

Published in Print: April 20, 2011, as **Teacher Teams Help Schools Turn Around**  
Updated: April 20, 2011

## Teacher-Leader Corps Helps Turn Around Schools

By Stephen Sawchuk

*Boston*

It's hard to imagine two schools superficially more different from each other than Blackstone Elementary, with its labyrinthine 1970s layout, and Orchard Gardens K-8 School, which opened in 2003, with its modern skylights and cheery primary-color accents. But they were similar in the way that matters most in young lives: Both Boston schools were among the poorest-performing in Massachusetts.

Now, though, district and school leaders think the pair may have turned the corner, thanks in part to an influx of a corps of top teachers in each school. Achievement has improved at both. At Orchard Gardens, teacher attrition seems to be on the wane—no small feat for the school, which has had six principals in seven years.

Both schools, plus a third in the district, are participating in a novel turnaround venture here that attracts and seeks to retain highly effective teachers through a bundle of incentives, including leadership opportunities, a structure for peer learning, and increased pay.

Now wrapping up its first year, the initiative is providing insights into the role of teachers in overhauling the culture of a low-performing school—as well as giving way to new questions about the nature of teacher leadership and how to develop it.

“It’s where the profession needs to move,” Callie Liebmann, a 5th grade teacher at Blackstone Elementary School, said about teacher leadership. Yet she is clear-eyed about the challenges involved in defining the ambiguous role, as well as the pressure to do right by underserved students.

“Working within a turnaround school, you have more on the line,” she said. “The role is more important here; the success or failure of it matters.”

### Designing a Strategy

Turnaround Teacher Teams, or T3, as the effort is called, is the result of a partnership between Teach Plus, a Boston-based nonprofit organization, and the 57,000-student school district.



Lisa R. Lineweaver, center, the T3 coordinator at Blackstone Elementary School in Boston, meets with teams of teacher-leaders before they break out for strategy session with other teachers. Three Boston schools have brought in cohorts of experienced teachers to help improve student achievement.

—Jason Grow for Education Week

Blackstone, Orchard Gardens, and Trotter Elementary are among the 12 Boston schools receiving federal School Improvement Grant money. Under that program’s turnaround model, each of the T3 schools has a new principal and has replaced at least half its staff. Additional details were fleshed out through new state legislation and a memorandum of understanding with the Boston Teachers Union allowing for extended learning time and hiring flexibility.

Beyond those prescriptions, though, the T3 initiative has been shaped by classroom teachers.

Teach Plus began as an offshoot of the Rennie Center for Education Policy and Outreach, in Cambridge, Mass., and became an independent nonprofit in 2009. Its goal, according to founder and Chief Executive Officer Celine Coggins, is to help create leadership opportunities for teachers in the “second stage” of their careers that don’t require them to leave the classroom for administration or higher education.

The T3 initiative grew out of the Teaching Policy Fellows, a program run by Teach Plus that selectively recruits teachers and gives them opportunities to study education policy and

craft their own proposals for improving schools. ("**Mass. Urban Teachers Being Groomed to Help Sway Policy**," April 30, 2008.)

In 2009, the Boston fellows outlined a cohort approach to help rectify inequitable access to high-quality teaching for students in low-performing schools. The teachers said they were willing to take on the additional challenge of working in such schools—but wanted to do so with a cadre of experienced colleagues at their sides.

As such, T3 stands in contrast to incentives states and districts have tried over the years that have primarily targeted individual teachers with financial rewards. When crafting the proposal, the fellows felt that even the best teachers could be overwhelmed by a dysfunctional school environment without support from a critical mass of experienced peers, Ms. Coggins said.

“An individual goes into a troubled school with their cape and says, ‘I’m a superhero’—the fellows were like, ‘Why would anyone think that would work?’ ” she recalled.

T3 teachers now make up a quarter of the staff at each of the schools.

The district’s superintendent, Carol R. Johnson, praised the effort for supplementing the turnaround model’s emphasis on principal leadership.

“A strong leader attracts better teachers, but we needed another strategy to attract and retain the best teachers possible to work in schools that needed significant acceleration,” she said. “While you can have great individual teachers in a school, unless the teachers work together as a team to establish a set of beliefs and action steps that are collectively owned, we won’t see the kind of sustainable improvement that really matters.”

