

# Our Journey to 2030

**Mindful Teacher Leadership in Arizona Schools and Communities**





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## Our Journey to 2030





## Contents

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<b>2</b>	Introduction
<b>4</b>	Our Mission
<b>6</b>	Mindful Teacher Leadership
<b>8</b>	Leadership at Crossroads: Intrusions to Mindful Teacher Leadership
<b>16</b>	Illustrations and Recommendations for Mindful Teacher Leadership
<b>32</b>	Conclusion
<b>33</b>	Special Acknowledgements



Introduction

*As teachers across the state and nation strive to provide the highest-quality support and instruction to their students while simultaneously moving into leadership roles, they may meet stumbling blocks.*

At times, those obstacles can threaten to overwhelm the individual’s efforts and interrupt the profession’s collective momentum. In the face of such challenges, teacher leaders must frequently affirm the *why* of their practice.

This *why*—the central tenets of teaching and leading—may differ slightly from professional to professional, but it is grounded in a moral imperative to:

*Help all students learn, honoring who and where they are and what they need*

*Help all teachers teach, honoring their skills and experiences, and supporting their development in challenging areas*

*Help all stakeholders understand the value of teaching and learning, honoring their best intentions and illuminating for them the best practices for supporting students and their teachers.*

The Arizona K12 Center’s annual Teacher Leadership Institute strives to be a place

where teacher leaders can focus on these imperatives and develop mind-sets, skills and strategies to help them become strong, effective and inspirational leaders. This report synthesizes the experiences of teacher leaders, as shared at the Institute, and provides illustrations of compelling teacher leadership from classrooms, schools and districts across the state. Using the energy and brainpower at the Teacher Leadership Institute and the extraordinary examples set by teachers leaders throughout Arizona, each year’s special report aims to provide thought-provoking, action-inspiring recommendations for teacher leaders to incorporate into their own practices.

Through this year’s special report, *Mindful Teacher Leadership in Arizona Schools and Communities*, educators, administrators, policymakers, members of school communities, parents, and other advocates for education can gain insight into the precise struggles Arizona teachers face. They can see the challenges we faced through the eyes of Arizona’s teacher leaders. They can hear these teacher leaders’ frustrations, but more importantly, they can hear about the myriad ways Arizona’s educators work through their frustrations, turn them into opportunities, and improve their practice and their students’ learning experiences. This report offers a practical tool kit, and it celebrates the many

successes and many more opportunities that Arizona’s teacher leaders enjoy. While its recommendations are by no means exhaustive, the aim is to provide a jumping-off point for truly transformative discussions and actions in Arizona’s schools.





Our Mission

*The Arizona K12 Center’s annual Teacher Leadership Institute Special Report serves as one outlet for the united voice of the state’s teacher leaders.*

The thoughts expressed in this report, the challenges noted, and the triumphs celebrated, are those of real teacher leaders. They represent the authentic experiences of some of our state’s excellent educators. We have strived to present a document that takes into account the diversity of the state’s teachers and students. The voices of rural and urban

teacher leaders, those in large and small, public and private, affluent and impoverished schools have been represented here.

Because this document aims to be fair and representative of Arizona teacher leaders’ viewpoints, we have deliberately steered clear of politics. Our state is diverse and,

often, divided. Our teachers do not represent a single political viewpoint; their views are nuanced and varied. More importantly, teacher leaders are determined not to let the divisive nature of state or local politics get in the way of their vital work. Teacher leaders are concerned with policy, and how policy gains can be achieved without politicking. Moreover, teacher leaders are committed to understanding the goals and perspectives of, and to working with, all state leaders, regardless of their political alignment. For these reasons, this special report will not attempt to address the strictly political aspects of Arizona’s education system.

It is our intent to share this report with all those who care about the quality of education in our country. If you are a policymaker, this report is for you. If you are a school administrator, district employee, superintendent, or school board member, this report is for you. If you are a parent or guardian, this report is for you. If you are a local business owner, this report is for you. If you live in a community where children attend school, this report is for you. And most importantly, if you are a teacher, whether you’ve taken on the mantle of teacher leadership or not, this report is for you.

We hope to share the experiences of teacher leaders in Arizona far and wide, and to help all members of our communities understand who teachers are, what they believe in, why they do the work they do, and

what they need to do it better. We hope to help every teacher in the state understand that he or she is not alone, that he or she is heard and understood—and is deeply valued. We hope to explore real experiences and offer real beginnings of solutions. We hope to share what Arizona’s teacher leaders are ready and willing to commit to doing to strengthen a profession they hold dear. We hope to bring together the voices of many of Arizona’s teacher leaders in a chorus of commitment, hope, and transformation.



## Mindful Teacher Leadership

*The concept of mindfulness has infiltrated virtually every corner of American life recently.*

From business leaders employing mindfulness strategies to improve creativity and productivity, to individuals turning to meditation to combat the stresses of modern, hyper-connected life, the mindful movement is everywhere. Well before the term became ubiquitous, however, Elizabeth MacDonald and Dennis Shirley, a Boston Public Schools teacher leader and a professor of education, respectively, began to investigate how mindfulness might improve teaching.

As Shirley and MacDonald define it, mindful teaching is “*a form of teaching that is informed by contemplative practices and teacher inquiry that enables teachers to...come to themselves through participation in a collegial community of inquiry and practice*” (MacDonald and Shirley, 2009, p. 4) Before cowriting the book *The Mindful Teacher* in 2009, the two led Mindful Teacher seminars with cohorts of teachers. There, “the goal [was] to establish maximum openness for teachers to identify and to explore collaboratively what they experience as core dilemmas and problems in their practice” (MacDonald and Shirley, 2009, p. 4).

