

**Moving Forward in Teacher Leadership:**  
**Current Successes and Challenges in Delaware's Schools**

A Report Prepared For:

**University of Delaware**  
**Delaware Academy for School Leadership**

June 21, 2012

Researcher and Consultant:

Dr. Bradley Portin  
Professor and Director  
University of Washington Bothell  
Education Program  
Bothell, Washington 98011

[bportin@uw.edu](mailto:bportin@uw.edu)

**“I have moved beyond just success for my kids to the success of my school.”**

**(Teacher Leader, Kent County)**

## **Acknowledgements**

The heroes of this report are the educators of Delaware who commit themselves daily to improving education for all students. School improvement is hard work and even with added resources it remains a critical challenge for leaders. I acknowledge the time provided by 36 teacher leaders and school administrators who graciously gave their time to share their candid views so that we could learn from them. Each participant is listed at the end of this report.

I would like to thank Dr. Jackie Wilson, Director of the Delaware Academy for School Leadership (DASL) for her long-standing commitment to deepening professional learning in schools. It has been a privilege to gain a better understanding of the model that Delaware is providing for many around the nation in guiding school systems to consistent learning achievement for all.

In addition, colleagues from the Delaware Academy for School Leadership provided invaluable assistance in planning and data collection. Many thanks to: Emily Poag, DASL Associate, and Bethel Crocket, DASL Associate.

Seattle, Washington  
June 2012

## Introduction

The eyes of many educators around the country are trained on Delaware. As one of the first states to be awarded federal *Race to the Top* grants, Delaware has positioned itself as a national leader in comprehensive educational reform. As reported for its first year, the US Department of Education noted that:

*Awards in Race to the Top will go to States that are leading the way with ambitious yet achievable plans for implementing coherent, compelling, and comprehensive education reform. Race to the Top winners will help trail-blaze effective reforms and provide examples for States and local school districts throughout the country to follow as they too are hard at work on reforms that can transform our schools for decades to come.*<sup>1</sup>

*Delaware is implementing teacher and leader projects that include data coaches; a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) residency program; Teach for America (TFA); a Delaware Teaching Fellows program; and the Delaware Leadership Project.*<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of the report is to delve deeper into one aspect of Delaware's efforts to improve schools—that of expanding the leadership team in to better support and sustain professional learning in schools.

What Delaware has effectively illustrated is that instructional leadership isn't singularly located in the principalship. In fact, efforts in Delaware to support professional learning resonate with a recent claim from The Wallace Foundation (who have been promoting deeper understanding of school leadership for over a decade). They argue,

*"A broad and longstanding consensus in leadership theory holds that leaders in all walks of life and all kinds of organizations, public and private, need to depend on others to accomplish the group's purpose and need to encourage the development of leadership across the organization.*

*Schools are no different. Principals who get high marks from teachers for creating a strong climate for instruction in their schools also receive higher marks than other principals for spurring leadership in the faculty, according to the research from the University of Minnesota and University of Toronto.*

*In fact if test scores are any indication, the more willing principals are to*

---

<sup>1</sup> US Department of Education (2012, January). *Race to the Top, Delaware Report Year 1: School Year 2010 – 2011*. Washington, DC: US DOE.  
<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> p 4 <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/performance/delaware-year-1.pdf>

*spread leadership around, the better for the students.”<sup>3</sup>*

### What we know about teacher leadership

The knowledge base around teacher leadership is, perhaps, one of the most vibrant and fast growing collections of theory and practice in education. One foundation for this claim rests with the consistent vacating of the position that the principal is the only, or even the primary, source of influence for shaping the learning improvement in schools. Our own work at the University of Washington, Center for the Study of Teaching Policy<sup>4</sup> has contributed to the larger terrain of instructionally-focused leadership in schools—especially in schools facing some of the greatest challenge.

Our prior work suggests four necessary characteristics for learning-focused teacher leaders in urban schools. These are represented in Table 1 (and referred to in the 2009 report, *Teacher Voices*):

---

<sup>3</sup> The Wallace Foundation. (2012, January). The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning. New York: Author. pp. 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example:

Portin, B. S., Knapp, M. S., Dareff, S., Feldman, S., Russell, F., Samuelson, C., Yeh, T. L. (2009). *Leadership for learning improvement in urban schools*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Center for Teaching and Policy.

Portin, B., Knapp, M., Plecki, M., & Copland, M. (2008). Supporting and guiding learning-focused leadership in US schools. In, J. MacBeath & Y. C. Cheng (Eds.), *Leadership for learning: International perspectives* (189-203). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Knapp, M. S., Copland, M. A., Honig, M. I., Plecki, M. L., & Portin, B. S. (2010). *Learning-focused leadership and leadership support: Meaning and practice in urban systems*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.

**Table 1: Core Areas of Expertise for Learning-focused Teacher Leaders<sup>5</sup>**

Areas of Expertise	Contextual Influences on the Exercise of this Expertise
<p><b>CONTENT KNOWLEDGE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher leaders' expertise arises from a content area.</li> <li>• While expert in a particular content area, they may also work across content areas.</li> <li>• The most common areas are those that emphasized by high-stakes testing, especially literacy and numeracy.</li> </ul>	<p>Teacher leader content knowledge serves as a link to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The accountability system, i.e., by working with areas targeted by performance data.</li> <li>• Their content knowledge is also used as a pathway to curricular reform efforts (alignment, pacing, etc.).</li> <li>• They may use their content knowledge in other content areas to coach teachers in how to link content planning to data-informed needs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>KNOWLEDGE OF POWERFUL PEDAGOGY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher leaders' work is closely connected to the quality of instruction. As such, they have the ability to know what good instruction looks like and have strategies for how to coach it.</li> <li>• There is often an expectation that they work across content or grade level areas in instruction.</li> </ul>	<p>Features of the school context distinguish teacher leaders' instructional knowledge from principals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They don't evaluate—the emphasis is on coaching and mentoring.</li> <li>• Expectations for “deprivatized” teacher practice informs this expertise.</li> <li>• They often work with two categories of pedagogical need—those of the novice teacher and of the veteran teacher in need of remediation</li> </ul>
<p><b>ABILITY TO BUILD RELATIONAL TRUST</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because teacher leaders work is non-supervisory, their entry point into the classroom is along a continuum from invitation only to gentle persuasion.</li> <li>• As their roles are often new, they need to develop a rationale and warrant for their work in the eyes of their peers.</li> <li>• Many tensions exist in the “middle ground” they occupy “between” administrators and classroom teachers.</li> </ul>	<p>At least two major factors inform their relationship building:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The district theory-of-action for improving instructional quality, which places them in a particular relation to the reform pressures teachers experience.</li> <li>• The culture of the school and its norms of privacy, which shape the challenges they face in the “opening up” of teacher practice to scrutiny</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> Portin, B. S., Russell, F. A., Samuelson, C., & Knapp, M. S. (forthcoming Spring 2013). Leading learning-focused teacher leadership in urban high schools. *Journal of School Leadership*, 23(2).

