



# WHY TEACHERS MAKE GOOD LEARNING LEADERS

By Brian Edwards and Jesse Hinueber

“**S**omebody asked me recently what pushes me as a professional,” says Becky Jensen, an elementary school teacher in San Jose, California. “It started when a new principal came in several years ago and let me try new strategies. But he also set up a structure to help me think through what worked and what didn’t, and then he gave me the space to lead.”

A principal’s support helped Jensen become more reflective and intentional about her teaching, which in turn

led her to want to help other teachers. She began by co-facilitating her grade-level team despite being among the least experienced staff members at her school. In that role, she emphasized depth over breadth: “Rather than coming up with a whole list of strategies for teachers to try, I engaged my colleagues in the specifics of one strategy. We planned lessons, gathered materials, and modeled instruction for one another so that we had everything we needed to implement the strategy the next day.”

Jensen exemplifies the fact that teachers at all career stages, if given the proper support, can design and lead effective professional learning. When teachers who deeply understand the needs of their students and colleagues lead

**EDUCATORS INTERVIEWED FOR THIS ARTICLE**

 <p><b>Sarah Bitner</b> Grade-level facilitator and instructional council member <i>Albuquerque, New Mexico</i></p>	 <p><b>Peggy Candelaria</b> Principal <i>Albuquerque, New Mexico</i></p>	 <p><b>Becky Jensen</b> Grade-level facilitator and instructional leadership team member <i>San Jose, California</i></p>	 <p><b>Katie Smith</b> Literacy coach and instructional leadership team facilitator <i>Chicago, Illinois</i></p>	 <p><b>Lindsey Walden</b> Grade-level facilitator and instructional leadership team member <i>Battle Creek, Michigan</i></p>
<p><i>When teachers who deeply understand the needs of their students and colleagues lead professional learning in their schools, everyone benefits.</i></p>				

professional learning in their schools, everyone benefits. Teacher leaders get to engage with their work in new ways. Their colleagues receive relevant, actionable professional learning. Principals leverage the benefits of teacher collaboration in leading instruction at their schools. District officials see the pipeline of school and district leaders expand.

Ultimately, and most importantly, students benefit. For example, students at Jensen’s school achieved great gains on the California Standards Tests as the school developed its professional learning systems between 2010 and 2013. In English language arts, the percentage of students achieving proficiency grew from 32% to 53%, and in math, the percentage increased from 50% to 72%.

Jensen is one of five educators whose perspectives on teacher leadership are featured here. These educators have all taught low-income urban children in elementary grades for several years, but in different parts of the United States. They hold similar views on how schools can foster the development of teacher leaders, some key ways that teachers can lead professional learning for their colleagues, and the benefits and challenges of teacher leadership. The discussion of these topics below is informed greatly by their voices.

**FOSTERING DEVELOPMENT**

The educators we spoke with represent a range of personalities — from relatively shy to naturally outspoken, and in between. However, they have in common a desire to share their expertise with their colleagues and make an

impact beyond the classroom. They also agree on the conditions that help teachers emerge as leaders in their schools:

**Shared vision:** School staff must share a vision of the type of school they are trying to create so that instructional leaders are taking staff and students in the same general direction. “You have to be on the same page and want the same thing,” says Peggy Candelaria, a principal in Albuquerque, New Mexico. “You always want to come back to your vision as a school and a community so that you know why you’re doing what you’re doing.”

**Culture of trust:** Maintaining a culture of mutual respect and trust is vital. Teachers need to be able to trust that their leaders will represent their interests; school administrators must have confidence that teacher leaders will implement initiatives with fidelity; and teacher leaders need to trust that the administration will support them, even when they encounter initial resistance. Katie Smith, a literacy coach at a pre-K-2 school in Chicago, Illinois, puts it this way: “If teacher leaders are not feeling trusted or are always doing the heavy lifting in the face of pushback, they’re not going to want to be leaders anymore because they’ll be frustrated.”

**Opportunities to lead professional learning:** For teachers to become leaders of professional learning, a school must set aside time for such learning. Protecting time for teachers to hone their craft as they try to improve the school’s instructional program signals that the school values professional learning and that there will be a sub-

stantial chance of making progress for students. Without such protected time, teachers will have few opportunities to practice being leaders.