In these seminars, the authors noticed a pervasive condition they came to call “alienated teaching.” Practitioners engaged in alienated teaching were essentially experiencing cognitive dissonance between what they felt was best in their own classrooms and the many mandates coming to them from outside forces, almost always perceived to be beyond their control. These teachers, many of them

veteran and highly accomplished, would find themselves teaching in ways they did not truly believe in, in order to align themselves with the mandate du jour. In their research, they came to juxtapose alienated teaching with mindful teaching, which entails *paying attention and care to teaching decisions, reflection, curiosity, connectedness, and commitment to the teaching practice*.

This theory of mindful teaching and, by extension, mindful teacher leadership, positions teaching as an act requiring principles, ethical rigor, open-mindedness, and acceptance of others’ diverse ideas and experiences. It emphasizes professional expertise and teachers’ prerogative to examine and judiciously implement prescribed programs and standards and allows them to be creative and to exercise their professional judgment. And it offers a myriad of ways to move forward for teacher leaders looking to approach their practice with a more open heart, with stronger connections, and with more contemplation and discernment. There are as many applications for a mindful approach to teaching and teacher leadership as there are professionals eager to practice them.

### Mindful Teacher Leadership in Practice

Much of *The Mindful Teacher* focuses on the everyday work of classroom teachers with their own students, which is, of course, the crux of the profession. However, teacher leadership is of rapidly increasing relevance in the lives of most teachers. Teacher leadership

encompasses all the roles teachers take on to create change within their own profession, working with other adult stakeholders to ensure that students learn and grow, and that teachers work in an environment that supports and respects them.

MacDonald and Shirley note that, at what they call the ‘microlevel’—that is, in interactions with individual students, in classrooms, and in schools—teacher leadership and mindful teaching are virtually interchangeable. Making adjustments to one’s teaching to meet needs one has identified through contemplation and reflection is being a mindful teacher leader in that micro-context (MacDonald and Shirley, 2009, p. 74). The authors also identify ‘mesolevel’ and ‘macrolevel’ actions that fall into the purview of mindful teacher leadership—ideas and practices that, having emerged from a mindful approach to teaching, can be shared broadly to help shape educational policy at the district, state, or even national level.

First, this report will lay out some challenges and intrusions to mindfulness that Arizona’s educators face today. Later sections of this report will highlight these challenges in the contexts of real Arizona teachers, and offer practical recommendations for all three levels of mindful teacher leadership. Use the Mindful Space in the margins of this report to reflect on your own pursuit of mindful teaching and leading in your contexts and communities.



Leadership at Crossroads:  
Intrusions to Mindful Teacher Leadership

*In mindfulness practices, challenges or blockages are often referred to as ‘intrusions.’ These intrusions may be internal—the surfacing of self-defeating thoughts and feelings—or external.*

External intrusions, depending on the context, may be anything from a jarring interruption in a moment of quiet and contemplation, to the large-scale challenges facing a professional as he or she attempts to teach and lead mindfully. Conceptualizing challenges as ‘intrusions’ can help teachers acknowledge that difficulties are simply events that get in the way. They are not insurmountable and, more importantly,

they are not indictments of teacher leaders’ intentions or efforts. Teacher leaders, when examining the intrusions in their lives, can practice recognizing barriers and confronting them with the mantra, “I want to do this work.” The simple reminder that intrusions are merely interruptions to progress in beloved work could be an excellent way for frustrated educators to reframe their challenges as growth opportunities.



Teacher leaders are passionate professionals who go above and beyond their everyday responsibilities, who create new opportunities for themselves and their colleagues to learn and grow, and who champion students with their every action. These worthy pursuits make teacher leadership a gift for many who choose this path. It is challenging, but rewarding, to lead. Viewing teacher leadership as a blessing helps many professionals face the difficulties of their careers. However, teacher leadership comes with unique intrusions, which are sometimes heightened in the teacher leaders’ minds because of their increased sense of responsibility for their profession. It is important for teacher leaders to practice gratitude for the parts of the jobs that are joyful. It is also necessary to allow for the additional challenges that come with leadership, and to allow for personal time and private, reflective, and self-caring approaches to these challenges.

Arizona’s teachers work today in an educational environment rife with intrusions, many of them thorny and multifaceted. Mindful teacher leaders spend focused time contemplating intrusions and categorizing them, trying to understand exactly what the problem is, rather than chalking all intrusions up to the same bogeymen that are easily (if often rightly) blamed for teachers’ challenges. In other words, an important skill set of mindful teaching is not just to acknowledge that there are issues, but to approach those issues with openness, attentiveness, skillfulness, and authenticity, which can allow the teacher to more wholly understand and address what is really going on, and what might really work as a solution.

So, *what is really going on?* During last year’s Ninth Annual Teacher Leadership Institute, teacher leaders from across Arizona shared many



of the individual frustrations and difficulties they were facing. While each context is different, themes emerged within these challenges.

The difficulties teacher leaders identified can be divided into the categories of *internal* and *external* intrusions. Many issues are foisted upon teacher leaders, but some come from within, such as challenges with outlook, self-trust, motivation, and relationship-building. It is valuable to identify both internal and external intrusions. Mindful teacher leaders benefit from examining which issues require decisive, outward-facing action, and which ones might be best addressed first through personal reflection and self-healing.

