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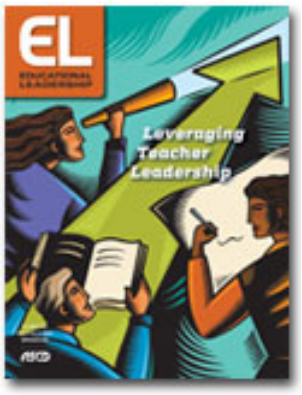

The Time Is Ripe (Again)

Roland S. Barth

Roland S. Barth and other leading education thinkers take a fresh look at teacher leadership.

Is this a promising time for teacher leadership? As someone who's been in education for 50 years, serving as both a teacher and a principal, I've found that it's *always* been a promising time for teacher leadership. It's just never been a *successful* time. It's never happened on a wider scale.

So what continues to stand in the way of teachers assuming serious leadership of schools? Five obstacles strike me as the most inhibiting.

First, many principals need to control what goes on in school. Principals are ultimately responsible. If I, as a principal, delegate or accept a teacher's leadership of something and it goes badly—say, staff development or developing the science curriculum—the superintendent isn't going to call that teacher. He or she is going to call me. So I have to be really careful about relinquishing control. And most principals just don't want to relinquish it.

There's also a taboo in our profession against one teacher elevating himself or herself above the others. You see it with merit-pay discussions, but you also see it when one teacher takes responsibility for something in the school and the other teachers are just worrying about their own 30 kids. The teacher who takes a leadership role can expect to be punished by fellow teachers.

It's just a very leveling profession. Teachers are, in a way, their own worst enemy when it comes to unlocking leadership because they don't welcome it, typically don't respect it, and often feel threatened by one of their own taking it on. Anyone who bumps above the level is subject to condemnation: "Who the heck do you think you are?!" I'm not talking about trends—I'm talking about *people* impeding teacher leadership. Some of the people are called principals, and some are called teachers.

Another big issue is that teachers' plates are full. Teachers already have a huge amount of responsibility for their students. With the increasing accountability we're seeing, they're going to be very careful about deflecting time and energy to that science curriculum committee rather than to getting their kids up to grade level in reading. It's an add-on for most teachers to assume additional responsibility for a school.

There's also the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle adversarial relationship that exists between teachers and principals, between unions and management. If I'm a teacher who's taking on a part of what's seen as the principal's responsibility, I'm siding with the enemy. What teacher wants to be criticized for siding with management?

And finally, schools have been co-opted by a business model over the years. We hear the language of business in school. I even heard a principal talk about "our product line here." Give me a break! By and large, the business model doesn't model leadership of the line workers—Toyota, Saturn, a few companies have tried—but mostly the job of the line worker is, know what's expected of you and do it fast and well. That business model does *not* favor teacher leadership.

Take any one of these obstacles, and they're pretty serious. Take them collectively, and they make realizing teacher leadership very hard indeed.

Three Promising Trends

Despite these formidable challenges, the time may be ripe for change. Three circumstances bode well for teacher leadership.

A Need to Share the Load

For a long time, people have realized that the principal alone can't run something as complex and enormous as a school. But now I think *principals* realize that. Principals are also beginning to understand that one way they can get teachers invested in what they're doing is to let them sit at the table with the other grown-ups and take on a leadership role.

When I was an elementary school teacher, I noticed there were two classes of citizens in the school: those who worried about their classroom and those who worried about the school writ large. By and large, it was the teachers in one place and the principals in the other. I vowed that if I ever became principal, I would change that.

And I did. Every September I used to ask every teacher, "What piece of this school do you want to take responsibility for?" I had a long list—the parent committee, staff development, and so on—and they could pick the one they cared passionately about. Usually they revealed their interest in one of two ways: Either they said, "I want to jump on this and make it better." Or they'd complain about something—like how the faculty meetings were run. I took those complaints as a hopeful sign that the teacher cared about that issue. So a few teachers would then get together to plan how those faculty meetings *should* be run.

Teachers were not just permitted to take on leadership roles in the school—they were *expected* to take them on. If all teachers are expected to be leaders, no one is breaking the taboo about standing higher than the others because everyone is on the same higher level.

A Curriculum to Create

The Common Core State Standards also represent an opportunity here. The standards specify what students should know and be able to do, but they don't specify how teachers must teach those things. They're intentionally leaving it up to each school to put together an effective curriculum that will lead to the accomplishment of those standards.

Principals aren't about to write a curriculum. They're inviting teachers to do this, to design the methods of instruction. Teachers have usually been told what they're going to teach and how they're going to teach it. This new development is a profound form of teacher leadership.

Already, over the Internet, teachers are sharing their experiences designing the curriculum. Teachers in other schools are asking them, "So how did you do this?" They're getting professional recognition for their efforts in this area—recognition they haven't received in previous years.

