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Supporting a Culture Where Teachers Are Leading Teachers

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Supporting a Culture Where Teachers Are Leading Teachers

by

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A graduate project report submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

This capstone project was part of a group project completed by two principals in elementary schools and a principal coach in Hillsborough County, Florida. Each of the team members has a passion for the work of administrator and lead learner in a turnaround school. Through creating a culture of teacher leadership, especially in high poverty schools, we believe students will succeed. We were looking for what a high performing school culture would look like if teachers were leading the work through ongoing inquiry and personalized support.

My individual focus was, how can district and school leaders support a culture where teachers are leading teachers? As a principal coach, I am responsible for supporting principals at all levels in the schools within my area. I am also responsible for creating professional learning experiences that will permeate into the schools where leaders will take action and where teachers are empowered to make decisions to address the needs of their students.

Selected literature was reviewed that considers how to create a system of support for leaders (teachers, administrators) who are increasingly expected to lead more autonomously when they have traditionally been provided directives through district initiatives that emphasize accountability. Themes in the literature reviewed included: community re-norming, teaching/learning symbiosis, and leadership that is proactive and reflective (inquiring).

Key findings in my area of focus included valuing professional community and supporting it; moving control of professional development from the district to schools; developing models to allocate time for professional development at the school level; clarifying school and district

leaders' roles in supporting teacher leadership; and assessing and prioritizing district initiatives to determine what is really needed at school sites—particularly in turnaround schools.

SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

When teachers are empowered to learn and are recognized as leaders within a school, they feel valued which results in a higher quality learning experience for students. By encouraging teachers to be reflective and own the work in schools, teachers see continuous learning as an opportunity for growth rather than a requirement. This moves learning from being compliance driven to reliance driven, where educators rely on their learning to stay current in their practice to provide students with high quality learning experiences each and every day. Such experiences are vital to all students but most important in turnaround schools. Our struggling students, more than any others, need high performing teachers who are engaged in their professional learning and growth.

Our project team was composed of three leaders from Hillsborough County Schools – two elementary school principals and a principal coach. Each of the team members has a passion for the work of administrator and lead learner in a turnaround school. Through creating a culture of teacher leadership, especially in high poverty schools, we believe students will succeed. The focus of our team’s inquiry was: What would a high performing school culture look like if teachers were leading the work of building capacity and sustainability through ongoing inquiry and personalized support?

Personal focus. My individual focus was, how can schools be supported in developing a culture where teachers are leading teachers? It was not until I became a teacher that I learned the

importance of advocating for teachers and for the children in their care. When students have a voice, can express their concerns, and believe they will matter, they will engage at a higher level.

As student groups change, teachers need to continuously grow to learn new ways to reach each child. This passion for student success and building a culture that understands the uniqueness of the students and the teachers is what drives the work of building a staff empowered culture. It is the common thread in building teacher leaders to prepare students for life. As a principal coach, I am responsible for supporting principals at all levels in the schools within my area. I am also responsible for creating professional learning experiences that will permeate into the schools where leaders will take action. The district has traditionally provided programs with training support across the district which is not individualized to the needs of the specific school. This leads to teachers feeling as though change is done *to* them instead of *with* teachers as leaders empowered to make decisions based upon the needs of their students.

School District Context

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) is divided into eight areas and has more than 270 school sites, including 141 kindergarten through grade five elementary schools, 43 middle schools, 27 high schools, five kindergarten through grade eight schools and 47 charter schools. Of these schools 141 are Title I schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families. Title I schools receive federal financial assistance to help schools ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. All public schools receiving Title I funds are district schools operating as Schoolwide Programs. Schools utilize Title I funds to add highly qualified staff, support parent and community involvement efforts, improve staff professional development, purchase additional instructional materials and supplies, and add technology and needed equipment.

Building district capacity. School level support is provided by an Area Superintendent and an Area Leadership Team. The Area Leadership Team includes a Principal Coach, MTSS/RtI Facilitator, ESE Supervisor, ELL District Liaison, Elementary Generalist, Professional Development Liaison, and Human Resource Partner. Specific content and job-embedded curriculum support are provided by area On-the-Ground Coaches in ELA, math, and science. The goal of the Area Leadership Team is to support the Area Superintendent in providing differentiated supports to principals in his/her area and to support all schools. Support is focused on schools in turnaround, while also providing supports necessary for all schools to be successful.