### External Intrusions to Mindful Teacher Leadership

#### Unreasonable Expectations and Misaligned Mandates:

A virtually universal struggle teachers face is the plethora of mandates from administrators, district leaders, and governmental policymakers, coupled with the high and complex expectations teachers face to carry out those mandates while preparing students for a battery of standardized tests, and creating an environment where students feel safe and welcome. Many teacher leaders who attended the Ninth Annual Teacher Leadership Institute made the frank statement that it felt almost impossible to do everything they were expected to do. As MacDonald and Shirley found in their examination of alienated teaching, shifting, top-down mandates, in addition to being difficult to implement, are often not aligned with teachers' personal knowledge of their students' needs. In these cases, teachers feel that they cannot simultaneously implement the mandates and do their best, most authentic teaching.

At the same time, educators must contend with a vast array of student needs. Differentiation is a vital part of teaching, and teacher leaders create classrooms in

which students have choices in their learning. Strong teachers offer the scaffolding necessary to meet diverse learning needs, as well as continually refine their classroom-management practices to address non-academic challenges. They also often provide for needs that seem to fall far outside the purview of teaching, such as healthy breakfast options and spare clothing. In short, the daily needs of students are growing, and teachers must expend a great deal of energy in addressing them all. Often, these challenges mount without the attendant resources. Support services are declining across most schools and districts. Addressing the needs of the whole child without the staff, resources, or time necessary is extremely challenging. Not only does this sometimes put teachers at odds with administrators and even outside stakeholders such as parents; it is also dispiriting to feel that one lacks the tools to meet the needs of one's students. Teachers choose their profession because they want to help children, and lacking the resources

to do this well is professionally frustrating and personally damaging.

Finally, teachers struggle with the fact that many of the activities they take on beyond classroom teaching, whether teacher-leadership roles, student-club advising, or creating additional materials for their classes' use, go unpaid. Not only is this a financial challenge, it undermines teachers' professionalism. Educators feel that their time is not valued and that their work is not viewed as professional because it is unpaid. While teachers are glad to seize additional opportunities, and happy to do extra work for the sake of their students, many feel this work is misunderstood or altogether dismissed, in large part because it frequently goes uncompensated. Many Teacher Leadership Institute participants noted that even small stipends for additional responsibilities or professional activities could go a long way toward affirming for teachers that their time and expertise is meaningful.



Mindful Space  
FOR NOTES, THOUGHTS, AND DOODLES





### **Disconnect with Communities and Policymakers:**

One of the great joys of teaching can be to forge mutually beneficial links between families, schools, and their communities. But in today's world of high-stakes testing, coupled with shrinking resources, many Arizona teachers find that parents are concerned about their children's school experiences. This concern can stem from misrepresentations of and misinformation about teachers and schools in popular media and in broader cultural conversations. It can also occur because parents and guardians are confused about the constant changes in their students' curricula and testing. Parents don't always know about new standards or mandates, and can become understandably angry when the expectations of their children shift year after year.

Additionally, in some areas, especially poorer communities, parents and other guardians may work several jobs, care for many children and/or elderly family members, or experience other drains on their time. Some students may live with guardians who are not their parents and who are either not committed to or not able to take a great interest in the children's schooling. These guardians may not attend regular conferences with teachers. They also

may find it difficult to spend enough time with the children to get a meaningful sense of their school experiences, let alone to participate in home-based enrichment activities.

At the same time, many Arizona teachers sense a dearth of support and understanding of their professional challenges from either policymakers or researchers at the university level. As one Teacher Leadership Institute participant described, "Policymakers are not getting their information from those closest to the classroom." Because teachers feel cut off from both the communities they serve and the decision-makers who craft so many of their day-to-day responsibilities, a feeling of mounting disconnect is a major problem for many teachers.

**Leaving in Order to Lead:** In the context of formal teacher leadership, many teachers are reluctant to take on leadership roles. This is especially the case for those for whom leadership is a calling but classroom teaching is equally compelling. "Teachers with accolades are almost immediately pulled out of the classroom," one participant noted. "There is so much less emphasis on the power of those inside the classroom." Many teachers see the leadership opportunities in their

contexts, as at best, double-edged swords; while they may have the chance to play a larger decision-making role, they must also leave their classrooms.

Teachers who lead from within their classrooms feel they receive less support and emphasis in the conversation around teacher leadership. Despite their leadership activities, they remain 'lower on the pyramid,' as one participant put it, unable to access the additional resources sometimes offered to those who take on formal, outside-the-classroom roles. Those who lead from within also often take on the challenge of creating their own leadership positions. Ready-made roles, such as instructional coaching or new-teacher mentoring, sometimes come at the cost of one's own classroom. And while these roles may be perfectly suited to some teacher leaders, those who would rather stay in their classrooms often feel left out and unheard.

### **Internal Intrusions to Mindful Teacher Leadership**

**Isolation from Fellow Practitioners:** Teaching can be a deeply isolating profession. Few workplaces suffer from such a dearth of opportunities for colleagues to spend time with one another. Compounding the natural isolating factor—spending most teaching time without another adult in the room—many of Arizona's teachers feel additional pressure to avoid meaningful communication with coworkers. Several Teacher Leadership Institute participants noted that Arizona's educational landscape, especially in public schools, is hostile toward collaboration because resources are spread thin and colleagues quickly become competitors. Several posed questions about how to develop collegiality in professional settings where teachers feel pitted against one another by administrators. Teachers may also fear sharing their true needs and issues with colleagues. "It's so hard to be vulnerable and not be exploited," one participant said. As a result, many teachers isolate themselves further, thereby robbing themselves of the many gifts that come from collaboration and from simple human interaction.

