School Conditions that Support Teacher Leadership / Informal and Formal

In the Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate Program, we understand leadership to be any action taken to improve the quality of teaching and learning. We also believe that leadership should be a shared responsibility; that students will be better served when all adults in a school have the commitment and capacity to contribute to improved teaching and learning throughout their school. Teachers can lead informally, such as by asking critical questions of colleagues, looking together at student work, or sharing their instructional decision-making processes; and they can lead through formal roles, such as team leader, coach, or mentor. Yet, to succeed, teacher leadership requires more than just teachers’ commitment and capacity. Our work since 2010 with teacher leaders in the Boston Public Schools has helped us to identify some contextual conditions in schools that are critically important for supporting and sustaining informal and formal teacher leadership in schools. Questions? Ideas to add? Please contact us: BostonTLRC@gmail.com.

What conditions in a school are conducive to INFORMAL teacher leadership?

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<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Questions for evaluating this condition</th>
<th>Sample strategies for creating this condition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic teaming</td>
<td>Where might regular conversations about teaching and learning occur in my school?</td>
<td>• Align schedules to make it possible for teachers with the same assignment or students to spend time together</td>
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<td>Be sure there is a venue and routine that makes it easy for conversations about teaching and learning to occur. Establishing nested systems of teams ensures that there is time and space to discuss priorities at all levels (the classroom, team, school level) AND among them.</td>
<td>• Provide collaborative work space, e.g. team offices or work space in a teachers’ room, so that teachers will plan together, not alone</td>
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<td>Data routines</td>
<td>What informs the focus of teachers’ conversations about teaching and learning in my school?</td>
<td>• Have grade-level team representatives form a school-level Instructional Leadership Team and/or a vertical curriculum alignment team</td>
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<td>Be sure you have routines and data systems that enable teachers to regularly review evidence of teaching and learning within and beyond their own classrooms.</td>
<td>• Ensure easy access to data: training to use district or state data warehouse, hardware &amp; software, filing cabinets, etc.</td>
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<td>Culture of shared ownership</td>
<td>Do teachers in my school feel they have permission from one other to discuss the teaching and learning in each others’ classrooms?</td>
<td>• Create a culture of deprivitized practice with frequent walk-throughs, instructional rounds, peer observations, videotaping, etc.</td>
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<td>Be sure to create a culture of shared ownership for student learning AND adult learning throughout the school. This requires trust and a shared vision. It requires risk-taking and courage.</td>
<td>• Provide time and training (and the expectation) for teams to engage in data-based inquiry</td>
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<td>• Communicate and model this expectation regularly</td>
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<td>• Use language of shared ownership, e.g. “our kids”</td>
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<td>• Establish routines that reinforce shared ownership (inter-classroom visits, portfolios, ways for teachers to learn the names of students they don’t have, etc.)</td>
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<td>• Establish routines that provide teachers with opportunities to show what they are learning and to help each other</td>
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<td>• Ensure decision-making is transparent</td>
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| Inventory of professional expertise | How do teachers in my school know which colleagues to tap when they have a question about teaching and learning?*  
Be sure there are ways for teachers to know what everyone else in the building is good at.  
*This is especially important in a school with high turnover (of teaching and leadership staff) | • Establish meeting routines that enable teachers to share classroom successes and other professional accomplishments so that they see each other’s strengths  
• Protect time for those engaged in external PD to come back and share with the staff  
• Survey the staff to identify who is willing to be a go-to person and for what area of instructional expertise |
| Communication structures | How do teachers in my school get a question about teaching or learning answered quickly?  
Be sure there are tools or systems that enable teachers who have a question about instruction to get it answered quickly by a colleague who might know the answer. | • Set up E-mail groups, blogs or listserves, grouping Ts by expertise  
• Encourage/ model a culture of posting and responding to each others’ online questions  
• Maintain culture of active mailboxes  
• Establish a 24-hr board (bulletin board that must be checked by all at least once in every 24 hours) |
| Access to professional knowledge base | How do teachers in my school learn about what research and best practice have to say when they have a teaching or learning question?  
Be sure resources are available for teachers to use to identify answers to questions they cannot address themselves and to get information that will keep their practice abreast of the latest advances. | • Establish and maintain a professional library; build routines for sharing what’s new, relevant and being used  
• Obtain school subscriptions to key relevant publications  
• Provide PD on using freely available resources (e.g. accessing education research online with a public library card) |
| Involvement of family and community | Where and when might teachers in my school engage with family and community members in ways that help fuel and inform conversations about improved teaching and learning?  
Be sure the school has routines that make it easy for teachers to build relationships with parents around student learning, and to see whether they are aligned with the same aims and values around teaching and learning as family and the community. | • Foster parent-teacher collaboration within school-level teams such as School Site Council, grant activities, etc.  
• Establish book groups or forums in which teachers and parents jointly consider education questions such as: What do we believe is a well-educated child?  
• Ensure family and community members have regular opportunities to engage with teachers around academic performances, e.g. LASW together, etc.  
• Cultivate a school culture of sending home classroom newsletters that are focused on teaching and learning news |

What’s missing?
What conditions in a school help ensure teachers’ **FORMAL** teacher leadership roles can succeed?