<p><b>CAPACITY TO FORGE SYSTEMIC LINKAGES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>TEACHER LEADERS OFTEN SIT AT AN INTERSECTION BETWEEN CLASSROOM WORK AND OTHER PARTS OF THE SYSTEM—(1) SUPERVISORY LEADERS; (2) DISTRICT CURRICULAR REFORM; AND (3) SYSTEM DATA.</b></li> <li>• <b>THEY OFTEN WORK IN CLOSE CONCERT WITH DISTRICT-LEVEL RESOURCES.</b></li> <li>• <b>THEY ARE OFTEN CHARGED WITH THE SCHOOL'S ACHIEVEMENT TARGETS IN A SIMILAR MANNER TO PRINCIPALS.</b></li> </ul>	<p>System-level actions and conditions shape how they carry out their “bridging” function:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They work is part of a district theory-of-action for increasing teaching capacity.</li> <li>• Accountability structures drive their (and other) school-level actions.</li> <li>• District and state data resources and system cast them in the role of data specialist and interpreter.</li> <li>• Policy pressures create career paths—although they aren't always seen as the “farm team” for future administrators.</li> </ul>
--	---

These areas of expertise mirror Swanson’s (2001) Five Dimensions of Teacher Leadership<sup>6</sup>:

1. *Empowerment*... Empowered teachers are confident in their ability to make a difference in student learning.
2. *Expertise*... Fueled by a passion for their subject area, expertise in teaching requires deep pedagogical content knowledge.
3. *Reflection*... Reflective practitioners are able to discern what is happening in the classroom and adapt their efforts...
4. *Collaboration*... Collaborative teachers recognize that collective expertise offers the possibility of generating optimal solutions...
5. *Flexibility*... Flexible teachers understand that teaching is an art and a science, requiring innovation and improvisation along with structure and planning.

Lieberman and Friedrich suggest that, “Today roles for teacher-leaders, as well as openings for formal leadership, are rapidly expanding.... Many teachers, however, continue to be reluctant to claim the title and identity of leader.<sup>7</sup>” Teacher leadership roles can be confounded when portrayed as supervision, or even as simply a pathway to the principalship. Many teachers have no interest in school administration, but are interested and talented in the skills necessary to assist colleagues in their professional learning. It is this aspect of teacher leadership that this project centers on. How more complex and expert teacher leaders are coming alongside of principal and district leaders to support new teaching capacities in schools.

<sup>6</sup> Swanson, J. (2001). *The role of teacher leaders in scaling up standards-based reform*. Final report prepared for the U.S. Department of Education, National Institute for Student Achievement, Curriculum and Assessment, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Grant #R305F970040-99. (p. 11).

<sup>7</sup> Lieberman, A., & Friedrich, L. D. (2010). *How teachers become leaders*. New York: Teachers College. (p. 7).

## Findings from Prior Research in Delaware

In 2009, a study was undertaken to explore emerging perspectives, practices, constraining forces, and enabling conditions for distributed leadership in schools. This study yielded two reports<sup>8</sup>, both of which are available on the DASL website<sup>9</sup>. At that time (2009), broad arrays of nascent teacher leader roles were in practice across the state. Briefly, we found that teacher leaders held both formal and informal roles in schools from traditional department chairs to team leaders and instructional coaches. With few exceptions, the participants in these focus groups were full-time classroom teachers. Few were in specifically identified and compensated roles as teacher leaders. Those that were contracted as such were district located, rather than school located. Most duties performed as teacher leaders were above and beyond classroom teaching.

### The day-to-day work of teacher leaders

In 2009, focus group participants were asked to describe the activities they engaged in on a regular basis. They were allowed to define the work of teacher leadership as they perceived it, not in relation to a predetermined set of activities. The following ten major categories of action emerged from their responses:

- Participating in, or leading committee work
- Guiding teams
- Meeting with school administrators
- Connecting teachers with resources
- Mentoring teachers
- Modeling practice
- Engaging in informal interactions
- Providing a bridge to district and state contexts
- Providing a bridge to school administrators
- Collaborating with other teacher leaders

We also found that they regularly had expanding rings of influence starting with the teachers they worked in closest proximity to, then to other teachers in the school, and finally to teachers and other teacher leaders at different schools.

In addition, we found that there were seven distinct areas of skill, knowledge, and disposition that were represented across the array of roles they assumed as teacher leaders. These included:

---

<sup>8</sup> Portin, B. S. (2009). *Teacher voices: Teacher leaders in Delaware's schools*. Newark, DE: Delaware Academy for School Leadership. [Research report prepared for the Delaware Department of Education, Delaware Academy for School Leadership, and the University of Delaware]