Isolation may even extend outside schools and affect entire districts. Arizona is home to many rural communities where geographic separation

*Mindful Space*  
FOR NOTES, THOUGHTS, AND DOODLES



can mean a lack of access to the resources and professional communities of urban centers. Professional-development offerings, conferences, and advocacy efforts are often inaccessible for teachers in sparsely populated rural districts. In these areas, even schools within the same district can be many miles apart, making regular collaboration difficult. Teachers may not have suitable living options near school, so it can be difficult to commit to activities outside school hours that would require extensive travel time. This can leave some rural teacher leaders with a sense of disconnect from their schools and from fellow professionals who might otherwise offer support.

#### Interpersonal Issues Derail Scant

**Collaboration Time:** Even in context with a strong culture of collaboration, the time set aside for professionals to work together can

often devolve, providing disincentives for teachers to participate fully and honestly. Many Teacher Leadership Institute attendees spoke of interpersonal conflict derailing what little time educators have to work together. Professional Learning Communities, which can—at their best—provide a space of honesty, sharing, and growth, often fail in that mission in practice. Teacher leaders shared many reasons for this. In some districts, PLC time is so regimented and data-obsessed that educators don't feel they have room to discuss their concerns or needs. Most Teacher Leadership Institute participants noted that more free-form conversations in PLCs face the pitfall of becoming griping sessions for professionals who have too much on their plate and difficulty coming into group conversations with a positive attitude. Interpersonal disagreements can become hugely problematic when those in conflict have so little time to

work out their differences, and so many other stressors and exacerbating circumstances exist. Moreover, strained relationships with administrators can mean teachers do not have safe, confidential sources of mediation.

All these difficulties mean that, for many teacher leaders, even the few opportunities provided for collaborative work become unpleasant and unproductive. Teachers may have a hard time coming into these spaces with the outlook necessary to examine issues deeply and develop meaningful solutions.

#### Challenges to Professional Beliefs in the Face of Change:

At the crux of the crisis of alienated teaching, as described in *The Mindful Teacher*, is the difficulty of maintaining one's professional integrity when changes come so quickly. How can a person keep his or her central sense of professional motivation and core dispositions intact while working with a new trend every year or so—a trend that, often, stands in direct opposition to whatever came before it? Veteran teacher leaders may have trouble holding consistently to their principles and strengths when everything they have to work with flips over with changes in state or federal governance or local administration. Newer teachers or those just entering teacher-leadership realms may have trouble defining and developing their critical dispositions. They may take longer to find their footing and cultivate successful practices.

Not only does so much arbitrary change rob both new and experienced teacher leaders of their agency and control; its most dire effect, as Dennis Shirley noted at the Teacher Leadership Institute, is robbing teacher leaders of joy. Taking pride and delight in one's profession is of paramount importance. When outside forces erode that pride and delight, even the most dedicated teacher leaders must sometimes conquer a feeling of burnout. Such a feeling would affect every single student in a teacher's class, and every single colleague looking to that teacher leader for guidance and support.

## Mindful Space

FOR NOTES, THOUGHTS, AND DOODLES





## Illustrations and Recommendations for Mindful Teacher Leadership

*Teacher leaders' hearts are with students, but they also know that often, important work for students is done outside classrooms.*

Mindful teacher leadership starts at the core of teaching: One individual, whether in individual practice or in a small, supportive group, commits to examining his or her teaching and applying to it the principles and energies of mindfulness. That individual can take what he or she discovers in contemplative silence or tight-knit collegiality to his or her students.

Beyond the microlevel of individual work, small-group sharing, and classroom application, mindful teacher leadership can take on many guises at the mesolevel and the macrolevel. This report lays out recommendations for all three levels, offering possibilities that can be interpreted

broadly and modified infinitely for different contexts. The accompanying stories serve to illustrate Arizona teachers' inspiring undertakings and to demonstrate elements of these recommendations.

While not every recommendation offered here will apply to or work in every teacher leader's environment, the Arizona K12 Center's hope is that teacher leaders will muster their full and potent creativity and openness in evaluating these recommendations. "This won't work" is an *internal intrusion*. It is a negative and defeatist thought that cannot be confirmed unless the recommendation, with any necessary modifications, is attempted.

"This didn't work" is not a conclusion to be reached easily, because as teachers share with their students every day, a first try should almost never be a last try.

These stories and recommendations are offered as a starting point for generation and iteration. Teacher leaders know their own sites and their own situations. Schools and districts should trust and try these leaders' ideas, understanding that they come from both a practical grounding and an expansive vision. This is not a road map, but a series of points from which to start a journey.

As you read through the stories and recommendations outlined at all three leadership levels, take time to respond to the reflective questions in the Mindful Space provided.

Mindful Space  
FOR NOTES, THOUGHTS, AND DOODLES





### Microlevel Recommendations

Teacher leaders working toward broad change must prepare internally for the struggles such change entails. Whatever personal roadblocks, crises of faith, or self-defeating attitudes teacher leaders are dealing with, *internal intrusions must be met with introspection and a desire to first transform the self*. It is nearly impossible to embrace mindful teacher leadership when saddled with corrosive doubt, distrust or cynicism.

#### Mindful Reflection:

- What strategies have I found useful when addressing internal challenges in my personal and professional life?
- What daily practice might I develop to hone my coping skills and remind myself of my personal and professional principles and goals?

#### Anchoring Illustration: Jessie Jaeger



Jessie Jaeger moved to Arizona from Wisconsin in 2010. She had just completed her master's degree and had been teaching fifth grade for nine years. During her first year as an Arizona teacher, Jessie felt restless

and uncertain of her next step. She felt she needed to either radically rejuvenate her teaching career or leave it. While she loved teaching, her experiences in Arizona were radically different from what she had known in Wisconsin, and they rattled her confidence.

