

A sequence of changes in Denver paved the way for a program of teacher leadership that is expected to touch every school in the district by 2018.

by **Lori Nazareno**

Teacher Leaders in Denver Public Schools

Teachers are increasingly dissatisfied. In one recent survey, 47 percent of teachers said they were not enthusiastic about their jobs, and another showed a sharp drop in teacher satisfaction since 2008, from 62 to 39 percent.¹ This dissatisfaction does not stem from what one might think—stresses related to dealing with students and families. Teachers instead cite policy development by those outside of the profession, lack of respect by elected officials, lack of autonomy, and lack of input into decision making.

The teaching force is also becoming less stable, with an increase in attrition rates and in the number of teachers moving from one school or district to another.² This instability is particularly apparent when one examines attrition rates of teachers of color. The organizational conditions most strongly related to minority teacher turnover are low levels of collective faculty decision-making influence, teachers' perceived degree of individual classroom autonomy, and the level of collective faculty influence over schoolwide decisions. These factors have been found to be more significant than salary, professional development, or classroom resources.³

These statistics point to a need for teacher leadership, which requires rethinking teachers' autonomy and authority to make decisions that affect whole-school success. Teachers are ready and eager to play a larger, more important role in improving student learning—and the public wants them to do so. A recent survey found that more than 90 percent of Americans think that teachers should have a "great deal" or at least "some" authority to tailor instruction to individual students and that teachers should have a great deal or some authority over curriculum and choices of technology. The public also expresses overwhelming support for

giving teachers the authority to select their colleagues and even control their school's budget (80 percent and 72 percent, respectively).⁴ Policymakers can stimulate this shift through policies and practices aimed at developing, facilitating, and supporting teacher leadership.

Teacher leadership has come to mean different things to different people. Some believe it means teachers will lead initiatives that result from others' decisions. However, Berry, Byrd, and Weider describe a bolder brand of teacher leadership in which teachers receive time, space, and rewards for incubating and executing their own solutions to the most pressing challenges in education.⁵ Such leadership provides opportunities for teachers to engage in the types of problem solving they are expected to instill in students. It also presents a means by which to leverage the skills of districts' most accomplished teachers.

Teacher collaboration is an important facet of creating teacher leaders.⁶ When teachers share their expertise with peers, teaching practice improves, as does student learning. When schools actively involve teacher teams in decision making, student achievement increases.⁷ Teachers are looking for these opportunities. According to the most recent MetLife survey, 51 percent of US teachers are at least somewhat interested and 23 percent are very interested or extremely interested in hybrid roles that allow them to continue teaching part time while assuming other roles in their schools or districts.⁸ In other words, they want to lead without leaving the classroom.

Denver Makes a Start

Few districts have begun to make the systemic changes required to incorporate teacher leadership in their schools. Denver Public Schools (DPS) is one of them.

Several factors persuaded DPS to develop a teacher leadership strategy:

- **Increased enrollment alongside increasing needs.** More students overall were enrolling in DPS schools, and many of them were English language learners and students who qualified for free or reduced priced lunches. These are students for whom an effective teacher is even more important.
- **Poor structures for teacher feedback and growth.** High-quality feedback improves instructional practice, yet few structures were in place for teachers to receive such feedback.
- **Lack of formal means by which effective teachers share expertise.** Every school has outstanding teachers, and most members of the community know who they are. Yet DPS was not leveraging the talents of these teachers.

Teachers in the district began to express interest in an increasing role for teacher leaders in addressing these challenges, with the support of teacher leadership organizations outside the district such as the Center for Teaching Quality.

The Evolution of Teacher Leadership

DPS has long been willing to do things differently. Their current efforts to rethink teaching are rooted in work begun over a decade ago with ProComp, the district's groundbreaking approach to teacher compensation. Its hallmark was a move away from paying teachers solely for years of service and degrees earned and toward compensating teachers for taking on challenging assignments, fostering student learning, and improving teaching practice.

In 2010, DPS changed its teacher evaluation system from one in which the only possible ratings were satisfactory or unsatisfactory and in which it was virtually impossible to differentiate developing teachers, good teachers, and great teachers. The new system, Leading Effective Academic Practice, or LEAP, made it possible to more clearly identify effective and highly effective teachers.

The system was not without its challenges. Improved precision in teacher evaluation requires more time and deeper expertise. In short, principals could not be the only ones making teacher observations and offering feedback.