### Track Records

T3 participants must have at least three years of classroom experience, and they must complete a rigorous interview process and provide evidence of past success in improving learning. The current crop of recruits averages nine years in the classroom.

Brian Denitzio, a 6th grade English teacher at Orchard Gardens, said he was drawn to the program by the appeal of working alongside other high-performing colleagues. “I really enjoy the feeling of being surrounded by other strong teachers,” he said. “I feel like I’m going to get so much better.”

Ms. Liebmann came to Blackstone after stints in a Boston charter school and in the New York City school system, where she felt isolated from colleagues and pressured to “teach to the test.” T3 appealed to her, she said, because it “seemed like it was bringing some integrity back to the profession.”

Surveys of the selected T3 teachers show that most were attracted for similar reasons. Leadership opportunities and belonging to a team were the top-stated reasons, while the \$6,000 bonus the teacher-leaders receive as compensation for their additional responsibilities rounded out the bottom of the list.

### Teacher-Corps Makeup

Participants in the Turnaround Teacher Teams project, intended to attract and retain top educators, make up at least 25 percent of each school’s teachers.

**Blackstone Elementary School (Pre-K-5):**  
14 T3 teachers out of 50 total

**Orchard Gardens K-8 School:**  
15 T3 teachers out of 59 total

**Trotter Elementary School (K-5):**  
8 T3 teachers out of 28 total

Next year, the program will expand to UP Academy Charter School, Dearborn Middle School, and Roger Clap Innovation School. Roger Clapp will have four T3 teachers; UP and Dearborn will have eight to nine T3 teachers. The team at Orchard Gardens will grow to 18 as the school absorbs more students from a nearby school that is closing.

SOURCE: Teach Plus

Small but visible signs of change at Orchard Gardens were apparent within weeks of the beginning of the school year. A school uniform policy long in place was finally being enforced. There were consequences for tardiness. Routines previously left to chance—such as changing classes in an orderly fashion—were starting to become ingrained: “We’re standing tall, and we’re ready for the hall,” younger students chirped between classes.

By the spring, teachers described solid relationships among staff members, particularly teachers and administrators.

Adrian Smith, a prekindergarten T3 teacher at Orchard Gardens and one of a handful of teachers retained during the “traumatic” turnaround process, contrasted the current

environment to the previous year's atmosphere of compliance and surveillance.

Now, she said, "teachers are trusted, and trusted to make good decisions on our own."

### **Working Together**

Running weekly meetings of teachers in the same grade or, in middle school, the same subject, is the primary responsibility of the T3 teacher-leaders. Extended learning time, provided through the turnaround funding, helps loosen up the schedule to provide for uninterrupted meeting times.

Each of the three turnaround schools also has a special T3 coach who attends all the teams' meetings and helps them work through roadblocks, such as when a number of students struggle on a concept or skill.

Because all the T3 teachers have had past success, "they have a vision of what it looks like when students and classes are operating at a high level," said Lisa R. Lineweaver, who serves as the T3 coach at Blackstone. "When we haven't seen the gains we want, how do we respond?"

It's essentially the question that 1st grade teachers at Blackstone are wrestling with today. The team, a mix of three novice teachers paired with two of the T3 teachers, is debriefing a unit in the district's new math curriculum, which relies less on algorithms and more on math concepts.

The lesson has 1st grade pupils making patterns from colored cubes. Ultimately, the goal is to make the connection to patterns of numbers, such as even and odd numerals or how to count by twos or fives or tens. The teachers are stumped about how to get the children to the next level of skill.

"Their strategies were so concrete," said T3 teacher and 1st grade team leader Doris Venditti, recalling how her pupils had grasped the idea of patterns, but weren't able to predict that every second cube in a particular repeating series would be the same color without actually laying them out.

"They're not going to get there unless we can come up with a way to push for it," said her colleague Lisa Gonçalves. The only teacher in the group with experience teaching the curriculum, Ms. Gonçalves explains that later units build on the concept, so it's important that students master it before moving on.

In the end, one of the novices in the group, Brian Gaines, suggests that his district induction coach, who's familiar with the curriculum, might be able to offer some additional strategies. The idea is quickly embraced.