She wondered whether she could continue to be a good teacher in this new environment.

Jessie heard about National Board Certification from her new principal, who encouraged her to pursue it. The more she learned about the process, the more it seemed like the best way to recommit to teaching. She jumped into the application process, finding it intense but motivating and invigorating. She regained her confidence and valued the opportunity to reflect on her practice and remember why she loved to teach.

Jessie achieved National Board Certification in November 2014, and remains a classroom teacher in Tucson.

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*"I wanted to know I was doing something to make my teaching better. National Board Certification helped me gain my confidence back and helped me defend my decisions."*

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While teachers develop sound strategies for internal intrusions, they must also *seek out and celebrate the aspects of their profession that give them confidence and pride*. More and more research focuses on the importance of *grit and determination for student success*. Teachers, too, must discover sources of grit. Whatever makes an individual teacher leader feel like a strong educator or an impactful advocate for students, he or she should seek out ways to deepen that aspect of his or her practice. Professional expertise and a loud, clear message come not just from knowledge,

but also from a self-assured disposition and a sense of professional worth.

#### Mindful Reflection:

- What animates me as a teacher leader?
- At what point during each day do I feel most empowered?
- What actions have I taken that I am most proud to share?
- What inner reserves get me through difficult days?
- Who am I at my best?
- What steps can I take to feel like my best self more often?

#### Anchoring Illustration: Deborah Kohls



Early in Deb Kohls' teaching career, a student entered her classroom mid-year. It was immediately evident that the young man was struggling, both with academics and with serious problems at home. Deb worked with him for the rest of the year, becoming his fierce advocate and trying to make him feel safe and supported in her classroom. At the end of that year, the boy's mother told Deb it was the first time her son had ever liked school. "My teacher helps me," he'd told her.

Mindful Space  
FOR NOTES, THOUGHTS, AND DOODLES



Deb kept checking in on the boy after he left her class, but, as a new teacher, didn't feel confident enough to share what she knew about his needs with his new teachers. She saw that sometimes he wasn't getting the personal connection he needed, and was acting out as a result.

Deb switched schools, and much to her surprise, found the boy in her new school the next year. He came into her room for in-school suspension, which she happened to be supervising. By that time, Deb had grown as a teacher leader and felt ready to contact the boy's classroom teacher and share his special needs with her. Whenever he had problems, he came to her. When he moved on to middle school, Deb contacted the teaching team there and told them he needed special attention and personal contact in order to succeed.

She continues to track his progress. When he came into her classroom for in-school suspension, she told him, "I will still be there for you." And she has kept that promise.

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*"Once kids step into my classroom, they are my students. They are my students forever."*

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Teacher leaders must, at the classroom and school level, *embrace trial and error and collaborative refinement*. Mindful teacher leadership involves circling back over and over again, returning to the same problem with a fresh and open mind as many times as it takes to find a solution that sticks.

#### **Mindful Reflection:**

- Who among my colleagues has helped shape my approach to problem solving?

- How might I involve that person or group in addressing future challenges?
- What skills will I utilize when I encounter frustration at setbacks?

#### **Anchoring Illustration: Whitni McCoy**



Whitni McCoy is a new Arizona teacher. She teaches sixth grade in Lake Havasu City, where she receives a great deal of support from her colleagues. She is part of a new-teacher mentoring program, meaning she works regularly with an Arizona Master Teacher who observes her classroom practice, provides meaningful, nonjudgmental feedback, and models lessons and techniques for her. She also works with an academic coach.

Additionally, Whitney participates in her school's Critical Friends Group, a small group of teacher leaders who improve their teaching practice through collaborative learning and structured professional interaction. This group allows her to connect with and learn from peers she wouldn't otherwise have a reason to spend time with. The group even participates in instructional rounds in each other's classrooms,

centering each week on a new set of focus questions the group creates.

As a first-year teacher, Whitney has a great many new skills and practices to juggle. She says often, building relationships with students and managing her classroom effectively make it difficult to spend time making her lessons as rigorous and meaningful as she wants them to be. The coaching and mentoring she receives helps her improve her classroom management *and* learn about building lessons. Her school's culture of collaboration, in addition to her generally outgoing spirit and humble approach to learning her craft, mean Whitney has ample resources to become a great teacher.

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*"I know that reaching out for support means things run more smoothly in my classroom the next day. I know that reaching out can help."*

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Openness is a central tenet of mindful teacher leadership. As such, those who hope to spread the benefits of these strategies must *share mindfulness practices with others who would benefit from them*. Reaching out to colleagues who seem to be struggling can be difficult, especially in some of the high-stakes environments described earlier. However, mindful teacher and mindful leadership work best when practices and strategies are shared.

#### **Mindful Reflection:**

- With whom would I like to share my approach to mindful teaching?
- How can I help this person or group find balance and solace in the practices that I have found helpful?
- How can I help engender a sense of peace and kindness in my professional context?

*Mindful Space*  
FOR NOTES, THOUGHTS, AND DOODLES



Mindful teacher leaders also have the responsibility to *address issues between colleagues honestly*. When teachers are coping not just with top-down frustrations, but also with interpersonal disputes, their ability to seek help is bound to be compromised. Mindfulness can be a powerful approach to disagreements, and teacher leaders who have themselves set out on a path of mindfulness should use the skills they possess to help their colleagues work better together, if possible.

#### Mindful Reflection:

- How can I offer my experiences to those facing interpersonal difficulties without offending, embarrassing, or alienating valued colleagues?
- How can I feel confident sharing my concerns and ideas with teachers who have more experience than I do?
- What mechanisms can I design to improve conflict-management strategies on my campus?
- With whom do I have personal conflicts that need resolving?