These challenges created an opportunity for DPS to leverage the talent of effective teachers to improve instructional practice across schools and the district. As DPS redesigned its evaluation system, it also started the Teacher Leadership Academy during the 2010–11 school year. This early phase of teacher leadership in DPS involved identifying teachers in each school, paying them a \$500 stipend, and supporting them with additional professional development. Teachers in these roles were expected to conduct leadership activities on top of their full-time teaching load. The principals selected teacher leaders in an “anoint and appoint” approach.

Teacher Leadership in DPS Today

DPS has since expanded and evolved its approach to teacher leadership. Its current vision is to significantly improve student outcomes by deploying teacher leaders in consistently defined roles in all DPS schools by 2018. Its program has these goals:

- **Support teacher growth.** Provide more frequent and actionable feedback and coaching for teachers.
- **Strengthen teams in schools.** Increase opportunities for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing by teacher teams led by teacher leaders.
- **Attract and retain strong teachers.** Keep great teachers in the classroom and the profession.
- **Increase distributive leadership.** Build stronger leadership teams while growing and developing potential assistant principals and principals.

In the 2013–14 school year, DPS piloted two hybrid roles for teachers in 14 schools. To qualify for these roles, teachers had to be rated effective or higher, a significant shift from how teacher leaders were previously selected, under a system that could not determine who was effective but only who performed satisfactorily. Teacher leaders had as much as 50 percent release time from regular teaching duties. During this time, these teachers work with teams of teachers on instructional improvement. All teachers in these roles observe, give feedback, and contribute to the evaluation of the teachers on their team. (This shift is represented visually on the following page in figure 1.)

Figure 1a. Traditional structures for observation, feedback, and evaluation

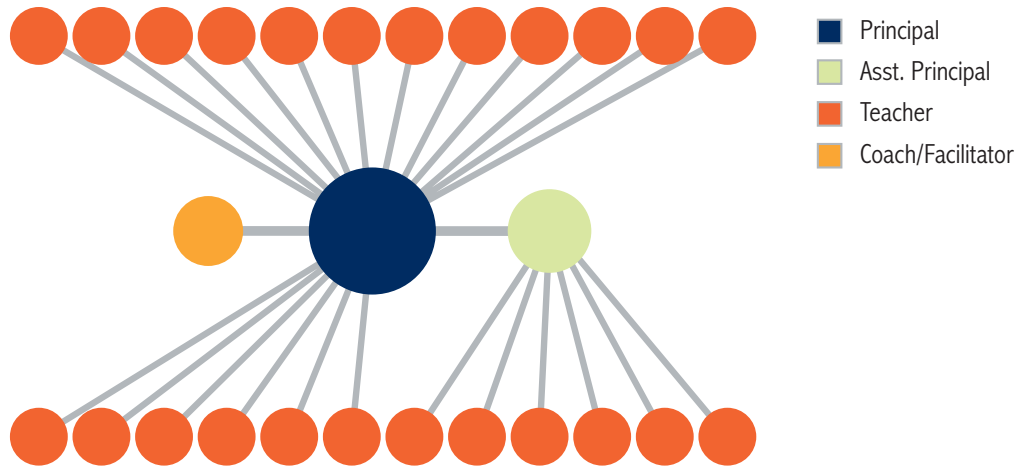
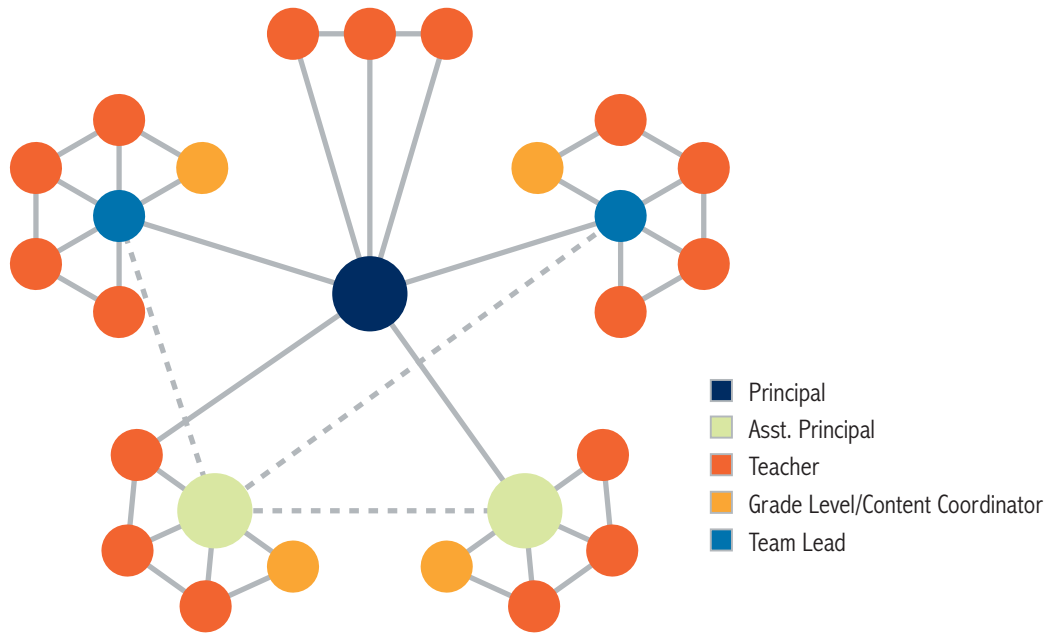