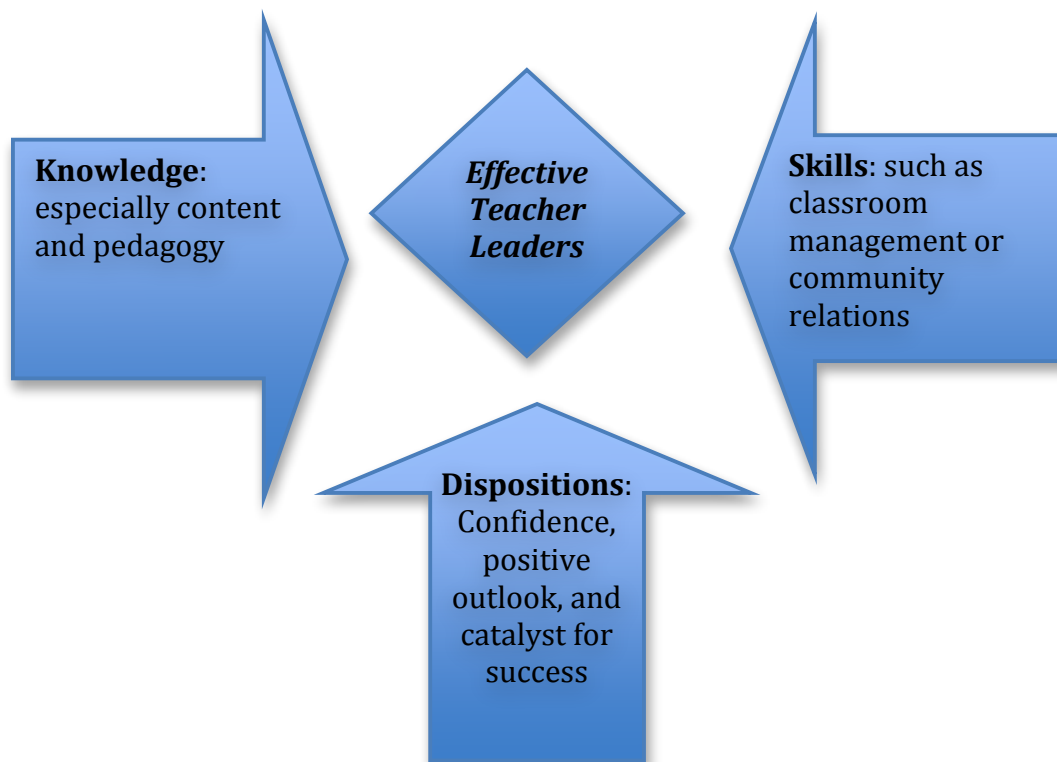
Portin, B. S. (2009). *Leading leaders: Principals and teachers in Delaware's Schools*. Newark, DE: Delaware Academy for School Leadership. [Research report prepared for the Delaware Department of Education, Delaware Academy for School Leadership, and the University of Delaware]

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.dasl.udel.edu/research-and-reports>

- Managerial expertise
- Orientation toward problem solving
- Reflective practices
- Expertise with data
- Content expertise
- Communication skills
- Ability to establish relational trust

Importantly, it was the interaction of these various domains of knowledge, their dispositions toward the work, and the skill base they operated from that contributed to their effectiveness.

**Figure 1: Interacting characteristics of effective teacher leaders**



Finally, we wanted to know what got in the way, or supported the work that teacher leaders did, or principals did as they developed their teams. Time and money were predictable in these categories, but six major categories emerged. The categories included:

- Resources
- Administrator expertise
- School management



- Professional culture and practice
- Initiative proliferation
- District direction, guidance, and support

## Methodology

This small-scale study was designed to collect viewpoints from teacher leaders and school administrators in the three counties of Delaware. Ninety-minute focus groups were conducted in three locations over the course of three days, May 21-23, 2012. Principals and teacher leaders were met with separately, but responded to a common protocol.

A semi-structured protocol was developed for the guided focus group discussion. This served as a topical guide rather than a standardized interview schedule:

### Guiding Questions for Focus Groups

1. What does teacher leadership look like in your school?
2. How has the 90-minute block of time dedicated to Professional Learning Communities as part of Delaware's Race to the Top grant supported the professional growth of teacher leaders in your school?
3. Describe the types of formal teacher leadership roles in your school (i.e. instructional coaches or PLC Lead Teacher)?
4. How do your teacher leaders contribute to teacher expertise in your school?
5. How do you see teacher leaders as helping you/the principal to lead school improvement?
6. How do you/does the principal identify prospective teacher leaders? What does he/she look for?
7. What direction and/or support do you get from your district (state) to aid your inclusion of teacher leaders in your school?
8. How do you/does the principal monitor and support teacher leadership in your school?
9. What type of training is needed for teachers to prepare them for leadership roles in Delaware schools?
10. What type of training is needed for principals to prepare them for distributing leadership responsibilities to teacher leaders?

## Participants

Participants were nominated to attend by their superintendent or superintendent's designee. Participants received a token gift card for their time. Participants by county are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2: Participants by county**

COUNTY	TOTAL
Sussex	13
Kent	12
New Castle	11
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>36</b>

## Data and Analytic Process

Data for this report were comprised of the following:

- Field note/transcripts were recorded on laptops by two members of the DASL staff during the focus group meetings. Participants received a unique numeric identifier and identities have been removed from the documentation. These written transcripts formed the core of the data.
- Audio recordings were made of each session for the purpose of fact-checking written response, but were not transcribed.
- Each participant was provided with a sheet with the 10 question areas and space for them to make notes or elaborate responses. The sheet asked them to identify their role but not their name. The handwritten sheets were collected and became part of the data set.

The transcripts taken by the observers and the transcript of the written response sheets were then subject to thematic and content analysis following an inductive approach similar to grounded theory. Themes and categories were identified and examples and quotes then extracted to illustrate the themes. Attention was made to privilege representativeness and outlying examples are identified as such in the report.

## Participant protections

Individual participants are not identified with quotes in this report. The researcher has also removed situational identifiers and, in a few cases, modified the quote to assure anonymity. In the findings, quotes from teacher leaders are only within

county. For principals, as there were a smaller number, they are not separated out by county.

### **Limitations**

As a small, non-random sample, the categories of findings developed in this report are limited. However, the broad representation of districts across the three counties suggests some common themes that might be found in a larger sample. It is the purview of the reader to judge whether the themes have application in a different context rather than the ones represented by these participants.

## Findings from Teacher Leaders

The findings from teacher leaders were informed by the study questions. The intent was to explore changes in the last three years to the work that teacher leaders do and, through parallel analysis, examine how these developments are perceived from the vantage point of principals.

In addition, we posed questions to explore some of the key leadership opportunities—especially around mandated professional learning community (PLC) activities and the use of data for school and classroom decision making.

### Transitioning to more instructionally focused leadership

It would appear that systemic efforts across Delaware are driving the energy toward instructional practice. This is especially so in how teacher leaders can exercise skills in instructional modeling and as a content resource rather than the more traditional management activities of some heretofore teacher leaders roles. As one teacher leader in Sussex County noted, “We are working at a way to restructure our instructional coach position to make it less of a department chair and more instructionally based. Right now we are in transition.”

### Professional learning communities

Owing to the state mandate, a great deal of activity was oriented around the work of professional learning communities (PLCs). The comments from across the state also showed that the work of PLCs differ along dimensions of district direction, local skill, and prior history with PLC activities.

Two Sussex teacher leaders noted,

“Our agendas show common core standards and matching them up with curriculum. Also our assessment tools—are they lining up the CCSS. We have specific agendas. The PLC is action based. We’re not talking, we’re doing. I find value in that. When you have activities like that, the productivity goes through the roof.”