#### Anchoring Illustration: Sandy Merz



Sandy Merz, a veteran eighth-grade STEM teacher in Tucson, excels at working with many different stakeholders and has taken on an impressive number of teacher-leadership roles. However, a teacher at his school once challenged his ability to collaborate effectively. The two did not see eye to eye and did not communicate well, and for the first time in Sandy's teaching career, he felt he had met a colleague he just couldn't work with. Their personal difficulties felt unsustainable, so Sandy decided to talk to his colleague and attempt to work out a solution.

He told the teacher he understood that they disagreed about a lot of things. But he also said his adversary's point of view was meaningful to him—that, in fact, the person was mediating his thinking on a regular basis and that he was “hearing the colleague in his head and considering new approaches.” The two agreed not to assume the other was wrong, but to be open to each other's point of view and use it to inform decisions, even though it was new and uncomfortable.

Today, Sandy calls himself and this colleague “a formidable duo.” Because they came together from an adversarial starting point, their collaboration and growing respect is even more meaningful. Being mindful of his language when initially approaching his colleague helped Sandy express himself honestly, and assertively, and allowed for openness between people who did not get along.

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*“You don't need an official protocol to have a professional and honest conversation. You just need to take make that brave first move of reaching out.”*

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#### Mesolevel Recommendations

One of the largest factors in alienated teaching is teachers' inability to respond when they feel mandates are inappropriate or counterproductive. As difficult as it may be, mindful teacher leadership must involve *honesty with administrators and other superiors about the impact of their mandates*. Approaching school leaders with concerns can be scary and risky. Mindful teacher leaders can work with their colleagues to develop communication strategies that address concerns, share experiences, and offer suggestions without alienating or demonizing administrators or district personnel.

#### Mindful Reflection:

- How can I foster more trusting relationships with my administrators?
- How can I express my needs to administrators without accusations?
- Who among my colleagues has strong relationships with the stakeholders I need to address, and how can I leverage those relationships for the common good?
- How can I help my fellow teachers craft approaches to encounters with administrators that will be fair, civil, and mutually beneficial?

Mindful teacher leaders should *remain informed and inform others about how decisions are made, and who makes them*. One of the reasons teachers feel alienated from mandates is that decision-making processes in their schools and districts are opaque. This can often stem from miscommunication. While teacher leaders often find it frustrating to have to “ask for a seat at the table,” it is sometimes necessary to do so in order to understand decision-making strategies and, more importantly, to insert teacher input into these decisions.

#### Mindful Reflection:

- What specific decisions are affecting my students and colleagues the most?
- What do I understand about these decisions, and what is unclear to me?



- What events can I attend, groups or committees can I join, and stakeholders can I cultivate relationships with so that I am better informed, more involved, and able to amplify my colleagues' voices in new arenas?

### Anchoring Illustration: Treva Jenkins



In 2011, Treva Jenkins' district, Maricopa Unified, received a grant that included copies of the book *Helping Kids Succeed—Arizona Style*. Compiled by Arizona parents, community members, local leaders and experts, the book aimed to help teachers and other stakeholders better understand Arizona's young people. The Maricopa teachers set out to use the book to empower their students and to better serve them. The book provided techniques and suggestions for offering support to struggling students, reaching out to families, and creating safe and inclusive classrooms.

Treva was especially passionate about the program. But with superintendent turnover in her district, priorities changed and support for *Helping Kids Succeed* disappeared.

Undaunted, Treva, her principal, and several other teachers at her middle school decided to tailor a program to their campus. Treva began spending Friday afternoons encouraging her students to either speak or journal about whatever they were experiencing, whether academic struggles, self-esteem issues, or problems at home. She saw students opening up as they never had before, and knew this openness in her classroom contributed to academic gains, as well. Students focused better in class when they had outlets during the week to discuss other issues.

Treva and her principal hope to create a microcosm on their campus that shows just how effective *Helping Kids Succeed* can be. Rather than be discouraged when the district-wide initiative ended, they worked even harder to prove its efficacy with students. While parts of the process have been disappointing, Treva and her school community are steadfast in their belief that these ideas can help kids, and intend to make the entire district see that.

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*“With everything else teachers have going on, and also trying to make this program work, it takes a principal making it a priority. And mine has. The district is not doing this right now, so we want to bring this to the district as a model.”*

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Mindful teacher leaders may be uniquely positioned to *reach out to parents and community members*. Often, in addressing microlevel concerns, these leaders have already learned about their students' home lives and community contexts. This knowledge should be shared with colleagues and administrators and used to develop outreach initiatives.

### Mindful Reflection:

- What is unique about my school's community?
- What are its outstanding attributes, and what are its largest challenges?
- What relationships can I deepen within the community?
- What stakeholders haven't I sufficiently reached out to, and what ideas can I present to these stakeholders to launch a practical, symbiotic relationship?

Teacher leaders can also tap into an often-overlooked resource for helping the public understand what teachers contribute to students' lives. Mindful teacher leaders can *find innovative ways to connect with former students*. After all, just about everyone is a former student, and most people can name a handful of teachers who changed their lives. Teachers often stay connected with former students on an individual basis, especially with innovations in social media. Teacher leaders can leverage these connections in broader contexts. They might set up alumni portals on their web sites, found Facebook groups for each graduation year, or help develop regular digital communication and outreach methods targeting former students. Students grow up to be community members, and can play a vital role in keeping schools and their communities connected.

