

Learning from the Field

Developing Teacher Leader Capacity to Work with Other Teachers

Directions: The following insights on developing the capacity of teacher leaders were provided by experienced practitioners. Individually, review these insights and the text that follows. Select two insights to discuss as a team using the discussion questions that follow.

1. Select with the role in mind – The nature of teacher leader work should inform teacher leader selection.

Teacher leaders should be selected, expert practitioners recommended, “based on the practices they will enact.” A clear job description or specific vision of the teacher leader’s work will establish a public and consistent understanding that teacher leaders are being selected for a particular role or for carrying out specific activities. One practitioner noted that “under ideal circumstances, there would be a one-to-one correspondence between the attributes identified in the selection process and the practices expected of teacher leaders.” Although total alignment may not be feasible in the “real world,” it is important that the selection criteria and qualifications come as close as possible to fitting the work that teacher leaders are expected to do.

An MSP representative, echoing the advice of other program leaders, noted that “one of the most important lessons learned about the selection of teacher leaders was the [importance] of a job description detailing the major responsibilities for which they would be held accountable.” Crafting such a description helped program leaders articulate the knowledge and skills they were seeking, which then informed the development of teacher leader selection criteria.

Without a job description or some articulation of the teacher leader’s role, there will be less clarity in the teacher leader selection process. Selecting teacher leaders to play undefined roles may lead to broadly-drawn selection criteria—such as “strong teaching experience” or “good communication skills”—that are not explicitly connected to the work that teacher leaders will do.

2. Less may be more – Selecting fewer, highly-qualified teacher leaders may be preferable to selecting larger numbers of less-qualified candidates.

MSP program leaders noted that it can be a challenge to find a sufficient number of teacher leader candidates who possess all of the desired qualifications. Some MSP leaders recommended that if there are only a small number of highly-qualified candidates available, it is better to hire fewer teacher leaders than originally planned rather than select a larger number of less-qualified candidates, unless the program is willing to devote substantial time and resources to developing the needed knowledge and skills. Some MSP programs found that the time and resources expended to develop less-qualified candidates were much greater than anticipated, and that the unevenness in these candidates’ qualifications made it challenging to implement a preparation program that

brought all teacher leaders up to the desired level of knowledge and skills. If it is not possible to provide such a preparation program, then teacher leader work may need to be redefined to match the skills and experience that the selected teacher leaders bring.

3. Align preparation to the work – The knowledge and skills developed in a preparation program should reflect the focus of teacher leaders’ work in schools.

In considering how to prepare teacher leaders, experienced practitioners noted the importance of developing knowledge and skills that are aligned with the focus and goals of the reform effort they will help lead. For example, teacher leaders might be charged with supporting the implementation of new science curricular materials. Preparation for these teacher leaders might be focused on developing deep understanding of the content and pedagogy featured in the materials and how that content might be challenging for the teachers with whom they will work. Or, teacher leaders may serve as mathematical resources for teachers, answering questions about content, clarifying areas in which instructional materials are unclear, and contributing to curriculum development. Knowledge of both mathematics content and students’ conceptual development would then be foundational. Teacher leaders charged with providing leadership to grade level, department, or school-wide teams may also need broader expertise, including knowledge of the needs and interests of different constituents (e.g., district staff, school administrators, and/or classroom teachers). In short, the vision of teacher leaders’ practice should shape their preparation.

In one MSP program in which teacher leaders were expected to engage in lesson planning with classroom teachers, teacher leaders were trained on how to effectively facilitate that process with groups of teachers using a specific lesson planning protocol. In another MSP, teacher leaders who would serve as coaches to classroom teachers received “common preparation in cognitive coaching, data analysis, and classroom observation training.”

Preparing teacher leaders is especially difficult when teacher leader roles are not identified in advance. In those cases, a preparation program must address the bigger challenge of developing a wide array of knowledge and skills so the teacher leaders will be able to address the specific needs in a particular context.

4. Keep on learning – Teacher leaders’ preparation should not be entirely “front-loaded,” but rather continue as teacher leaders implement their work in schools.

Experienced practitioners suggested that teacher leader preparation support participants along a trajectory of learning, and not be limited only to what happens “at the beginning” of the program. Preparation that occurs prior to engaging in teacher leader practice is important to get teacher leaders started, but designers of preparation programs should be purposeful about what this portion of preparation is meant to accomplish. Otherwise, resources might be wasted on preparation experiences that are not meaningful to teacher leaders because they cannot be applied yet.

The leader of an MSP program that distributed teacher leader preparation over three years commented about the importance of “spreading out the learning to allow for reflection and deeper understanding.” Other experienced practitioners also noted that building teacher leaders’ knowledge and skills is not a “one-time” activity; it needs to occur at the beginning of preparation as well as after their practice has begun, to help them continue to develop as leaders.

Like all learners, teacher leaders need opportunities to apply and practice what they are learning, helping them connect their preparation to the realities they are facing or will face in their practice. For instance, a cycle of learning might be implemented in which teacher leaders learn about and plan for a skill, implement it at their schools, reflect on the results with teacher leader colleagues, and apply what was learned in subsequent practice. Or, it might be a focus on artifacts of teacher leader practice, through “assignments” that are carried out by teacher leaders or through observations of other teacher leaders engaging in practice, and then analysis and reflection on those artifacts. If explicit connections are not made between preparation and practice, there may be a divide between what happens under the label of “preparation” and what occurs as part of “practice.”

5. Scaffold learning – Teacher leader preparation should feature explicit structures to scaffold teacher leaders’ learning.

Experienced practitioners suggested that teacher leader preparation programs include explicit structures to support ongoing learning. For example, teacher leaders could be given an observation protocol to use in peer observations or guiding questions to use in reflecting upon an activity in the preparation program. These structures may change over time, but some kind of scaffolding is needed to support teacher leader learning. As one MSP leader explained, “One of the things we know from the learning research is that people need structure to understand, and that, as learners, they often are not capable of imposing their own structure on information.”

Experienced practitioners noted that external resources are often helpful in providing additional opportunities for scaffolding the preparation of teacher leaders. A program designer might identify institutes and conferences that are particularly relevant given the goals and purpose of teacher leaders’ work, or recruit external experts to serve as an additional resource for teacher leaders during their preparation. The contribution of these resources to the preparation of teacher leaders lies in the ways in which teacher leaders’ learning is scaffolded; giving teacher leaders access to external resources such as conferences does not necessarily mean that teacher leaders learn.

These insights come from a number of knowledge reviews about developing and supporting teacher leaders, prepared by the Knowledge Management and Dissemination project. See <http://www.mspkmd.net/blasts/tl.php>