And,

“Our teachers videotape some lessons and they’ll watch videotapes of lessons. They’ll show clips and critique it.”

Other comments showed the variations in who leads PLCs, when they meet, and how the PLCs are structured:

“Our PLCs are held after school on Wednesdays. It is just a long day. Your brain doesn’t just shut down; you think about what went on all day. Currently it is the data coaches or associate principals that run the PLCs.” (TL Sussex)

“I’m K-5 and we have (N) elementary schools. Sometimes we are asked to come over to another schools and the AP and the data coach will run the PLC. The next week we go through navigation to see strengths and weaknesses, but it’s never a grade level meeting.” (TL Sussex)

“Our PLCs are strictly run by our instructional coach. She was hired to work with the teachers and run the PLCs.” (TL Sussex)

“Ours is definitely grade level. Teachers at the same grade level get together during common planning.” (TL Sussex)

“We have teacher leaders that do PLCs. That’s a big role they have to play. Sometimes I’ll do it or the administrator. [PLCs are by grade level]. Led by various people, depending. If there’s a PLC, then we can depend on our teacher leaders to take over. It’s a grade level chair role. Those people are placed there strategically. There’s a reason they’re a leader in our building.” (TL Sussex)

### Admired characteristics of teacher leaders

Teacher leaders play central roles in many PLCs and other coaching activities. In one focus group, half of those present participate regularly in walk-through visits to other classrooms. Teacher leaders readily describe the characteristics and skill they admire in other teacher leaders. They note such attributes as:

- Intelligence
- An articulate presence
- Charisma
- Specific expertise in content or technology
- Communication savvy

Teacher leaders also note that effectiveness in the classroom is important for a role as a teacher leader—whether formal or informal. The following three quotes illustrate the expertise as seen from their vantage point as teacher leaders:

“Let test scores show which teachers are doing well. Whether you like them or not, that teacher needs to be in a leadership role. If the data shows that person is doing well, they should be teacher leaders. Something is amiss in that school if that person is not being utilized.” (TL Sussex)

“[Teacher Leader’s] being modest. She is a go-to person for curriculum. The literacy person was hired by District Office. To be blunt she does not coach anyone. She goes to meetings, but does not coach.” (TL Kent)

“Informally it looks like a peer role model. It is someone to whom other teachers who are struggling can go to without going to principal and worry about getting dinged, like for help with discipline. I think that’s one aspect of teacher leadership.” (TL New Castle)

### Work of the Instructional Leadership Team in the school

The work of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) as one aspect of shared instructional leadership is changing. It seems to be more inclusive of participants, but also more focused on instructional needs.

“It has changed a lot. We’re part of Vision 2015. (ILT members) come back and teach the staff. We would always break down in small groups and discuss. It is an ever-changing role depending on the educational (climate).” (TL Kent)

“I like the model when we had the lead teachers where they could give the info back to the teachers. Honestly I don’t know what’s going on. I wait for directives.” (TL Kent)

“One of the important pieces of ILT is building rapport and relationships. It’s also important for me to feel comfortable to say, “I really am having trouble with (something).” We need to be comfortable with each other.... You welcome being involved, but there is something in the involvement that (something else) doesn’t get done as well. Some of these changes are principals trying to utilize other people. The Distributive Leadership training wasn’t there for other people and they don’t know what the norms were and how you keep (some things) to yourself. People are excited to be on ILT but how those people are chosen and trained is a precarious situation.” (TL Kent)

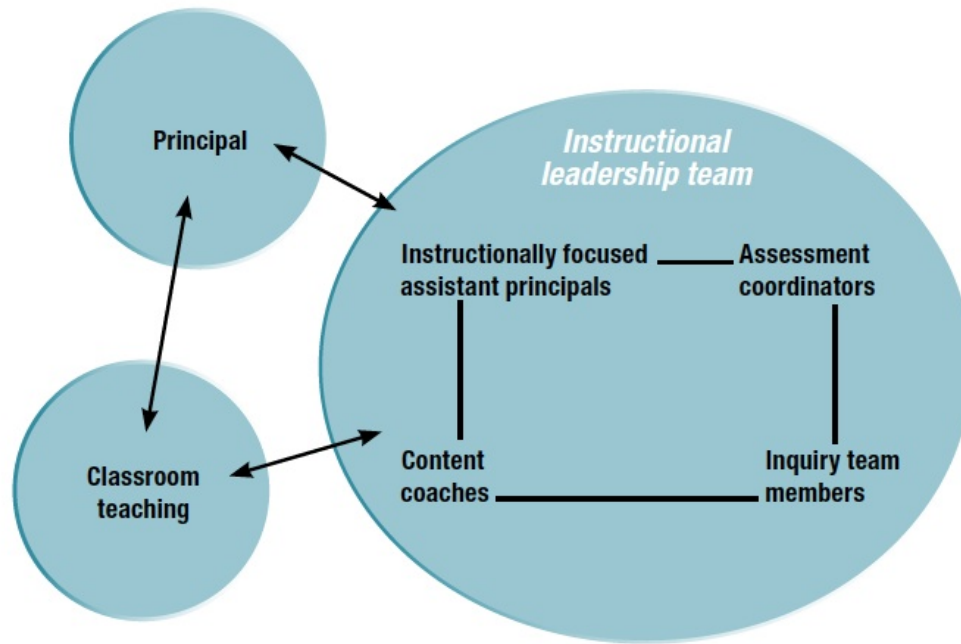
“Vision network and that piece of the ILT is really important. We’ve really been led by Vision in our school. We go to vision trainings. We have time to plan and implement key drivers. We funnel things through our school through the ILT. They become a lot of the things we’re working on in the ILT. People do different things to support them.” (TL New Castle)

Of course, the work of the ILT is also situation dependent—especially on the skills and experience of the leaders in the school.

“I’ve worked in three schools. It depends on the leader.” (TL New Castle)

This arrangement of principals working through an ILT or other leadership body around instructional improvement can be understood through the following figure:

Figure 2: Leading Through Instructional Teams



### Data coaches

Data coaches are a key feature in the exercise of teacher leadership. Whether contracted externally or developed from within in a “train the trainer” model, the participants in the focus groups repeatedly referred to the role that deliberations around data, and appreciating the direction that data can provide.