Figure 1b. Future state of observation, feedback, and evaluation



Surveys of DPS's teacher leaders show promising results (figure 2):

- They believe they are filling a critical leadership role and are increasing teacher voice in decision making.
- They value both their continued teaching responsibilities and their coaching contributions.
- They are growing in their profession and stimulating student growth.

■ The pilot is helping to distribute leadership and improve school culture.

Surveys of DPS teachers in the pilot schools also show positive results (figure 3):

- Eighty-nine percent responded that they value having leaders who are still in the classroom.
- Seventy-four percent are glad their school is participating in the pilot. Most teachers agree that the roles help distribute leadership, increase teacher voice, and have a positive impact on school culture overall.⁹

DPS completed year two of its pilot in 2014–15, increasing the number of participating schools from 14 to nearly 50. Early survey results are also promising in terms of impact on instructional practice, school climate, and teachers' sense of engagement and ownership. There will be yet another ramp-up during the 2015–16 school year; it will be interesting to see the results as this approach goes to scale.

Policy Recommendations

DPS had to retool policies to account for teachers who both teach and lead. For example, some teacher responsibilities are defined by district policy and state statute. This is also true

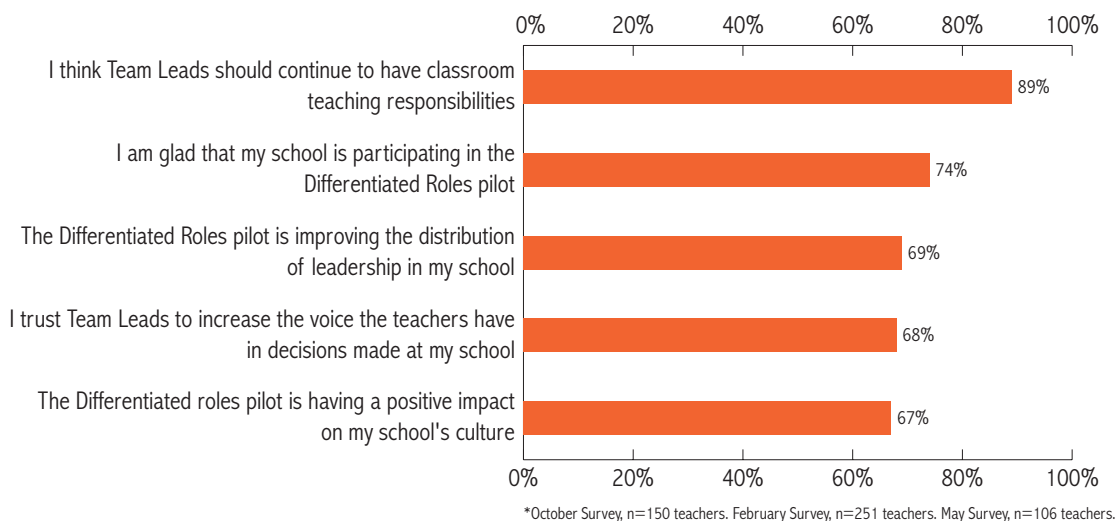
for principals. Having teachers assume responsibilities that were historically within the principal's realm (like evaluation) required changes in policy. Specific policies vary from state to state and by district. The bottom line is that blurring the distinction between those who teach and those who lead requires policy shifts at the state and district levels.