To ensure the direct support to the school is effective, HCPS has completed several initiatives, including (a) development of Leader Standards and Principal Supervisor Standards; (b) alignment of principal pipeline curricula to the Leader Standards; (c) training of area superintendents (principal supervisors) in a new model for assessing principal development needs, identifying high performers for promotion or more challenging roles, differentiated development and succession planning; (d) development of a vacancy model used to assess the strength of the principal pipeline and the vacancies anticipated over the next three school years; (e) redesign of principal recruitment, screening and selection processes; and (f) training for principals in using teacher evaluation data to build capacity school wide.

Building school capacity. The district supports building school level capacity in various ways, including unit and personnel analysis, problem solving, progress monitoring, and Title 1 support. Cross divisional collaboration occurs, beginning with the basic allocation of personnel units, an analysis of the effectiveness of the assigned personnel, and building a supportive structure with the addition of units and services. Principals work in partnership with the Title 1 office to utilize their Title 1 budget effectively, adding additional layers of support corroborated by data.

Personnel added include additional content coaches, guidance counselors, psychologists, social workers, and student success coaches.

Quality schools require quality personnel. A fully-released principal coach for turnaround is a veteran principal with a track record of successful school turnaround. Principals and Assistant Principals are matched to complement each other's leadership skills based on the HCPS School Leader Competencies and Key Elements Matrix. The district Human Resources Department is a crucial part of efforts to support our schools through recruitment and retention of the most highly qualified and effective teachers.

The Teacher Induction Program (TIP) is a state-mandated two-year induction program that includes specific professional development training and activities. For teachers new to HCPS with less than six months of teaching experience, a fully released mentor is assigned to assist the new teacher for the first two years in the district. The mentors do not evaluate their mentees; they simply guide and support working with the New Teacher Center Formative Assessment System (FAS), a set of tools that helps to identify accomplishments and challenges during the first two years of teaching. The mentor's knowledge, experience, and growing relationship with the mentee supports professional areas for growth, as well as students' academic needs. The FAS tools provide a mentee and mentor with important information which will systematically guide the advancement of instructional practice. Other educators who support the new teacher will work closely with the mentor in order to meet the teacher's needs.

The Instructional Leadership Academy was developed to strengthen support through coaching; it is offered to academic and instructional coaches in all content areas, K-12. The academy gives instructional coaches a foundation of core leadership and coaching skills through a series of ten modules in facilitating change, interpersonal skills, diversity and group process,

coaching and mentoring, instruction, and data analysis. Follow up support is provided by school-based leadership and district content supervisors.

The HCPS Principal Pipeline was created in partnership with the Wallace Foundation, the New Teacher Center, and the Education Development Center. The pipeline consists of four rigorous district programs: Future Leaders Academy, Assistant Principal Induction Program, Preparing New Principals, and Principal Induction Program. These are based on the core competencies of school leaders: Achievement Focus and Results Orientation, Instructional Expertise, Managing and Developing People, Culture and Relationship Building, Problem-Solving, and Strategic Change Management. Entry into the programs is based on a thorough screening process which includes a written response, an interview by a team, and participation in scenario-based role plays. The applicants are accepted based on the evaluation of all three portions of the screening process.

Turnaround schools. HCPS focuses on using proven best practices to strengthen district capacity to assist and collaborate with turnaround schools while providing individualized supports based on data points specific to each school. In addition to specialized plans for each school, the district continues to build its own capacity for supporting turnaround schools by working in tandem with several outside partners. The organizations chosen as partners all have an extensive, successful record of providing support to high-poverty, low performing schools nationally, as schools and districts build systems and structures that provide for the very best education for disadvantaged students.

District priorities. In 2015 Hillsborough County Public Schools hired a new superintendent. After collaborating with the School Board, a new vision and mission were created. The vision is “Preparing Students for Life,” and the mission is to provide an education and the

supports needed to enable each student to excel as a successful and responsible citizen. The superintendent is invested in making sure all students are successful. Four Strategic Priorities were established: (1) increase graduation rates, (2) communicate with stakeholders, (3) build strong culture and relationships, and (4) strengthen foundations of financial stewardship. Our group project was directly linked to the district's priority of building strong culture and relationships.

SECTION 2. PERSPECTIVES FROM SELECTED LITERATURE

This study focuses on the question, what would a high performing school culture look like if teachers were leading the work of building capacity and sustainability through ongoing inquiry and personalized support? Currently, our district provides professional development for teachers delivered in one-size-fits all delivery models. Our district is so large that there are multiple initiatives each year, and each district department believes that their area is most important. This provides teachers with a mixed message of what *is* most important. It also contributes to a lack of buy-in and commitment from teachers as they are not sure what to spend their time on in the classroom. When teachers are provided with so many areas to focus on, they do not have ownership of the learning and do not feel supported. In addition, we have used a train-the-trainer model in our district to deliver these district-wide initiatives, all of which may not necessarily be what each individual school needs. Bolman and Deal explain this as, “When we don’t know what to do, we do more of what we know. We construct our own psychic prisons and then lock ourselves in” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 7).

