A New Strategy to Identify Teacher Leaders

Teacher leadership is a "sleeping giant," according to researchers Marilyn Katzenmeyer and Gayle Moller. In their 2001 book, *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders*, they write: "Within every school, there is a sleeping giant of teacher leadership, which can be a strong catalyst for making change."

As financial cutbacks reduce the number of administrators and resource personnel in schools and districts, teacher leadership can boost instructional expertise, instructional coaching, collaboration, teacher efficacy, and informed decision-making.

As the sole administrator for over 500 students and approximately 60 faculty and staff members at Ohio's Gurney Elementary School, I always want to increase leadership capacity among my teachers for those exact benefits. But before a principal can build leadership capacity through training and professional development, it is critical that he or she identify promising teacher leaders.

Once, during a pre-conference for an observation, a teacher shared with me the results of an affinity survey she conducted with her students. She asked them three questions:

1. Who would you most like to sit by in our room?;
2. Who would you most like to play with at recess?; and
3. Who would you most like to be work partners with?

The results informed the teacher of strong peers in her room, as well as students who might need social support. That's when the light bulb went on for me: I thought this might be just the format to identify promising teacher leaders. I'd read countless articles on key leadership qualities, such as trust, authenticity, emotional intelligence, and expert knowledge. If I could identify the teachers my staff members admired for these traits—the colleagues that others sought out for advice and guidance—then I knew they would have the trust and following necessary to have an impact.

Implementing the Survey

I decided to create a kind of sociogram, or a graphic representation of teachers' social links. I started with a basic survey of my staff. The six survey questions were based on the areas in which I believed we would most benefit from having teacher leadership. It sought teachers' opinions on:

- Who, of their colleagues, would be a trusted, critical observer of instruction;
- Who is considered very knowledgeable/successful in math instruction and language arts instruction;
- Who has strong classroom management skills;
- Who has strong technology integration skills; and
- Who teachers choose to work with in a collaborative team.

All teachers were listed as possible choices for each question. To add another layer, I answered all six questions myself so that I could then compare my perceptions to those of my teachers. The survey was administered via a Google Form, and responses were immediately placed into an Excel document and graphed for easy analysis.

Surveying my teachers about the leaders among them could have been dicey, to say the least. There are several reasons why it went smoothly for me. First, I've been principal at my school for 13 years and have established trust with this staff. When I assure them that no one other than me will see the results and that the results will in no way impact their evaluations, they know that's the truth. Second, I created a sample results Excel document from the

Google Form, so staff could see that all responses were anonymous.

Third, my staff understood the value of this process. The reason that teacher in my opening example shared her affinity survey with me was because it illustrated one method she uses to know her students and their needs, a component in our teacher evaluation system. Likewise, my teachers knew that a critical aspect of our Ohio principal evaluation system is how well I know my teachers. They could see the connection between this activity and my gaining insight to better support their growth. Finally, our district was, at the time, looking for teachers to be trained in peer observations. This was another way for teachers to have input into who they trusted to be their peer observers.

Identifying Leaders

The survey results provided me with a variety of information. Based on the results, I learned which teachers would be well-received by their peers in various leadership positions, such as a language arts curriculum representative or a school technology advocate. I sorted the results by grade level, which allowed me to choose subject-specific teachers in a variety of grades for leadership roles.

For instance, I had been asked to choose two teachers to attend a three-day training on our state's new teacher-observation process so that we could begin planning peer observations in our district. In a building with 10 National Board Certified Teachers, where over 90 percent of the teachers have Master's degrees and over 75 percent have 10 or more years of teaching experience, this choice could get complicated. I knew that I had to identify teachers who the majority of the staff trusted so that staff would value their critical peer feedback. I was excited when the survey results clearly indicated a handful of teachers who I could confidently say would be welcomed into classrooms and whose feedback other teachers would take constructively.

Additional Support and Self-Reflection

Because I took the survey myself, the results also allowed me to compare my perceptions of teacher leaders and my staff's perceptions. For example, what does it mean if I chose a stand-out teacher to lead technology integration, but almost no other teachers identified technology as one of his or her strengths? It could mean that I'm not adequately acknowledging and celebrating what that teacher is doing in the classroom. Or, it could mean that there are other teachers with greater skill in that area, and I need to be present more in their classrooms to learn this about them.

By using this strategy, I am also able to identify teachers who, over time, are never selected by colleagues as having an area of strength. Seeing this, I can provide additional support to help those teachers develop and set goals for their growth. Additionally, when teachers approach me for leadership roles, I can use this information to support them in developing the common characteristics evident in our current leaders.

The ability to identify teachers who will likely be effective leaders in our school makes the sociogram an invaluable strategy. This is a practice that doesn't have to be done every year, but using it every three to five years gives teachers ample opportunities for leadership, growth, and recognition. Filling leadership roles with these peer-identified teachers ensures that our school's teacher leaders are capable and effective, and will remain in their positions over time. Some of the teacher leaders from Gurney Elementary have even been sought out to provide training and mentoring in the other schools within the district. Resources for developing teacher leaders are always limited, so when I've chosen a teacher for a position, it's nice to feel confident that he or she will see it through and be a true asset to our school. **P**

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