

The Learning Network

A Newsletter for Washington State High Schools that Receive Gates Reinvention Grants

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Teacher Leader: A Promising New Role

Two years ago, a superintendent said, “One of the best parts of this [high school redesign] is that the young teacher leaders have stepped forward. They’ve joined with more experienced leaders to tackle this work—and, in some cases, they’ve moved them aside.”

One year ago, a principal, watching teacher leaders struggle with their new roles, said, “I really blew it by not recognizing that just because people wanted to take on teacher leader roles and said they were ready didn’t mean they *were* ready. I let them down by not doing more to prepare them.”

Last autumn, a teacher leader said, “It’s only October, and I’m exhausted, my colleagues are [mad at] me half the time, and my teaching [stinks].”

Three statements, three “truths.” In them, we see the promise and the problems associated with the new roles emerging in redesigned high schools—part of the new landscape we find ourselves in. Schools have always had teacher leaders, sometimes in formal roles such as department heads, more often informally—the teachers who influence others by what they say or do. While

those remain, we’re now asking for something new and arguably more complex: take a lead role in shaping new entities, creating new cultures, de-privatizing practice, advocating for students, connecting more with parents. While you’re doing that, represent our school’s interests to the larger building (and keep us happy).

The concerns and problems are real, and need to be addressed if redesign is to work. But the promise of more distributed and diverse leadership is a central component of new small schools, whether they are conversion schools, start-ups, or already-small schools learning to take advantage of their smallness.

While job definitions and expectations for this role are only now beginning to emerge and will vary between and among schools, perhaps the greatest promise of teacher leaders is this: teachers who are unwilling to give up teaching to take on administrative roles now have the opportunity to lead as well as teach. That can only be good news—good teachers are needed too much in our classrooms to force them to make an unnecessary choice.

- Rick Lear, Director

TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Taking Responsibility For What Matters

Teacher leader. Lead teacher. Academy facilitator. Whatever the name, teachers in many of your high schools have taken on new leadership roles in the past few years. *The Learning Network* spoke to eight of them recently to elicit their thoughts about the challenges and rewards of being a teacher leader.

While these leaders’ years of teaching ranged from less than a year to more than 30 and their roles and responsibilities varied from school to school, some common themes emerged in their reflections:

- **Teacher leaders are facilitators; all teachers are or can be leaders.** In almost every case, teacher leaders were quick to describe themselves as “just” facilitators and to give credit to other teachers in their new small schools. While they are taking on specific tasks, they clearly subscribe to author Linda Lambert’s tenet that “everyone has the right, responsibility, and capability to be a leader.” (*Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement*, 2003)
- **Taking on a new leadership role results in personal growth.** According to these teachers, when you operate as a facilitator with your peers, you are bound to learn new

skills. Some talked about the challenges of balancing the listening role with the need to have a voice, while others mentioned gaining a new appreciation and respect for divergent thinking. To a person, they say they’ve learned a lot.

- **Change is hard work.** Every one of these teachers said some variation of “I’ve never worked harder in my life.” Most tempered their remarks with comments about being invigorated and excited, but when they were asked what they would say to other teachers who might consider stepping into their shoes, they didn’t gloss over the realities of extra hours, working with peers in a new role, dealing with ambiguity, and so on.
- **This is the right thing to do—for kids and for teachers.** Given their agreement about the challenges of the work, these leaders’ commitment was remarkable. They said, “We have to do this,” and “We can’t go back,” and “It’s up to teachers to create schools as they need to be.”

A recent issue of *Schools by Design* (BayCES, Oakland) describes leadership as “taking responsibility for what matters.” Scores of teachers in Washington State are doing just that. In the following pages, you will meet a few of them.

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NICK ANGELOS and SUE METZLER, Academy On-Line (AO-L), Mariner High School, Mukilteo. *Both history teachers, Nick has taught for 20 years and Sue for 14 years. AO-L has 14 teachers. Nick and Sue share the leadership role and are clearly comfortable doing so, as they sometimes speak at the same time and often finish each other's sentences.*

Sue: Although we were originally called facilitators, the school uses the term “teacher leader” now. Part of our role includes drafting the academy meeting agendas that we send out to our group for input and changes.