Our project team believes professional development is most effective when it is based upon needs and when follow-up support is included specific to the school where teachers engage in their work with their students. Without a model that supports teacher leadership, we impact morale in a negative way which results in a decrease in teacher retention. Thus, it is time that we provide support at the school site that is more individualized and will lead other teachers to support what they individually need. It is important that we “transform professional learning so that it really supports educator learning...[E]ducation leaders will need to pay greater attention to the

importance of teacher agency. In addition to analyzing data, visiting classrooms, and reviewing school and system goals, leaders must cultivate an environment of continuous learning that engages teachers in their professional learning at every step of the way” (Calvert, 2016, p. 3).

Supporting Leadership

The following review of selected literature considers how to create a system of support for leaders (teachers, administrators) who are increasingly expected to lead more autonomously when they have traditionally been provided directives through district initiatives that emphasize accountability. The aim of this review of the literature is to answer the question: how can schools be supported in developing a culture where teachers are leading teachers?

My assumption while beginning this review was that moving away from a centralized leadership model to a more individualized approach that is determined at the school site will place ownership of responsibility where it belongs. “Teacher quality is the most important lever for improving student outcomes” (Glatthorn, Boschee, Whitehead, & Boschee, 2016, p. 243). We need to see autonomy welcomed at the school sites where school and teacher leaders can make decisions about professional development based on student needs and instructional practices tailored to each specific school and teacher.

The following themes were present in the literature reviewed: community re-norming, teaching/learning symbiosis, and leadership that is proactive and reflective (inquiring).

Methods used to conduct the review. To prepare this literature review, the University of South Florida Libraries general keyword, title, and abstract searches were used to search a variety of databases including Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, SAGE, and Web of Science. Searches included the following keywords: teacher collaboration, instructional coaching, peer coaching, teacher leadership, job-embedded professional

development, and supporting leadership. Sources within selected texts were cross-referenced, resulting in additional searches by author or source. Sources were limited to the last 10 years, and the primary focus was on studies conducted in the United States. However, applicable studies conducted outside the US were included where appropriate.

Community Re-Norming

Using a strategy like Networked Learning Communities, as initiated in the United Kingdom, provides an opportunity for schools to take on roles of working together to enhance both internally and externally generated knowledge to increase teacher effectiveness (Townsend, 2015). This approach to teacher leadership development is inquiry-led where teachers sit in the driver's seat in leading the change in their own practice. This strategy, like any, would involve the active involvement of the school principal. Without such involvement, educators will regress to the familiar and expect the principal to continue in the lead role of determining their learning, seeing the leader as the boss.

Creating an environment of professional collegiality is essential for promoting teacher growth. This also results in sustainability in staff. Papay (2015) showed that teachers working in schools that fostered professional community improved 38% more in 10 years than teachers with weaker professional environments. These environments had several key qualities: supportive principals, effective teacher training, a culture of trust, and a fair evaluation system with meaningful feedback. Papay asserted that principals need targeted support in systems development to create a community invested in the idea of improving teaching and learning.

In a study conducted by the American Institute for Research, Le Floch (2016) found that adults in schools have the greatest impact on achievement in schools, particularly low-performing schools. One of the key reasons to support the role of the principal is that principals influence

teachers' working conditions. When a positive, professional environment is created, teachers increase their ownership of their work and the collective success of the school as a whole.

Murphy (2015) claims that it is the responsibility of school administration to develop systems, with the involvement of teachers, to divide responsibilities and create an environment of professional community. This type of community exists when teachers move from the privacy of their practice within the four walls of their classroom into an interactive setting with patterns of relationships. This shift in mindset must also include district personnel.

District offices tend to find it challenging to relinquish control of teacher professional development. Central offices have a fear that their focus will be shifted to the back burner, and teachers will lose sight of it (Calvert, 2016). Changing the framing of this support is critical to teacher ownership, resulting in increased teacher morale as well as more effective instruction if teachers value what is presented and see immediate connections to their work in the classroom. Oftentimes, training has a global focus and may not fit with structures in place at all schools, and teachers then see the new learning as a waste of time and resources if they are not able to integrate it into their current goals or areas of focus.