### Mindful Reflection:

- How often do I reach out to former students?
- What do I gain personally from these relationships?
- What do my former students likely share with friends and family about their school experiences? z
- How can I strengthen relationships with former students?
- What are appropriate channels for reaching out?

Mindful Space  
FOR NOTES, THOUGHTS, AND DOODLES



Teacher leaders are likely to pursue activities outside their schools, including higher education, committee membership, and activism/advocacy. Mindful teacher leaders participating in these activities should use that opportunity to *connect stakeholders with classroom teachers*. People like researchers, legislators, and philanthropists may not be informed about the realities of teachers' experiences. They may not have a sense of what programs need to be undertaken, what questions should be asked, or what laws should be made or eliminated in order to improve teaching practice. Teacher leaders can bridge the gap between policy and practice that is such a major challenge for all educators.

#### Mindful Reflection:

- What activities or associations offer me unique opportunities to advocate for my profession?
- In these situations, what is my message?
- What would my colleagues ask me to share with these stakeholders?
- How can I forge further connections between fellow teachers and others in my sphere of influence?

#### Anchoring Illustrations: Tara Dale



Tara Dale, a science teacher at Akimel A-al Middle School, was part of a group of teacher leaders who, together with the Arizona K12 Center, the Arizona Educational Foundation, and the Arizona Education Association, piloted a program called Take Your Legislator to School (TYLTS). Tara helped create training for participating teachers. The training included a basic brushup on governmental structures and how policy is made, as well as guidance on how to make visiting legislators feel comfortable, how to structure their time in the classroom, and how to follow up with lawmakers to continue to foster a relationship.

Tara, along with the other teacher leaders who helped pilot the TYLTS initiative, focused on helping teachers turn site visits into long-standing partnerships. While not all teachers have remained in close contact with legislators, many participants feel empowered to reach out to policymakers and have deepened their awareness of how lawmaking affects their day-to-day lives.

Tara herself hosted a legislator in her classroom, and was impressed with his interest in her class and his rapport with her students. She hopes to continue to connect with the legislator on matters of policy, and simply to share her experiences and expertise as a teacher leader.

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*“I have two hopes. One is that more legislators go to classrooms, and that this becomes the ‘cool thing’ to do as a legislator. The other hope is to take it to the next level, where a bill comes up and, before they make a decision, they call and ask teachers what we think.”*

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#### Macrolevel Recommendations

Teacher leaders must be at the forefront of *designing roles for themselves and others who wish to lead*. The concept of ‘leading without leaving’ is growing in popularity within teacher leadership, but still, positions that support classroom teaching and outside leadership simultaneously are few and far between. Mindful teacher leadership can help individuals reach out to organizations, whether private foundations or government agencies, to suggest and help design appointments for teacher leaders that allow them to stay in their classrooms, at least part time.

#### Mindful Reflection:

- What is my ideal role as a teacher leader?
- How is my time best spent?
- What organizations could help me achieve my teacher-leadership dream?
- How can I present my ideas to these groups so they see benefits to their own interests, as well as the interests of teacher leaders like myself?

Mindful Space  
FOR NOTES, THOUGHTS, AND DOODLES



## Anchoring Illustration: Melanie Volz



Melanie Volz and the rest of the teachers at Playa del Rey Elementary School, in Gilbert, are taking on an exciting and groundbreaking new project: They are forming a teacher-led school. After seven teachers and the school's principal attended a *Teach to Lead* event, nationally sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the staff decided it was time to take this step.

Playa del Rey was already a place where teachers had a voice and made decisions. The school's principal has long entrusted teachers with important leadership tasks. Now the school is ready to create structures to formalize teachers' roles in leading the school.

The teachers are in the early stages of working out the perfect structure for their teacher-led school, but according to Melanie, it will involve a round table approach to decision-making, instead of a sense that an administrator has the final say. The school will develop different leadership areas, such as technology, extracurricular activities, grade levels, and school improvement. When a consensus is

reached about what areas require formal leadership teams, teachers will choose the team where their skills and interests best fit.

Already, the teacher-led school initiative has been met with excitement and enthusiasm from Playa del Rey's staff. The teachers are excited to have a voice that must be recognized in important decisions, and to have roles that allow them to lead alongside their peers.

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*"I love teaching kids,  
and that's what I want to do.  
But I have also found that  
I love leading other teachers.  
A teacher-led school is a great  
in-between. Teachers can  
find a leadership niche,  
but still stay in the classroom."*

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Teacher leaders who are interested in or have benefited from mindfulness practices should *help create structures that support these practices broadly*. This could entail founding informal circles of professionals who practice together and discuss the role of mindfulness in their work, or reaching out to leaders in the field of mindfulness research to develop curricula specifically for classroom teachers.

### Mindful Reflection:

- How has mindfulness changed my teaching?
- How can I share this experience with others?
- In what environment would my ideal mindfulness practice take place?
- What infrastructure already exists to support this ideal practice environment?
- What are the best ways to share my experiences with others so they see the

possibilities of mindful teacher leadership and want to learn more?

## Anchoring Illustration: Pam Clark



In much of rural Arizona, teachers have trouble accessing professional development opportunities and transformative endeavors like National Board Certification. Pam Clark, an instructional coach in Humboldt, wants to change that in her area. She and a colleague were the first two teachers in their district to achieve National Board Certification. Pam found it to be a powerful process, and wanted other rural northern Arizona teachers to have access to it.

Working with staff members at the Arizona K12 Center, Pam became an ambassador in her region for National Board Certification. Wherever and whenever she can, she spreads the word. She has shared at the elementary schools in her district, at staff meetings, and at instructional specialist meetings. She has also provided support for other teachers throughout the state pursuing National Board Certification which strengthened her resolve to get more Humboldt teachers involved.

