

Teacher Voices: Teacher Leaders in Delaware's Schools

A Report Prepared For:

**Teacher Leadership Advisory Committee
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“It should be recognised that the proper status of teachers and due public regard for the profession of teaching are of major importance.”

UNESCO (Art. 5 of 1996 Recommendation)

Teacher leadership is not simply an abstract concept, a set of skills, or even a description of a powerful shared activity—it resides in people. 39 educators took time from their daily work with students and colleagues to share their experience and insight. I acknowledge their commitment and the important contributions these teacher leaders play in an honorable profession.

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“Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education. The human mind is our fundamental resource.”

John F. Kennedy

Introduction

On behalf of the Teacher Leadership Advisory Committee, the Delaware Department of Education, the University of Delaware, and the Delaware Academy for School Leadership, the researcher was responsible for facilitating (with assistance from colleagues at DASL) focus groups of teacher leaders from each of Delaware’s three counties over the period of April 28-29, 2009. A total of 39 teacher leaders participated in the three focus groups.

The purpose for the focus groups was straightforward: To gain direct insight from those who are currently identified as teacher leaders in school districts across the state of Delaware. The method was designed to be as representative as possible—both geographically and by level. The focus groups were asked to engage in a series of questions meant to describe their daily work, to see what supports or inhibits their work, and what types of resources might be implicated in the exercise of teacher leadership.

What we know about teacher leadership

Teacher leadership is not a new concept and teachers have been exercising influence over a wide range of school activities. Their expertise has often been necessary for the efficient organization of large and complex schools and in many instances has served as a pathway for aspiring principals. In many ways, their historic roles have been largely managerial in focus, often based on negotiated elements of the collective bargaining agreement. Teacher leaders would take on “extra duty” for “extra pay.” They might rise through seniority to positions such as department head with duties for ensuring materials were ordered, organizational and professional learning occurred, and schedules were assigned. They have, however, not been regarded as supervisors—collective bargaining most often retains a “firewall” between the evaluative work of principals and the peer support that a teacher leader can provide.

These are new and challenging times for schools, districts, and states. In the face of a severe recession, we are also in the second decade of a different form of accountability for learning outcomes in schools. The provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act*—and the companion reform strategies and policies in states—places concern for all students and their learning at the center of attention. “Learning focus” is the watchword. While principals have long been heralded as key “instructional leaders” in schools, the work of leading the “learning agenda” is far too complex and expansive for a single person—the principal—to shoulder the responsibility solely. As noted in a recent report (Portin, et al, 2006),

Working at both the local and state levels, efforts are under way to reconstruct school leadership roles by formalizing the distribution of school leadership responsibilities among various staff in the school and by creating policies and

*structures that redesign existing administrative positions. Distributed models are often motivated by the increasing demands of NCLB and pressure to attend to the instructional needs of the school in addition to operational and management needs. These models also acknowledge that many current principals and others in formal administrative positions simply lack the skills or experience to provide requisite instructional leadership. Three strategies are especially popular. The first creates new positions with instructional leadership responsibilities (e.g., instructional specialists or coaches); the second takes advantage of existing instructional leadership expertise among the school staff (by formalizing teacher leadership positions); and the third cultivates collective leadership with teachers' "professional learning communities."*¹

As a result of this new focus on improving learning, new roles and work for teacher leaders are proliferating across the nation. Sometimes these are new roles that are established by policy and/or negotiation, at other times they are experimental and even *ad hoc*. A variety of "coaches" and "instructional leadership specialists" are being called upon to help teachers acquire new teaching strategies to work with all the diverse needs of students in their classrooms. We have written elsewhere about these new teacher leader roles:

Formalizing teacher leadership roles focused on instructional improvement. Rather than create wholly new instructional leadership positions, as in coaching arrangements, other systems are seeking to designate teachers in formal roles of "teacher leader" or "mentor." The conceptions of teacher leadership that underlie such arrangements place teachers at the center of instructional improvement (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), as in Connecticut's BEST (Beginning Educator Support and Training) program, which provides new teachers with an induction support team comprised of veteran teachers.¹ Accomplished teachers attaining National Board certification are also being used in some jurisdictions to support the instructional practice of their colleagues (Berry, Johnson, & Montgomery, 2005). These approaches to nurturing the instructional leadership capacity of expert teachers contrasts with a more typical management role that such teachers have often played in site councils, where they function more as a decision-making rather than a professional development arm of the school organization.²

Current research underway at the University of Washington, Center for the Study of Teaching Policy, suggests four necessary characteristics for learning-focused teacher leaders in urban schools. These are represented in Table 1.

¹ Portin, B. S., Knapp, M. S., Alejano, C. R., Marzolf, E. (2006). *Roles, responsibilities, and authority of school leaders: Patterns in current research, theory, and practice*. State of the field monograph published by the University of Washington Center for Teaching and Policy and The Wallace Foundation. p. 23

² *ibid.* p. 24-25.

Table 1: Core Characteristics of Learning-focused Teacher Leaders (LFTL)