As Denver schools and other districts and states continue to reimagine the role of teachers as leaders, policy barriers must be removed and new policies put in place. Current policies tend to emphasize individual performance and roles, whereas teacher leadership requires a collaborative mind-set for both performance and roles that policy must reflect. ■

Figure 2. Excerpts of team lead perceptions of pilot



Figure 3. Excerpts of team lead perceptions of pilot, year-long average of all responses



What follows are recommendations for guiding principles for new policies or removal of old ones that create barriers to teacher leadership.

Emphasize collaboration rather than competition. Policies that pit teachers against each other inhibit knowledge sharing and hinder a sense of collective responsibility for student success. Instead, state boards of education and local education agencies can consider the following:

- Create policies that encourage teachers to collaborate, share expertise, and support their colleagues in continuous improvement. Recognizing and rewarding teams of teachers for collaborating to improve practice and student outcomes are more likely to create systemic improvement. Incentives could be put in place, for example, to allow teachers in a team context to earn micro-credentials for demonstrating mastery of specific skills. Current policies, in contrast, tend to measure professional development in terms of hours spent attending lectures and seminars rather than skill mastery, with license renewal contingent on meeting these seat-time requirements.
- Remove policies that create the conditions for teachers to compete for limited resources or incentives. Limiting resources or incentives to x number of teachers or schools creates a climate of competition.
- Remove policies that assign student scores or other measures of learning to individual teachers. Teachers understand that many teachers and support specialists contribute to student learning; it is not possible to attribute learning to one individual. Yet many current evaluation policies do just that. Removing these policies will encourage collaboration and collective responsibility for student outcomes.

Emphasize autonomy rather than control. Teachers are increasingly frustrated with being held accountable for things over which they have little or no control. Teachers willingly accept responsibility for student outcomes when they are also given the autonomy to address students' individual needs.

- Create policies that support teachers in leading their own professional learning and that of their colleagues. Nationally, \$18 billion

is spent each year on professional development, and in formats that are not meeting teachers' needs because they have little voice in their own learning, training is not connected to their core work of helping students learn, and it is not led by practicing teachers.¹⁰

- Remove overly prescriptive policies about how teacher leadership is to be implemented. Alternatively, create policies that provide flexibility for schools and districts to design the type of system that will meet their needs. For example, proposed legislation in Iowa would require that one in four teachers be tapped for teacher leadership roles over the next two years but provides districts flexibility to design these roles.¹¹ ■

¹American Federation of Teachers and Badass Teachers Association, "Quality of Worklife Survey" (Washington, DC, 2015), <http://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/worklifesurvey-results2015.pdf>.

²R. Ingersoll, L. Merrill, and D. Stuckey, "Seven Trends: The Transformation of the Teaching Force," *CPRE Research Report #RR-80* (Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, updated April 2014).

³R. M. Ingersoll and H. May, "Recruitment, Retention and the Minority Teacher Shortage," *CPRE Research Report RR-69* (Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2011).

⁴Education Evolving, "Teacher-Powered Schools: Generating Lasting Impact through Common Sense Innovation" (St. Paul, MN, May 2014), <http://www.teachempowered.org/files/Teacher-Powered-Schools-Whitepaper.pdf>.

⁵B. Berry, A. Byrd, and A. Weider, *Teacherpreneurs: Innovative Teachers Who Lead but Don't Leave* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013).

⁶C. K. Jackson and E. Bruegmann, "Teaching Students and Teaching Each Other: The Importance of Peer Learning for Teachers" (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, 2009), <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/workingpapers/77/>.

⁷K. Leithwood and B. Mascall, "Collective Leadership Effects on Student Achievement," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2008): 529–61.

⁸MetLife, "The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership" (New York, 2013), p. 50.

⁹Denver Public Schools, "Differentiated Roles: Year One Pilot Impact," (2014).

¹⁰Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, *Teachers Know Best: Teachers' Views on Professional Development* (Washington, DC, December 2014), <http://collegeready.gatesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Gates-PDMarketResearch-Dec5.pdf>.

¹¹Iowa Department of Education, "Guidance on the Iowa Teacher Leadership and Compensation System," (Des Moines, July 15, 2013), <https://www.educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/2013-07-15GuidanceOnTheTLCSystem.pdf>.

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