Teaching/Learning Symbiosis

One of the greatest barriers when providing teachers with the support they need to plan quality instruction is time. Lack of time serves to “calcify the already inflexible institutional backbone of schooling” (Murphy, 2015). Teachers often wrestle with creating a balance between their own learning and planning for student instruction. As a result, oftentimes new ideas are absorbed into the functions of the organization, leaving their way of work unchanged from the new initiatives. This is both a waste of time and of resources. When extended periods of adult to adult contact are irregular, episodic or rare, teachers resort to the norm of continuing with the monotony

of teaching the same content the same way day after day and year after year, creating stagnant or declining results in student outcomes.

Every school is unique and with that comes a staff with diverse needs. Principals have teachers who fall into three distinct stages: novice, mid-career or late-career (Masuda, 2013). This creates its own challenges in selecting the right support for each individual teacher with limited resources, time and knowledge. Just like teachers are expected to provide differentiation to their students, leaders are expected to do the same for their teachers.

Masuda looked at teachers' attitudes and willingness to engage in professional development and found that depending on a teacher's years of experience in the field, each held a different view of professional development. New teachers looked for training that helped them survive the early years as they felt overwhelmed with things to learn. Midcareer teachers looked to hone their craft but felt they lacked time for training. Late-career teachers sought learning around new initiatives and were disheartened by mandatory trainings that did not suit their needs.

New Approach to Leadership: Proactive and Reflective

It is important to approach change with the understanding that everyone enters at a different level of understanding or proficiency. This is true for school leaders as well. Knowing that the same system has been used for sometimes decades in an organization, it is possible that some early work needs to happen to establish a clear understanding of what is possible and what quality looks like. One of the key elements when developing professional development opportunities is to understand the Standards for Professional Development. They call for professional development to be ongoing, embedded, connected to practice, aligned to school and district goals, and collaborative. Leaders are tasked with creating teacher agency, an environment where teachers

engage in professional community focused on their growth and the growth of their colleagues (Calvert, 2016).

Proactive leadership. School administrators need to increase their knowledge and skills in designing quality learning systems at their site. Leaders need to be coaches, cheerleaders, friends, parents, role models, teachers and disciplinarians when guiding the training (Burke, 2013). It takes a proactive leadership approach to make teacher learning successful.

One example of proactive leadership training is the Florida Turnaround Leaders Program. This program was funded by the Department of Education's Race to the Top initiative. It was implemented in the spring of 2012 with 118 prospective leaders in turnaround schools which included both public and charter schools. According to Duke (2014), there is a great need to identify the components of support that will directly result in strong school leadership in turnaround schools. Needs in these schools are high, similar in some ways, but unique in others. Leaders must be aware of these differences when making decisions to support the needs of the teachers which will result in success for the students. The need for change is urgent as the stakes are high for the students especially those in high needs schools.

The cause of low performance, according to Duke (2014), is most likely impacted by school personnel who provide professional development designed to support the uniqueness at low performing sites as well as the need to increase the knowledge and skills of teachers to raise student achievement. The training focused on 10 foundational skill sets included promoting effective teaching and learning and implementing organization change and professional development. One strategy included using teachers as role models for the training of other teaches so they may learn from the experts in the same field. Another strategy focused on the use of lesson studies which is a current practice in Hillsborough County schools (Duke, 2014).

Reflective inquiry. Leaders need to develop inquiry skills, sharing ideas across schools and seeking common goals to create a central focus for their research. Just as classroom teachers would benefit from visiting each other's classrooms to learn effective practices and to critique their instruction, principals would benefit from the same, reflective inquiry with other leaders. This, along with consistent coaching, provides real time support that is relevant to the learning needs and interests of the principal.

Reflective inquiry is an approach to professional development for principals and teachers. It is synonymous with action research. Participants engage in reflective thinking which allows them to see various points of view related to their practice. Reflective inquiry provides a systematic and intentional approach to professional development. This is contrary to traditional forms of training that are typically random topics that are convenient or the new trends across the district or the nation which may not directly relate to the current needs of the principal or every school in the nation. Once principals are equipped to critically examine their practice, they are better suited to guide teachers to doing the same with their practice (Fichtman, 2009).

Summary

Research shows that districts are moving towards a more decentralized model. As a result, leaders must learn new ways to support their teachers in the most effective manner to engage them and boost motivation. There is indeed a need for different professional development for teachers to foster and improve teacher leadership. Several important areas for school leaders to examine include: how teachers are supported, how time is allotted, the degree to which a leader is committed to teacher learning and leadership, the need for collaboration with teachers, and the need for teacher support.

