

Growing Teacher Leaders in a Culture of Excellence

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Abstract

Viewing teachers as leaders requires a paradigm shift about the concept of leadership in a school system. The Teachers as Leaders program of the Mountain Brook, Alabama Schools represents that shift and is empowering teachers to utilize their leadership skills and contribute to the system as it fulfills its mission to offer education to its students that is effective, challenging, and engaging.

The Mountain Brook Schools established the Teachers as Leaders program in order to develop a culture of continuity in leadership as many administrator retirements were predicted for the near future. The program, however, was not designed as a “Teachers as Future Administrators” program. Rather, it was an intentional plan to prepare teachers for continued leadership, whether that is demonstrated in their classrooms or in administrative roles. The school system partnered with private consultants, a restaurant business, and the University of Alabama at Birmingham to deliver the Teachers as Leaders program. This article, a report from the field, allows the reader a glimpse of the culture of excellence in the Mountain Brook Schools through the description of the Teachers as Leaders program and reflections of several participants.

How do you create a district pool of future principals who understand and honor the culture of a school community? How do you also increase the leadership capacity of teachers so that they can effectively lead from the classroom? The central administration and elected board of the Mountain Brook, Alabama school system sought to answer this question as a continuity plan for leadership that was being developed. The answer was to continue to shift the paradigm about the concept of leadership in the school system and intentionally promote a culture that would empower teachers to lead at all levels. The Teachers as Leaders program of the Mountain Brook, Alabama Schools represents that shift and is training teachers to utilize their leadership skills and contribute to the system as it fulfills its mission to offer education to its students that is effective, challenging, and engaging. This article describes their exemplary program.

Background

Growing teacher leaders needs to be an intentional act in our nation’s school systems. The principal’s job in schools is becoming more complex, and it has been established that school leadership can no longer reside in one person (Ballek, O’Rourke, Provenzano, & Bellamy, 2005). Further evidence for the urgency to grow teacher leaders is the fact that public school principals are leaving the profession in increasingly high numbers. According to the Educational Research Service, nearly 40% of all principals will retire or leave the position for other reasons before 2010, causing vacancy numbers to soar (Ballek et al., 2005). Principals nearing retirement must prepare to pass the torch of leadership to those who come after them (Weller & Weller, 2002); those who will carry the torch in the future are the classroom teachers of today. It is imperative that schools invest in the leadership capacity of the teaching staff.

Schools that have high leadership capacity are those that amplify leadership for all. The guiding paradigm is that the principal is only one leader in the school community (Lambert, 2005). Schools in which teachers are becoming significant leaders have structures in place that provide opportunities for broad participation in teams, study groups, vertical communities, and action research teams. According to Danielson (2007), there are three main areas of school life in which teacher leaders can have a role: within a department, across the school, and beyond the school. In an extensive study on the work of

teacher leaders, Lieberman, Saxl, and Miles (1988) focused on what teachers actually did when they took on leadership positions. While the evidence proved that the work of teachers as leaders was varied and highly dependent on the individual context of the school, Lieberman et al. did discover that it was necessary for teachers to learn an array of leadership skills while on the job. These skills include the ability to build trust and develop rapport, diagnose organizational conditions, deal with learning processes, manage the work itself, and build skills and confidence in others. Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, and Richert (1996) examined the importance of “leader behaviors” that classroom teachers can exhibit, even though they are not in formal leadership roles. “Teachers emerge into new and continually expanding roles by the very nature of learning to see themselves differently and therefore behaving differently. They also do not sabotage those in other leadership roles” (p. 29). Extending this concept, Dr. Charles Mason, superintendent of Mountain Brook Schools, developed a list of how teachers could lead without being in a formal leadership position:

1. Leaders ask the right, tough questions.
 2. Leaders can set the tone for meetings and discussions with their energy level, attitudes, and encouragement.
 3. Leaders are mentors, one-on-one, to others.
 4. Leaders anticipate needs and meet them without being asked.
 5. Leaders support other leaders emotionally and professionally.
 6. Leaders establish their own credibility through competence.
 7. Leaders learn what they need to know and are willing to share it.
 8. Leaders interpret reality for others.
 9. Leaders always ask, “What is our purpose?”
 10. Leaders ask the question, “Is this consistent with our values and beliefs?”
- (C. Mason, personal communication, October 16, 2006).

