

There's Now a Body of Research on What It Means to Be a Teacher Leader

By Madeline Will on June 24, 2016, 4:52 PM

Share 0



All teachers have the capacity to be leaders, researchers wrote in a recent comprehensive review of literature on teacher leadership—but not all teachers want to be.

Julianne A. Wenner, of Boise State University, and Todd Campbell, of the University of Connecticut, reviewed 54 reports and studies from the last 12 years to compile [a literature review](#) about what exactly it means to be a teacher leader. They define teacher leaders as "teachers who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom."

The teacher-leadership movement has gotten a boost from the U.S. Department of Education's [recent support](#), and advocates say the constant shifts in education policy have [motivated more teachers](#) to take on leadership roles.

So what does the literature say about teacher leadership? Here are a few important points.

What exactly does a teacher leader do?

Wenner and Campbell condensed the extra workload of teacher leaders into five themes.

1. Teacher leadership goes beyond the classroom walls.
2. Teacher leaders should support professional learning in their schools.
3. Teacher leaders should be involved in policy and/or decision-making at some level.
4. The ultimate goal of teacher leadership is improving student learning and success.
5. Teacher leaders are working toward improvement and change for the whole school organization.

How do you become a teacher leader?

Teacher leaders are typically prepared in two ways, Wenner and Campbell wrote. Most commonly, teachers develop leadership skills and strategies in professional development, local training, and/or conferences.

Another pathway that surfaced in the literature is university master's programs, where teachers focus on personal and professional growth, or engage in action research to take steps to improve their practice.

The important part is that teachers need to be empowered in their training and preparation, the researchers concluded. "If teachers are told what to learn, how to learn, and why to learn, their learning is controlled by others and their capacity to lead is stunted," researcher Monica Taylor once wrote.

Also, Wenner and Campbell wrote, administrative support seems to be critical to foster successful teacher leadership. One way principals can support teacher leadership, they noted, is through additional compensation for their extra responsibilities.

What are the benefits of becoming a teacher leader?

There are some clear and obvious benefits of becoming a teacher leader, according to the research. Teacher leaders reported increased positive feelings and professional growth. They feel more confident, empowered, and professionally satisfied. And many teacher leaders have said that it allows them to improve their practice in the classroom and learn more about pedagogy.

Teacher leaders reported an increased leadership capacity, where they look for even more leadership opportunities in other areas of their work and life. One teacher leader was quoted in the research as saying that as a result of being a leader, "I constantly want to better myself and look forward to the next challenge."

The researchers also found that teachers taking on added leadership roles resulted in feelings of empowerment for all teachers in the school. Teacher leaders' colleagues receive relevant support that encourages professional growth, and teacher leadership contributes significantly to school change, the research found.