



Mitigating Teacher Shortages: Teacher Leadership

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The first brief in this series, *Teacher Shortages: What We Know*, explores research on teacher shortages and highlights recent state task force findings. This report is one of five policy briefs examining strategies states are using to address shortages:

- 1 ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION
- 2 FINANCIAL INCENTIVES
- 3 INDUCTION AND MENTORSHIP
- 4 EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK
- 5 TEACHER LEADERSHIP



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Providing leadership opportunities to teachers can be an effective strategy to **recruit** and **retain** them. A definition of teacher leadership is provided, followed by a summary of supporting research on this strategy, state policy examples and considerations for policymakers.



What are teacher leader programs?

Teacher leader is an ambiguous title covering “expansive territory”¹ – there are few agreed-upon definitions and many kinds of teacher leadership roles. According to a frequently cited definition, teacher leadership is “the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement.”²

Teacher leadership takes on many different flavors and forms at different levels within a school system. Leadership opportunities can include both formal and informal activities, such as participating in a formal mentorship program or informally mentoring colleagues. Teacher leader roles are typically at the organizational or instructional levels or centered on professional development.³ For example, teacher leaders could serve as department chairs, be school-wide teaching coaches or create and present professional development workshops.

Some states have created policies to formalize the teacher leader process in policy. As of 2013, three states had a master teacher designation, eight states had some type of certification endorsements for teacher leaders, 20 states had tiers for advanced or master teachers within their multi-tiered certification systems and four states had introduced teacher leader roles to assist teachers with the Common Core State Standards transition.⁴

DIG DEEPER



The publication “[Defining Teacher-Leader Roles](#)” from Public Impact’s Opportunity Culture provides a list of potential teacher leader roles and their descriptions.

“[Creating Sustainable Teacher Career Pathways: A 21st Century Imperative](#),” a joint publication by NNSTOY and Pearson, provides an in-depth look at each state’s teacher career path initiatives.



What does the research say?

WORKING ENVIRONMENT AND RETENTION

Although research directly linking teacher leadership opportunities with increased retention is scarce, it is often asserted that experienced teachers “who have opportunities to share their expertise”⁵ experience greater job satisfaction and are more likely to stay in the profession.

Teachers leave schools or the teaching profession entirely for many reasons. Some research indicates that job dissatisfaction, having little influence or autonomy in their school and few opportunities for professional advancement could be significant sources of attrition.⁶ Additional research cites a lack of career pathways as a barrier to retaining teachers, particularly the best ones.⁷ In other words, some teachers leave a seemingly “flat profession”⁸ because they feel they have no voice in their school.



Teacher leadership opportunities can, at least to some degree, offset these concerns. For example, in a recent survey state teachers of the year rated teacher leadership opportunities as one of their most significant professional growth experiences,⁹ while in a different survey another set of teachers expressed “a great deal of satisfaction” in their leadership work.¹⁰ In a case study of eight school districts’ career advancement programs, teacher leaders reported greater job satisfaction and some districts with teacher leadership programs saw an overall increase in both retention rates and teacher applications.¹¹ Finally, research found a strong link between teachers having a voice in their school and staying in the profession.¹²

Thus, research indicates that teacher leadership opportunities can improve teachers’ job satisfaction and provide them a greater voice in their working environment, potentially improving teacher retention.

Sustaining Teacher Leader Programs

Despite the perceived benefits of teacher leader programs, sustaining them can be challenging.

