

# Growing Sustainable Teacher Leadership

Today's principals struggle to hire, grow, and sustain teacher leaders. More than 40 percent of new teachers leave within the first five years of entry into the profession, a statistic that should cause principals to reflect on their hiring practices, induction efforts, and school culture. Teacher leadership is difficult to foster when teachers are fleeing the profession.

In order to ensure that the teachers they hire are successful for years to come, principals must develop a comprehensive and inclusive approach to growing sustainable teacher leadership. If principals adopt consistent practices in four key areas—hiring, induction and support, observation and evaluation, and professional development—they can improve teacher retention and focus their efforts on growing teacher leadership.

## Hiring

Growing sustainable leadership begins with the hiring process. Hire a poor candidate and you will spend a long time undoing your error. Hire a great candidate and you can stand back with pride as he or she excels. Simple enough, but how can you increase your chances of hiring a great teacher? A few simple practices can dramatically increase the odds of hiring the next teacher of the year candidate:

- *Hire by committee.* Let your teachers help select their next colleague. This immediately improves your new employee's chances of being successful because peers will be invested in his or her future. New teachers who have colleagues looking out for them will find it hard to fail.
- *Ask questions that are based on your school's values.* The interview committee should get a sense of whether the candidate will fit in with the school's culture by asking every candidate the same questions. Develop questions that evoke the responses you want (e.g., ask candidates to give an example of how they have

collaborated with other teachers to meet the needs of students).

- *Call references.* Surprisingly, many principals skip this basic step. Even if you already know who you want to hire, take the time to call references. It could save you from hiring the wrong person.
- *Avoid hiring from desperation.* Principals often advertise positions and interview at the last minute. An unexpected retirement or a family crisis can result in a principal who is desperate to fill an opening. This untenable position is like buying a car when yours has to be towed onto the lot. Be patient. Hire a long-term sub if necessary, but don't hire someone just to check it off your "to do" list.

## Support

Once your new hire begins teaching, you need to provide the support to get him or her off to a strong start. Planning for the induction and support process shows new employees they are valued and that you recognize that their needs are different.

In its 2012 *Teacher Induction Discussion Guide*, The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) provides suggestions for the scope and structure of teacher induction programs. The guide suggests that comprehensive teacher induction programs include the following:

- Support for new teachers for at least two years;
- High-quality mentoring using carefully selected and well-prepared mentors;
- Regularly scheduled common plan-

ning time with other teachers;

- Ongoing professional development; and
- Standards-based evaluation of new teachers throughout the process.

Just as relationships are key to the achievement of students, they are also key to the success of teachers. The achievement of new teachers is highly dependent on their relationships with colleagues, support personnel, and the principal. Principals can strongly influence the progress of new teachers just by being available to them. Schools that grow skilled teachers do so through comprehensive and highly supportive methods. When teachers feel they are part of something bigger than themselves, they rise to the occasion and grow exponentially in their skills.

## Observation and Evaluation

The observation and evaluation process is a critical component in growing sustainable teacher leadership. Principals who focus on using teacher observation and evaluation to improve instruction will have more success than those who use it as a punitive tool. When observation and evaluation conferences include honest conversations about student performance, they are much more likely to lead to teacher growth.

Charlotte Danielson is recognized as a leader in the teacher observation and evaluation field. Many districts have adopted her approach when developing teacher and principal evaluation models. Danielson's framework addresses four domains essential to the teacher observation and rating process:

1. Planning and preparation;
2. Classroom environment;
3. Instruction; and
4. Professional responsibilities.

Danielson's comprehensive framework targets the skills and knowledge that teachers are expected to master. Her approach is based on empirical studies that connect specific teacher behaviors to student achievement. Teachers are unlikely to feel threat-

ened if observation and evaluation discussions are centered on student achievement. In order to grow sustainable leadership in schools, teachers and principals must work collaboratively in the observation and evaluation process.

### Professional Development

The state of professional development (PD) in education is rapidly changing. Just like principals expect teachers to provide instruction to meet the needs of all learners, school leaders must provide the same for the developmental needs of their teachers. Professional development should be job embedded and inclusive of the needs of individual teachers.

In 2012, the Annenberg Innovation Lab brought together researchers, teachers, and school administrators from across the country to collaborate on a report titled *Designing With Teachers: Participatory Approaches to Professional Development in Education*. In constructing a framework for participatory professional development, the group identified four core values:

1. *Participation, not indoctrination.* Everyone (teachers included) has a role in PD.
2. *Exploration, not prescription.* Teachers have a say in the scope of PD. It should be individualized for their content area.
3. *Contextualization, not abstraction.* PD is practical, meaningful, and immediately useful.
4. *Iteration, not repetition.* PD is evaluated as an iterative process and the selection of PD comes from the examination of data.

Principals must be innovative in all aspects of their work, including professional development. Thoughtfully designed professional development can sustain teachers throughout their career. Principals who know the strengths of their staff and design PD that is specific to their needs create learning environments that are healthy for teachers and students.

### Role of School Culture

Ultimately, teacher retention and development are products of school culture. A culture that values everyone's contributions is able to thrive even when teacher turnover occurs. Principals who hire effectively, support new teachers, foster the observation process, and provide innovative PD greatly increase the likelihood that teachers will remain in, and contribute to, the profession.

Teachers want to make a differ-

ence and be the best they can. The belief system in a school that values teacher retention and leadership is the same value system that supports student learning and growth, creating the ultimate win/win opportunity for schools. ■

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**Christopher Wooleyhand** is principal of Richard Henry Lee Elementary School in Glen Burnie, Maryland, and an adjunct instructor of teacher leadership at McDaniel College.

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