The Case for
Teacher-led School Improvement

LaQuanda Brown

Principals' expanded roles and responsibilities can be shared with teacher leaders.

One of the new buzz phrases in education is "teachers as leaders." While this term intrigues educational professionals, it is not a term that should be used loosely. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) contend that leadership is considered to be vital to the successful functioning of many aspects of a school. Therefore, retaining effective teachers and developing them into leaders is essential for school improvement, which will ultimately lead to school success. And given the expanded roles and responsibilities of principals, it is crucial that district and school administrators cultivate teachers to successfully share leadership responsibilities.

Leithwood (1994) identifies the four I's of school leadership—individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence—that are essential for schools to be successful in the 21st century. Leithwood's four I's are what he refers to as the elements of transformational leadership. In a school where the principal is focused on building the leadership influence of teachers, the principal must teach, exhibit, and train teachers on the intellectual stimulation of school leadership. Through the intellectual-stimulation approach, the principal helps the school staff to have vision and foresight in looking at old problems in new ways by working together to create, identify, and implement innovative, workable solutions.

Build Capacity and Consensus

Administrators must build instructional capacity and instructional consensus among school staff. However, many administrators are still at a loss on how to accomplish this daunting task. The principal has to fulfill many complex administrative responsibilities each day. Some decisions must be made immediately, while other decisions may allow the principal to include input from teachers and other stakeholders. Gabriel (2005) writes that it is useful to let someone else propose the change and that the principal should not be the only person in the school to offer solutions.

For example, there may be a concept that the principal truly believes in, such as building time into the school day during which every student and teacher is involved in independent reading. However, before the principal brings this proposal to the faculty, he or she should find out if other members of the school staff share this same philosophy. If other staff members share the principal's philosophy, then the issue should be introduced to the staff as a capacity-building activity. In addition to teachers, custodians and other staff members may also agree with the proposal. If this is the case, staff members (other than the principal and teachers) may introduce the initiative to the faculty to begin critical conversations on implementing the instructional practice into the daily school program. Administrators must be cognizant of the fact that true school improvement involves everyone on the school staff, and must therefore incorporate every member of the staff in the decision-making process.

Develop a Leadership Team

An additional component of creating an atmosphere of shared leadership, where teachers work collectively with administrators to implement research-based instructional practices and methodologies, is to create an effective school leadership team. A strong and purposeful leadership team is able to adequately sustain the responsibilities and challenges of becoming an effec-

IN BRIEF

The author argues that principals must take the lead in transforming teachers into leaders and increasing the instructional capacity of schools by building consensus, creating a leadership team, and grooming teacher leaders.

tive school. To create a strong leadership team, the principal must create an atmosphere of shared data collection and analysis, shared decision-making, and shared respect among the team. For example, the principal must create an environment where teachers feel comfortable offering suggestions, asking questions, and providing feedback. In addition, the atmosphere must be conducive to teachers sharing the responsibility of identifying problems, offering viable solutions, and working collaboratively to create a plan to implement agreed upon solutions.

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004) write about the power of collective intelligence, or the practice of professionals working collaboratively to solve problems within an organization, as well as the practice of "harnessing the power of collective intelligence that already resides in the school to solve problems." Similarly, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2004) describe the concept of agreed-upon processes that "enhance communication among community members, provide for efficient reconciliation of disagreements, and keep the members attuned to the current status of the community." This research reflects the well-known fact that successful schools have a culture of collaborative, sound, research-based decision-making practices that focus on the needs of the school. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004) note that "these schools made astonishing progress with existing amounts of time and funding. They did not wait for someone from the outside to give them the magic formula, the perfect program, or more resources." Part of the culture of change and excellence

involves a great deal of teacher collaboration and faculty ownership of the identified issues and possible solutions.

Groom Teacher Leaders

School principals must create a cadre of teacher leaders for each grade level and for each content area. The teacher-leader selection process must be based on a variety of leadership traits and instructional qualities and must be equitable, nonbiased, and honest.

More important, the teacher leaders and the members of the school's leadership teams should have an innate desire to serve, should have a high level of commitment to the total functioning of the school, and should have a spirit of dedicated volunteerism.

The principal should not be the only person choosing the teacher leaders. A principal may choose to have the school staff nominate teacher leaders, or perhaps there may be a teacher-leader nomination committee. Teachers should also have the option to decline the opportunity to become a teacher leader without fear of consequence. Furthermore, the teacher-leader selection process should result in teacher leaders wanting to serve the school by taking part in the school-improvement group. Essentially, this practice gives teachers the opportunity to operate as joint and collaborative leaders.