Nick: Then we facilitate the meetings, which can be lively because we have a group of people who aren't afraid to speak their minds. After we discuss something, we find a way to come to consensus.

Sue: So we are just the organizers of the meetings; we aren't the decision makers.

Nick: That can be challenging for me because I'm a person with strong opinions and sometimes I have to just bite my tongue and remember that this is what the group wants and that it's important not to force my opinions on others.

Sue: On the other hand, it's important for us to have a say, and that can be challenging for me. As senior class advisor, I've had experience facilitating a lot of meetings, but although I can use the same skills in our AO-L meetings, there's a difference. For example, it's easy for me to let the seniors decide what color they'll choose for some event, but the decisions we make in an AO-L meeting affect me personally. So I have to both listen to people and be sure my own voice is heard.

Nick: Sharing the leadership role works well for us because we've known each other for a long time and we bring different personalities and skills to the role.

Sue: However, sharing wouldn't work if we didn't have the same work ethic, the same values.

Nick: One thing people should know is that being a teacher leader is an incredible balancing act, because you really are doing a double job. You have to be willing to be caught in between sometimes, even be blamed for something that maybe wasn't your fault. And you couldn't possibly work any harder!

Sue: That's not just true of teacher leaders; it's true of every single teacher right now. We're all struggling with the reality that while we are spending so much time planning for the future, the kids in our classes deserve us right now.

Nick: Yes, it's hard, but we stay because we are committed to these changes.



LOUISE MOST, Gateway Academy, Lincoln High School, Tacoma. *Has taught English and reading for 30 years. Gateway has about 200 ninth and tenth graders and 12 teachers.*

I was one of several who wrote the original RFP for Gateway, so that's how I

ended up with this role. My responsibilities include drafting agendas for our meetings and facilitating them. I also attend the building Leadership Team meetings and represent Gateway.

Our group, which I think is a great one, makes decisions by consensus. When we meet, we spend some of our time talking about students of concern. It's really been rewarding to establish close collegial relationships and to support each other.

As far as my own learning goes, I've learned more in the last four or five years than at any other time in my 30-year teaching career. Before we wrote our RFP, I did a lot of research, and I believe this is major educational reform. I've been at Lincoln for 22 years and we've always had lots of good teachers, but little has really changed. Now we are starting to change because we are looking at learning differently. We are learning how kids learn.

In my teacher leader role, I've learned a lot about how different people respond to change and how each of us needs different kinds of encouragement to get from one place to another. Even though we are all different, I believe we can come together to reach a common goal. Part of my responsibility as a teacher leader is to bring people together, to make them feel valued.

That's not to say that change isn't hard. It takes courage and determination. And all of us, not just teacher leaders, are working incredibly hard and taking major risks. It would be easy to say, “I don't need this,” so you have to keep things in perspective and not just dwell on the barriers and the obstacles.

You have to focus on what you believe, because the only way change is going to happen is through a groundswell from the troops—the teachers. We're the ones who know our kids.

Summer 2004 Teacher Leader Institute

Last summer, the Small Schools Project sponsored a week-long institute for teacher leaders. Another institute is planned for this summer, so watch for information about dates and location.



WALT BENNETT, Renaissance School, Mountlake Terrace, Edmonds. *Is in his first year of teaching high school physics, ESL science, and algebra; has previous adult education and managerial experience. Shares teacher leader role with Jeannie Brzovic. Renaissance has 20 staff and about 250*

students (without seniors who will be included next year).

I had done a lot of research about small schools when I applied to Mountlake Terrace, and I liked what I read. So when Renaissance met the week before school to elect teacher leaders, I threw my hat in the ring.

As teacher leaders, Jeannie and I facilitate our regular meetings and retreats. Our role also includes serving as liaisons with the large school's Leadership Team. We represent the views of Renaissance in those meetings, and we take information back to our faculty.