Learning-focused Teacher Leader Characteristics	Contextual Influences on the Exercise of the Characteristic
<p>CONTENT KNOWLEDGE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LFTLs expertise arises from a content area. • While their work is often most located in relation to the content area, they also work across content areas • The most common areas are those that are most driven by high stakes testing, especially literacy and numeracy. 	<p>LFTL content knowledge serves as a link to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accountability system, i.e. they are often working with targeted areas from performance data. • Their content knowledge is also used as a pathway to curricular reform efforts (alignment, pacing, etc.) • They use their content knowledge in other content areas as a way of coaching teachers in how to link content planning to data-informed needs
<p>KNOWLEDGE OF POWERFUL PEDAGOGY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LFTL 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. • There is an expectation that they work across content or grade level areas in instruction. 	<p>There are distinctive feature of the school context that distinguish LFTL instructional knowledge from principals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They don't evaluate. The emphasis is on coaching and mentoring • The expectations for "deprivatized" teacher practice informs this expertise • They often work with two categories of pedagogical need—the novice teacher and the teacher in need of remediation
<p>ABILITY TO BUILD RELATIONAL TRUST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because LFTLs work as non-supervisory leaders, their entry point into the classroom is along a continuum from invitation only to gentle persuasion. • As many LFTL roles are new, they are also developing a rationale and warrant for their work in the eyes of their peers. • There many tensions that exist in the "middle ground" they occupy. 	<p>There are at least two major factors that inform this work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The district theory-of-action for improving instructional quality. This rests on a broader instructional leadership team—beyond the principal and supervisory leaders • As in the prior category, the "opening up" of teacher practice to scrutiny is also a part of this characteristic
<p>PROVIDING SYSTEMIC LINKAGES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LFTLs often sit at an intersection between classroom work and various parts of the system. They sit between classrooms and: 1) supervisory leaders; 2) district curricular reform; 3) system data. • LFTLs often work in close concert with district level resources. • They are often charged with the school's achievement targets in the similar manners to principals. 	<p>The informing activities and contextual variables include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LFTL work is part of a district theory of action for increasing teaching capacity • Accountability structures drive school level actions • While there is individual differences in how LFTLs are arrayed in schools within a district, there are common roles and expectations • There are policy pressures to create career paths—although LFTLs aren't always seen as the "farm team" for future administrators

(Portin, 2008)

Methodology

This small-scale study was designed to collect viewpoints from teacher leaders in the three counties of Delaware. Two-hour focus groups were conducted in three locations over the course of two days, April 28-29, 2009.

A semi-structured protocol was developed for the guided focus group discussion. The six areas of questioning are outlined in the protocol below:

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Note: This is constructed as a topical guide, rather than standardized interview schedule.

- 1. Please describe the day-to-day work that you do as a teacher leader**
 - a. How do you think other teachers in your school view the work you do?
 - b. How do you work with other leaders (such as principals, district, or state leaders)?
 - c. How do you work with other teacher leaders?
 - d. How do you work with teachers and/or students?
 - e. How do school level needs shape your work?

- 2. What skills and knowledge do you draw upon to do your work?**
 - a. Prompt for knowledge of curriculum, instructional strategies
 - b. Prompt for coaching and/or professional development experience
 - c. Prompt for leadership dimensions and planning

- 3. What gets in the way, or facilitates, the work you do as teacher leader?**
 - a. Listen for social/climate issues (collaborative environments, professional learning communities)
 - b. Prompt for organizational/leadership issues that facilitate or constrain the work
 - c. What are you held accountable for?

- 4. What incentives and recognition are you being provided to take on these extra roles and responsibilities?**
 - a. Are you compensated? Other forms of "reward" (salary steps, etc.)
 - b. Is it adequate? If not, what do you think is appropriate compensation?
 - c. How is your work recognized?

- 5. What other resources are provided to you to carry out your work?**
 - a. Material resources such as space, supplies?
 - b. Collegial support and teacher leader teams?
 - c. Time?
 - d. What resources do you need?

- 6. How do you see your work affecting teaching and learning in your school?**

Participants

Teacher leaders were recruited from school districts in the three counties by the study sponsors. Participants were nominated to attend by their superintendent or superintendent's designee. School districts were reimbursed for the substitute teacher expenses necessary for the teacher leaders to attend. Participant numbers by county are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Participants by county

County	TOTAL
Sussex	14
Kent	11
New Castle	14

Data and Analytic Process

Data for this report were comprised of the following:

- Field note/transcripts were recorded on laptops by two to three members of the DASL staff during the focus group meeting. 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 six 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 transcribed.

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

Participants are not identified in this report. The researcher has also removed situational identifiers and, in a few cases, modified the quote to assure anonymity.

Findings from Focus Groups

The following section outlines the key findings from each of the seven categories of questions presented in the focus groups.

The roles teacher leaders hold

The participants in the focus groups described their teacher leadership roles in two categories: Formal roles that included responsibility or titular oversight for some aspect of school activity; and, informal roles that would be acknowledged by others, but are not an official designation.

Formal roles

- **Department chair** – Mostly in middle school, or secondary settings in a traditional content area such as mathematics, science, social studies, etc.
- **Content teacher** – A role designated for content area expertise (such as science, math, gifted, reading support, etc.), but without traditional department head/chair responsibilities.
- **Member of School Leadership Team** (teams have a variety of differing names).
- **Team, academy, or grade level leader** – A similar role to department chair, however, cross-disciplinary in emphasis.
- **Coordinator for specific learning or curriculum programs** such as Accelerated Reader™, RTI Response to Intervention®, AVID Advancement Via Individual Determination®, Positive Behavior Support®.
- **Instructional or teacher coach** – a formally designated role to assist teachers with pedagogy and curriculum.
- **Principal designee** – As principal designee, the teacher leader becomes the on-site staff member with responsibility for school issues in the absence of the principal. In a few cases, the designee also has administrative credentials, but not always.
- **Committee member or chair** – Some of these school committees include those dealing with curriculum, grading, school improvement, special education, etc.
- **Parent-Teacher Organization liaison**
- **Union representative**
- **Grant leader** – In a few instances, teacher leaders were responsible for overseeing the use of grant resources in the school.
- **In-service, professional development, or professional learning community leader**

Informal roles

- **Informal or non-designated leadership** — As one participant stated, “*I think it could be said that we’re all the ‘Informal go-to person’ in our buildings*”
- **Principal confidant** - A number of teacher leaders spoke of the time they spend as a “touchstone” for their principal, or as one described it, a “*major sounding board.*”

With few exceptions, the participants in these focus groups are full-time classroom teachers. Few are 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 are above and beyond classroom teaching.

The day-to-day work of teacher leaders

The 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 perceive 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

Each is briefly described, with illustrative examples.

