



Teacher Leaders

By Sara Vitaska Shelton

School leaders are important to student learning.

Today's complex school environment requires effective leadership among all educators—teachers, principals and superintendents—to turn around struggling schools and improve student achievement. Among the most important school-related factors that improve student learning, school leadership was second only to classroom instruction, according to a report commissioned by the Wallace Foundation.

A growing number of effective teachers—the single most significant factor affecting student achievement—are assuming leadership responsibilities outside the classroom. Teacher leaders serve as mentors, facilitate professional development and lead school improvement efforts. States, school districts and schools are recognizing the effect teacher leaders have on teaching and learning and in building instructional and organizational capacity in schools and classrooms.

Principals rely on the leadership of key teachers and administrators.

Gone are the days when principals were expected to be superheroes or virtuoso soloists, single-handedly turning around struggling schools. The Wallace report found evidence from multiple studies that effective school leaders develop the skills of school staff and distribute leadership responsibilities. Principals cannot—and should not—perform all a school's leadership tasks by themselves. They often count on key teachers and local administrators for such leadership. As a result, the most successful principals more closely resemble orchestra conductors.

Teacher Leader Roles. How schools use teacher leaders and what they hope to accomplish with them vary greatly. There are, however, teacher leader roles and responsibilities that are common across schools and states.

A growing number of states have created or are considering adding to their licensing systems teacher leader endorsements to formally recognize teachers who serve in leadership roles and have acquired additional leadership training. Many states view the optional endorsements as twofold: A career ladder for teachers who want to strengthen school culture and professional practice but remain in the classroom, and a career pathway for teachers who aspire to be assistant principals and principals. Teacher leader endorsements typically are performance-based; include coursework in education leadership; and recognize the expertise of teachers in many areas, including subject matter knowledge, instructional practices, child development and

Potential Roles for Teacher Leaders

- Mentor and coach new teachers
- Develop and deliver professional development
- Evaluate teachers and administrators
- Help develop the school budget
- Develop curriculum
- Lead school improvement initiatives
- Serve as department or grade-level chairs
- Serve on school leadership teams
- Become union chapter leaders
- Collect and analyze assessment data to improve teaching and learning

Some states endorse teacher leaders in their licensing systems.

teacher needs. Creating separate teacher leader tracks in principal preparation programs can be cost-effective. It gives teachers who do not want to be principals another way to improve their skills and increase their salaries, but leaves costly principal preparation programs to those who want to become principals. A teacher leader endorsement is not necessarily needed to assume a leadership role, nor does it have to require a pay increase.

States may wish to consider several critical policy questions when thinking about teacher leader endorsements. States also could consider bringing together key stakeholders—including practitioners, policymakers and unions—when they craft teacher leader policies.

**Teacher Leaders:
State Policy Questions**

- How does your state view the role of teacher leaders in relation to the principal?
- Can a teacher leader endorsement serve as a pathway to principalship?
- Do your state professional standards for teachers include teacher leadership?
- What state-level systems, if any, are in place to recruit, retain and recognize teacher leaders?

- State Action** • A five-state consortium on teacher leadership—Kentucky, Ohio, Delaware, Alabama and Kansas—developed a model university teacher leadership program. The modules are designed for states that are considering a new license or certificate in the area of teacher leadership or are weighing the addition of a teacher leader endorsement to an existing teacher certification.
- Georgia, Illinois and Louisiana offer voluntary teacher leader endorsements as part of their teacher certification system.
 - Kentucky recently approved a Teacher as Leader master's degree endorsement for teachers who want to lead outside the classroom and for those who aspire to be principals.
 - Maryland and Massachusetts have worked with teacher unions to expand teacher leader roles in professional and curriculum development, peer review and increased compensation.
 - The Ohio Leadership Advisory Council's framework for leadership development emphasizes a team-based approach to school leadership.

States have taken varied approaches to endorsing teacher leaders.

Teacher leaders can play an important role in education reform. Although more research is needed to determine the effects of teacher leaders, recognizing, developing and rewarding teacher leaders can help recruit and retain talented teachers and principals; improve teacher quality and school working conditions; cultivate a new generation of effective school leaders; and, most important, increase achievement for all students.

Teacher leaders can have an important role in education reform.

Resources

- Institute for Educational Leadership. *Leadership for Student Learning: Redefining the Teacher as Leader*. Washington, D.C.: Task Force on Teacher Leadership, 2001.
- Leithwood, Kenneth, et al. *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Center for Applied Research and Education Improvement and Toronto, Ontario: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2004.
- Levine, Jesse. *Teacher Leadership*. Alexandria, Va.: National Association of State Boards of Education, 2008.
- The Wallace Foundation. *Becoming a Leader: Preparing Principals for Today's Schools*. New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2008.

Contacts for More Information

Sara Vitaska Shelton
NCSL—Denver
(303) 364-7700, ext. 1647
sara.shelton@ncsl.org

Five-State Consortium on Teacher Leadership
Kansas Department of Education
www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=3458

Teacher Leaders Network
www.teacherleaders.org

The Wallace Foundation
www.wallacefoundation.org