“Ours [data coach] is everywhere and anywhere. Very supportive, information-giving, data-tracking. Gives us the data. We go to her office and she whips it out.” (TL Sussex)

At the same time, the following comment revealed that some of the work is still developing:

“We have a Data Coach every Thursday from Wireless Generation. There has been a disconnect from week to week. There doesn’t seem to be a goal.... As teachers, we would be glad to have the support but it doesn’t go with what we are doing in our class.” (TL New Castle)

### Developing teacher leaders

How teacher leaders are initially identified and then subsequently mentored in their emerging roles is a complex issue. There are many countervailing forces such as the difficulty some teachers have with equating leadership with positional authority such as the principalship. We found in 2009 that being a teacher leader can also

place a colleague in a precarious position of being seen with the suspicion of favoritism or just an administrator in disguise. Taking on the mantle of teacher leadership is a complex process of negotiating a new identity<sup>10</sup>

### Invitation

Teacher leaders expressed their appreciation for the invitation to leadership that principals can extend, as the teacher leaders note here:

“A required first step might be administration seeing teachers, talking to them, and letting them serve. It is empowering. You go home and feel good about yourself. It makes you want to step up.” (TL Sussex)

“It feels good that you were thought of, that you are valued and appreciated. But (in my school) it is the same person: Why does the principal always go to that person?” (TL Sussex)

“Leaders need to know what people are good at and get them to help. There’s got to be a vision from the top or we (teachers) run around crazy.” (TL Kent)

“There are so many initiatives plus the nationwide curriculums. It allows teachers to step up. There’s too much to do, too much for administrators to know. They rely on teachers to take these leadership roles. They need to make the teachers feel important. Administrators need to say, ‘I need you to be on this committee.’ Not put it in an e-mail. The principal needs to come in the room. It changes everything. You feel valued.” (TL Sussex)

At the same time, past history or a perceived lack of definition can color how teacher leaders look at the invitation to leadership:

“It’s been political in my district. It is who you know not what you know.” (TL Sussex)

“Biggest problem is that roles are not defined in the district or in the school. (We’re told): You’re a PLC leader: do it.” (TL New Castle)

“Once they notice, you get that dumping effect.” (TL Kent)

### Deliberate mentoring

Increasingly, principals are called upon to think about how they work with existing teacher leaders and how they bring others into the work. A New Castle teacher leader described this by saying, “My last principal was extremely knowledgeable. He scooped me up and took me everywhere. It was learning while doing.”

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Lieberman, A., & Friedrich, L. D. (2010). *How teachers become leaders*. New York: Teachers College.



As in the “invitation” described earlier, this can also include looking for opportunities for showcasing the expertise of an emerging teacher leader. In Sussex County, a teacher leader noted:

“That is how our principals have gotten so many teachers involved in so many aspects of leadership because they allow so many people to become trained in one little specialty. It gives them an edge so they present at PLCs and faculty meetings. Confidence to build on leadership roles and try something else.”

### Creating a culture of distributed leadership

In work in 2009 on instructional leadership in schools, colleagues at the University of Washington found that:

Whatever their skills at and propensity for working directly with teachers, in and out of the classroom, the principals and other supervisory leaders understood the limits of their own capacity to serve the instructional improvement needs of the entire school, as established by research on the principalship (Portin, DeArmond, Gundlach, & Schneider, 2003). The size and complexity of the school, not to mention limitations on the principal’s base of instructional expertise, prohibited the principal from providing direct instructional support to all teachers who needed it. Furthermore, the sharing of a learning improvement agenda presumed and was nurtured by a team-oriented culture, which principals were fostering, as noted earlier. The kinds of conversations that would help school staff focus on instructional improvement were, and needed to be, mediated by whatever team structures were in place or could be developed. For all these things to happen productively and in a mutually reinforcing way, *principals needed to act, and see themselves, as leaders of an instructional leadership team as much as, or more than, the sole or chief instructional leader of the school.*<sup>11</sup>

Such were the conditions commonly described by participants in leadership teams in Delaware schools.

“Our principal is not a micro-manager. When she asks a question and gives you a responsibility, there’s full faith that she’s giving it to you. She’s very open door and very hands-off. It works really well for some people. A lot of people wear a lot of a hats.” (TL New Castle)

“The culture of our building is let’s see what we need to do. We don’t need the principal to lead everything. They bring a whole different perspective. It’s that culture of the school that breeds leaders. Quiet, behind-the-scenes

---

<sup>11</sup> Portin, B. S., Knapp, M. S., Dareff, S., Feldman, S., Russell, F., Samuelson, C., Yeh, T. L. (2009). *Leadership for learning improvement in urban schools*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Center for Teaching and Policy. (p. 71)

leaders. They are as important as anyone who stands in front of a crowd. They don't have the big gold star on them." (TL Sussex)

"They've (our administration) always been good in involving teachers for a number of years to brainstorm and make decisions. It's another way to empower teachers and make the step up. It trickles out into other areas as well." (TL Sussex)

"Success breeds success. Somewhere in that school there are successes going on. This is what the DuFours say. Build on success. That makes people hungry for more success. We take pride in our data. We like being at the top. We work hard. All schools would do that. Administration needs to find teachers where success is happening and celebrate it. All teachers somewhere – celebrate it." (TL Sussex)

## Experimentation

"Let people run with ideas." (TL Kent)

The design studio work of Donald Schön<sup>12</sup> reminds us that learning is often a process of experimentation in social situations. The number of references to contexts for teacher leaders to experiment with their learning was noticeable. The teacher leaders reported comments such as:

"I've never gotten turned down for anything. It doesn't have to be standard, traditional stuff. Out-of-the-box. If it helps kids, try it. You might fall on your face, but you get a chance to try it. You're not shot down. It makes you want to be a risk-taker. We're allowed to be risk-takers. You have to follow protocol, but you want to take risks. What can I do? Not, what will she let me do?" (TL Sussex)

"You need to be able to fail forward. You can make your mistakes there and not lose where your kids are." (TL Kent)

"You're the forever problem-solver, they think you can solve anything." (TL Kent)

Perhaps, most importantly, for a number of the participants these experimental opportunities to "fail forward" seem to be promoting a larger perspective for the teacher leaders. They used phrases like:

"I have moved beyond just success for my kids to the success of my school." (TL Kent)

"It's bigger than us." (TL Kent)

---

<sup>12</sup> Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*. London: Temple Smith.

## Findings from Principals

While fewer principals than teacher leaders participated in the focus groups, those who came were open and candid about the work they are doing in their schools with teacher leaders. The main goal was to understand their work in relation to the teacher leaders and how they increasingly partner with teacher leaders in leading the school's learning improvement agenda.