Sometimes, aspiring teacher leaders create their own opportunities to practice. For example, Smith volunteered to help facilitate her school's instructional leadership team while she was a kindergarten and special education teacher. The literacy coach who facilitated the team took Smith under her wing, walked through the steps of facilitating the group, and asked Smith to help plan and run meetings. Smith's initiative led to her being encouraged to apply for the coaching role when the previous coach retired.

**Encouragement to lead:** Other teachers need substantial encouragement to assume a leadership role. The three teachers interviewed for this article did not enter the education profession with the intention of becoming school leaders. For example, Lindsey Walden, who teaches in Battle Creek, Michigan, became a grade-level coordinator and instructional leadership team member after eight years of focusing on her own classroom instruction.

Two years ago, her professional growth plan included the concept of becoming more of a leader at her school. Encouragement from coaches and administrators gave her the push she needed. "I was more the type of teacher who sat back and listened and took everything in," says Walden. "I didn't realize that I had the potential to become a leader until I really worked with my principal and gained a little more confidence."

**Support and training:** Aspiring teacher leaders also need support and training. For example, they often need training in how to facilitate groups, which entails planning meetings, asking questions that will elicit participation, documenting decisions, and forming action plans.

Another area where coaching can be helpful is in having difficult conversations with peers. Teacher leaders may need to explain unpopular administrative decisions to their colleagues or give constructive feedback on another teacher's instruction. It is an area with which some teacher leaders struggle. For example, Walden noted, "I recently told my instructional coach that I'm interested in expanding my leadership role, but my biggest weakness is having difficult conversations because I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings." The coach's response was just what Walden needed: an offer to role-play and think through a variety of potentially tense discussions.

With these conditions in place, teachers at various stages of their career can step up as leaders. Smith has found this to be true at her school in Chicago. She works with veteran teachers who enjoy teaming up with their colleagues, providing mentorship, and lending their expertise for the benefit of the entire school. "We have teachers who've been teaching for 15 to 20 years who are phenomenal teacher leaders because they see the benefits of analyzing data and always trying to improve," says Smith.

Newer teachers also make strong instructional leaders, she

says, because working closely with other staff members comes naturally to them, reflecting the current professional emphasis on collaboration. However, they may need to work especially hard to establish their credibility with their more seasoned counterparts. Smith would tell a new educator who wants to become a leader, "You need at least two or three years to hone your practice as a teacher, try different strategies, achieve success in different areas, and have a body of work to reflect upon. You'll use all of that to lead other teachers and communicate with them in meaningful ways."

## TEACHER LEADERSHIP ROLES

Two common roles that teachers engage in to develop as school leaders are facilitating professional learning communities and participating in instructional leadership teams.

### Facilitating professional learning communities

Professional learning communities in the form of grade-level teams or subject-matter departments allow educators to work together in a wide variety of ways — for example, peer coaching, constructing and scoring assessments, lesson planning, data analysis, and lesson study.

To be as effective as possible, a professional learning community should embody Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, which include several criteria. It should be committed to high expectations, continuous improvement, and collective responsibility. In addition, a professional learning community needs to incorporate several design elements (e.g. active engagement, modeling, reflection, feedback, and ongoing support) and use the element that is most appropriate to the goals and learning styles of the participants and the topic under discussion.

Professional learning community members should analyze student outcome data to monitor instruction and the learning community itself. In addition, the group's goals should align with those of the school and district. Finally, members must make efficient use of the human, fiscal, and technological resources needed for professional learning.

For those expectations to be met, a professional learning community must have effective facilitation. A strong facilitator generally sets the agenda for meetings, keeps sessions moving and on point, and ensures that all voices are heard. Smith, the literacy coach in Chicago, sees grade-level facilitation as a good entry point for teachers looking to have an impact beyond their own classroom: "It's a nonintimidating way to move into a teacher leadership role. Teachers are with their peers, and their peers know them and respect them, and the teachers identify with each other and each other's challenges."