New Models of Leadership

Today we see a proliferation of all kinds of alternative schools—charter schools and pilot schools, among others. If you look at their organizational and decision-making structure, you'll see that many accord teachers a major decision-making role, such as the ability to choose their new colleagues, evaluate one another, and design the curriculum.

First, Unlock the Passion to Teach

Promoting teacher leadership also means supporting teachers' passion to teach. Teachers tend to keep two sets of books. One lists what they have to do to comply; the other lists what they believe is best for their students. As a teacher, I learned what I had to do to be successful, and I jumped through those hoops. At the same time, the things I cared most deeply about—the reason I signed up for the profession—had little to do with jumping through those hoops. Most teachers sign up for different reasons than those they're evaluated on.

For example, a lot of teachers are committed to experiential education—taking kids on field trips, getting them involved in the community, or taking them to the park and having them pick up leaves and categorize them. Yet schools don't really acknowledge, let alone appreciate, the power of experiential learning. So you do the worksheets, the workbooks, the didactic instruction, enough to get the supervisors off your case, and then you've earned the right to take your kids on a field trip. But you've got to succeed on the first set before you can move on your own set.

There's great power in that second set of books, though, and here's how I discovered it. As a principal, I was convinced the teachers had all these interests and passions they were just locking in the car in the parking lot each morning before coming in to teach. So we organized what we called *optionals* once a week for two hours in the afternoon. Every teacher would teach something they really cared about. The students would choose which classes they wanted to attend.

Everyone got involved—the librarian, the custodian, the secretaries—so the class sizes were small. Everybody got a green light for their topic of interest. You want to teach kids how to build a model airplane? Understand the subway system? Great—do it!

What I found was that teachers were bringing that second set of books to these classes. They suddenly came to life, recognizing that their second set of books had value and that kids thrived on things the teachers really cared about.

If you can unlock the second set of books, and not let it get locked up in the car each morning, or even merge the two sets of books, that's crucially important in supporting not only teachers' passion to teach, but also their passion to lead.

Lead—and Win

I've always been haunted by the phrase, "I'm just a teacher." It says that I'm not really so important, that I'm *just* a teacher. But if you're a teacher, you're already a teacher leader. Just ask your 28 students. They'll tell you who the leader in that classroom is. The teachers may be good leaders or bad leaders, but they're incontrovertibly leaders.

The shift comes when you also take on a piece of leading the school. There's tremendous satisfaction that comes from making that jump, from being an owner rather than a renter here. The thinking goes, "I'm taking ownership of my school and making my corner of it a little bit better."

Although higher education hasn't provided for me much of a model of inventive teaching over the years, it does offer a noteworthy model of teacher leadership. Professors lead major committees on matters such as program evaluation and curriculum. They participate in making decisions about finance, use of space, graduation requirements, and scheduling. And they're instrumental in selecting new colleagues—as well as their own school administrators. Indeed, few important decisions are made without them.

Another important outcome of teacher leadership relates to learning. We're always looking for conditions under which the learning curves of teachers, principals, or students go right off the chart. When you're responsible for something, whether it's the science curriculum or the supply closet, you're invested in making it work. You have to talk to other people and to other schools to get ideas, to figure things out. All of a sudden, you come alive as a learner. Teachers who aren't alive as learners start to percolate when they take on leadership roles.

Look at the beginning teacher or principal. Both have steep learning curves. All the energy they invest and the learning they experience get transferred to other areas like classroom management or curriculum. It's the same with kids. When students take responsibility for something important in the classroom or school, their learning curves go way up.

A school should be a community of leaders—not just a principal and a lot of followers. The principal, teachers, students, and parents should all be first-class citizens of that community. Our business ought to be to promote profound levels of learning in school—and teacher leadership is one of our most powerful assets for doing so.

Editor's Note: Roland Barth's comments are from his August 2013 interview with *EL* Senior Associate Editor Amy Azzam.

Now or Never

by David C. Berliner

In my lifetime, there has never been a better time for teacher leaders to emerge. Either these leaders emerge soon, or public education as we know it is gone.

When public education is under such vicious attacks and the public school system itself may be lost, for a teacher *not* to take a leadership role is tantamount to complicity. Are you willing to go along with the destruction of a wonderful profession? Are you willing to have your wages frozen, your job stability lost, your chance to teach kids what they might love to learn about highly restricted, your worth determined by a test of children who may be English language learners or in poverty or who may not quite qualify for special education services but are close? Sorry, but silence is agreement.

