Teacher Leadership that Strengthens Professional Practice


The topic of teacher leadership is a thread that appears throughout discussions of professional learning communities (PLCs). Teacher leadership is seen as providing support for the development of a PLC, while a PLC in turn creates opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles and to practice important skills and behaviors. Thus, Danielson’s work on teacher leadership fits well with this issue of Research Roundup’s discussion of PLCs.

Danielson begins by talking about some teacher characteristics that should be taken into account by principals interested in fostering teacher leadership. Teacher leaders are teachers first; most do not desire an administrative job. Instead, they often “emerge” among their teaching colleagues as they see an opportunity for improvement or notice a need. As teachers often have longer tenure at a school than an administrator, the teacher leader plays a vital role in the culture of a school. However, in terms of leadership, such teachers may need to develop certain skills. For example, they need to have the capacity to:

- Recognize an opportunity and take the initiative;
- Mobilize people around a common purpose;
- Marshal resources and then take action;
- Monitor progress and adjust the approach as conditions change;
- Sustain the commitment of others;
- Anticipate and deal with negativity; and
- Use evidence and data in decision-making.

Danielson also talks about the critical role school administrators play in developing teacher leaders and the skills such as those listed above they will need. In her view, administrators need to:

- Embrace a culture of risk-taking;
- Demonstrate democratic norms;
- Treat teachers as professionals;
- Ensure opportunities for teacher involvement in school governance are present;
- Introduce mechanisms for proposing ideas;
- Offer time for teacher collaboration; and
- Present opportunities for skills acquisition.

Much of the book discusses ways in which teacher leadership can be directed toward improving the school. A strength of the book is the time spent on instructionally related issues as areas of possible focus for teacher leaders. Thus, a teacher might take on the responsibility, within his or her own department or team, of pooling information from different classes in an effort to identify “systematic patterns regarding learning.” The teacher might do this through analysis of already available data or by bringing together other teachers for discussion.

A helpful tool is the included survey that is intended to assess teacher perceptions about the school. Danielson stresses the importance of school culture and governance—as positive or negative forces—to the development of teacher leadership. By either asking teachers to complete the instrument or by selecting a few of the statements for discussion, principals might identify areas that need to be strengthened or practices changed.