While school systems may receive grant funding to launch a teacher leader program, finding long-term and sustainable funding is one of the most significant challenges.¹³ For example, of the eight school districts reviewed in the aforementioned case study, the majority sought outside funding to start the program but many districts were struggling to identify program funding going forward.¹⁴ Up-front planning is critical to maintain the initiative long term, and some districts have found it useful to redirect existing staffing and professional development funds to the initiative.¹⁵

A school system’s environment also does much to sustain teacher leadership programs. Specifically, the long-term health of an initiative is affected by a system’s culture, governance structures and the roles and relationships of teachers and administrators.¹⁶

- **Culture.** School systems that value openness and teamwork and where administrators and teacher leaders work together and communicate with staff may be more likely to have successful teacher leader initiatives.¹⁷
- **Governance Structures.** Traditional, top-down governance hierarchies tend to hinder teacher leader initiatives while “shared or participatory” leadership structures, such as site-based decision making, tend to foster these programs.¹⁸
- **Roles and Relationships.** Successful teacher leader programs are highly dependent on supportive relationships between teacher leaders and both their colleagues and their principals¹⁹ plus strong district leadership.²⁰ Given the ambiguity of teacher leadership, both school and district leadership play a crucial role in shaping the direction of the teacher leadership program and creating a culture that supports the initiative.²¹

In short, teacher leadership programs are more likely to succeed if they are not leadership programs in name only, but are in a positive school system culture with administrators who actively seek to support and sustain the program and the teacher leaders themselves.



State examples



Iowa

In 2013, the **Iowa** General Assembly passed legislation establishing the Teacher Leader Compensation System, a teacher career paths framework aimed at recruiting and retaining effective teachers. These policies established five teacher levels. For each level they defined salary requirements and general duties and outline the amount of time that teachers at each of the five levels should spend in the classroom or in other leadership duties. School districts may implement one of two prescribed models or select a third that meets certain criteria: minimum salary, rigorous selection process, leadership roles extending beyond initial and career teacher roles, increased coaching and mentorship for teachers and a good-faith effort that at least 25 percent the teacher workforce participates in teacher leadership roles. Districts may apply for planning grants.²²

For more information about the financial incentives in Iowa’s Teacher Leaders Compensation System plus program accomplishments, see Education Commission of the States’ *Mitigating Teacher Shortages: Financial Incentives* by Stephanie Aragon.



Tennessee

The **Tennessee** State Board of Education adopted the Teacher Leader Model Standards in 2011, and in 2013 the Department of Education created the Tennessee Teacher Leader Network to help implement these standards. Over the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years, two cohorts of representatives from school districts statewide met and developed teacher leadership models that are adaptable for various districts depending on their needs.²³ In addition, Tennessee state leaders recognized the value of using teacher leadership in 2011-2012 while planning a shift to the Common Core. Seeing the need for “bottom-up” Common Core implementation, the Department of Education recruited and trained 200 highly effective teachers in implementing the standards. These teachers then taught these skills to 13,000 additional teachers who served as “Core Coaches” for their districts and schools.²⁴

MORE ANALYSIS



For additional state spotlights plus a thorough overview of teacher leadership policy issues, see *Policy Snapshot: Increasing Teacher Leadership* from the center on great teachers & leaders at AIR.

MORE ANALYSIS



National Network of State Teacher of the Year’s *Teacher Leader Model Standards*, created in 2008, include competencies for teacher leadership roles.

The Teacher Leadership Competencies, created jointly by Center for Teaching Quality, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the National Education Association, outline competencies for three different arenas of teacher leadership.



Policy considerations

When revising or creating teacher leadership programs, policymakers could consider the following:

- Look for policy changes or policy barriers that would affect the initiative.²⁵
- Seek teacher and administrator input on the program.²⁶
- Consider sustainability issues, including long-term funding streams beyond initial start-up grants.²⁷
- Consider the type of teacher leadership position that would be useful the school system, including the roles, duties and responsibilities of teacher leaders.
- Adopt teacher leader standards.²⁸
- Create a state teacher leader certification.²⁹
- Provide teacher leaders with support and development opportunities.³⁰
- Tie teacher leadership positions with increased compensation.

MORE ANALYSIS



The publication [Teacher Career Advancement Initiatives: Lessons Learned from Eight Case Studies](#) from the National Network of State Teachers of the Year and Pearson offers multiple elements to consider when designing a teacher leader initiative.



Endnotes

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