Facilitators gain experience in team building and navigating adult dynamics while keeping their lesson planning and data analysis skills sharp. Walden in Battle Creek believes that facilitating her grade-level team has improved her own teaching:

“It’s pushed me to learn about best practices and share what I’ve learned with my colleagues, which has allowed me to take a look at myself as a teacher, to become a better teacher.”

According to Walden, the school also benefits when professional learning is facilitated by one of its teachers rather than someone from outside the school: “If your colleagues see you delivering the information and know that you’re implementing it in the classroom next door, they’re more apt to be on board than if the information comes top-down.”

In sum, when a teacher facilitates a professional learning community, the facilitator acquires or sharpens valuable skills and fellow teachers tend to engage more than they would if someone else led the work. Participating teachers also gain support and mutual accountability.

### Participating in an instructional leadership team

Joining a school’s instructional leadership team is another pathway to teacher leadership. An instructional leadership team generally consists of the principal, instructional coaches, and teachers from each grade or grade span. Often, the grade-level representatives on the instructional leadership team are the facilitators of grade-level teams.

The instructional leadership team works on schoolwide issues such as developing or sustaining a schoolwide vision, setting goals, and planning strategies for reaching those goals. In addition, instructional leadership teams often assist the principal with operational issues — for example, revising the process for evaluating students for special education or ensuring that each classroom constitutes a cross-section of the school’s students.

When teachers join an instructional leadership team, they gain opportunities to make an impact beyond their own classroom and influence the policies and strategies of the whole school. In addition, if a teacher is considering pursuing a coaching role or principalship, taking part in an instructional leadership team will give the teacher a small sense of the responsibilities of those positions. Smith’s instructional leadership team in Chicago works explicitly on general leadership skills, discussing what it means to be a leader and reflecting each week on challenges and successes they experienced as a leader.

The rest of the school also benefits from having an instructional leadership team with robust participation by teachers. The principal gains thought partners on challenging issues, and some of the principal’s heavy workload can be delegated to instructional leadership team members. In addition, teachers not on the instructional leadership team gain representation in school-level decisions, and instructional leadership team members can act as mediators if difficult issues arise between administrators and staff.

Sarah Bitner, a 2nd-grade teacher on the instructional council of Candelaria’s school in Albuquerque, describes the situation at her school this way: “My colleagues know that when we have something to take to the principal, it makes sense for me

to be that person because I have a good relationship with her and know how to talk to her.”

When a team of administrators and teachers work in unison to realize a vision, students win. For example, in Smith’s school in Chicago, reading scores increased markedly as a high-functioning instructional leadership team led the implementation of Common Core standards and created units of study in literacy. In 2011-12, before the instructional leadership team hit its stride, 27% of 2nd graders were reading on grade level. Just two years later, 42% were.

However, participating in an instructional leadership team comes with challenges. For example, the work of the instructional leadership team will not always be appreciated by non-members. Smith, the literacy coach in Chicago, believes that part of her role as the facilitator of her school’s instructional leadership team is to make sure that the team members know how important their work is. She offers, “They might not hear it from anyone else, and they need to hear it from someone.”

A related challenge for instructional leadership team members in some schools is finding successors. Ideally, new members would join from time to time as long-serving members rotated out so that a broad cross-section of staff gets to play a part in leading the school, and a few teachers do not feel that the long-term success of the school depends solely on them.

Instructional leadership activities often occur outside the regular school day so teacher leaders must adopt a flexible schedule, using time typically spent preparing for their own classes to support the learning of their peers. In addition, they may receive minimal or no compensation for the extra work. Bitner in New Mexico puts it succinctly: “You have to really want to be a leader. There’s no pay for it.” However, the fact that Bitner has volunteered repeatedly for the extra responsibilities indicates that the professional growth and fulfillment that come with being a teacher leader make the sacrifices worthwhile for her.

### NEXT ROLES

The teacher leaders discussed here see themselves and their career possibilities differently now that they have grown into new roles. They find leading professional learning very rewarding and, though they would miss working directly with students, are considering becoming full-time instructional coaches.

Interestingly, these teachers recognize that becoming a principal involves a different mindset and set of skills, and they expressed little interest in going down that path. For now, they are enjoying being able to use their energy and knowledge to raise the achievement of not only their own classrooms, but those of other teachers as well.

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