The Teachers as Leaders program sought to encourage teachers to see themselves in those expanding roles of leadership.

The District’s Rationale for Growing Teacher Leaders

The Mountain Brook school district, desiring to enhance the leadership capacity of its teaching staff, initiated a program that will prepare teachers for leadership roles both now and in the future. The Teachers as Leaders program was established in order to develop continuity in leadership as many administrator retirements were predicted for the near future. The program, however, was not designed primarily as a “Teachers as Future Administrators” program. Rather, it was an intentional plan to prepare teachers for continual leadership, whether that would be in their classrooms or in administration. In the Mountain Brook school system, the teacher-leader program was part of an aggressive plan developed to enhance the expectation of excellence that exists in this school system. According to Mason, the origination of the Teachers as Leaders program was conceptually tied to the culture of collaboration in the district. “All the important work we do in our district depends on teachers, and this forms our philosophy behind the Teachers as Leaders program. In our culture, there is a belief that the experts are those that are doing the job; thus, teacher leadership is extremely important. If teachers are going to collaborate effectively in groups, teacher leadership is necessary. Therefore, we needed a structure to intentionally help teachers develop their leadership skills” (C. Mason, personal communication, January 16, 2008).

The Mountain Brook Schools have been recognized with a number of state and national awards for excellence, but the culture of the district does not allow it to become complacent. Under the leadership of Mason, the district has developed a strategic plan for boosting the achievement of students who are already performing at the highest levels in the state of Alabama. The district’s continuity plan

acknowledges that the teachers are the most important players in that pursuit of continued excellence. The Teachers as Leaders program was designed to ensure that there would be outstanding leaders in each of the schools who would take the initiative with their peers in preserving this culture of high expectations and bring to life the three words that characterize that culture: effective, challenging, and engaging.

However, the program was also set in the context of a district with leaders who have given thought to the fact that there are principals in the school system who are getting older. The district is intentionally planning for how to retain the culture that has been developed so carefully over the last decade when those who created and fostered it start to retire. District leaders want to look for individuals who have the potential to be future administrators and have an understanding of the vision and mission of Mountain Brook Schools. According to Mason, “the district is challenged to hire the best new leaders we can, and we want to encourage teachers to consider formal leadership roles such as reading coaches and assistant principals” (C. Mason, personal communication, January 16, 2008). The three goals of the Teachers as Leaders program, therefore, were:

1. to develop a cadre of teachers who have a deep understanding and commitment to the vision of the school system—that it would be effective, challenging, and engaging.
2. to give participants the opportunity to assess and develop their own leadership skills.
3. to encourage participants to provide positive leadership wherever they find themselves serving.

Description of the Teachers as Leaders Program

District principals were asked to nominate two or three teachers from each building who demonstrated leadership potential. Belinda Treadwell, principal of Mountain Brook Elementary, shared her criteria for selecting teachers from her building to be involved in the program:

I listened to the comments of teachers in my building when they talked about what they want to do in the future. I looked for the pioneers and those who were engaged in continuous action research, trying new things in their classrooms. I watched for who was comfortable with collaboration. I chose teachers who were risk takers (B. Treadwell, personal communication, October 20, 2006).

Treadwell also concurred with research that cited the fact that exemplary teachers bring certain skills to the leadership role, which make it easy for others to trust them. Such skills include relational skills, assistance in maintaining a school’s sense of purpose, and the ability to improve instructional practices (Donaldson, 2007). This criterion further influenced her selection of the teachers who would become a part of the 2006–2007 Teachers as Leaders cadre.

