

## **The Value of Teacher Forums in Establishing Teacher Leadership in the School Systems**

South Carolina continues to grapple with a growing teacher shortage that makes retaining teachers as critical as recruiting them. Coming into the 2020-21 school year, just under 6,000 teachers left their positions while there were around 2,000 people who graduated from our state's colleges or universities with a teaching certificate (CERRA, 2020). This trend has spanned several years, and the gap continues to widen. With so few of our state's college students entering the pipeline, there is no way to maintain the teaching force without enhanced retention efforts. It is simply not possible to recruit ourselves out of the teacher shortage. Efforts to retain the current teaching force are warranted, and that includes ensuring that teachers have improved satisfaction with their jobs and a sustained desire to stay in the classroom. One approach to this is through teacher leadership initiatives.

### Why Teacher Leadership is Important?

There is a growing body of evidence that ties the opportunity of teacher leadership to retention, increased job satisfaction, and improved learning environments. There are many teachers who would like to remain in the classroom for the entirety of their career rather than move into administration, but they also have the desire to contribute to the culture and organization of the school and district from the perspective of the classroom teachers. To be afforded the opportunity to take on leadership roles, either informally or formally, without having to leave the classroom to move into administrative roles can mean that experienced teachers remain in the classroom longer; the ability to grow professionally and contribute to the culture are often the reason that teachers move into administration. If they can be leaders from the classroom, they fulfill that desire to lead and grow without having to give up their teaching roles. This in turn reduces teacher turnover and thus also the costs associated with onboarding new teachers on a continual basis.

While the evidence is clear that teacher leadership is an important tool in the fight against teacher attrition and to enhance job satisfaction, what is not clear is how to best develop teacher leaders. Existing research on teacher leadership mainly explores improving instruction, curriculum, and policy rather than how teachers can best develop leadership skills (Smulyan, 2016). In fact, there seems to be a misunderstanding that educators know how to lead their colleagues without any formal professional development (Harris & Kemp-Graham, 2017; Knapp, 2017). Self-identity as a teacher leader is an obstacle for teachers who tend to see leadership in others but not themselves. Once they view themselves as leaders, they can begin to both imagine and realize themselves as valuable contributors to the school, district, or profession in a myriad of ways. Further research shows that teachers who are provided the opportunity to access professional development related to leadership in a cohort setting gain that self-identity as a teacher leader and consequently want to serve as such (Koty, 2020).

That cohort setting is the caveat to providing several opportunities: collaboration among professionals, the construction of both individual and team leadership skills, and an understanding of the role organizational support has in establishing capacity for teacher leadership. The South Carolina Teacher Forum and the district teacher forums offer that cohort setting. The forums are open to Teachers of the Year; those individuals have already been recognized as high-quality educators by their districts who have potential for leadership. They are provided professional

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development specifically aimed at developing and recognizing leadership skills, service to community, and teacher recognition. Most professional development opportunities offered to teachers focus on content and pedagogy; the teacher forums differ in that the focus of the professional development is on leadership skills and associated behaviors. Due to the structure of the forum being participant-led, it is understood that the experiences and activities of the forum are contextual based on the strengths and interests of the forum's leadership, the desired learning outcomes of the members, and the social interactions within the group (Koty, 2020).

### Research

Currently there is no consensus about how to define teacher leadership, how to best develop teacher leaders, and what roles and responsibilities teacher leaders should hold (Koty, 2020). What is evident in the existing research is a shared understanding that teacher leaders are needed and valued. School organizations benefit when they allow teachers to work in leadership capacities, as there is a strong correlation between teacher leadership and student achievement gains (Ingersoll et al., 2018; York-Barr and Duke, 2004; Danielson, 2006). There is also agreement on the need for a formalized professional development process to help foster teacher leadership. Ongoing, meaningful professional development related to leadership skills leads to increased human and social capital (Osmond-Johnson, 2017).

Recent research into South Carolina's teacher forums conducted for a dissertation led to the establishment of several recommendations. The first is that the Teacher of the Year selection process should be meaningful resulting in the selection of individuals who are professional and who are contributors to the organization and experts in their field. There should be school-wide and district-wide support of the forum that includes coverage for teachers to attend the meetings during school hours. Members of the forum are growing as teacher leaders and should, therefore, be given opportunities to serve in leadership capacities within the school organization. This expectation that teacher leadership will be supported and cultivated at all levels should be communicated from the district. The emerging teacher leaders should be afforded time, space, and reward for their work. Every forum should have a committed liaison who can help secure resources and advocate on the forum's behalf, but that person should not have been in a supervisory role over teachers. Finally, every forum should be served by strong leaders. (Koty, 2020)

### Conclusion

Forums are an important tool in the mission to both retain and advance teachers within the profession. Teachers often want to stay in the classroom, but they also may want to serve in roles outside of instruction. Being an effective and engaging teacher does not always translate into possessing leadership skills necessary to work at the organizational level. Therefore, professional development is needed to support them as they develop these crucial skills and step into leadership capacities, both formal and informal. As stated above, there are a number of recommendations that emerged from research about forums in our state regarding how to best meet this need. Leadership among the forum members is best fostered by teacher leaders who facilitate appropriate and relevant professional development activities. If forums are intentional about their goal of cultivating teacher leaders, the teachers, schools, and districts can all benefit.

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