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| **Clearly-defined roles**                      | Does everyone who interacts with your teacher leaders understand what the role is (and is not)? Be sure that formal teacher leadership responsibilities you assign are clearly defined in a job description and explicitly tied to local goals. (e.g. define what the role involves AND what place the role has in the larger reform plan) This should be defined publicly, so that all know what they can and should not expect from the holder of this role. This can also be used as a frame for outcome-based evaluation and should guide growth-oriented feedback. | • Create and share publicly the job description; ensure it is discussed prior to assignment  
• Ensure the staff handbook explains the role  
• Clarify in situ, e.g. “As part of her role…”  
• Agree upon who will do what, then stick to it OR communicate about changes |
| **Purposefully selected teachers to hold those roles** | **How do you match teachers with leadership roles?** Be sure to carefully consider how to make strategic matches between the knowledge and skill set required for the role and the teachers who have the requisite knowledge and skills and who want the role. (This means you have to have a way to learn what teachers know and can do.) | • Use an application process or talk directly to potential teacher leaders so that you learn what they bring to the role and can find out what support they will need to do it well  
• Ensure match process offers two-way preview so they have a clear idea of what they may be getting into  
• Assign (or re-appoint) roles all at one time, not one at a time, in order to make the most strategic matches  
• Set term limits, so there is room to reassign each year, as needed to make better matches |
| **Culture of professional regard**              | **Are teachers in your school prepared to follow those you’ve designated as leaders?** Be sure that your assignments of teacher leaders to roles have some credibility among teachers. | • Establish routines that ensure teachers in the school know each others’ professional strengths  
• Make decision-making process transparent  
• Consider social capital (who has it and how you can support teachers to build it) |
| **Leadership training**                        | **How do you support teachers to build the leadership (non-instructional) skills they need to be successful in the roles you have assigned to them?** For each role you have assigned, be sure you have also ensured supports for teachers to learn how to do well what they are being asked to do. | • Support their participation in the Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program and other leadership training  
• Encourage participation in cohorts so teacher leaders can learn from one another’s leadership dilemmas  
• Recommend books, articles and web-based resources on leadership; reserve time to discuss them  
• Be a mentor; take time to reflect together on leadership puzzles and practice |
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<th>Time</th>
<th>How do you create and safeguard the time teacher leaders need to prepare for and perform their roles effectively? If teacher leaders are to influence colleagues’ instruction they must have time with colleagues around instruction (observing and discussing it). Be sure they also have time to prepare for the work of the role.</th>
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<td>Communication and feedback routines</td>
<td>How do you maintain ongoing two-way communication with teacher leaders so that they can build and feel a sense of success in the role?* Be sure there is a routine for regular communication between the teacher leader and the principal, a check-in time that makes it possible to address issues proactively regarding resources needed, political tensions, culture issues, etc., to get warm and cool feedback on the performance of the role and to be shown appreciation for their work in the role. *Important for retention, especially for under-compensated positions.</td>
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<td>Coordinated leadership vision</td>
<td>How does your school ensure that teachers are not getting mixed messages from various leaders and that there are no major gaps or redundancies in how leadership is enacted? Be sure there is a clearly-communicated vision about how the leadership actions of multiple individuals will add up to a coherent, positive influence on teaching and learning.</td>
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- Staff teachers with hybrid roles or job-sharing roles (allowing them to teach part-time and perform their role part-time)
- Assign extra admin /duty periods to teachers holding a role
- Compensate teachers to use time outside of school
- Assign administrative support staff, a sub or an aide to take on some of the teacher leader’s non-professional duties
- Schedule preps strategically
- Protect time that has been allocated for teacher leaders to do the work of the role
- Provide infrastructure and promote culture for technology solutions to improve efficiency and save time: collaborative work, announcements/ info-sharing, and meetings
- Keep a standing appointment, (e.g., bi-weekly) to check in
- Establish routine of revisiting the job description regularly; use it as a framework for goal-setting and growth-oriented feedback
- Have evidence-based discussions (use meeting notes, surveys/ meeting exit slips, etc.)
- Be a learner yourself; be open to feedback, willing to take risks, fail and learn
- Do NOT rely upon e-mail for this kind of communication
- Leadership team agrees upon and shares clear, consistent expectations for quality instruction and quality leadership
- Co-construct an org chart and/or logic model that maps out each individual’s role
- Establish efficient communication routines and regular opportunities to check in on leadership alignment
- Ensure leadership team (incl TLs) engages in leadership learning together and/or has opportunities (and expectation) to tell each other what they are learning that might be useful to the organization.

What’s missing?

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