Did you really mean to be silent when they instituted high-stakes tests because your state needed to know how it was doing? What did you learn that you didn't already know about your students? What did the state learn that couldn't have been predicted from zip codes? How much does all that test data inform your teaching compared to your own classroom

tests and knowledge of your students? Are you going to remain silent now, as they get ready to fire you because your test scores are not as high as someone wants them to be for your poor kids and your English language learners? Maybe you should have spoken out earlier and taken a leadership role before this all happened.

The fact is that teachers must lead and manage the political forces that now buffet them. Teachers have always led busy lives and worried more about their students and their families than the politics that surround them. But now politics needs their attention.

Today's teachers can no longer afford to be pawns. We need more teachers—in particular, more female teachers—on community boards, in state legislatures, and in Congress. We would probably have a better and more humane social system in the United States as a result.

Teachers should stand up for professional rights, as did the teachers in Seattle recently, who simply said, "No" to irrelevant high-stakes testing. Of course there needs to be accountability. Of course there have to be assessments. Of course schools need to improve. But they'll only improve if the lives of the children and families they serve improve.

It's time for educators to stop taking the rap for a society that has allowed a 30-year drift into poverty for so many families. Teacher leaders need to get into political positions and right these wrongs. Teachers who stand together in solidarity can force responsible changes in education.

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Seizing Opportunity From Crisis

by Frederick M. Hess

These are exciting times for teacher leadership. There are grand opportunities to be seized, though doing so requires both imagination and discipline. While a surge of new policymaking by the U.S. Department of Education and by state officials has buffeted schools and frustrated some teacher leaders, this turbulence has yielded a pressing need for teachers to help figure out how all these changes will actually work. The emergence of social media has created new opportunities for teachers to be heard. And emerging technologies and intriguing school models make it newly possible to rethink teachers' work.

When teachers seek to have an impact beyond the schoolhouse, however, they've often gone about it in a manner that seems calculated to deliver disappointing results. Teacher leaders have made eminently reasonable points about the problems with school accountability systems, the limits of test-based teacher evaluation, and the foolhardiness of "reformers" who dismiss the effects of poverty with "no excuses" sloganeering. But they have frequently done all this in vitriolic language that marginalizes their voice and alienates potential allies.

Two familiar missteps have especially hampered teacher leadership. One is a reluctance to publicly call out mediocrity. We rightly distrust doctors, lawyers, or bankers who seem to stand mutely by in the face of troubling practices. Educators need to bring that intuition to bear. Self-policing is the surest way to reassure outsiders and reduce the urge for policymakers to intrude on practice—especially when public funds and purposes are at stake. Teacher leaders need to push the profession to do much better on this score. Union leaders have allowed themselves to be scapegoated rather than call out "go-along-to-get-along" leadership. Teachers have done little to challenge wasteful professional development, ineffectual spending, or irresponsible staff. The failure of professionals to visibly police themselves tends to erode their collective credibility.

Teachers also tend to make a second crucial mistake. Winning policymakers over requires addressing shared problems by acknowledging the other's concerns and offering smart, mutually satisfactory solutions. Unfortunately, when given a public platform, teachers too often do one of three things: ask for more money, denounce policies they dislike, or tout a terrific program in their classroom or school. None of these win allies, change minds, or convince listeners that teachers have better large-scale solutions to the problems on the table.

But crisis often contains within itself the seeds of opportunity. Teacher discontent may have contributed to creating some unfortunate divides, but it also has created an intense appetite for teacher leaders to offer alternatives.

It's no coincidence that the landscape is rife with new outfits like TeachPlus, Educators for Excellence, and Leading Educators. These have emerged alongside more familiar ventures like the Center for Teaching Quality and Teach For America. The National Network of Teachers of the Year is enjoying a resurgence. And the unions are showing some promising signs, with the National Education Association's Commission on Effective Teachers and Teaching and the American Federation of Teachers rightly pointing to promising district-union partnerships in places like Hartford, Connecticut, and Baltimore, Maryland.

With models to emulate, platforms from which to speak, and a rash of opportunities to join with like-minded colleagues, teacher leaders are now equipped with tools that can help them respond to the moment.

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Formal Recognition Required

by Susan Moore Johnson

In some ways, this is the best of times for teacher leaders. Because the quality of teaching varies widely from classroom to classroom, schools need skilled and dedicated teachers to extend their influence beyond their classroom—whether as instructional coaches, leaders of grade-level teams, induction coordinators, mentors, or peer reviewers. Principals' responsibilities continue to expand with every new policy, and they simply cannot do all they're expected to do. Expert teachers can use their specialized knowledge about curriculum and instruction to bridge the boundaries in the "egg-crate" school and thus ensure that the school will more effectively serve all students.

At the same time, teachers and their union leaders are developing new approaches to identifying, promoting, and rewarding teacher leaders. Baltimore, Maryland, and Cleveland, Ohio, have adopted performance-based career ladders that allow effective teachers to assume differentiated roles within their schools, thus supporting colleagues who have less experience or skill; in other districts, consulting teachers both mentor and evaluate fellow teachers in peer assistance and review (PAR) programs.