Participating in, or leading committee work

The teacher leaders described, often first in their comments, the work they do in relation to committees within the school. Occasionally, the committee work was also at the district level. In some cases, teacher leaders participated as members of committees, in others they held facilitative or chairperson roles.

Some of the committees cited included titles such as: School Improvement Team, Standards-based Grading Initiative Committee, Positive Behavior Support Committee (many cited this), Technology Committee, Gifted and Talented Committee, and various forms of Special Education Committees.

Guiding teams

It was common in the responses for these teacher leaders to speak about various teams that they work with. These may be grade level teams (for elementary and some middle level) and sometimes content teams for which they are not traditional department chairs.

They often work within a regular meeting time for these teams, as one participant noted:

We also have joint grade level planning times; each grade level has the same planning time (4th/ 5th/etc). It's helpful to be able to have that time together.

Occasionally, these teams were not based on grade levels or content areas, but were associated with common strategies around “professional learning communities.” These may be study groups, or other forms of cross-school groupings. Sometimes, these groups use approaches, such as “Learning Focused Strategies” (LFS) for the purpose of structuring collaboration around teaching and learning issues.

Professional learning communities meet several times a week for planning—a total of 2-plus hours meeting a week as a grade level... We use LFS as format for lessons; we have taken our lessons and put them in LFS format, have essential questions, vocabulary, and so forth to bring everything together through LFS.

Meeting with school administrators

Teacher leaders spoke often of meeting with school administrators. While some of these meetings were formalized under various forms of leadership team structures, these teacher leaders often spoke of individual meetings with principals as a means for the principal to discuss plans or to “check-in” on learning issues in the school.

We have 7 groups or teams. All team leaders meet monthly with the administration

We meet weekly with our principal; as far as we start every day with a ½ hour meeting: section or academy depending on which day it is. Our administrators don't attend our section/academy meeting unless requested by the group; they expect us to step up and do what we need to do and bring it to them if there's a problem.

Usually the principal taps on a couple of the shoulders to do PD (professional development) and usually I am on the list. (The content of our meetings are around) collaborative teaching processes, AVID instructional strategies, master schedule being involved in meetings as well—mostly meetings to determine master schedule and (issues around) students.

Connecting teachers with resources

A great deal of what these teacher leaders describe is akin to matching problems with resources. They often serve as repositories of information about where colleagues might go to find the answer to a specific question, or what resources they might tap to address a particular need they have. As one teacher leader noted,

Sometimes you come across someone who comes to you with a problem and you don't have a solution but you can guide them—send them to someone who can help them.

Mentoring teachers

While formal mentoring roles for new teachers was not prominent in the comments shared, many participants in these focus groups noted the work that they did to informally mentor teacher colleagues.

Mentoring of new teachers, but much of it is informal and would like to know more.

Many of these mentoring relationships were built on the basis of the reputation they perceive others have in the school. The role of mentoring is one that they mentioned as building up over time in relation to the trust built with colleagues. The following quote illustrates what a number of participants mentioned:

One of the most important things I do as a teacher leader is instilling the confidence to collaborate with each other; they think that every new initiative is punitive, just another thing to do; the role I do day-to-day is not liaison... it is mentor to other teachers; I think the true test is will they come to you; when a teacher says "Hey I'm really struggling with an issue, do you have a solution, can you help me find a solution?"

Modeling practice

Setting themselves up to be model classrooms is something that many of the teacher leaders did both formally and informally. Some extended invitations to other to come in and watch. In one case, it was part of a formal project and included video documentation of teaching practice.

I set up basically an open classroom to video cameras and focus on student and analyze everything you and students do all day, all discourse, all mistakes you are making...

You are putting yourself out there, this is live, real deal, very powerful, images, audio.... Nothing is edited

For other teacher leaders, it is more a practice of extending an "open door." They understand their practice as teacher leaders is under scrutiny and they may be called upon at any point to host visitors. As one noted,

(I) teach bell to bell, with proper warm ups and closing activities. Maintain proper ways to instruct students to give good examples to observers; encourage people to stop in and sit and watch in my own classroom, to collect the greatest information from other teachers not in same subject area they may teach.

Engaging in informal interactions

While much of the work of teacher leadership is associated with formalized tasks or positions that they undertake in the school, a very prominent feature of the comments was the informal nature of interactions that they have—especially with colleagues around teaching and learning.

Like the others mentioned, a lot of it is informal. You can be doing your daily duties, and someone will stop you and have a conversation. A few years ago, (a colleague) and I started a reading program that came out of informal conversations we had in the halls, after school with others. (The colleague) became the “go-to” person on that project.

We don’t have any formal structure at the high school, but informally, around the coffee pot, I have had people come up and ask what they can do to help students read (I’m getting a master’s in reading). In-house we do a good job of seeking out expertise of others. If we’re going to get it we get it ourselves; there is no formal structure set up by administration.

This relates to and reflects the reputational stature that many of the teachers noted that they establish as the “go to” person in the school for a specific subject or issue.

Providing a bridge to district and state contexts

A common theme among the teacher leader participants was the work that they do to connect the school and colleagues to initiatives or directions from the district level, or even the state level. A variety of different terms were used that implied “connecting”, “bridging”, or “interpreting.”

A feature of that bridging function resulted from the organizational connections they may have to a content department at the district, or to committee work that they may be involved in at the district level. Comments included,

I think that you see something that may be common among a lot of us – the role of leader carries out beyond the school walls into the community, into the district.

The high school was fortunate about 6-7 years ago that the chairs held quarterly meetings with district office; we were able to sit down with district office to say, “Here’s where we are, where we would like to go. Can you help us with resources?” We continue to do that, it takes in-house issues across the street to get input from district office, make them aware and it’s really helping us move forward.

Providing a bridge to school administrators

A very common, and emphasized role that teacher leaders mentioned was the work that they did as a “go between” in the space between school administrators and the classroom teachers. Their comments revealed a sense that this was based on mutual confidence in their competence from both administrators and teacher colleagues. In the next section of this report, their ability to establish trust will be discussed further.

