

INTRODUCTION

As Teach Plus Policy Fellows, we represent a diverse group of teachers from public schools in Massachusetts deeply invested in the success of our students. We know that teachers must have the opportunity to learn from and share information with each other. *The Mirage*, a 2015 report from TNTP, estimates that the costs of professional development at the district level range from roughly \$73 million to \$181 million spent annually on teacher improvement. However, much of those efforts are not creating lasting, significant changes in teacher practice or student outcomes.¹

We believe that teacher leadership is the most powerful method of improving teacher practice. Engaging in strong collaboration with fellow teachers both enhances the learning experiences of our students and allows us to grow as educators. The new federal law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), creates opportunities for collaborative experiences by way of teacher-led professional development and career ladders. No stakeholders are better positioned than teachers to support the implementation of this new law.

USING ESSA'S TITLE II FUNDING IN MASSACHUSETTS

From many conversations and meetings with teachers throughout the state of Massachusetts, and from our own experiences, a common theme has emerged: teachers learn best from their colleagues. When external consultants, or those far removed from the classroom are brought in to deliver professional development (PD), they are often not able to understand the demands or realities of our work. When working together with teachers, we are grounded in shared experiences and challenges, and are able to work together to discuss and share best practices in order to better serve students. As it stands, consistent use of teacher-led PD exists only in pockets. With the passage of ESSA, we see a profound opportunity to evaluate, re-think, and re-conceptualize how teachers develop professionally — and how to optimize talented teachers in our state and use their knowledge to support one another's growth and development.

Under ESSA, Title II Funding can be used in Massachusetts to:

- Provide opportunities for a cadre of effective teachers to lead evidence-based professional development for their peers.
- Expand career opportunities for teachers to advance in the profession and grow as leaders — such as through hybrid roles that allow teachers to serve as mentors or coaches to their peers — while remaining in the classroom.
- Provide training and support for teacher leaders and school leaders who are part of instructional leadership teams.¹

The following recommendations are intended to support the implementation and optimization of this new law, and to give districts the tools to design professional development and career ladders that are more effective, more measurable, and develop teachers as leaders and experts in the field.

I. TEACHER-LED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Recommendation 1: Implement an effective teacher-led professional development selection and incentive process.

It is important that teachers who are recognized as experts in their field lead professional development. Experts are teachers who routinely use evidence-based practices to increase student performance. (Summative teacher evaluations can provide evidence that teachers excel.) When selecting teacher leaders, first priority should go to teachers from within the school (when running school-embedded PD) with second priority given to teachers from within the district. Given the nature of these responsibilities, effective teachers should be compensated monetarily, with opportunities for additional leadership, or through a reduced teaching schedule for planning and delivering professional development.

Best Practice in Distinguished Teacher Roles

Boston Public Schools: In a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program, expert teachers serve as “consulting teachers” (CTs) that mentor and evaluate their colleagues. These highly respected CTs are selected and trained by the PAR Panel, which is made up of teachers and principals. The mentoring component of PAR provides CTs with further professional development as leaders and unique coaching opportunities. Holding leadership positions in evaluating and recommending a course of action for their peers empowers CTs to further the professionalization of teaching.³ The Boston Public Schools PAR program is the first and only in the state.

Recommendation 2: Select professional development initiatives that are tied to both district and school priorities.

Districts should be strategic about the selection of professional development priorities, selecting a few high-leverage initiatives. These initiatives must include both district and school-wide priorities. Schools should then prioritize these initiatives based on site-specific needs as identified by teacher input through staff surveys. Staff surveys must inform the menu of options provided at each school site in order to meet the diverse set of teacher needs.

For example, based on the district profile of Lawrence Public Schools, two statistics stand out: 1) Lawrence has a high percentage of English Language Learners (ELLs) and 2) 100 percent of classrooms have access to technology at a ratio of two students per computer.⁴ Therefore, the district may choose to focus on literacy integration and technology integration within teachers’ curriculum. Each school can then prioritize among these core initiatives based on the specific needs of their students and teachers. In an ideal system, this prioritization would stem from teacher input based

on staff surveys. The result is a range of professional development options directly influenced by the needs of students, teachers, and the district. Instead of teachers seeking out alternative professional development opportunities, the PD offered at their school site would be aligned to the needs of their students. A streamlined and collaborative approach that addresses those needs would increase investment from teachers.

Recommendation 3: Structure teacher-led professional development to meet the federal definition of high-quality development.