I see keeping the momentum moving forward as another major responsibility of teacher leaders. And that means figuring out what motivates people. When it comes to motivation, there are both similarities and differences between the business world and education. Because they've had their own routines for so long, teachers may be less familiar with working collaboratively, so that can be a challenge.

Another challenge is that the staff here has been in the planning stages for this transition for so long. Now that we are implementing, most people are pretty tired, and things don't look as different at this point as they had hoped. This can be quite demotivating, so we're trying to pick small areas in which we can experience success.

As far as my own development is concerned, I've learned that I'm not as organized as I thought! And I need to resist the temptation to just "do it myself." I'm the kind of person who could get sucked into that mentality, but leadership isn't about doing it yourself, it's about motivating other people to step up.

MELISSA JOHNSTON, HEAL Academy, Cleveland High, Seattle. *Has taught science for 5 years. HEAL Academy has 186 students and 10 teachers.*

I co-authored the RFP for HEAL and have been the lead teacher since the beginning of this school year. I have several major responsibilities, including facilitating our weekly two-hour meetings and scheduling our students into their classes.

For our meetings, I put together a draft agenda and then send it out for input. We spend the first 30 minutes of every meeting

talking about students of concern; then we tackle other issues. We work on a consensus basis, using the fist to five method, and it works pretty well, even though we have a very vocal team.

Scheduling is a huge job, but I have to say that all of our teachers are taking on leadership when it comes to our kids' academic progress. Each teacher serves as an advisor to 20 students (and advisories meet daily). The advisors spend time going over graduation and college entrance requirements, so they've had to learn a lot about credits and colleges and so on.

As lead teacher, I've learned a lot, too—not just about course scheduling but about working with different styles, managing meetings. It's incredibly hard work that requires lots of evening hours. But the truth is that all our teachers are working horrendous hours. I'll continue to serve as lead teacher because I feel supported by them and because I'm invested in this work.

What's the reward? We're doing this for the students. As teachers, we can't go back into our rooms and shut the doors. You may be a wonderful teacher and students may have a great time in your class, but then they walk out and go into five other classrooms where they face different teachers with different philosophies. It's important for kids to know that they have 10 teachers who are all on the same page.

We may have a long way to go, but I believe that rigor has improved at our school. I see freshmen doing work the seniors used to do. And we are getting to really know our kids.



MARY ANN ARENS, South, Truman Center, Federal Way. *Has taught math for 17 years. Truman has two small schools, South and Forum; every teacher has leadership responsibility for some area (e.g., data gathering, writing, internships, etc.). South has 6 teachers and about 100 students.*

I have responsibility for math at both South and Forum and for South's CFG, and I have found a real difference between the two roles. I feel more effective as the CFG facilitator because of the size of the group. It's easier to work with a group of 6 than with 12; you get farther faster, especially when you know people so well.

As CFG facilitator, I'm in charge of getting student work together for our meetings and I choose the protocols we'll be using. Our CFG time is extremely valuable as a time when we can get together to talk about student work. It's also been helpful to me because I've learned how to be a good facilitator. These skills can carry over into the classroom.

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MARY ANN ARENS, *continued*

Although the math leadership role has been more challenging, I've certainly seen some rewards. The district clearly respects what we've done because they are using (after a little tweaking) the math rubric we developed. Also, our students are writing about math in a much more positive way than they used to.

As faculty at South, we meet frequently to make decisions by consensus. For example, deciding when to hold our exhibitions or open house would be a decision the six of us would make. Other kinds of decisions—our expectations of students, for example—would be made by the whole school staff of 12 teachers, the principal, and the dean of students.

Being a teacher leader is certainly time consuming, so the idea of balance is something we talk about often at Truman. What I would say to someone considering taking on a teacher leadership role is, "It's important to *plan* to have a life."



MARK VALENTINE, SLC A, Port Angeles Senior High. *Has taught English for 9 years. Shares teacher leadership role with Betsy Snipe. SLC A has 350 ninth through twelfth graders and 20 teachers.*

I volunteered for this role, and its responsibilities are still evolving. Betsy and I facilitate our SLC meetings in which we are often working

on a school-wide task—for example, implementing a new freshman project, as all SLCs are doing right now.