In order to build capacity for instructional knowledge and delivery, which ultimately will positively affect student achievement, there must be a system in place for ongoing training of effective, standards-based instructional planning, standards-based delivery, and standards-based assessment. In addition, teacher leaders should be trained by a variety of experts, including the principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, district- or state-level content expert, district- or state-level instructional coordinator, and district- or state-level master teacher.

The teacher leaders must also be provided the opportunity to train teachers within the school day. Trainings must be nonthreatening, collaborative, and data-driven. Teachers should also be given opportunities to provide open and honest feedback on trainings. For instance, summative assessments may indicate that teachers need training on differentiated instruction or on delivering best instructional practices to students. The teachers, however, may voice concerns on needing training that focuses on delivering quality, collaborative instruction or on the use of standards-based assessments and standards-based grading practices.

Therefore, in order to build quality consensus, teachers must have a voice in the types of training offered by teacher leaders. Thus, teacher leaders should provide and implement quality training systems that offer a balance for classroom teachers and that answer to the data as well as to the teachers' requests.

Teacher-led leadership includes the process of teachers analyzing, disaggregating, and conversing about students' achievement, attendance, and discipline data. In addition, a part of the data conversation must address cause, or the "why" questions. The "why" questions must be qualitative, substantial, and correlated to the ongoing data-collection process. This is a practice that is also not easy to master and may call for training. For instance, if the school-achievement data indicates high literacy and low math scores, it is not enough for teachers and administrators to know this fact. The team must work together to figure out why this is the case and what plan can be collaboratively created and implemented that speaks to the causes.

For example, a "Needs Improvement" school that may also be involved in restructuring will require the school staff to have a central, daily focus on data collection and data analysis. Due to the status of the school's progress, focusing on student-achievement data is a critical step to increasing student per-

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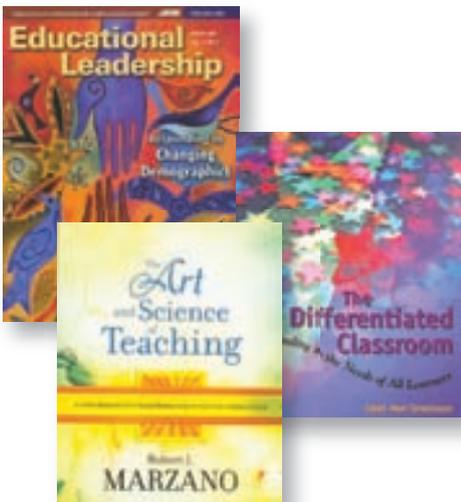
formance. Listed below are examples of some of the "why" questions that the school might use to help guide and inform instruction:

- Why are the male students scoring higher than the female students in science?
- Why are the female students not interested in the science curriculum?
- Why are the female students outperforming the male students in reading?

- Why are the majority of the students at performance level 3 in science male?
- Why are the male students only interested in certain types of writing, such as writing poetry?
- Why are the students that are scoring the lowest on summative and formative assessments also the students who miss the most school days during the course of the school year?
- Why is less than 10 percent of the total school population performing in the highest category of student achievement?
- Why are more of the fiscal resources being used to address the areas of low student performance?

These are examples of the types of questions that must be asked and seriously considered by teachers and administrators to ensure that a school begins to focus and move into a large-scale school-improvement planning and implementation phase.

Teachers and school leaders can achieve amazing feats of school improvement when everyone works together. In some of the most challenging schools in the nation, teachers and students are thriving because teachers feel comfortable identifying problems, conversing together about solutions, and carrying out solutions that speak to those challenges.

Teachers and principals must be creative, systemic thinkers and learners, and collaborative leaders. They must be willing to implement solutions that are nontraditional, speak to the needs and interests of the students, and address the summative and formative data that answer to the state and federal mandates and guidelines that outline the responsibilities of successful schools. Gabriel (2005) writes that teacher leadership "can transform schools from houses of detention to houses of attention—for both student and teacher." To allow this process to fully develop, administrators must maintain an open,

responsive, and receptive attitude to new ideas, realizing that often the most effective strategies and suggestions come from sources within the school building. ▣

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WEB RESOURCES

The Winter 2008 issue of *Research Roundup* features the book *Teacher Leadership that Strengthens Profes-sional Practice* by Charlotte Danielson. **www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=2390**

In its report "Leadership for Student Learning: Redefining the Teacher as Leader," the Institute for Educational Leadership provides a historical perspective on the development of teacher leaders and what needs to be done to better prepare them in the future. **www.iel.org/programs/21st/reports/teachlearn.pdf**

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