The following are a selection of comments that reveal this “bridging” and educative function in the space between classroom practice and school administration.

I think that is one of the biggest roles I serve is being facilitator between teachers and administrators. The past couple of years I don't know if issues or new things such as RTI, student ratio... people don't feel comfortable to speak up.

The roll out with DPAS2 became confusing for teachers and principals on how to reach all five of the components.... I don't want this to sound arrogant, but sometimes teacher leaders can help educate administrators. There's no way administrators can be experts in all areas when you bring to them the nuances of what is going on in classrooms—when you bring them into a classroom and say, “This is what you can expect to see...”

It's a dance, it's an absolute dance; you have to be able to walk the walk.... I don't know what you call it, it's kind of leadership from the bottom up

Collaborating with other teacher leaders

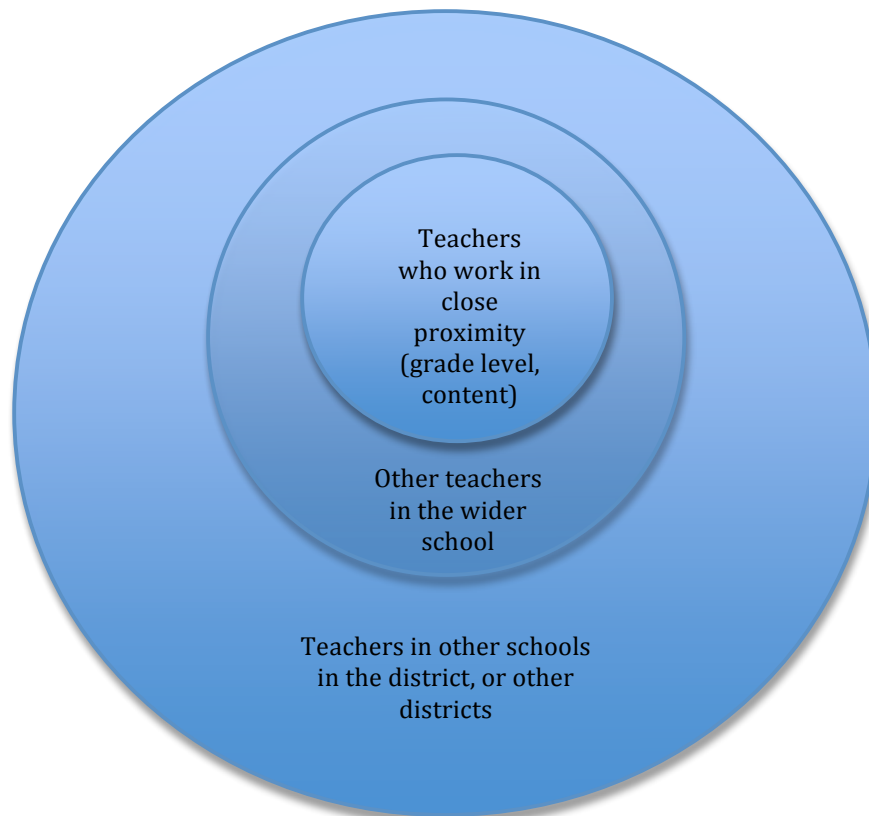
One part of teacher leadership work that was cited both as a practice they engage in, and one they wish they were able to do more of, was working and collaborating with other teacher leaders. Whether that was within their school, or across the school district. They often noted appreciation when the resource of time was provided for such collaboration. As the following teacher leader notes,

At our school we're given time one afternoon a week when other teachers give us coverage...and we'll work with the reading specialist...and one of us ends up leading that... so it starts there but you also have your department level meetings with your administrators... also before budget cuts we used to have district supervisors, so in social studies I would meet a lot with the district level specialists

What is very beneficial is the timeframe in which that happens, it's on a weekly basis after school; with it being on such a regular basis it allows you to influence the curriculum in a more direct way; our principal has been very specific about this right from the very beginning...

The previous sections describe the work of teacher leaders. Analysis of their comments reveals that they do their work in concentric circles as represented in Figure 1. These teacher leaders spend most of their time and energy with the teacher in close proximity with which they have the most direct and daily interaction. Their influence, and time spent, expands out—with less time spent—as they move away from their most direct colleagues.

Figure 1: Teacher leaders' expanding connections with colleague teachers



Skills, knowledge, and dispositions of teacher leaders

Interestingly, the original protocol for the focus groups focused largely on skills and knowledge. In the course of the first focus group (and with their input), the category of dispositions (or characteristics) was added. These are included in the following section.

Seven distinct areas of skill, knowledge, and disposition arose during analysis of the participants' responses. These include:

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

Each of these seven skills, knowledge, and dispositions are discussed in the following section.

Managerial expertise

The work described by these teacher leaders necessitated a wide range of skills. As one participant noted, *“You also have to be a jack of all trades; you wear different hats.”*

A skill noted—not unlike principal leaders—is the ability to undertake both the responsibilities of their teaching assignment, along with “other duties as assigned.” A teacher leader stated, *“We are the people who feel comfortable in what we do and can manage many things.”*

Orientation toward problem solving

Perhaps, one of the more prominent managerial skills described was that of problem framing and problem solving. Their experience and expertise—as well as leadership commitments—oriented them toward dwelling on solutions.

I think that one advantage we have as teacher leaders is that we don't just come with problems—we come with solutions too.

Sometimes it involves reframing... taking one bit of information and reframing it so that the group your seeing will take it more positively... sometimes you can reframe something so that it comes out positive and that really changes the relationship.