I stepped into this because I felt compelled to do so. It's anachronistic for teachers to think we can go into our classrooms and shut the doors, because we know the system must change. Able students (and their parents) have always known how to leapfrog around and get the best out of the system. But now we have a new challenge—making sure that every student across the board gets equal learning opportunities. And teachers must be a part of building a system that's consistent with meeting that goal.

In our SLC, we use a consensus decision-making process, which is sometimes messy. I use the football team analogy and compare us to an entire team of quarterbacks. As teachers, we are all used to calling the plays in our own classrooms. Now we are learning how to work together and be respectful of each others' opinions.

What I've learned personally as a teacher leader consists of enormous amounts of humility! It can be an awkward position to be in, because these are my peers. For teachers to be taking on this kind of a role is a new concept for many of us, but we have the opportunity to jump in and create schools as they need to be.

Yes, it's a lot of work—and it comes at a time when teacher workload is maxed out already. But for me, it's invigorating to work among my peers and to ask, "What is it that *all* of us can do to create schools that work for *all* kids?"

The key word is *responsibility*. We have to change the paradigm that teachers only have responsibility to the kids behind their own classroom doors. We have to enlarge our vision to include *all* teachers taking responsibility for *all* students in the school.

TUAN VU, Nobel Academy, Kent-Meridian High, Kent. *Has taught math for 4 years. Nobel has approximately 400 students and 15 teachers.*

This is my second year as Nobel Academy teacher leader, and I share the role with another teacher, Janet Plank. We put together the agenda for our SLC meetings and facilitate them, and we represent Nobel at school-wide meetings.

Our Nobel faculty meets twice a month, and we make decisions by consensus, using the fist to five method. On occasion, we do take a vote and move ahead if we have an 80 percent "yes" vote. We always listen to the other 20 percent, however.

I believe a leader needs to decide what he or she is leading *to*. For me, it's the belief that all kids can learn. As I look back at my high school years, I see that I was the only one in my group of friends who went on to college. It wasn't that the others didn't want to go, but they hadn't been prepared. I believe this is a huge equity issue that we have to talk about, because for many kids, school couldn't get much worse.

So as a leader, one of my roles is to start that equity conversation and keep it going. How do we teach to all kids? How do we change our practices so that we reach everyone? How will we ensure that all kids are prepared for college?

These are hard conversations. Although you aren't trying to *tell* people what to do or believe, you may be challenging their prior knowledge. You are trying to show them what they've never seen and lead them to a place where they've never been.

It's so much easier to talk about the concrete tasks of building small learning communities. But if your school does not have good philosophical debates about teaching for equity, I would predict you are on your way to being a small comprehensive high school—which is not the goal.

Yes, time is always a challenge, so you have to be intentional and make time. But the reward is seeing change happen, even if it's slow. We're starting to collaborate more, we're talking about student work, and we're having those equity conversations.

DISTRICT MATTERS

Supporting Emerging Teacher Leaders

Perhaps nothing matches the sheer terror a district human resources director experiences when she has to hire a new high school principal—unless it is that triple terror (or quadruple, in the case of the Seattle Public Schools) that comes with multiple vacancies. The pool of qualified candidates for high school principals has been shallow—some would say dry—for years.

Why? It's not uncommon to hear people respond, "Why would anyone want all the grief and pressure—and the extra hours upon hours—for a few extra bucks? Who wants all that weighty stressed-out loneliness that comes with the job of the school leader?" The problem is exacerbated, word has it, when the principal is expected to drag a passel of reluctant staffers through the slough of school reform.

A powerful solution to leadership shortages

It is in that final imperative, however—the expectation of school reform—that a powerful solution to leadership shortage emerges and gives hope. There are leaders everywhere. They are the ones who have been energized by a vision of better, more responsive schools. They have experienced how good it feels when a usually passive student engages in a Socratic Seminar—a strategy picked up in a small schools-related workshop. They have been energized by working with their colleagues in a Critical Friends Group. Stirred by a sense of possibility, they step forward to facilitate change.

