

Enhancing Leadership Capacity Through Distributed Leadership

Why should states focus on distributed leadership?

Reducing the burden on principals

We all know great principals can have a tremendous impact on whether students and teachers are successful. Principals foster success by setting high expectations and establishing a culture of instructional excellence. But the job has grown. Nearly every education reform being adopted by states involves adding new responsibilities and expertise for the school leader.

School leadership needs to be a team endeavor

After years of studying successful school leaders, the Wallace Foundation cites the cultivation of leadership in others as one of five key practices of an effective school principal. When schools rely on an outdated model, in which nearly all responsibility and authority is vested in a single leader, the principal shoulders a great burden and the talents and capabilities of teachers to make an impact beyond the classroom are untapped, leaving teachers frustrated.

A more effective model

Distributed leadership models emphasize specific roles for teachers in carrying out certain leadership practices. This allows responsibility for leadership to be widely distributed across the school.

The benefits are twofold: effective teachers experience professional growth while continuing to teach in the classroom, and principals have more time to focus on other duties. And research shows that teachers' working relationships are stronger and student achievement is higher when principals and teachers share leadership ([Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Walhstrom, and Anderson, 2010](#)).

What do states with distributed leadership models look like?

Formal recognition of the role of teachers in school leadership is common.

State-level standards, training guidelines, and certification/licenses exist for a variety of school leadership roles.

Evaluation of school performance is based in part on the **strength of leadership** at the school.

State funding allows for **incentives and differentiated compensation** levels for teachers according to their role within their school.

School leadership is an integral component of the state's accountability framework, requiring, for example, evaluations of teachers, teacher leaders, and principals to align with common outcomes.

Teacher Leadership Roles

Classroom Teacher – regular classroom teacher who works as part of a collaborative instructional team.

Middle Leadership – classroom teacher with additional responsibilities for the quality of teaching within a certain department, grade level, or grade cluster, including supervising, supporting, and evaluating other teachers.

Senior Leadership – classroom teacher with additional schoolwide responsibilities (similar to an assistant principal).

* Adapted from [Jonathan Supowitz, Building a Lattice for School Leadership, \(2014\)](#).

What can states do to support distributed leadership?

Many states could do more to support districts and schools seeking to develop robust distributed leadership models. [New Leaders](#) provides several policy recommendations:

- Establish statewide leadership standards that guide school leaders on how to structure their time, utilize their school team, and ensure both teachers and leaders are trained for their new roles.
- Remove barriers in state collective bargaining, personnel rules, or salary schedules that prevent schools from empowering teachers to take on meaningful leadership roles, including peer evaluation, or receiving differentiated compensation for additional responsibilities.
- Ensure exceptional teachers can be identified through rigorous, learning-centered evaluation systems and ensure principals are empowered to choose which teachers to hire, promote, and remove.
- Invest in pilot programs that incentivize districts and schools to develop distributed leadership models and develop sample collective bargaining language that can be used in negotiations with local unions.

Learn more:

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- Jody Spiro, Director, Education Leadership, The Wallace Foundation
- Jim Spillane, Principal Investigator, The Distributed Leadership Study, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University
- Jackie Gran, Chief Policy and Partnerships Officer, New Leaders
- Dr. John DeFlaminis, Executive Director, The Distributed Leadership Program at the Penn Center for Educational Leadership, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania
- Jonas Chartrock, Ed.D, CEO, Leading Educators

Model spotlight

The **United Kingdom** has developed national standards for all leadership roles with aligned training and certifications for completion. Each role requires sequenced training, reflects progression on the career ladder, and comes with its own mix of time devoted to teaching and time spent leading:

- **Head teacher:** teachers who lead schools (equivalent to the principal's role in the U.S.).
- **Senior leader or deputy head:** teachers who assist the head teacher through cross-team leadership, such as leading evaluation of a schoolwide program or leading professional development (similar to the vice principal role in U.S. education, but with additional schoolwide responsibilities).
- **Middle leader:** teacher who is responsible for the quality of teaching within a certain department, grade level, or grade cluster. Teachers spend most of their time in the classroom, but take on additional responsibilities, for example, curriculum development and line-management duties such as supervising, supporting, and evaluating other teachers.

The **Distributed Leadership Program at the Penn Center for Educational Leadership** is a joint program between the University of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia Public Schools. It was one of the first programs in the country deliberately designed to expand distributed leadership capacity in an urban school system through training, professional development, and coaching, and it has demonstrated positive results.

Leading Educators offers a two-year leadership development fellowship to high-performing teachers in New Orleans, as well as strategic support for schools and districts expanding the reach of their top teachers. The program focuses on: Instructional Leadership, Core Beliefs and Mindsets, Cultural Leadership, and Management of Self and Others. Leading Educators currently serves over 700 teacher leaders in six cities, and early results are promising, including positive impact on student learning.