Reflective practices

An orientation toward reflecting on one's work is an attribute that cuts across a number of roles. For the teacher leaders in these focus groups, there is a link between the problem solving skills just described, and the communication skills described in the next section. A teacher leader described it this way,

What you are saying is everything falls under being reflective if not, you can't be a leader if not reflective. It starts with yourself. Over years, that is what has made me stronger. What could I have done better? And, watching what is going on around you

Another element of reflection is the warrant that it provides to be open to new ideas and to “risk taking” in one’s own practice (and by implication, instilling in others). These teacher leaders spoke in a number of instances about the ability to tolerate and take risks.

Along with openness, you have to be a risk taker, willing to fail. If you are willing to put yourself out there you might fall on your face, but need to be willing to do that if you want success.

Expertise with data

Data was a prominent theme in the responses from teacher leaders across all three focus groups. Data, the ability to use data, to query data, and to understand its strengths and limitations was in the language and expertise of many of these teacher leaders. As one participant clearly stated, “You can’t speak up if you don’t use data.”

I’m on my school’s improvement plan committee so we are constantly reviewing data. We get a lot of in-service on how to read data and use data. We use it on a school-wide basis on how we are going to use data throughout the year.

Data, and data analysis, forms much of the work that teacher leaders do with both administrators and colleague teachers. In a context of educational accountability, they were clearly in touch with the role that data serves in providing a warrant for progress and for identifying areas for improvement in practices. The expertise that a teacher can bring was evident in the following response:

One of my struggles... is convincing my teachers that data is not a dirty word... data shows all your weaknesses and not the things you’re doing that are good; modeling that it can be a tool for reflection; some people just don’t trust the data at all, and I have to work around that; even if you’re not a believer in data there are some parts where you can use that until the person becomes a believer.

Content expertise

A clear platform for the majority of these teacher leaders was around some area of content expertise. The expertise may have been purely in a subject area, a tool for subject teaching (such as technology), or in how different students engage with content (such as students with special educational needs). The following responses illustrate an array of the ways in which teacher leaders draw on content expertise in the exercise of their roles:

People come to me with technology issues: graphing calculators; book needs, etc. Or they come asking, ‘How do you do it?’

In my case, a lot of times it’s behavioral issues they come to me with. I am lead teacher for (N) grade- they’ll come to me because I’ll initiate getting all of a

student's teachers together to talk as a team to decide what is the best way to proceed for that student to have success.

I think the nature of my position as a (content) support teacher; my position is to be a resource person/liaison person to district office. Perceived as having the "inside scoop" and peers come to me.

Communication skills

Communication skills may be the most important thing that I have been able to develop. Speaking to people the way you want to be spoken to has been the most important lesson I have learned. Not dictating, making sure you can deliver a constructive message. I learned that through experience...

No skill, or attribute, was more cited, or more emphasized, than the communicative expertise necessary for teacher leadership. This was a consistent response across all three focus groups and across all grade levels.

There were multiple dimensions to the communication skills described. Some were along more interpersonal dimensions—not unlike those necessary for building relationships and collegiality. Openness, listening skills, and empathy were often cited:

Listening. Like (colleague) said, you can't pass judgment, you have to listen to others; some longer than others. Many times I've been in meetings and thought about something someone said and have not been afraid to go back to that person and talk about their issue, give advice, disagree with them. It's OK to do all that, but it takes listening first.

Empathy. Pulling in your own personal experiences, but developing a thick skin when remembering your failures. We have to allow others to make mistakes like we have. That's maybe where the comfort level comes in with others; we allow them to come to us and pull on our background, expertise and willingness to try.

The notion of communicating in a positive manner—of being a “cheerleader” was commonly noted among the participants. The positive response to new initiatives, or new expectations, was seen as a way of building commitment as the following participants noted:

Effective leadership is 20% how can you get everyone on board? Getting people to do something you don't want to do

You have to be your school's cheerleader with your parents and your school administrator.

(It's a) motivational convincing type of role, twisting arms.

You need to look for the good, and share; negativity breeds negativity; I have the unique position of going around from school to school and I see a lot of neat things going on, and it's nice to be able to share what I've seen. I informally leave little notes to people – 'I see the good things you do'...

As described in the section on teacher leaders' daily work, bridging to school administrators and to district colleagues is a common part of teacher leadership work. Under communicative expertise, effectiveness is often how teacher leaders communicate "back up" the leadership chain.

Descriptions of this activity include the following:

Sometimes they (teachers) just come with complaints because their workload is just too much... Sometimes it's just a way for them to relieve stress – just to talk it through. Sometimes it's just listening; if I think I can help then I help... If it's something I think is detrimental to kids I take it straight to administrators and I let the person know that I'm doing that

A lot of people are afraid... they might not be comfortable approaching their administrator, they may think that some people's voice carries more weight than theirs... They might come to someone who they think has their (the administrator's) ear (the teacher leader).

Sometimes, part of the responsibility of leadership as part of our liaison team is to work with administration. We gather information from administration. We recently had a meeting to gather information and suggestions that was administration free to pass along... about what we would like to have done... so the district administration is welcome to see what we think we need.

Our team also met with several representatives from the Department of Education on what (colleague) was saying about the budget and other concerns...

Ability to establish relational trust

As teacher leaders work with colleagues from a position of equality rather than supervisory authority, they leverage their influence through developing relational trust with their colleagues. Participants spoke of this as taking time and drawing upon their own skills, personality, and perceived trustworthiness.

Relational trust... that relationship level is huge and without that kind of support you can't do the job as well.

Barriers and bridges to the work of teacher leaders

When the question of what gets in the way or facilitates your work as a teacher leader was raised, without exception all three focus groups would chorus, “time!” This was closely followed by “money” and “politics.”

However, more extended discussion of the barriers and bridges revealed a more nuanced sense of these dimensions, and others. It is also important to note that for virtually all of the dimensions cited, examples were provided for ways the dimension could be either helpful or a hindrance. For example, the school master schedule was very often cited. The master schedule could be a tool for providing common planning time for teachers in a subject or grade level encouraging collaboration, or it could be structured in such a way that the only space to engage in shared professional learning was outside of the teaching day. The following dimensions should be read for both their “helping” and “hindering” aspects.

