

Not Just a Catchphrase: Teacher Leaders are Key to School Improvement

By Brian Kulak, Chief Academic Officer, Collingswood Public Schools



I'll admit it: I loathe educational buzzwords and catchphrases. From rigor to deep dives to meaningful conversations, I can't help but scoff at the fact that, more often than not, folks use such platitudes because they feel like they're supposed to. As if without such platitudes, our very existence in this profession is somehow unqualified. Yet, here I am, about to espouse the profound importance of an educational catchphrase: the teacher leader.

Unlike so many of its catchphrase brethren, the term teacher leader

actually means something. What's more is that it often means something different depending on the district. For some, a teacher leader is a stipended position, only a Praxis score away from administration, with tangible leadership responsibilities like building coverage, schedule creation, or professional development design. In other schools, a teacher leader is recognized as such simply by virtue of the fact that she is an excellent teacher to whom the administration can turn for ideas, ambassadorship, or mentorship. In any case, the terms and conditions of teacher leadership have never been more necessary or

more relevant than they are right now as our profession is, finally, starting to evolve from traditional, top-down leadership to more collaborative, shared governance.

Such shared governance is paramount to a healthy and thriving school culture. Because administrators are often hamstrung by state level, bureaucratic protocol, it is far too common to lose sight of the more human needs of their staff. However, administrators who are self-aware enough to admit they need help empower teacher leaders to share leadership responsibilities on the way to greater staff support. As a

result, teacher leaders begin to seek opportunities to lead, whether through their content expertise, their innovative instruction, their specific skill set, or their desire to get better. Finally, when administrators and teacher leaders work together to improve, a natural and necessary shift in dynamic occurs. Watch, then, as staff begins to support ideas pitched by teacher leaders, begins to support each other overtly, and begins to find a collective voice it may not have known it had.

Identifying Our Leaders

On the surface, identifying someone as a teacher leader speaks to her ability to inspire, to innovate, and to collaborate, all of which we want from our teachers. She has great ideas, is willing to share them and to take instructional risks based on them, and is the person to whom we most often turn when we need a mentor for new staff. If she had a theme song, it would be “Walk This Way” by Aerosmith.

However, in identifying this teacher leader as such, don’t we inadvertently reduce other teachers to something lesser, something generic? Shouldn’t all teachers be willing to share, to compare, and to reflect on their practice as a matter of professional course? Aren’t all teachers extroverted “edu-rock stars” (catchphrase alert!) who can’t wait to lead their colleagues to greatness simply by existing on the same plane? Clearly, we know that not all teachers are leaders, and that’s okay, too.

A common mistake in identifying our teacher leaders is assuming our teacher leaders are aspiring administrators, willing to act as surrogates as they pursue leadership certification. While that may be the case, our best teacher leaders are often those who just want to get better and are willing to do whatever it takes to invite colleagues on that journey. Furthermore, even the perception that those tabbed as teacher leaders are toeing an imperceptible line between staff and administration is enough to keep teachers from pursuing leadership opportunities.

In order for such shared governance to work, identifying our teacher leaders should not come with pomp

and circumstance, a special parking spot, or even a formal title. Rather, the subtleties of identification can make all the difference. Take note of in whose room “lunch bunches” often form, pay particular attention to pre and post conference discussions that are particularly reflective, create opportunities during staff and department meeting for teachers to share great things happening in their classes, and see who volunteers. Ask with genuine interest what staff thinks about a particular initiative or idea and listen to who speaks up.

However we identify our teacher leaders, identification is only the first step. Whether in form or function, it would be irresponsible for us to tab someone as a teacher leader and then cut her loose. In order for our teacher leaders to thrive, it is imperative that we model and support the kind of leadership that defines healthy and thriving school cultures.

Leading the Leaders

The most crucial step in supporting teacher leaders is modeling the kind of leadership in which the district believes. Without a clear picture of the administration’s leadership philosophy, we will attract the wrong folks for the wrong reasons to leadership positions. Rather, administrators have to invest themselves in the kind of collaborative and reflective practice we expect from our teachers. We have to be able to be willing to view ourselves and our school from the staff’s perspective, to admit when something isn’t working, and to take tangible steps toward improvement.

The next step is twofold: invite teacher leaders to address that which is important to staff and be prepared to get out of the way. For some administrators, the latter is often a deal breaker; after all, we joined administrative teams to be the leaders, not to give way to them, right? However, it is precisely this self-awareness that allows our teachers to see us as members of the same team rather than as managers barking orders from the dugout. Because the administration has made it clear that it values its staff and each other, and is committed to a reciprocal relationship,

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teacher leaders can work with the confidence that comes from genuine administrative support.

Creating a Space to Lead

Progressive and positive school leadership teams create a space for teacher leaders to emerge. However, it’s not teacher buy-in of administrative ideas that supports teacher leaders; in fact, it’s the opposite. Developing a shared consciousness, which invites teachers to say, “Have we thought about trying it this way?” or “I have this idea that I want to run by you,” rather than waiting for the next administrative edict to add to their already full plates, provides teacher leaders with a platform from which to lead. Sadly, such a platform is so often missing in schools in which a top-down, archaic leadership model is still the norm. Consider, too, that beyond the state mandated trainings and mindless red tape lies a trove of staff ideas that remains undiscovered without teacher leaders who have their fingers on the collective pulse of the staff and who have the confidence to bring it to the administration’s attention.

Finally, an often overlooked expression of teacher leadership has little, if anything, to do with curriculum or instruction. Rather, so many of our teacher leaders have an innate ability to act as a sounding board for their colleagues. Regardless of the concern for or the tenure of the concerned party, teacher leaders are able, if not desirous, to listen with confidentiality, to process with empathy, and to lead with aplomb. Consider how many crises of confidence have been mitigated, how many questions have been answered, and how many pep talks have been given about which administration is wholly unaware because a teacher

leader took care of it all. Though such leadership may not appear on a formal job description for teacher leaders, without such indispensable, often behind-the-scenes, soft skills, teacher leaders are often masquerading as something else.

Not All Catchphrases Are Created Equal

Despite my aversion to edu-jargon, I am thankful this one exists. As a district leader, who is also in charge of new

teacher induction and mentorship, I spend most of my time with teachers or thinking about how our administrative team can support our teachers. As a result, I am in the unique position to see teacher leadership take shape from its inception, to watch as it ebbs and flows over time, and to do as much or as a little as is necessary to ensure that our leaders are honored and supported.

Ultimately, teacher leadership is a direct reflection of our own. If we are willing to model the type of

leadership we expect, to usher our own egos out the door, and to create a culture through which teachers are encouraged to lead then, before long, there will be no need for that pesky edu-catchphrase, teacher leader, because it won't be an anomaly in need of a title. Rather, it will be the norm to which we aspire.

About the Author



Brian Kulak is the Chief Academic Officer of the Collingswood Public School District. Before entering administration, he spent 15 years as a high school English and Journalism teacher at Audubon High School. He has written for *Edutopia* and *Educational Viewpoints*, presented on leadership at the NCTE/CEL conference in St. Louis and at the ECETNJPA conference at The College of New Jersey, and is an EdCamp organizer. Brian can be found on Twitter @bkulak11.



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