### Identifying teacher leaders

The first step for many participant principals is in identification of teachers leaders—those in their school who, they believe, have the expertise and disposition to help move the school forward with their learning goals. While this may exist in a complex mix of mandates and/or historical arrangements, it appears that principals are thinking about the broadening capacity of teacher leaders as both a larger cadre and an increasing opportunity for those who may have been overlooked in the past.

One principal talked about a more “fluid” approach to allow greater participation:

“In my mind the perfect world of a teacher leader is a fluid teacher leader. In PLC our core teachers are the only teachers involved (in leading). We're changing next year because everyone has something to offer. Our staff gets caught in content bubbles. They miss the big picture that it is about strategies, not our content. It is about improving our teaching skills.... People are not being utilized fully.” (Principal)

The principal leaders also understand the nuanced nature of leadership and the differences between positional assignment and the ability to actually influence colleagues as the school progresses in a given direction.

“I think words mean things. And words don't mean the same things to the same people. And I think the word leadership is going to scare off a percentage of your clientele. When you talk about the leader you described, I would consider that to be someone who provides support. How we present teacher leadership to people, the words we used will scare people off. They will offer support.” (Principal)

The work of identifying teacher leaders isn't haphazard or simply the first volunteer (a recipe for repeatedly drawing on the same talent pool). Instead, principals talk about both processes and characteristics to reinforce the importance of the role.

“When I came they (the chairs) were in place. Rather than just deplete people, I drew up a guidelines of what you (grade level chairs) are responsible for. One thing was DPAS; you needed a strong observation and summative that says you are an expert teacher yourself. Part of responsibility of grade level chair is to be able to model for teachers and mentor new

teachers. More important than organization and management is be able to provide good instruction. I waited two years rather than oust someone out. The district had a book of job descriptions. Most who had position were just information givers.... The assistant principal and I interviewed and selected based on instructional performance. Most people who are good instructional leaders are pretty organized too. (Principal)

“I actually survey teachers. I knew some of them and didn’t know some of them—their strengths and weaknesses. We have kind of that informal network of teachers. We used a process—surveying them—to identify teacher leaders. I had one brand new teacher who came with a really strong social studies background. He’s done some different meetings sharing what he knows before. It would have taken me longer to learn about teachers’ skills if I didn’t do the survey. PLC leadership was an application process.” (Principal)

Finally, there is a sense on the part of principals that they are identifying more than simply teacher leaders—they are also identifying successors and other school administrators to feed the pipeline, in some cases.

“I guess I would just say, the more we can build them up as teacher leaders, the better chances they’ll be better APs, and principals... I see how valuable it was to me.” (Principal)

#### Preferred characteristics for teacher leaders

There is a clear sense that there are new efforts taking place across the state to bring further teacher leadership to bear on both student and professional learning. In this case, it is interesting to note how principals use the language of leadership to distinguish it from either a simple accolade or an accrued title. The language of expertise and looking at the work of leaders rather than the positions of leaders were evident in the following three comments.

“In our school, we’re very heavy on titles and lacking on leadership. There are a whole lot of teachers that have titles. We’ve got grade level chairs and loads of committees. The leadership team itself – the room is full – but I don’t know how much leadership there is among that group with co-workers and throughout the school. When looking at teacher leaders and how to cultivate them, a title doesn’t make one a teacher leader.” (Principal)

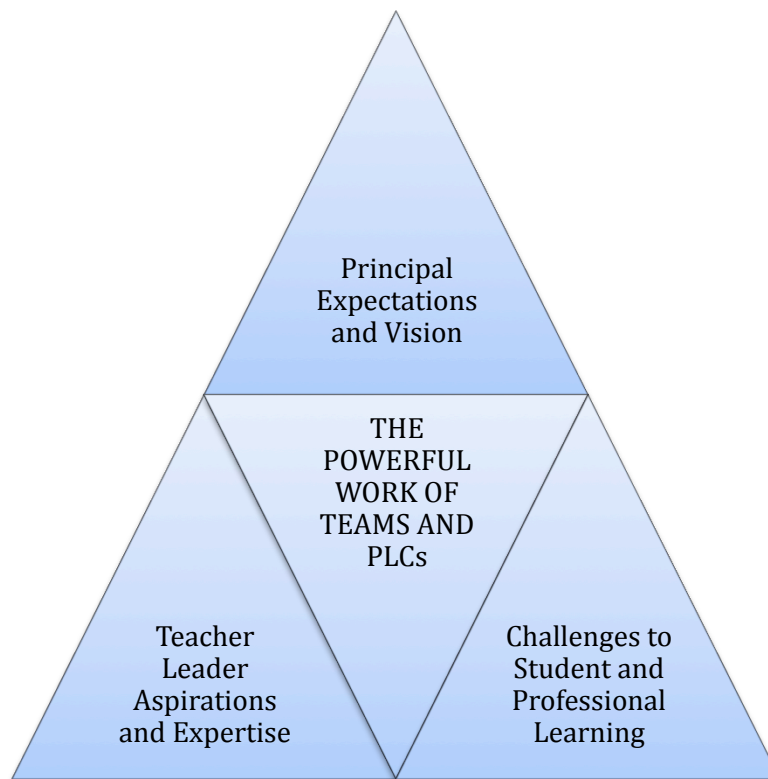
“They need to have expertise in their content area. They also need to be able to have confidence in themselves and have a knowledge base. They need to know what they’re talking about and be able to motivate people with respect and rapport you have with them. That is very important.” (Principal)

“Teacher leaders need to think about: How do I improve students? How do they get the big vision? Teacher leaders have to be part of establishing the goals and facilitate their development. (The teacher leader must) embrace

that they are part of the vision for student achievement. They must know that they can initiate something towards meeting the goals. They should give and receive feedback. If I'm the PLC lead, I can initiate something and move forward with plans that impact the goals. Teacher leaders must initiate and sustain change. It is moving forward, momentum." (Principal)

There is an important consonance between the expectations of the principals and the aspirations of teacher leaders to do something more than generate and distribute agendas and minutes. When mixed with learning challenges, it suggests that an alignment could provide a unique point of excellence as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The Powerful Work of Instructionally-focused Teams



#### Preferred characteristics for school data coach and other teacher leaders

While there was large overlap in preferred characteristics between those outlined by the teacher leaders and the principals, the principals put greater emphasis on the knowledge of teaching and learning, followed quickly by the social skills and courage to have difficult conversations.