Content analysis of the responses generated six major categories of barriers and bridges:

- Resources
- Administrator expertise
- School management
- Professional culture and practice
- Initiative proliferation
- District direction, guidance, and support

Resources

Resources can be imagined in a number of ways including, time, people, and money. Each was discussed, however, time was—by far—the most cited resource, and usually in a deficit sense.

One of the challenges is that as new things are added, nothing is taken away. Sometimes what happens is people remember failed initiatives, and so you really have to pick and choose what you value, and it's a time issue. In our school we would love to plan out ELA curriculum for the next year, but it's a time issue.

The participants in the focus groups, by and large, are full time classroom teacher. All agreed that most of the time they invest in assisting colleagues happens during their lunchtime. They are quick to point out their primary commitment to classroom teaching, as the following quotes illustrate:

Still a classroom teacher first, not saying that gets in the way, but it keeps you from doing more.... I would like to do more, but my kids come first, I am a classroom teacher...

I worry that the group that suffers is my class. I was out 12 days in the fall for professional development, but that was 12 days I was not there.

I think a down side, though, is time. All of us are in charge of our classrooms and we have all the planning and preparation... When I'm out, I have to go home and get ready for the next day.

When working to find the right time to work in leadership roles, the school master schedule was noted as both a help and hindrance, as the following juxtaposed quotes show:

(There is a) lack of common planning time with content teachers.... I feel I am asked to do a lot at certain time that my (subject) class or my planning, or my personal needs, get cut out.

(Our) master schedule has helped to create more time that we didn't have before. Now we have a PLC built into the schedule. It has been a positive thing. But it can go either way.

Comments shared in the focus groups clearly demonstrated that the current economic times are having an effect down to the school level. Issues of financial compensation are more thoroughly covered in the next section. One teacher leader noted that, *I think sometimes if you have stipend, fifteen hundred, or whatever, it is if you have project or portfolio so there is time.* Money is seen as a support.

In this section, financial resources were most often cited in terms of personnel, or having enough staff to do the work. These teacher leaders worry about the impact of more work spread to fewer people as the following comments illustrate:

As budget cuts, and as people and resources get smaller, I think that the number of things that teacher leaders are going to be asked to handle are going to get more and more... and people are going to get burned out.

I think budget effects a lot of it... we did have specialists. They were the go-to person at the district level. With budget cuts they were cut, and it's trickled down to our building level.

Our principal has already addressed that with us... half of our staff is new, so she lost half of the people who would deal with that for her... she wants everyone to have opportunities, she wants to share that and she doesn't want us to burn out...

Administrator expertise

Teacher leaders readily acknowledged the critical role that the relationship with their school administrator plays. As one participant stated, *"Our administrators need us, they need someone on their side. Don't bite the hand that feeds you!"* This is discussed in more than one section of this report. Clearly, principal expertise can be both a support and an obstacle in the minds of these teacher leaders.

(You need) an administrator that let you think outside the box, if you don't (have that kind of administrator) you don't.

I feel that I have my administrator's support. She wouldn't keep coming to me if she didn't value the work I do.

Administrative style was also noted. As the prior quote illustrates, freedom to lead is appreciated; “micromanagement” is not. When asked what gets in the way, one leader said, “Administrators that micromanage all aspects of education and do not allow for new, creative ideas.” These teacher leaders noted their appreciation for words of encouragement from principals, a shared sense of vision, and the principal’s skill in opening doors for them.

These teacher leaders speak of being included in decision-making processes—active participants in distributed leadership in the school.

Being a part of the process, instead of being told. I'd rather have a say in what is going to be my job in the end, as a teacher. I'd rather have a say in what I will have to do... Then when it's mandated upon doing it, you're already doing it

Some teacher leaders worry about the effect of being the “go to” person for the principal. There are two areas of concern that they mention. The first is how it affects the time and attention they are able to give their students.

“(We) are paid to teach the kids. Also, something that I worry about is there are only certain people administrators go to. (This is) how I go to saying ‘no’, I’m not going to impede on planning, teaching, and providing feedback. It’s going to have ramifications, there are only so many hours in the day.”

As teachers we can't cut our students out: so we have to do this for them, it's not their fault.

The second concern is how they might be perceived by teachers as a result of the ongoing working connection they have with the school principal. Some worry about being seen as an extension of the principal.

It is a fine line to walk as a teacher leader, because on a day-to-day basis, I am a sounding board (to the principal). We brainstorm a lot together and sometimes that can be seen to others (teachers) that I am on the administration's side. It's been tough over the years, because some administrators I can walk that better with than other administrators. It varies. That is a tough part.

Not that we're being pulled in two directions, but it's hard to be a teacher leader when you don't know the vision/mission of your building administrator. So then you resort back to what you know: being an instructional leader in your classroom.... But as far as being a liaison from administration to staff, it's

hard to do when you don't know your administrator's focus. When they only come to you in dire needs to fix something, it's hard to help.

School management

Earlier, the managerial dimensions like master scheduling were mentioned as something that many of them participate in. The managerial use of scheduling to ensure time for collaboration was mentioned as a valued asset.

Meetings, however, can be seen as both a way to facilitate the work of teacher leadership, but if not managed well, it can be a hindrance. One participant noted, *"You have, at my school, time for morning meetings, but I don't know that that time is always used effectively."*

Professional culture and practice

The professional culture of the school, and the practices that staff engage in were cited by many as sources of help and hindrance. One dimension often cited surrounded the micropolitical activities that can occur between competing interests within the school—sometimes between teachers, sometimes between administrators and teachers.

Another important manifestation of professional culture cited by the participants was the attitude that they experience from their colleagues—particularly in relation to change or improvement in practice. Sometime it was seen in apathy, or resistance, sometimes in willing participation. The following comments illustrate this dimension:

Teacher buy (can be) hard to get from veteran teachers. They say we have seen this 10 years ago they have just changed the terminology. They've seen it come down before and that they will see something else in 3 years.