### **Developing Leaders**

The importance of work with peers increasingly seems to be backed by empirical research. In a 2009 study, Cornell University economists found that a teacher's individual effectiveness appears to improve when he or she is surrounded by talented colleagues, a sign that good teaching practices "spill over" to peers. ("**Effective Teachers Found to Improve Peers' Performance,**" Sept. 16, 2009.)

T3 teachers at Blackstone Elementary have had some major tests of their mettle already: The school's new principal left in mid-December, leaving the teacher teams to carry on by themselves. It came as a discouraging blow to the teachers. But within a few days, they were reminding one another that their success wasn't dependent on just one actor, Ms. Lineweaver said.

Conceptual questions about the nature of teacher leadership—how it is fostered and how it matures—remain. Ms. Liebmann said that the often-undefined nature of the role has led to a year full of ups and downs, at times even leading her to question the concept of teacher leadership.

"When you are an administrator, you have this built-in role. People expect you to make decisions and you don't necessarily have to explain or prove you're qualified to make that decision," she said. "As a teacher-leader, you have to kind of earn that role a little more, and that takes a little time."

Experts on teacher leadership say such concerns are typical of the field. Among other issues, scholars debate whether teacher-leaders should be full-time classroom teachers (as they are in T3) or part-time coaches, and the value of standards and certifications for such positions, said Terry Dozier, the director of Virginia Commonwealth University's Center for Teacher Leadership.

"I think that's part of the struggle," she said. "Are these formal roles? Informal roles? The verdict is still out in many people's minds."

Mr. Denitzio, the Orchard Gardens English teacher, drew a distinction between his teacher-leadership work at Orchard Gardens and his prior position in the district, in which he served as a "cluster chair."

The biggest difference, he said, is that he's now leading problem-solving work rather than disseminating directives from administrators.

"Looking back, I was not at all effective at facilitating clear goals or working with a team to set goals and objectives,"

Mr. Denitzio said about his former job. “It’s not like teacher-leaders go up a mountain and get the answers.”

The T3 schools have also had to contend with the baggage of differentiated teacher roles and pay, always a potential tension in the relatively flat profession of teaching. A few of Ms. Liebmann’s colleagues, for instance, have questioned her about what she does to earn the additional stipend.

Preventing such situations from spilling over into resentment is an area in which principal leadership plays an important role. At Orchard Gardens, Principal Andrew J. Bott said he guarded carefully against inadvertently creating a situation in which T3 teachers were viewed as an elite corps within the school.

“I was very explicit that [T3] is one component of our school turnaround universe,” Mr. Bott said. “You do not want to create a position where there is ‘us’ and ‘them.’ ”

Among other tasks, classroom teachers at the school can serve on other teams or in other roles. One teacher, for instance, is setting up an informal system for peer observations.

### **Next Steps**

So far, the three existing turnaround schools have made academic progress. Seventeen 1st graders at Blackstone came in not recognizing a single uppercase letter. Now, the number of pupils in that grade scoring “far below” benchmarks for reading fluency has fallen by two-thirds.

Based on data from interim assessments aligned to the state test, it’s possible Orchard Gardens will meet its third-year

School Improvement Grant performance benchmark two years early, Mr. Bott said.

Its shakedown year having concluded, T3 is poised to expand into three additional public schools in Boston and to grow at Orchard Gardens, which is absorbing students from a nearby school that is closing. The Teach Plus group now operates its fellows program in Chicago, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, and Memphis, Tenn. Eventually, the nonprofit organization would like to begin initiatives similar to T3 in those locations.

To a degree, it is hard to separate progress in Blackstone and Orchard Gardens from all the layers of reform. In addition to the new principals, staffing flexibility, and turnaround funding, the schools have dozens of community partnerships, and at Blackstone Elementary, are building on training in data inquiry and analysis laid out by the Boston Plan for Excellence, a nonprofit group supporting public education.

But Mr. Bott, for his part, thinks that the program has quickened the pace. In the absence of T3, he said, “I think we eventually would have seen improvements, but not as fast.”

Superintendent Johnson concurred.

T3, she said, “allows us to jump-start in a way that would not be possible if we didn’t have teachers who actively want to be involved in a reform effort.”

*Coverage of policy efforts to improve the teaching profession is supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation, at [www.joycefdn.org/Programs/Education](http://www.joycefdn.org/Programs/Education).*

Vol. 30, Issue 28, Pages 1,16-17