SECTION 3. INSIGHTS AND APPLICATIONS

Schools benefit greatly when principals are seen as lead learners and lead the learning community where each member learns and teaches each other. Teachers participate in something they are willing to do; this creates a shared sense of ownership in the learning process with a focus on student success (Dana, 2009). Just as students' needs are different, so are the needs of adult learners. A one-size-fits-all approach to training and professional development is outdated and ineffective.

Research supported the need for individuality and follow up support at the school level for professional learning to be effective and impact positive change in instruction. It takes a growth mindset to change the norms that have been established for decades to shift the focus from a traditional lecture style learning platform to a more real-time applied learning approach. Time must be used to learn what principals' and teachers' interests are at each individual school—and particularly in turnaround schools—in order to build a professional development plan that will change the quality of instruction for students.

Insights from Appreciative Exploration

The implementation of professional development delivery models varies from school to school, district to district, and state to state. Current delivery models have included coaching, small group, web-based, and off-campus training; however, the most widely used model is lecture with little follow up. Hillsborough County School District has strengths in recognizing that a new delivery model for the professional development of teachers is needed, one that will empower

them to develop as leaders. There are pockets of support, and we are progressing towards a shared vision.

The creation of Area Superintendents in 2015, for example, was viewed as a way to refine processes and provide more individualized focus for leadership support across this large district. As part of the cultural change process, defining the role of the principal is the focus of the superintendent. He believes in using our resources in the district to help principals to better serve the needs of the students in their individual school sites. Bolman and Deal (2013) state, “There is no such thing as an ideal structure. Every organization needs to respond to a universal set of internal and external parameters. These parameters, or contingencies, include the organization’s size, age, core process, environment, strategy and goals, information technology, and workforce characteristics. All of these combining to dictate the optimal social architecture” (p. 60). The new vision has provided a clearer lens of what schools should be doing.

There are, however, varied levels of commitment evident in different divisions’ ability to communicate and take actions that support the direction in which we are headed. One example of this is support provided by academic coaches in the schools. Some work under the premise of catching schools doing something wrong instead of moving schools forward through coaching and encouragement.

District leaders must also be cautious in coming to conclusions about schools without knowing the strategies, initiatives and practices used within a given school. Despite the new vision, we still have some offices cemented in attempting to use their positional power to politically influence decisions made at the school site. This is not surprising as it is a common problem:

Former teachers now working in district offices said that it is often difficult for districts to lighten their control over professional learning. “There is a central office fear of letting go,

of giving educators agency to make decision. Various departments each have their thing, the program they want to emphasize. They believe this is the most important thing. They are afraid that if they don't direct the PD, teachers will lose sight of their thing,' said a former teacher working on professional learning in a district office" (Calvert, 2016, p. 14).

HCSD has a priority on creating a positive culture focused on preparing students for life. "Values characterize what an organization stands for. Qualities worthy of esteem or commitment. Unlike goals, values are intangible and define a unique distinguishing character. Values convey a sense of identity, from boardroom to factory floor, and help people feel special about what they do" (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 249). We can leverage this priority to increase autonomy and shared leadership in school site decision making.

Recommendations

- *Value professional community and support it.* When a positive, professional environment is created, teachers increase their ownership of their work and the collective success of the school as a whole.
- *Move control of professional development from the district to schools—particularly in turnaround schools.* This is critical to teacher ownership, increased teacher morale, and more effective instruction. Teachers value learning when they see immediate connections to their work in the classroom.
- *Develop models to allocate time for professional development at the school level.* Extended and focused periods of adult-to-adult contact cannot be irregular, episodic or rare.
- *Clarify school leaders' and district leaders' roles in supporting teacher leadership.* School and district leaders' roles in developing teacher leadership need to be more clearly defined with a focus on building capacity for empowering shared leadership.

- *Assess and prioritize district initiatives and determine what we really need at school sites—particularly in turnaround schools.* One size does not fit all. With autonomy, principals and teachers will be able to develop instructional leadership capacity at their sites to make sound decisions as to what is best for the students in their schools.

Summary Reflection

In pursuing this topic and selected literature review, I have grown as a leader in many ways. My confidence has increased significantly in the way that I am supporting school leaders. I am also using what I have learned in my coaching approaches. Multiple changes have occurred in my professional practice since beginning this program, as well as an increased eagerness to move to a district area where there is a greater number of schools in need of turnaround. My goal is to change my approaches to providing support to principals in these schools, putting into practice what I have learned.

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