There may be no more pressing urgency for district leadership these days than to cultivate and support these new leaders. Teacher leaders are far more than just a potential crop of new administrators, although that may be reason alone to make it a priority. They are harbingers of a new school culture that values distributed leadership and recognizes nothing important or lasting will ever get done if it isn't done collectively.

In lots of ways, the job description of "school leader" as a single person is indeed impossible. And maybe it should be. This hard work is hand-holding stuff; it takes a whole school to change a whole school.

Ways to support emerging teacher leaders

So, how do you, as district staff, support these emerging teacher leaders? How do you honor their courage and commitment? The Small Schools Project asked a number of new teacher leaders. Here's what they said:

- Come see us.
- Go to the community and tell them what we are doing. Send the message that you are behind us all the way. Go to bat for us.
- Build opportunities for dialogue and conversation into the daily schedule and defend teacher collaboration time with the community.

- Give teacher leaders time to plan.
- Give us more flexibility. Here we are doing this whole paradigm shift—but doing it in the same context. Build a framework to support the *new* work.

Many districts have declared school visits by central administrators a major priority. Beyond supervision, school visits by district leaders honor the work of the school. We've known that a long while. Now, including purposeful visits to the schools' teacher leaders should be an integral part of that process—watching teacher leaders in action, asking them about their work, thanking them, valuing them. Standing with them.

John McGean was a high school principal and an assistant superintendent before joining the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative. He can be reached at jmcgean@comcast.net.

SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Friday Harbor Creates Multi-Age Opportunities

During the past few years, the teachers and administrators at Friday Harbor High School have been "mixing it up"—creating multi-age advisories and classes and even moving student lockers—so that students will interact with peers from other grades.

"In a small school, what tends to happen is that kids stick with their grade level all the way through the day," explains Principal Marilyn Luckman. "We felt like the older and younger students were too segregated."

Friday Harbor began its advisory program three years ago and during the first two years, the school had grade-level advisories. But this year, they decided to mix it up so that every advisory includes students from each grade.

Multi-age grouping benefits older and younger students

"Older kids can act as big brothers or sisters to the younger ones. We want our older kids to feel some responsibility for raising up the young to take them under wing and help them," says English and speech teacher Susie Hale.

"We also want our younger kids to feel welcome; we don't want them to feel like they have to wait until their sophomore or junior years to gain some respect and acceptance."

Freshman Sarah Herren sees many advantages to multi-age advisories. "You have someone older to look up to, to say 'hi' to in the halls, to talk to about anything."

"The advisories have helped create some excellent friendships, and show you a different side of people that can be missed if you only see them in the hallway," adds Sarah.

Junior Tyler Roberts says the younger and older students in his advisory get along well.

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“Multi-age advisories give us the chance for all grade levels to get to know each other and interact. You get a diverse atmosphere with many different minds putting in ideas. You also get to find out what’s going on with other classes and grades in the school.” In Tyler’s opinion, a disadvantage of multi-age advisories is that there isn’t any time for class planning and organizing.

Decision based on previous positive experience

The decision to create multi-age advisories was also based on the school’s positive experience with multi-age classes, which they implemented last year. The school offers multi-age English, social studies, science, and math courses.

Junior Kimberly Kennedy believes the school’s multi-age advisories and classes have given her a chance to meet and learn from students from other grades that she wouldn’t otherwise meet. She agrees with Tyler that a downside to these advisories is not being able to discuss class issues, such as homecoming, so more class meetings are necessary.

Principal Luckman describes an unanticipated benefit to multi-age classes. “We wanted the students to serve as role models for each other. We knew the younger students would learn the ropes from the older kids, but what we didn’t anticipate was how the older students would be impacted by the younger students’ enthusiasm.”

“In my mixed grade speech class, the younger students, who are eager to please and make good the first year in high schools, really rise to the work load and challenge the older kids who are not taking class as seriously,” says Susie.

“We are creating a culture of positive peer pressure.”

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