“What a difference a decade makes,” write the authors of the Wallace Foundation’s 2012 report, *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning*. Ten years ago, principals were conspicuously absent from school reform agendas, they say, but are now considered by education leaders and policymakers to have more of an impact on school success than drop-out rates, testing, college and career preparation, and other high-priority issues. The report also finds a direct correlation between effective leadership—including shared principal and teacher leadership—and higher student scores on math and reading tests, citing student access to the collective knowledge and wisdom of the school community as a primary factor.

The Wallace study and others show that successful principals also benefit from teacher collaborations that help them focus on instructional practices and teacher evaluations by aiding them in tasks involving curriculum alignment, assessment, peer observation and problem-solving. Teacher leaders often act as department or grade-level “ambassadors,” driving consensus on issues among their teams and bringing needs and concerns to the principal’s attention and vice-versa. In some cases, teachers are also taking daily building management tasks, such as security and maintenance duties, off the principal’s plate.

Recognizing that teacher leadership positions provide avenues for motivated teachers to grow and learn new skills, the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium published the *Teacher Leader Model Standards* in 2011. This guide was designed to spark dialogue about what knowledge and skills teachers need to be leaders. Among the many identified competencies are facilitating instructional improvement and promoting professional learning skills, two core areas where working with principals can provide ongoing in-the-field training.

In schools across the country, a range of successful principal-teacher leader collaboration models are devel-
Teacher Leaders and the Turnaround Principal

A strong teacher leadership team has been central to principal Doris Candelarie’s ability to transform the urban, high-poverty, mostly Hispanic school she leads. Alicia Sanchez International Elementary School in Lafayette, Colorado, has moved from having a low-performing “victim environment” to an empowered learning environment that’s earned International Baccalaureate (IB) status.

Eight years ago, Candelarie left a high-level district office position to accept the principalship at Sanchez International Elementary with the express purpose of understanding exactly how to create and sustain a turnaround school. Recognizing shared commitment and accountability as crucial elements, Candelarie hired purpose-driven, self-managed teachers she could build into leaders through training in collaboration, data analysis, and Response to Intervention (RTI).

The leadership team at the 350-student, pre-K-5 school includes a counselor and 12 teacher leaders representing different grade levels, and other areas such as English-language learning (ELL) and family resources. Teacher leaders share the perspectives of their individual teams with the larger group, determine the focus of professional development, monitor effects of the school improvement plan, and lead goal development for school action teams, who execute plans. Action teams represent core curriculum areas, plus ELL, IB, family and community, and talented and gifted programs. “The goal of the leadership and action teams is to get a 360-degree stakeholder perspective,” says Candelarie.
A key element of the leadership team’s success at Sanchez International Elementary is the tight structure of staff meetings, which promotes professional learning based on Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman’s norms of collaboration in *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups*. Another key element is Sanchez’s customized set of guidelines, which include: speak your truth; keep it businesslike; have empathy; less talk, more action; and fully process issues within the walls of the room. “If you bring an agenda item, it will be discussed, and you must come prepared with possible solutions,” says Candelarie.

With sustainability a key issue at turn-around schools, Candelarie ensures teacher leader roles are rotated often, every year and a half, so there is a constant influx of new voices. “So often when a school leader leaves, everything falls to pieces,” she says. Additionally crucial to sustainability is principal tenure, she says. “It takes five years for a principal to get traction and to see real change. Ideally, principals should stay for 10 years.”

Working with teacher leaders is not without its challenges, says Candelarie, because there is a fine balance between the principal’s leadership and teacher leadership. “You’re a member of the team, but you’re still the leader.” Candelarie says principals have to be okay with allowing themselves to be vulnerable and transparent, which can be “a lot of work.”

**Teacher-Driven Leadership**

At the rural, 323-student, K-4 Urie Elementary School in Lyman, Wyoming, principal Layne Parmenter credits his teacher-led leadership teams with cutting discipline referrals by 50 percent and increasing benchmark test scores up to 30 percent since implementing the model three years ago.

As with Sanchez International Elementary, Urie Elementary’s broad range of teams represent both academic and support areas of the school. Included are an Oversight Team composed of facilitators and grade-level representatives who monitor building-level data and suggest adjustments in materials, curriculum, and teaching strategies. Other teams report to the Oversight Team and represent grade-level PLCs; behavior and incentives; RTI; public relations; health; school climate; and parent communication.