The 2006–2007 cohort of 15 teacher leaders consisted of 13 females and 2 males, representing each of the six schools in the district. Three participants were early in their teaching careers (1 to 5 years of experience), five were mid-career teachers (6 to 15 years of experience), and six were veteran teachers (16 to 30 years of experience). There were five elementary teachers, three junior high teachers, and three high school teachers. Their ages ranged from 24 to 55, with a large cluster between the ages of 26 and 31. Eleven of the 15 participants had earned master’s degrees, two had educational specialist certificates, and two were National Board Certified teachers.

Dr. David Stiles, director of Organizational Development for the Mountain Brook Schools at the time, was charged with developing the Teachers as Leaders program. He designed a protocol through which the selected teacher leaders met six times during the year for full-day experiences in understanding themselves and expanding their awareness of leadership issues. The district provided substitute teachers for the participants in the Teachers as Leaders program, allowing the participants to leave their classrooms during the school day. The first four sessions were devoted to activities that led to a great deal of self-awareness for the participants. They each completed an extensive personality

inventory, and a trained consultant led the group of teachers in learning about their relationship styles, how they behaved when they were most productive, how they operated under stress, and how they would typically lead. One participant, responding anonymously in the program evaluation, shared the following:

I am amazed at how much I learned about myself. I have always considered myself a motivated, energetic person. Going through this personality inventory, I learned that while I would make a good leader, I have so much to learn about how to “become” a good leader. This process really made me more aware of how I think of myself and how others view me as a leader.

In addition to the intense personality inventory activities, the participants had informative sessions such as an education legislation update and a presentation on how the power of personal reflection assists in developing leadership skills. Team-building activities were also an integral part of the Teachers as Leaders training. The teachers met in the summer to experience a ropes course, during which a trained facilitator led them through the challenges of working together to achieve difficult physical feats. The culminating team-building activity was a cooking challenge, held at a local restaurant that housed a corporate cook-off kitchen designed for organizations to practice working in teams. The teachers divided into two groups and were given instructions to prepare an elaborate Italian meal together in 90 minutes. They were judged on how well they cooperated, how creative they were with the recipes, and on the presentation and taste of the food. Of course, their reward was the opportunity to enjoy the gourmet lunch they had prepared! In both of these activities, the concepts of teamwork, negotiation, compromise, time management, delegation, handling crises, and dealing with multiple perspectives were explored and discussed by the teachers under the leadership of a facilitator.

Evaluation of the Teachers as Leaders Program

An evaluation of the Teachers as Leaders program was conducted by one of us (Dr. Searby), a professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. A survey (see appendix A) was given to each participant at the conclusion of the 2006–2007 cohort activities to gather qualitative data on how the participants perceived the program. The survey consisted of a series of 11 open-ended statements for participants to complete, such as “Since participating in Teachers as Leaders, I ...”; “The most significant learning occurred for me when...” Teachers who participated in the program gave it high marks; in fact, there were no negative comments made about the program at all. Participants shared comments on how much they had grown both personally and professionally through the program. Many noted that they had changed their opinions about leadership. One participant shared the following in her survey:

Having been in the classroom for more than 15 years, I have seen teachers move from teaching in isolation to being true leaders who enact change. In the past, teachers have thought that becoming a leader in their building meant that they must come out of the classroom and become an administrator. The Teachers as Leaders program made me realize that not only can I be a leader in the classroom, but through my professional development, my sphere of influence can reach beyond the classroom and into schoolwide leadership activities.

This teacher realized that her previous opinion of leadership was based on a faulty philosophy that leaders are born, not made (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004). “I have always looked at leadership as something that people had or didn’t have. I hadn’t ever really thought that leadership is something that can grow in a person. This process really made me more aware of how I think of myself and how others view me as a leader.”