I think one thing that facilitates our role is to understand where those people are—those who have been around the block and seen this or that initiative before.... I have come to appreciate their experience...

Using those people who have experience to your benefit, know who you have in building and who get immediate and struggle know how to stroke those you need to get on board. Good to facilitate, to know who to stroke, and maybe convince them again to do it this way.

The personalities of teachers and their belief systems... whether they're willing to be reflective and (be willing) to change; you can suggest... you can be "Jaime Escalante", but unless (the teachers are) willing to believe in that (that students can learn) then it doesn't matter.

Teacher leaders find simple acknowledgement and gratitude for their work to be a bridge to their continued enthusiasm for teacher leadership (perhaps, not unlike any member of the school community).

One thing that helps is appreciation you get from other teachers. This encourages you to keep helping.

Knowing that you're doing everything you can to be the best you can be for your students is incentive—when you walk in the classroom knowing that you've done all you can to help them. You might not get it (incentive) anywhere else.

I print out every e-mail I get from parents thanking me and I save for days I do not get thanks. I remember the looks on kid's faces and that carries me through and I remember them when I'm in the trenches

Knowing your administrator and superintendent has confidence in us to come today (to the focus group) is a good feeling.

Initiative proliferation

Delaware, as in all corners of the US, is engaged in multiple efforts to meet accountability expectations for student performance. This includes experimentation and planning to increase the capacity of schools and educational professionals to meet the learning needs of all students. Teachers can sometimes perceive this as “innovation overload” which adds to already existing expectations on practice.

I think our administrators, they, too, are getting more and more put on their plate and that's why they rely on us more and more. That's why they listen to us, and think about why we don't have time to do everything they ask of us... there's pressure on them too because they are getting these initiatives from someone else above them.

I think it's a shame how much has been put on us... now there's published DSTP scores...

For many of the teacher leaders in the focus groups, they don't always see the coordinative work of districts and at the state level to fit initiatives together. This perception of disconnect is seen in the following comments,

(Talking about multiple initiatives) It would be nice if they would look at where they overlap...

I think that all of a sudden, now, I feel like our district has dropped the ball on PD. We spent the last two years on PD doing GLE alignment, (that's) all we have done for 6 PD days.

Our goals are not consist from superintendent to administration to staff.... we are caught in the middle. Listen to the superintendent, and he isn't in schools every day, or listen to the principal. Difficult when they are going in opposite directions

District direction, guidance, and support

Districts (and the State as well) are sources of direction, guidance, and support for the activities and roles of principals and teacher leaders in schools. Occasionally, the teacher leaders present would speak about this in terms of “bureaucracy” or “red tape.” Their comments revealed a hope that district colleagues would express a greater sense of connection to the decisions made or the district’s ability to initiate collaboration and coordination such as in “*greater access to role-alike colleagues.*” As one participant noted, “*Also I think scheduling we are a small state, sometime there are schedule conflicts for state meeting. (It) should never happen in this state—no communication. Some of the same people are going to half of this or that meeting.*”

Other colleagues mentioned,

I think now that we have common standards, initiatives statewide we are all trying to reinvent the wheel. It would be beneficial to communicate and share ideas across districts.

I noticed it’s funny we see the same faces at every meeting.... Now it doesn’t seem there is a vehicle/desire for us to share out what we learn and do. I come back with a pool of knowledge that it seems like no one wants to have!

On two occasions, union activity was also noted as influencing their work as teacher leaders. One was a DSEA initiative to work “bell-to-bell” and it was shared that the work of teacher leaders can’t fit within bell-to-bell constraints.

Incentives and recognition for the roles of teacher leaders

The discussion of incentives for the work of teacher leadership always began the same. When asked if there were financial incentives, the groups replied with laughter. While added pay was not uniform, after some discussion it was apparent that all of the work of teacher leadership is not simply voluntary—there are some forms of compensation for teacher leaders in a number of the districts and schools represented.

The incentive structure described fell into the two expected categories of extrinsic incentives and intrinsic rewards. It should be noted, however, the idea of intrinsic incentives was described with a great deal more detail and energy than even desired-for extrinsic rewards. As one teacher leader summarized, “*Money would be nice, but I do this for more than money.*”

In terms of extrinsic rewards, those who held specifically titled positions (such as department chairs) likely received a stipend, “*I get a small stipend for being the ILT co-chair.*”

Other teacher leader responsibilities were uncompensated in the form of salary, or mixed with other forms of compensation. A variety of other incentives were described. These included:

I get a leadership stipend and I get a stipend for being the web master, but other than that I just get clock hours...

Prep time, for example, I teach two blocks, instead of three. Another described, four 30-minute periods per week (for doing teacher leadership work).

There are stipends for some positions. You basically just get thanks and respect.

The chairs teach two 90 minute periods and have one for planning and one for chair work to do planning and walkthroughs... but I'll be honest with you and I've been given that block of time and I've filled that time with initiatives to help (subject) kids... I had that time.... I'm able to do those things

The chairs in our district in general have a reduced schedule; I think the intrinsic is much more powerful... the money doesn't seem to make much difference because it's minimal.

One teacher leader commented that, "I would really like to see a 'quasi-administrator' pay grade." Other incentives described as desirable included opportunities to both participate in, and lead, professional development, to be the principal designee (for experience purposes), and the ability to accrue flexible/or comp time and use those in a professional manner.

It would be nice if it were an official title and something where you taught part time so you're not leaving the kids with substitute. Personally, I could be an administrator, but I have no desire. (Such a system) would allow time during the workday to teach four classes and have the afternoon to work on (teacher leadership tasks).... Be part time teacher and part time school leader.