*Mindful Space*  
FOR NOTES, THOUGHTS, AND DOODLES



Pam knows that there are barriers unique to her context, especially geographic isolation. She hopes that as the numbers of National Board candidates and National Board Certified Teachers grow in and around Humboldt, the region will be able to attract more location-based resources and professional-development events. She would even go through the necessary training herself in order to run National Board pre-candidacy classes in Humboldt. Her progress has hit some roadblocks, but Pam believes in National Board Certification as a gateway to better teaching and learning, and remains committed to bringing opportunities to her community.

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*“There is a lot of community pride in these small towns. So the more we work together, even as a county, the more beneficial it will be for all of us.”*

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Similarly, teacher leaders must *share their experiences as broadly as possible*, outside the teaching profession. Openness is central not just to mindful teaching, but to changing the way education stakeholders and the general public view teaching. One of the great challenges for teacher leaders in talking about teaching is providing what might be a searing and even brutal picture of what it’s like to teach some days, while also approaching such communication opportunities from a place of understanding and with the assumption that others, even those who feel like adversaries, want to help.

#### **Mindful Reflection:**

- What one thing do I wish everyone knew about my profession?
- What positive and inspirational aspects of teaching can I share?

- What challenges would I like others to understand?
- What outlets am I aware of for sharing teacher leaders’ experience and expertise?
- What outlets do I wish existed?
- How might I play a role in creating new outlets for our voices?

#### **Anchoring Illustration: Jess Ledbetter**



As many of the Arizona K12 Center’s *Stories from School* bloggers can attest, blogging offers teacher leaders the opportunity to share their experiences, reach an audience, and create communities where teachers’ voices are amplified. Jess Ledbetter, a National Board Certified Teacher of preschool special education, understood the power of blogging even before she became involved with *Stories from School*.

Jess started her own blog when she was both a classroom teacher and a doctoral candidate. As she worked toward her degree, many people asked her when she was going to leave the classroom and ‘do more.’ She kept hearing the

message that she could make a bigger difference for children as something other than a classroom teacher, and wanted to debunk that notion.

Her blog focuses on ways classroom teachers can be leaders. She writes about teachers’ ability to influence the profession from inside the classroom. She is uncomfortable with the idea that teacher leadership is an ‘either/or’ proposition, and wants to share the myriad stories disproving that.

In addition to helping her share stories and ideas she’s passionate about, blogging helps Jess organize her thoughts around issues. After she has put her ideas into words, she feels more prepared to have conversations with fellow teacher leaders and other stakeholders about the issues that animate her. In addition, her blog helps her break through the feeling of being silenced. She wants to help other teachers feel empowered, so rather than leave the profession when they feel like they have no say, they stay and find ways to express and empower themselves.

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*“I started to think about how we’re talking to teachers about how they can influence the practice in their current context. I want to tell them, ‘right now, you’re a leader. What are you doing about it?’”*

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#### **Mindful Reflection:**

- What does teacher leadership look like in my practice?
- What do my students need from me?
- Who are my allies?
- What aspect of my practice brings me the most joy?
- What aspect of my practice is most alienating?

*Mindful Space*  
FOR NOTES, THOUGHTS, AND DOODLES



## Conclusion

*Whether addressing the needs of a single child or changing the nature of the teaching profession, mindful teacher leadership has enormous potential to improve the experiences of individuals, their colleagues, their students, and their communities.*

And whether they have formally embraced it or not, teacher leaders throughout Arizona are employing the tenets of mindfulness to solve problems and to create bold and lasting change. Participants in the Ninth Annual Teacher Leadership Institute: Mindful Teacher Leadership found that their deepest concerns could be contemplated, and solutions could be generated when a group of fellow leaders came together to listen, reflect, offer insight, and honor one another's experiences. Similarly, outside the Teacher Leadership Institute, Arizona teacher leaders are using the ancient skills of contemplative discussion and collaboration to remake education in the state.

Of course, there is still much to be done. The Arizona K12 Center is proud and excited to present the *Tenth Annual Teacher Leadership Institute: Elevating the Teaching Profession*, in June 2015. There, teacher leaders will continue to examine their dispositions and practices on a grand scale. Arizona's dedicated educators will work together to understand teacher leadership in the context of vast shifts in the teaching profession, locally and worldwide. They will delve deeper into the role of teachers on the vanguard of educational transformation. The Teacher Leadership Institute will continue its tradition of providing a heady environment where Arizona's teachers can share their

best ideas for students' and the profession's successful future.

In anticipation of this continued good work, the Arizona K12 Center invites all teacher leaders, as well as stakeholders at every level, to pause, reflect, and get ready to move forward with a fresh and potent vision for education in Arizona. As we reaffirm our beliefs and commitment to excellent teaching and learning, we look to Arizona's mindful teacher leaders to participate in the complex voyage toward meaningful change.

**Thanks to the many teacher leaders who contributed to this report, through our Annual Teacher Leadership Institute or in participating in focus groups throughout the state. We thank you for your sharing your stories and your expertise.**

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Beth Maloney NBCT, Dysart Unified School District	Elizabeth Rushton Arizona Master Teacher, Humboldt Unified School District
Kristie Martorelli Dysart Unified School District	Karyn Vick-Frantziskonis NBCT, Amphitheater Public Schools

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## My Mindful Reflections

Use the tear-out cards below to serve as a daily reminder of your goals and commitments to Mindful Teacher Leadership.

My teacher-leadership mantra is...

My goal is...

My next actionable steps are...

Today, I affirm...





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