** I left the 2017 ACTFL Convention in Nashville and began to synthesize and reflect on all that was learned and experienced, one idea stuck with me and continues to challenge me. It was offered during a presentation called “Why Schools Have Difficulty Staffing Their Classrooms with Qualified Teachers” by Richard Ingersoll, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, at the Assembly of Delegates. Much of the information around issues with teacher recruitment and retention in the presentation shared by Ingersoll was to be expected: teacher shortages and turnover, job dissatisfaction, novice teachers leaving at high rates, and an insufficient pool of qualified,



certified candidates. Among all of the data and information presented, what most grabbed my attention was:

“The data showed positive impacts of teacher leadership on teacher retention and student achievement.”

At that moment, I realized that there are actions that all of us can take to positively impact teacher retention: *open up leadership opportunities for teachers.*

## What leadership pathways exist for teacher leaders?

By virtue of the fact that you are reading this article, you have likely acted in the role of a leader. Think about how leadership opportunities came to you. You may have been encouraged to lead by a colleague, administrator, or supervisor. You may have been inspired by observing a leader you know. Most leadership pathways are very limited. A typical progression might be from teacher to department

**“Teachers have spoken eloquently about how important it is to have a voice in what happens in their schools and their profession—without leaving the classroom.” –Arne Duncan**



*Teachers coaching and collaborating on curriculum in Howard County (MD) Public Schools.*

chair to assistant principal to principal or to a central office role. The availability of leadership roles can be quite minimal. There is only one supervisor of a program and only one department chair per school or institution.

Beyond “formal” leadership opportunities, what “informal” leadership opportunities might be available to teachers? Roles that best align with the strengths of practitioners are ones that broaden their influence beyond the classroom, following a natural progression from facilitating learning, coaching, and building relationships with students, to doing the same for their colleagues. Some suggested roles include:

- Curriculum/assessment writer
- New teacher mentor
- Mentor teacher for student intern
- Instructional coach
- Professional learning facilitator
- Breakout group leader
- Professional learning community leader
- Committee member (e.g., textbook and materials selection and curation)

- Teacher candidate interviewer
- New teacher induction facilitator
- Model teacher (i.e., master teacher whom novice or struggling teachers can observe)
- Peer observer
- Data coach

Teacher leaders who serve as new teacher mentors contribute to teacher retention. Research shows that, in addition to teacher leadership opportunities, having a high-quality mentoring program during induction positively impacts teacher retention. In fact, in their article “Solving the Teacher Shortage: How to Attract and Retain Excellent Educators” (2016), Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, and Darling-Hammond report that “new teachers who do not receive mentoring and other supports leave at more than two times the rate of those who do.”

Another tactic might be to create teacher leadership opportunities that do not currently exist. If you are an aspiring leader, consider assessing the needs in

your school, institution, or district and align those needs with your skill set and experience. Think about how you can add value to program and school initiatives through your knowledge of what works in the classroom, the trust you have built with colleagues, and your relationship-building skills. Use the list of suggested roles on this page for inspiration. Explore the possibilities by volunteering or meeting with a leader to express your interest.

If you are currently serving in a leadership role, reflect on the needs of your team, department, school, or district. Consider how you can leverage the power of teacher leaders to “spread the wealth” by expanding the number of voices and advocates for your program initiatives. Think about how you can delegate roles and responsibilities to others that you would normally take on yourself. This type of shared leadership leads to teacher empowerment and validation.

An additional consideration is to ensure equity of opportunity to prospective teacher leaders. If you were asked to name the colleagues whom you consider leaders in your school, institution, or district, respondents from the same setting are likely to come up with the same short list. In order to ensure equity of opportunity for teacher leadership, we must expand our thinking by reaching out to teachers beyond the “go to” list. Think about teachers who have credibility with their peers, who are admired, trusted, and respected (Patterson & Patterson, 2004). Consider teachers who are open to continuous improvement in their practice and who are often early adopters of new initiatives. Some ways to ensure equity of leadership opportunity are to solicit volunteers; maintain a list of teachers who have been offered leadership opportunities and focus on those *not* on the list; request recommendations from current



## Useful Resources

### Teacher Leadership Resources:

[www.grahnforlang.com/teacher-leadership.html](http://www.grahnforlang.com/teacher-leadership.html)

### Teacher Recruitment and Retention resources:

[www.grahnforlang.com/teacher-recruitment-and-retention.html](http://www.grahnforlang.com/teacher-recruitment-and-retention.html)

### ACTFL Leadership Initiative for Language Learning (LILL):

[www.actfl.org/assessment-professional-development/lill](http://www.actfl.org/assessment-professional-development/lill)

### ACTFL Mentoring Program:

[www.actfl.org/professional-development/career-resources/mentoring-program](http://www.actfl.org/professional-development/career-resources/mentoring-program)

### Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (Teacher Leadership Skills Framework):

[cstp-wa.org/teacher-leadership/teacher-leadership-skills-framework/](http://cstp-wa.org/teacher-leadership/teacher-leadership-skills-framework/)

### Teacher Leader Model Standards:

[www.nea.org/home/43946.htm](http://www.nea.org/home/43946.htm)

teacher leaders and create more opportunities to interact with teachers and discuss leadership possibilities with them.