Formal positions for teacher leaders were widely adopted in response to No Child Left Behind, which required schools to succeed with all subgroups of students, but these positions encountered deep cuts following the recession of 2009. However, without an organizational strategy for supporting and developing all teachers, schools will never move beyond being a patchwork of separate classrooms, some excellent or good, others mediocre or poor. Teacher leaders can be the centerpiece of such strategies for organizational improvement, but few policymakers see that potential.

Many teachers serve as informal leaders within their schools, and although others may appreciate their contributions, their influence will remain limited until the school formally recognizes these teacher leaders' talents and authorizes their roles. Formal policies, whether passed in legislatures or negotiated locally through collective bargaining, provide the best route for establishing teacher leadership and ensuring its future.

Susan Moore Johnson is the Jerome T. Murphy Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Bold Leaders, Inconvenient Truths

by Barnett Berry

Now is the perfect time for a bolder brand of teacher leadership to emerge, benefiting all students. For one thing, economists have concluded that students earn higher scores on achievement tests when their teachers have more opportunities to work with effective teaching colleagues. For another, the principal's role has become "too complex," as reported by 75 percent of principals on the most recent MetLife survey. Lacking bandwidth (and sometimes know-how), principals struggle to address the needs of growing numbers of highly mobile families, English language learners, and students living in poverty. The good news is that 23 percent of U.S. teachers are "extremely" or "very" interested in serving in hybrid roles so they can teach students and, in conjunction with administrators, incubate and execute bold ideas from the classroom to the community and beyond.

Finally, the American public is beginning to learn more about the practices of other top-performing nations. People are discovering that Singapore and Finland have built their recent student achievement successes on creating more expansive teacher leadership roles. In Finland, nearly all administrators teach so that more teachers can lead, particularly in the areas of curriculum, assessment, and school-community partnerships. These models portend new leadership opportunities for U.S. teachers.

There are obstacles, of course. Teaching has long been bedeviled by its egalitarian culture, in which no member is supposed to rise above the rest. But there are other more powerful forces of late that undermine teacher leadership. First, U.S. high-stakes accountability systems, which often draw on narrow metrics and unstable test score data, push administrators to control everything in their school buildings—including teachers. Second, U.S. education schools have typically done a poor job of fostering leadership in new recruits and providing prospective administrators with the skills they need to create more opportunities for teachers to lead.

Third, school reformers, who have their sights on controlling the $600 billion U.S. public education enterprise, may well wish to minimize the role that a growing cadre of expert teacher leaders can play in leading education policy debates. With Gallup data showing 72 percent of the U.S. public having "trust and confidence" in its teachers, bold leaders from the classroom may present an "inconvenient truth" to school reformers and their more restrictive reform agendas.

But there are bright spots nonetheless. The Common Core State Standards offer unprecedented opportunities for teachers to spread their expertise and collaborate across district and state boundaries. Moreover, to effectively address the complexities of teaching, learning, and assessing the standards, school reformers are going to increasingly need to turn to teachers—as real leaders.

Barnett Berry is founder and CEO of the Center for Teaching Quality.

It All Comes Back to Instruction

by Charlotte Danielson

Right now is as good as it's ever been for formal teacher leadership roles. With the emphasis on teacher evaluation, the principal's job has become even bigger than it previously was, leaving more opportunities for teachers to assume a portion of the role of instructional leader.

In addition to being managers, administrators have been encouraged for decades to also be instructional leaders in their schools. Of course, they have to "keep the trains running on time"—that is, attend to myriad managerial responsibilities, such as scheduling and budgeting—and good principals are adept at doing just those things. But to the extent that principals do *only* management, there's a big vacuum in the area of instructional leadership. For example, encouraging teachers to try a new instructional strategy is different from managerial work, and some principals are not as skilled at it. Teacher leadership—whether formal or informal—offers a real solution to this problem.

Typically, teachers must apply for formal teacher leadership roles (for example, team leader, mentor or coach, department chair), and those appointed often must leave their classrooms. But many teachers choose not to do this for a variety of reasons—because they're committed to the challenges of teaching and don't believe it's necessary to move out of the classroom to get recognition or to make a contribution. In addition, some teacher leaders in formal roles encounter resistance from colleagues, who question whether this teacher (particularly if he or she is young) has greater expertise.

But when teachers do take on leadership roles, they can make a real contribution, especially because they typically focus on instruction. Even as informal teacher leaders, they may also choose to tackle administrative policies, such as a homework or an attendance policy. Their voice is important in pointing out the relationship of such policies to the quality of instruction.

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