"In her particular case, her knowledge of how children learn. Not just reading, because you can apply it to everything else. Help teachers learn how to scaffold to bring their kids along.... Knowledge gets my respect."  
(Principal)

“Have to be very knowledgeable about what good instruction looks like. Have to be very flexible. There are a lot of different personalities. Had a conversation with one of my department chairs yesterday. We were doing her summative for the DPAS II. She was concerned about new role of department chair and also asking for feedback on how she did. I thought she did a really nice job in a department with conflicting beliefs on how mathematics should be taught. I guess it’s knowing who to go to for what reason. When to ask for administration’s support. Where your allegiance lie tends to be a difficult thing. Balanced, good listener. Yes, I hear what you’re saying, but this is the district’s path. Holding teachers accountable but also listening to what teachers say.” (Principal)

“They should be knowledgeable but they don’t have to know everything. They have to work with people and to listen.” (Principal)

### Differentiating teacher leadership roles

These next comments seem to suggest that language and the pace of change is influencing how principals differentiate teacher leader roles.

“This may have been done, but in my mind there doesn’t seem to be a distinction between a teacher leader and someone who is aspiring to be an administration. Yeah, I don’t ever want to do that but they have a lot of leadership qualities within them.” (Principal)

“We went back and forth with the name. Ours is technically instructional coach. It used to be content specialist. With RTTT, we really wanted that coach name to be in there.” (Principal)

“Our reading specialist and math specialist play a huge role in teacher leadership in our building. With RTTT funds, we were able to have math specialists.” (Principal)

“Listening to this discussion, I think our teacher leaders are named wrong. We call grade level chairs instructional coaches, but they are really PLC teacher leaders. They assign roles in the PLC. They are grade specific, not content specific. It is a formal position. It is an application process. It is a limited position with a stipend. When I listen to what they really do (in other districts), what these people (in our district) really do is take their data and look at it.” (Principal)

### Learning to distribute leadership

“We could go back to the DL project. That’s the way I was brought up more or less in the profession. Being collaborative. Your staff trusts you and I’m very fortunate that I’m in a school where I was a teacher, was an AP, and now I’m a principal. They know I’m there to protect them and support them. When it’s

a mandate, they know it's the way it has to be. It's about the relationship."  
(Principal)

Principals are looking for opportunities to distribute and share leadership through a variety of existing and emerging activities. While most of the initiators to distribution of leadership were characteristics like a collaborative orientation,

"I see myself as a collaborative leader. I depend on the Instructional Leadership Team to develop the vision and watch the vision. We meet as an ILT and talk about next steps in our plan. That ILT communicates that to other members of the school gets feedback and reports back. There is lots of liaison work." (Principal)

At the same time, there were several comments that show how distributed leadership can be hampered by traditional administrator-teacher dichotomies. The latter often believing they lack the authority to act on their own behalf.

"I think really this year seeing that before being a teacher leader was serving on a committee of leaders. Now they have something to do, they're leading a group. Now they're not sitting side by side with an administrator. I've had to help teachers be leaders – they were frustrated with what's happening in those groups and I had to help them. Do you have a norm for that? They couldn't look at me to come and fix it. All I've wanted them to do is meet and talk about instruction. The other stuff was under their control. They became their own leaders and had to do that. We couldn't be at every meeting. They were by themselves." (Principal)

"It's a hard nut to crack. For so long, we've been in this traditional teacher and administrator (divide). It was just last week that a teacher leader asked that the administration send out an email to communicate a decision they had made." (Principal)

### Leadership teams

As noted earlier, the move across the country is from principal as instructional leader to the principal as leader of instructional teams. The work of these instructional teams is as varied as the contexts of the schools. However, working with data to identify and address persistent learning issues was prominent in what was described.

"I really need their input to help them develop an improvement plan that is usable and measurable. I need them to be a part of providing that information and giving their input. I think it does come back to them getting them to see that an improvement plan is more than complying with the grant. I don't want them to see it as something I put on them. I want it to be what they see as necessary." (Principal)

“We’re constantly keeping the data. They all tell me, my bachelor’s was in math, they all tell me they think they’re becoming mathematicians. How do you drive decisions based on the data? I constantly try to model that. We’re kind of like a showcase. Now, what would you do? How would you talk to your team about data? SIT is a showcase where they can rehearse and feel prepared and have a full understanding. One of the biggest things is feeling prepared. If not, it takes away the confidence.” (Principal)

### The activities of PLCs

Mirroring the descriptions from teacher leaders, the principals talked in detail about the work of the professional learning communities, who runs them, how they have changed or grown over time, and some of the barriers to the effectiveness of their school PLC time. What is important is the connection between the work of the PLCs and the growth of teacher leadership in schools. As one principal claimed, “PLC meetings have made teacher leadership more meaningful.”

“It certainly has evolved as our school data coach has been trained in *look-fors* from Wireless Generation. We’ve only gotten through three (modules). It changes, the process changes. So lately we introduced action plans. Each group chose to do something different: sight words, subtraction because subtraction is new for kindergarten in common core. They’ve looked at that, going through the process. We do our 6 week RTI during that time. We look at DIBELS scores and see if there are any changes for children in their tiers. We’ve included the IST (Instructional Support Team) within it if a teacher has a concern about a child. If it escalates it goes to our psychologist split between buildings. That’s difficult to schedule.” (Principal)

“It has been a learning year for us with PLCs. The schedule had to be tweaked and changed several times. Next time it will be a revolving schedule with lunch and recess. Now we have a 45 minute block on Tuesday and Thursday. Teachers aren’t happy with the schedule but they are still getting their allotted planning for the union. We are doing the best we can to make the best use of their time.” (Principal)

“The focus on data has been helpful (in PLC meetings) until a teacher comes in with data higher or lower than the rest. Especially when someone’s data is lower than the rest – that conversation is hard.” (Principal)

“They were directly facilitated this year in the data coach project. They have been doing. They could have done more and it has been a relearning of data. It was very strongly thought about this year.” (Principal)

“Planning and instruction is what is going to be the most valuable for Student Achievement. The other things are good – participating in other activities are good – but they don’t matter if you can’t give good sound explicit instruction.