A clear definition of teacher-led professional development must be established to create a common language around what it entails. Those defining teacher-led PD should consider the following questions:

- What training and/or supports are being provided to teacher leaders?
- Are best practices being shared?
- Is student data being used to drive decision-making? Is the PD encouraging a collaborative environment including, but not limited to, horizontal planning?
- Is information being brought back from conferences or trainings to be shared with staff?
- What is the accountability around the topics being discussed?
- When are the PD sessions happening? (e.g., during common planning times, the school day, or during department meetings, etc.)
- How do we ensure meaningful deliverables from the PD?

ESSA calls for PD to be “sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short term workshops), intensive, collaborative, data-driven and classroom-focused.”⁵ Addressing the above questions will ensure that professional development meets the federal definition of high-quality development.

As an early-career teacher looking forward to the continuous growth that is in store for me, I have a clear trajectory of where my career is going and the actions I need to take to make that growth a tangible reality.

The Power of Teacher-Led PD

By Tuyet Dinh

I work in an elementary school as a Kindergarten Sheltered English Immersion teacher in Boston Public Schools. My students are newcomers to the country. My 24 students came to me not knowing how to read a single sight word. Within the first eight months of school, three fourths of my students learned to read 100-200 sight words and have met or are exceeding end-of-year district-wide benchmarks.

I am able to make this progress with my students because each week, my grade level team meets to discuss topics that have the greatest impact on our teaching at the time. This helps to create ownership in our development as teachers. All teachers on the team take turns facilitating meetings that are in their area of expertise. Doing this allows us to best utilize the strengths of every teacher and gives every teacher the opportunity to serve in a leadership role. This also helps to build leadership capacity within a school. By meeting weekly, we are able to commit ourselves to looking at and discussing student work and sharing common challenges and best practices on a regular basis. This is how we are able to hold ourselves accountable to each other for our learning.

Districts can ensure this happens by giving teachers time throughout the school day and the resources and training on an as-needed basis. More specifically, districts should build in weekly scheduled times within the school day for grade level teams or content-area teams within a school to analyze student work and set grade level priorities based off of this. Districts also need to give grade level teams the autonomy to flexibly and creatively share best practices. For example, if a grade level team decides that they need to strengthen their reading instruction, teachers should be able to decide how to best go about doing this. Some schools/grade levels might want to observe each other's teaching and provide feedback. Others may want to evaluate reading data to see what areas need the most improvement and come up with strategies for those areas. Districts should also provide the resources needed to allow teachers within the grade level team to attend trainings that will allow them to serve as "experts" and bring that knowledge back to the grade level team to be implemented.

Recommendation 4: Measure effectiveness to assess the extent to which professional development is influencing teacher practice and student outcomes.

Schools should develop multiple measures to assess the effectiveness of their professional development sessions. According to the new recommendations for professional development in ESSA, PD activities should be “sustained over time rather than 1-day or short-term workshops.”⁶ Therefore, accountability measures should also be varied to capture a comprehensive perspective of the effectiveness of the PD sessions. Effectiveness measures should include:

- Pre and post PD rubrics or staff surveys
- Observations or reports on the execution of strategies learned through PD
- Analysis of student data in response to the PD sessions and implementation

A strong accountability plan would include more than one of the above measures to fully assess the extent to which PD is influencing teacher practice and student outcomes. As teachers working with students every day, we are best positioned to help design these surveys, rubrics or observations protocols.

Best Practice: Measuring Effectiveness

The Core Collaborative (C2) Initiative, designed by Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellows, is a set of teacher-led professional learning courses. The C2 Initiative provides leadership roles for highly effective teachers and gives educators the opportunity to learn best practices from the experts they trust most – fellow teachers. The effectiveness of C2 is measured in multiple ways. Pre and post surveys are administered during the first and last week of the course asking whether participants' confidence in implementing Common Core-aligned lesson plans has increased, whether participants have implemented new strategies or practices in their classrooms, and much more. The post-survey also collects information regarding the participant's likelihood to recommend the course to their colleagues. 99% of participants report that they would be likely or extremely likely to recommend the courses. These multiple measures help track the success of the program.

II. CAREER LADDER AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Highly effective teachers want to stay in the profession. We love what we do, and strive to expand our impact at the school, district, state, and national levels. Career ladders offer effective teachers opportunities to determine the trajectory of their professional growth.

Recommendation 5: Recruit teachers for career ladder opportunities through district leadership and teachers working in collaboration.

Districts and teachers should work collaboratively to determine clear criteria for effective career ladder candidates. This criteria could target demonstrated past leadership, organizational skills, communication skills, and a variety of other measures. Districts should work in collaboration with teachers to design a selection process in order to choose the strongest candidates for these opportunities. This allows the districts to act as talent agents in order to choose the best possible candidates for advancement opportunities.