Urie Elementary teacher teams operate with a high degree of autonomy, meeting and setting their own schedules, with Parmenter’s primarily serving as an informal coach and consultant. He sits in on team meetings and represents the principal’s point of view, suggesting considerations, such as how initiatives might dovetail or conflict with district policies. Lead teachers are normally chosen by Parmenter based on their experience and areas of expertise. For instance, the school psychologist leads the behavior team.

Parmenter says a high level of trust characterizes his relationship with his teacher leaders. He credits them with “doing the heavy lifting” in each of their particular areas, allowing him to spend more time on teacher evaluations, community relations, and district-level professional development training for other administrators. Beyond increased student achievement is the benefit of a happier, more connected staff. School nurse Dyan Hill, who heads up the school health team, says sharing responsibility makes teachers’ jobs more interesting, with a higher level of professional interaction and a feeling of being part of a bigger picture.

“It gives teachers a sense of professionalism and dignity,” says Parmenter.

**Dual Teacher Leadership Teams**

In the suburban, 921-student, K-5 Kay Granger Elementary School in Keller, Texas, principal Kimmie Etheredge stays on top of her multiple administrative responsibilities with the help of both an Instructional Leadership Team and a Operational Leadership Team.

The Instructional Leadership Team consists of representatives from grade level PLCs, RTI, special education, advanced placement, and physical education. The Operational Leadership Team, headed up by the assistant principal, includes teacher leaders who take responsibility for technology; school morale; communication; and safety and security.

Etheredge, who meets with teams every two weeks, sees her role as both an enabler who provides resources, professional development, and other support, as well as a district-level facilitator. When the technology team wanted to pursue a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) initiative, for instance, Etheredge checked with the district IT staff and learned it wouldn’t be possible for another six months.

As with the Sanchez International Elementary model, Granger Elementary teacher leadership is regularly rotated—every three years—with the goal of “growing” more leaders and facilitating instructional improvement by spreading expertise in RTI.

Ongoing professional development and training is integral to the teacher leader experience in both teams. Instructional Team members receive formal training in adult learning techniques, such as collaboration, facilitation, and conducting critical conversations in a non-confrontational manner. Operational Team members participate in restraint, CPR, first aid, and safety practices several times a year.

Etheredge says she relies on teacher leaders to help her make better deci-
Coaching Teacher Leaders: 10 Key Questions

Learning to think like a principal is one of the challenges teacher leaders face as they move from the micro view of the classroom to the macro view of the school and district. Principal Mark E. Shanoff shares the type of questions he asks teacher leaders in the service of stretching their perspectives.

1. How will this affect the greatest number of students?
2. How will this decision be greeted by teachers?
3. What school improvement target does this initiative serve?
4. What's your timeline?
5. What barriers to implementation do you anticipate? How will you handle those?
6. What training will need to take place to ensure your initiative can be implemented?
7. How can the administration support you?
8. What costs are associated with your initiative?
9. Will your initiative conflict with the progress or success of any other school initiative?
10. Is this initiative sustainable should we want to continue it beyond its current intended implementation?

Trickle-Down Leadership
Principal Ardith Bates of the high-needs Gladden Middle School in rural Chatsworth, Georgia, says her superintendent’s generosity in allowing schools to make many decisions on their own is responsible for a more innovative teacher leader culture at her school. With the freedom to make more decisions, she can pass that flexibility down to her teacher leaders, who have the power to initiate elements such as schedule changes, for instance, if more time is needed for a math project or other activity. Decision-making also “trickles down” to students, who vote on decisions such as cafeteria paint colors and decorations.

Bates uses an integrated system of developing staff leadership skills through comprehensive data analysis training, academic review teams, and a curriculum facilitator. Faculty-led, whole-school departmental “brag” meetings also promote best practice sharing. Her eight-person leadership team comprised of representatives from each department, plus special education and other groups, has had a dramatic impact on Gladden Middle School, with the school seeing leaps in student achievement and garnering a Title I Distinguished School award and others over the past five years.

The Power of Collaboration
Though the models, approaches, and circumstances of principal-teacher leader collaborations differ greatly among those profiled here, the common elements are trust, empowerment, motivation, and a school climate that invites participation and promotes high achievement. For school leaders who might feel hesitant to relinquish traditional controls and embrace the shared leadership model, the Wallace study finds that principals “do not lose influence as others gain influence.” Moreover, Granger’s Kimmie Etheredge offers, “When you let teachers inside your world, you get buy-in. That’s the beauty of it.”

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