It is the same for me if I can't go to staff development and give you good sound guidance." (Principal)

### Support for principals

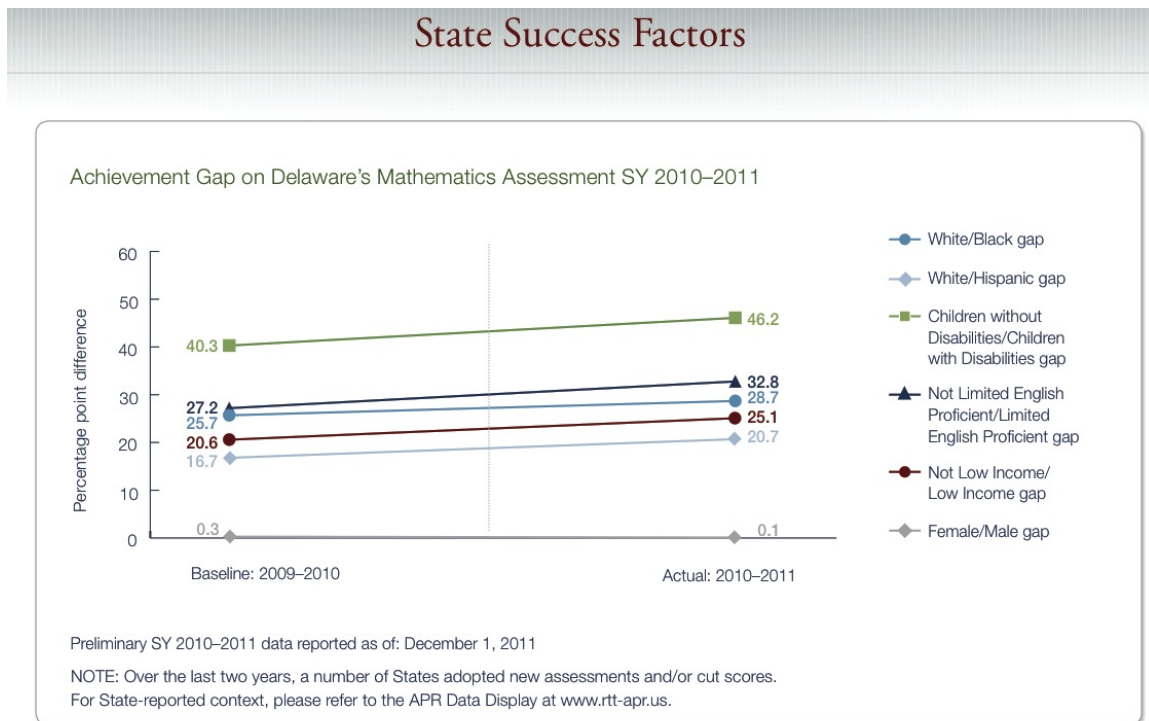
While the scope and time allocated in the focus groups didn't look, specifically, at support relationships, there were comments shared that illustrated sources of support. Most often mentioned were the work leaders had done with DASL, Vision 2015, their districts, and the data expertise provided through state resources.

"We've had some of that support this year. We've worked with DASL and have had observations of the PLC's work. There was some training about basic leadership – vision, assessing where are we now and where do we want to go." (Principal)

## Further Considerations

The activities and efforts around *Race to the Top* in Delaware appear to have brought a clearer focus to many of the challenges remaining. Certainly, the persistent achievement gaps present here (as in most of our US schools) and shown in Figure 4, lays the groundwork for deep attention to a robust and challenging curriculum and assessment system; preparing and retooling teachers with the instructional expertise to meet a variety of student needs; expanding the work of professional collaboration to support professional learning; and equipping an array of teacher leaders and principals with the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to lead this work.

Figure 4: Achievement Gap in Delaware’s Mathematics Assessment<sup>13</sup>



Rather than extended conclusions, I close the report with a list of questions raised from these focus groups. The nine hours of discussion with these principals and teacher leaders show that many of the efforts to expand leadership teams, deepen collaboration through PLCs, and approach goal setting with a more substantive data framework is still a work in progress. Progress made, and goals to pursue. These questions are designed with this in mind:

<sup>13</sup> US Department of Education (2012, January). *Race to the Top, Delaware Report. Year 1: School Year 2010 – 2011*. Washington, DC: US DOE.<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html> (p. 9)

## Key questions

- How can the work of distributed leadership be learned?
- What can teacher leaders do that can help principals to further expand the leadership team?
- How can the historic divide between leading by position and leading through expertise and influence be further developed?
- Is it more important to have consistency in activities like PLCs, or allow for local adaptation?
- What are the data that are most important to attend to? What further expertise is needed to better appreciate these data and use them for instructional planning purposes?
- What role could teacher leaders uniquely play in PLCs to deepen collaboration?
- What should be the role of third party resource providers as part of coordinated system of supports?
- How can districts better support distributed leadership activities?
- How can a climate of experimentation be provided while maintaining a rapid pace of improvement?
- Where do the professional learning needs of principals and teacher leaders intersect?
- What inter-school collaboration might support the work of teacher leaders?
- Are there successful models of teacher leader mentoring that can be scaled?
- How can the roles of teacher leader be designed so as not to drive a wedge with those who are colleagues?
- What outcome measures should teacher leaders be assessed on?
- How would you know if an instructionally focused team is successful in a school?

## Participant List

The following 36 teacher leaders and principals from districts in all three Delaware counties provided their views for this report. Their commitment and sharing of their time at a busy point in the year is gratefully acknowledged.

### New Castle County

#### *Appoquinimink*

Beth Everett  
Rene Nolan  
Kim Gibbs

#### *Colonial*

Kari Redding  
Lindsay DiEmedia  
Bill Johnston  
Brenda Farris

#### *New Castle County Voc-Tech*

Marianne Lancaster  
Monica Quann  
Annemarie Linden  
Sarah Vieni-Venton

### Kent County

#### *Lake Forest*

Denise Timberman  
Anita Hart  
Brenda Wynder

#### *Capital*

Debra Bones  
Jennifer Christman  
Erlinda Colon  
Terri Sharpe  
Shawndell Solomon  
Chastity Steele  
Melissa White  
Andrea Woodard

#### *PolyTech*

Bruce Curry

### Sussex County

#### *Cape Henlopen*

Patti Seabolt

#### *Indian River*

Cindy Baker  
Juliane Hein

#### *Milford*

Susan Donahue  
Kelly Hageman

#### *Sussex Tech*

Jason Peel  
John Sell  
Deborah Long

#### *Woodbridge*

Kaitlyn Duncan  
Donna Hall

#### *Seaford*

Robert Zachry  
Lynelle Hyland  
Dave Hudson