For example, in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), teachers and administrators worked together to do just that. This collaboration resulted in the creation of a new career pathway model for the district. Teachers, school leaders, central office staff members, and other educators contributed to the design of the Leadership Initiative for Teachers, or LIFT. LIFT creates a five-stage career ladder that provides high-performing teachers with opportunities for advancement inside the classroom, as well as additional responsibility and increased recognition and compensation.⁷ This is a clear example of the power of collaboration between administrators and teachers. A unified approach is the best way to empower teachers to determine the trajectory of their own careers.

Recommendation 6: Publicize the structure of the career ladder; each career ladder “rung” should be clearly defined and correlated with incentives (time, money, opportunity).

While teachers are the leaders in their classrooms, there needs to be a path for those teachers who want to grow professionally through additional leadership opportunities. The method for acquiring new leadership opportunities must be clearly stated and accessible to all educators: new educators so they are informed of what they can strive for as they continuously develop, and current/veteran educators so they know whether they are already eligible for additional leadership opportunities. As a baseline, teachers who seek out these opportunities must have a demonstrated record of exemplary teaching. A teacher's years of experience, degree, and supplemental experiences should determine for what positions he/she is eligible. Districts should also determine appropriate incentives (time, money, and opportunity) that correspond to each career ladder "rung."

Career Ladders Allow for Continuous Growth

By Desirée Daring

After Lawrence Public Schools went into receivership, the new leadership created a career ladder system to hold teachers accountable for a baseline of student growth as well as to attract veteran teachers. As a first year teacher in Lawrence, I was grateful for the lengthy document outlining Lawrence's clear career ladder. As I planned out my professional trajectory, I knew what prerequisites were necessary to attain the "rung" that I desired by the time I desired it.

Had this career ladder been less concrete, I may not have accomplished all that I have since first starting in Lawrence. For example, I represent my school on the district-level Teacher Leadership Cabinet – a cabinet of teachers who advise the superintendent on district-wide policies. After my time on this cabinet, once I have met the necessary criteria, I will apply for the Advanced Educator role. My cabinet work developing curricular materials for the math department at my school this past year will directly relate to the project I will lead as an Advanced Educator. Through this role, I would be recognized as an educator leader, be compensated as such, and be continuously pushed to better my craft as I work with fellow colleagues through peer observations and feedback cycles. As an early-career teacher looking forward to the continuous growth that is in store for me, I have a clear trajectory of where my career is going and the actions I need to take to make that growth a tangible reality.

Recommendation 7: Allow opportunities for teacher leaders to develop spontaneous, hybrid roles. Teachers are best positioned to identify critical needs within their school.

Districts should have an application process in place to create a "spontaneous" role. If an educator discovers a need or a gap that exists within their school, they should be allowed to create and develop a role to bridge that gap. There must be a clear procedure for a teacher leader to follow so that they can meet the needs of the community. Teacher leaders who take on these roles should receive compensation (time, money, or opportunity) as appropriate.

Teacher Leaders Best Suited to Develop Hybrid Roles

By Jennifer Langdon

The children in my dual-language school come from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Jacobi arrives in kindergarten not knowing any letters and never having had bedtime stories read to him. Tom arrives knowing all of his letters and most of his sounds. He reads with his parents each night before bed. These two boys are starting from two very different places and their experiences at school will be very different.

Career ladders should not be limited to pre-existing roles, but allow teachers who see a need to step up and engineer a solution for a new, unexpected situation — solutions that best allow teachers to serve the changing needs of their students. To better serve Jacobi, we need to support his parents. This can be done through a hybrid teacher role in which a colleague or I were able to remain in the classroom, but also work (compensated with money or time) to figure out the best way to support parents – educating them on the value of reading at home, directing them to the public library, and other opportunities. If we really dedicated our efforts to this outreach, it could make all the difference for students like Jacobi.

CONCLUSION

As leaders in our classrooms, we know what we need to do to improve the teaching in our schools. We urge key decision makers in Massachusetts to adopt teacher leadership practices through Title II funding of ESSA to benefit districts, teachers, and students in the Commonwealth. Districts should adopt best practices in teacher-led PD and create career ladders that allow teachers to gain opportunities that meet their aspirations. Teachers are ready and eager to rise to the challenge.

ENDNOTES

1. TNTP. (August 2015). The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development. Retrieved from http://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP-Mirage_2015.pdf
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5. See Learning Forward Appendix A: ESSA's Definition of Professional Learning & Title II Allowable Uses of Funds. Retrieved from <http://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/getinvolved/appendix-a---agents-for-learning-competition.pdf>
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