There are also leadership opportunities that exist outside of schools, institutions, or districts. Aspiring teacher leaders may become involved in their state professional organizations and their language or level-specific organizations as conference presenters, committee members, and board members. In addition, ACTFL offers a variety of leadership opportunities to teachers aspiring to lead. The ACTFL Mentoring Program, for example, provides opportunities for experienced language educators to act as mentors to novice teachers. ACTFL, three other national language organizations, and the five regional language organizations have together organized a program for emerging leaders called the Leadership Initiative for Language Learning (LILL). The LILL Summer Institute offers opportunities for aspiring leaders to deepen their leadership skill set, network with other aspiring leaders, and to create a plan for the organization that sponsored their participation in the institute.

### What are the benefits to teachers of taking on leadership roles?

Practicing teachers bring a unique perspective to leadership roles. We need to reject the idea that leadership is about working toward leaving the classroom. As former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan explained during a speech at the National Board on Professional Teaching Standards Teaching and Learning Conference in October 2014: “Teachers have spoken eloquently about how important it is to have a voice in what happens in their schools and their profession—without leaving the classroom.”

Practicing teachers are positioned as the most direct link to what works in the classroom and what practices and strategies are most effective for student success. They actualize curriculum and assessment in their classrooms and can provide critical feedback on their effectiveness. Their contributions to school and programmatic

conversations are invaluable. Highlighting the value added by teachers leading from the classroom recognizes the power and wealth of their knowledge and experiences. As teachers assume leadership roles, it not only benefits them as individuals, but it also has a positive impact on the school or program in multiple ways.

Benefits to teacher leaders include: teachers having a voice in policy and practice; increased access to opportunities to contribute; and teacher professional growth and an expanded leadership skill set. In addition, having leadership experience can be a résumé differentiator for teachers. Along with increased teacher retention and increased student achievement, benefits to schools and programs are:

- Teachers motivated to stay in the classroom;
- growth of future leaders for succession planning;
- an increased number of advocates for the program who can articulate its vision and mission;
- teacher leaders facilitating teacher buy-in for new initiatives; and
- guidance for staff in navigating change.

It may not be possible to offer monetary compensation to teacher leaders who are serving in informal leadership roles, but the skill-building professional learning opportunities provide an incentive.

### What questions do prospective teacher leaders ask themselves?

A teacher who considers taking on a leadership role may be unsure that he or she has the skills, time, and knowledge to fulfill the role. Just receiving an invitation from a colleague currently in a leadership position communicates confidence and belief in the prospective leader. In her book, *Learning Along the Way: By and for Teachers* (2003), Diane Sweeney suggests that prospective teacher leaders ask themselves the following questions:

- Am I ready to do this?
- Will I be alienated if I take a leadership role?



*Involving teacher leaders in strategic planning.*

- Will I be able to motivate other adult learners?
- What kinds of expertise do I need?
- Do I have enough time to take on a new role?
- Will I be pulled away from my students?
- Will others scrutinize me?

Although not totally inclusive, this list of questions can serve as a guide to prepare for the conversation with a prospective teacher leader. Also think about the questions you asked yourself when you were first offered the opportunity to lead.

### How can we nurture the growth of teacher leaders?

Two of the questions listed above signal skills leaders need to lead effectively:

- Will I be able to motivate other adult learners?
- What kinds of expertise do I need?

Revisiting the list of possible leadership roles for teachers earlier in this article, we cannot assume that all teachers inherently have the skills necessary to perform those roles. Budding teacher leaders will benefit from professional learning experiences that deepen their leadership skill set. Useful skills for teacher leaders include: an understanding of adult learning principles; mentoring/coaching skills; team build-

ing skills; facilitation skills; and conflict management skills.

There are two frameworks for teacher leadership. One is called “The Teacher Leadership Skills Framework” which was developed in 2009 by the Center for Strengthening the Teacher Profession (CSTP). The Teacher Leadership Skills Framework delineates the knowledge, skills, and dispositions teacher leaders should possess. The five skill categories are Working with Adult Learners, Communication, Collaboration, Knowledge of Content and Pedagogy, and Systems Thinking. The CSTP website includes the framework, teacher leader self-assessments, and other relevant resources. Additionally, the National Education Association Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium has a similar framework called the “Teacher Leader Model Standards” that describes characteristics of model teacher leaders. The Teacher Leader Model Standards consist of seven domains:

- Domain 1:** Fostering a collaborative culture to support educator development and student learning
- Domain 2:** Accessing and using research to improve practice and student learning
- Domain 3:** Promoting professional learning for continuous improvement

**Domain 4:** Facilitating improvements in instruction and student learning

**Domain 5:** Promoting the use of assessments and data for school and district improvement

**Domain 6:** Improving outreach and collaboration with families and community

**Domain 7:** Advocating for student learning and the profession

The resources from these two frameworks can serve as a foundation and a needs assessment for a professional learning plan for teacher leaders.

### What are the next steps?

We can take immediate action to positively impact teacher retention in our profession through opportunities for teachers to lead from the classroom. Some next steps are:

- Learn more about teacher leadership and teacher retention
- Discuss teacher leadership with colleagues
- Make plans for activating colleagues as leaders within your sphere of influence
- Deepen your own leadership skillset.

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