Intrinsic rewards were described in far more detail. One teacher leader asserted, "(it's) certainly not a monetary thing for me. It's the intrinsic rewards, the work with students." Another indicated, "It's a chance to be part of the solution or the success instead of always hearing about the problems; it's nice to be able to fix things"

There was not a sense of "recognition seeking," in fact, there was often discomfort expressed in comments when they felt "spotlighted" as it could be an opening for distrust or ill-will among other hard-working colleagues. It took some prompting, but the teacher leaders in the focus groups shared the following comments:

The greatest incentive is student achievement. Also progress and solutions rather than excuses for why we can't fix a given problem.

I can leave the room if necessary.

Being a voice for those who can't

It's an intrinsic reward... it's your own personal high that you get on because you're doing the work.

You also don't have to have that ultimate responsibility, I don't have to be in charge but I have a say...

Everything else everyone has said. When you come and do this type of stuff you learn a lot more of what is going on in schools and districts. You learn what works.

Doing the right thing helps me sleep at night.

The incentive, or motivator won't sound school leader like. It's selfish, intrinsic. The district might have (professional development needs) so I am willing to take a role more to grow. No stipend. Maybe a thank you letter from assistant superintendent.

It's a chance to be part of the solution or the success instead of always hearing about the problems; it's nice to be able to fix things.

The same, very intrinsic, passionate, I love being part of change and bring people who can't come to meetings what they would say

Being district selected is the thanks. Not the tangible.

The school that I came from if the school administrators were out they'd bring me the walkie-talkie and sure I feel important because I have the walkie-talkie on but I don't get anything extra for it.

Resources provided to teacher leaders

The purpose of this question was to explore beyond general supports, or the specific incentive structures provided by schools and districts. The idea behind this question is to understand what other non-salary resources are made available to teacher leaders in the exercise of their roles in schools.

Some of the elements described here are recurring. For example, "time" again arises as a key resource (similarly, it was a bridge and an incentive). The same occurs with professional development.

Small budgets appeared to go a long way for many of the teacher leaders. There were a number of sources for small grants noted. These included:

- Professional associations such as NCTE, or NCTM
- Delaware Department of Education
- University of Delaware
- Wilmington University

- Delaware Academy for School Leadership
- Distributed Leadership and Vision 2015
- Delaware Science Coalition
- EXXON
- Local businesses

Professional development in key initiatives such as RTI and PBS were noted, as were trips to visit other schools

Other tangible resources provided for teacher leaders in the exercise of their work included technology upgrades, laptops (both provided, but also cited by others as a need); books and programs for their own professional learning (e.g. aspiring leaders program); instructional coaches from the district level, district model resource units and district support staff

We're always creative with what we have but we always think about how much more we could do if we had the resources...

How teacher leaders see their work affecting teaching and learning

How the work of teacher leaders connects to high quality teaching and learning is an important and complex issue. While these teacher leaders often spoke of their own classroom commitments, they recognize that what they do has the potential to influence teaching and learning in a broader way across the school. As with principal leadership, they recognize that their influence on students and their learning is largely indirect. For these teacher leaders, there were a number of comments that suggest they see their work as influencing the larger context, culture, and climate of the school that can shape teaching and learning.

As they imagine their work shaping the learning climate of the school, their comments included the following:

What becomes better and better becomes best!

I see being a positive role model... the kids see who walks into your room and they feel that they're in a room (with a good teacher)

(It's important) that you're part of a community...

Creating a positive atmosphere in school. Making it run smoother. Teachers aren't stressed.

(Our work is about) ultimately increasing achievement. You're asking teachers to be reflective... and ultimately that (should increase student achievement)

In addition to shaping a learning climate and culture, a number of the teacher leaders commented on the secondary effect that their leadership has in making other leaders, like principals, successful in their work. Several of them suggested,

The more help (they) get from teacher leaders it gives administration more time to run the school.

As a teacher leader (my work) is helping the building run more smoothly... if everything is on track, it helps student success. The managerial (aspects) not just instruction make it right for learning.

Making change... developing a more positive culture not just in my building, but in the district.... Others are tying-in the vision and mission of the district. I have own vision and mission of my classroom typed up and show to the principal and I share it with parents. (We work on) co-existing and building strong school and district collaboration.

Further Considerations

The Teacher Leadership Advisory Committee assumes responsibility for interpretation of the findings for policy purposes. There are, however, several issues that readers may wish to consider as a means of beginning the next stage of policy planning.

- The teacher leaders describe the difficulty of what it means to inhabit the “middle space” between administrators/principals and their colleague teachers in classrooms. Many described what it means to be “allied” with the principal, at least in the perceptions of others. Leading from this middle space, suggests teacher leaders provide a different form of support for professional learning for teachers in schools and in the way they work with other teacher leaders.
- The participants talked about duplication of activity and wonder about what coordination of the work of teacher leaders might look like, as well as access to role-alike colleagues. One participant noted, *“I think now that we have common standards, initiatives statewide we are all trying to reinvent the wheel. It would be beneficial to communicate and share ideas across districts.”*
- One participant claimed that, *“Colleges don’t do a good job preparing teachers that there is the extra stuff.... Most (of the extra responsibilities) doesn’t have to do with the school day and children and doesn’t go with (regular) planning...”* This implies a rethinking of what happens in teacher preparation to better understand their role as a member of a professional learning community.
- So many of the teacher leaders speak about their informal influence as leaders. Their influence doesn’t arise from position. It does, however, suggest that they draw on something. What allows for the development of relational trust and expertise should be further explored.
- What it means to be “compensated” for the work is subject to how the incentive allows them to remain connected to the work of teaching and learning—their often described passion. What, beyond salary and resources, might serve to reward teacher leaders in their work?
- It is not clear what portion of teacher leaders see this as a pathway to the principalship or other administrative positions. This raises questions about what a career continuum might look like without being, necessarily, a feeder activity for principal preparation.
- These participants also help to illuminate some potential directions for necessary skills, knowledge, and dispositions to undertake the work of teacher leadership. What will be needed in the future is an important question.