



# A BOLD MOVE FORWARD

**By Joellen Killion**

**T**eacher leaders are vital to establishing a collaborative school culture that fosters continuous improvement of teaching and student achievement. According to Learning Forward's definition of professional development, effective professional learning "is conducted among educators at the school and facilitated by well-prepared school principals and/or school-based professional development coaches, mentors, master teach-

ers, or other teacher leaders" ([www.learningforward.org/standfor/definition.cfm](http://www.learningforward.org/standfor/definition.cfm)). Teacher leaders model, facilitate, advocate for, and support ongoing professional learning within schools.

Learning Forward's focus on teacher leadership began in 2004 with the advent of its first national academy for school-based staff developers, as they were called then. Over the last seven years, Learning Forward's support of teacher leaders has focused more on teachers who support their colleagues by serving in one or more of many roles with one of many diverse job titles. Whether as coaches, instructional facilitators, teacher leaders, or school-based



## CONSORTIUM OUTLINES NEW STANDARDS FOR TEACHER LEADERS

staff developers, highly dedicated and well-prepared teacher leaders work in these roles. They choose to make a difference beyond their classroom, some while remaining in their classrooms full- or part-time, and others who leave their role of classroom teacher to serve in one of these new teacher leadership roles.

A fundamental belief underlying Learning Forward's work is the importance of collective responsibility. This belief acknowledges that no school or system will succeed based on the leadership of a single hero leader. Deep change requires that all parties within a school or school system work collaboratively and productively to

realize results for every student. Teacher leadership and the Teacher Leader Model Standards elevate the importance of collaboration among teachers, principals, and central office staff as a vital pathway to improving student learning. (See the model standards on pp. 16-24.)

In *The Learning Educator: A New Era for Professional Learning*, Stephanie Hirsh and I (2007) describe eight principles that guide effective professional development. These principles are the foundational beliefs about professional learning that describe Learning Forward's approach to educator learning. Among the eight principles are several relevant to teacher lead-

ership. The Teacher Leader Model Standards offer an opportunity to revisit several of these principles to explain why Learning Forward is committed to developing and supporting teacher leaders who serve as chief learners and facilitators of professional learning within their schools and districts.

While all eight principles are relevant to teacher leadership, three serve as the foundation for teacher leadership (see all eight in the sidebar on p. 14).

### **LEADERSHIP: Leaders are responsible for building the capacity in individuals, teams, and organizations to be leaders and learners.**

The principle of leadership encompasses both who leads and what leaders do. "Leaders exist throughout the system. If leadership rests in the hands of an elite few, little deep and sustainable change will occur" (Hirsh & Killion, 2007, p. 37). Leaders at all levels – district, school, and classroom — contribute to improved learning, and communities of leaders are critical to creating lasting change, just as communities of teachers compound their learning and impact. "Students will reap substantial rewards when leaders share responsibility for leading, recognize and build on the unique contribution of each person, and focus their efforts on quality teaching and learning. And, more importantly, when all leaders learn, students learn" (Hirsh & Killion, 2007).

Teacher leaders have a single guiding purpose — to build capacity in others. They use their talents to influence, shape, support, and catalyze change that results in increased student achievement. Their actions reveal their fundamental belief that the more they build capacity in others, the more they contribute to sustaining long-term, deep transformation that allows others to address today's challenges and to be prepared for facing those that arise tomorrow.

## REFLECTIONS OF A TEACHER LEADERS' LEADER

**A**s I write this article, I reflect on how apropos the theme of teacher leadership is for my last *JSD* article before my retirement. Throughout my career, I have had multiple opportunities to support and advance teacher leadership. I was a teacher leader early in my career and found tremendous professional satisfaction in the work I did. Later as a school and district leader, I worked closely with teacher leaders who served within their schools and beyond in multiple capacities as coaches, program leaders, facilitators of professional development, mentors, department and grade-level chairs, leaders of teacher residency programs, and facilitators of special projects. At Learning Forward, I have the honor of interacting with teacher leaders

who have been members of our Coaches Academy or participated in our programs and services, and who work every day to make a substantial difference in their schools and districts.

In these significant roles, teacher leaders use their dedication to student achievement, professionalism, expertise, and commitment to the profession to facilitate change that refines teachers' professional practice, increase student achievement, and build collaborative communities to support teacher and student learning. They work in partnership with school and district administrators to identify and study complex challenges within



Joellen Killion

schools and districts and lead innovations to address the identified challenges. As teachers first and leaders second, as their name suggests, they model salient practices and dispositions that allow them to engage peers in collaborative learning to strengthens teachers' practice and increases student learning. The expertise of teacher leaders and school administrators within schools is the most logical and readily available source of innovative approaches to our most intractable challenges in schools. Teacher leadership holds tremendous promise and potential for building school cultures within which all students and educators thrive. Now it the time to turn inward and tap the rich and readily available resource within schools to inquire, discover, and spread successful strategies to ensure that each student achieves.

— Joellen Killion

As leaders, they work not to direct the work of others, but rather to build others' knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practices to lead their own reform or improvement efforts. They strive to be invisible, to give away all that they know and have for the benefit of others, and to leave interdependence, empowerment, and efficacy in their wake. As leaders, they are interested not in notoriety or fame, but rather in making a difference for others.

### **EXPERTISE: Communities can solve even their most complex problems by tapping internal expertise.**

Today's educators are facing enormous challenges. In their efforts to meet student needs and the demands of their communities and education policy makers, they seek solutions to their most difficult challenges. Their search often turns outward rather than inward. Educators have long depended on external expertise, and entire industries are based on this.

A foundational assumption in education has proven faulty far too many times. That assumption is that a single solution to even the most complex problem can work effectively at scale in all schools and that, if it is implemented universally, it will solve every occurrence of the problem. "Because schools are so

different from one another in terms of staff and student characteristics, resources, parental and community support and involvement, and leadership, the assumption that a solution that worked in one school or classroom is going to work in another is faulty. That assumption has proven unsuccessful as a means for rapid and even lasting change in the nation's public schools. A more appropriate approach is to maintain the focus on what works within the defined community and to figure out how the community wants to use the information to improve its own results. Information of this sort is usually not transferable across communities. Tapping teacher expertise within a school increases the chance of identifying solutions that can be adopted throughout the school, sustained for longer periods of time, and implemented without extensive additional resources" (Hirsh & Killion, p. 88).

"Allowing solutions to emerge from within engenders commitment within the community rather than resistance. 'When identification of a superior method is imposed, not self-discovered, cries of "We're not them" or "It just won't work here" predictably limit acceptance. By contrast, a design that allows a community to learn from its own hidden wisdom is, among other things, respectful. Innovators and adopters share the same

DNA. Community members invest sweat equity in discovering the positive deviants, and, in the process, they become partners to change' ” (Pascale & Sternin, p. 3) (Hirsh & Killion, p. 90-91).

When educators are given permission and professional respect to inquire into their own practice, to discover what works within their unique communities, they not only solve the presenting problem, but they also refine their expertise with inquiry, problem solving, innovation, evaluation, and improvement efforts. Within these empowered communities, teacher leaders serve as facilitators, resource providers, and catalysts for change.

**COLLABORATION: Collaboration among educators builds shared responsibility and improves student learning.**

Expertise depends on skillfulness in collaboration. Collaboration leads to building collective responsibility among educators so that every student, not just some, succeeds. Collaboration is enhanced with structures, processes, and facilitation. Teacher leaders can bring those into networks of teachers in schools, districts, and beyond.

“Schools will be far more likely to be able to provide great teaching for every student when collaboration among educators is routine and daily. In addition, when all educators in a school assume a collective responsibility for their own and students’ success, we fulfill our moral commitment to children. ... Collaboration among educators improves learning opportunities for students. In many schools, a culture of collaboration and collective responsibility is replacing the culture of isolation. Educators are recognizing that all students benefit when they pool their expertise. They also realize that educating all students requires more knowledge and effort than any one individual educator possesses” (Hirsh & Killion, p. 100).

Within collaborative teams, teacher leaders guide professional learning, facilitate problem solving, promote reflection, and challenge assumptions. Collaboration deepens understanding and builds a culture of continuous improvement driven by a healthy dissatisfaction or dissonance to stimulate intellectual dialogues, research, inquiry, and reflection.

Collaboration will not solve every problem in schools today, yet it is one way to bring to the forefront what every educator knows and to use that information to improve teaching and learning. Roland Barth challenges educators when he states, “I wonder how many children’s lives might be saved if we educators disclosed what we know to each other” (Barth, 2001, p. 60). When educators commit to developing their own and their colleagues’ expertise so that every student in the school achieves, students benefit. Teacher leaders take an active role in facilitating and tapping teachers’ expertise.

**Collaboration deepens understanding and builds a culture of continuous improvement.**

**FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES**

These eight principles provide the grounding for much of Learning Forward’s approach to professional learning. Those in red are the foundation for teacher leadership.

- 1. Principles:** Principles shape our thoughts, words, and actions.
- 2. Diversity:** Diversity strengthens an organization and improves its decisions.
- 3. Leadership:** Leaders are responsible for building the capacity in individuals, teams, and organizations to be leaders and learners.
- 4. Planning:** Ambitious goals lead to powerful actions and remarkable results.
- 5. Focus:** Maintaining the focus of professional learning on teaching and student learning produces academic success.
- 6. Impact:** Evaluation strengthens performance and results.
- 7. Expertise:** Communities can solve even their most complex problems by tapping internal expertise.
- 8. Collaboration:** Collaboration among educators builds shared responsibility and improves student learning.

Source: Hirsh & Killion, 2007.

As partners in the leadership of schools, school systems, and other education agencies, teacher leaders support students, colleagues, schools, districts, and communities beyond the walls of their classroom. When the scope of teacher leaders’ work expands, the benefits expand exponentially. Through the strong partnership between teacher leaders and school administrators, schools become learning organizations in which everyone learns and grows.

**REFERENCES**

**Barth, R.S. (2001).** *Learning by heart*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

**Hirsh, S. & Killion, J. (2007).** *The learning educator: A new era in professional learning*. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

**Pascale, R. & Sternin, J. (2005).** Your company’s secret change agents. *Harvard Business Review*, Reprint R0505D.

**Senge, P. (2006).** *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of learning organizations*. New York: Doubleday.

**Sparks, D. (2002).** *Designing powerful professional development for teachers and principals*. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

**Joellen Killion (joellen.killion@learningforward.org) is deputy executive director of Learning Forward. ■**

Copyright of Journal of Staff Development is the property of National Staff Development Council and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.