As a part of the final evaluation survey, participants in the Teachers as Leaders program were asked to identify where their leadership abilities were currently being demonstrated, as well as where they would like to extend their leadership work in their school or the system. They set 1- to 5-year goals for themselves and stated what encouragement and support they would need to reach those goals. Over half of the 2006–2007 group of 17 participants stated a desire to pursue a leadership position at a different level than their current assignment.

The teachers were extremely appreciative of being selected for this program, as is depicted in the following survey comments:

Teachers as Leaders is the best professional development I have been to in a long, long time. It has been a privilege to be a part of this group. I hope we can continue as a group—a think tank—on other projects. Put us to work for the system!

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to learn more about myself and my leadership abilities. Affirmation of these skills is important to me and has presented the need to use them more in my school and system.

Although the Mountain Brook school system has graduated just two cohorts from the Teachers as Leaders program, it has already reaped the benefits of encouraging teachers to take more responsible leadership roles. For example, several National Board Certified teachers have emerged from the first cohort of Teachers as Leaders. Others have become new teacher mentors, chairpersons of their grade levels or departments, chairpersons of professional learning community committees, or student-teacher supervisors. In addition, one teacher became a staff development specialist, two were chosen to work on statewide curriculum committees, and one became an assistant principal. One of us (Shaddix) was a 2006–2007 Teachers as Leaders participant and has demonstrated leadership by becoming an advisor/mentor to new teachers, facilitating professional development activities, serving on school-based leadership teams, and serving on instructional support teams. Shaddix noted that, “by serving in these various leadership roles, I have noticed that my skills and knowledge about best practices in education have increased. I am much more confident, and I feel a renewed commitment to teaching and learning.”

Schlechty (1990) defined teachers as leaders when they strive to influence peers to become more effective in classrooms and when they themselves become active in school governance. Shaddix advised teachers about how to take leadership roles by stating:

I would encourage teachers who are looking to revitalize their careers to become more involved in leadership opportunities. Obtain a clear picture of the vision at your school, and take the initiative and become a vital part of that vision. Use your expertise and support and encourage other teachers. Facilitate reflection among your coworkers. Help your team make better decisions about teaching and learning. Be patient and realize that not everyone will be on the same learning curve as you, but the time you invest in people will be well worth it.

The Future of the Teachers as Leaders Program

Viewing teachers as leaders requires a paradigm shift about the concept of leadership in a school system. As Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, and Many (2006) state, these shifts often make teachers uncomfortable. Such paradigm shifts associated with developing teachers as leaders may include moving from isolation to collaboration, from privatization of practice to open sharing of practice, and from independence to interdependence. The designers of the Teachers as Leaders program of the Mountain Brook Schools acknowledged that these paradigm shifts are important, and they will continue to refine the program components as Teachers as Leaders will be offered every other year in

the district. Mason, dedicated to the continuous improvement of the program, stated, “in future years we need to make sure that the components of the Teachers as Leaders program more tightly align to the goals of our system and that we help participants grasp the big picture and overarching purpose of the program, seeing the connectedness in all that we do” (C. Mason, personal communication, January 16, 2008).

We would like to make some additional suggestions for refining the Teachers as Leaders program in subsequent years. First of all, although it is important to spend time helping future leaders enhance their self-understanding through a personality inventory, we would advise that the time spent on the accompanying interpretive activities be reduced so that a varied list of leadership topics can be covered in the course of the year’s program. A possible list would include how to lead the change process, how to conduct action research in a school, and how leaders can develop resiliency. Each of these topics could be translated into creatively designed, practical experiential activities.

Secondly, teachers who are considering expansion of their leadership need opportunities to stretch their skills. We would suggest that the designers provide teachers with authentic problem-based leadership tasks that have the potential to make a significant difference in the work of the system. It was noted that one participant in this cohort said, “Put us to work for the system!” Teacher leaders want to contribute; they welcome new challenges. Perhaps each cohort of teacher leaders could be given a specific assignment that they could work on collaboratively, developing their teamwork skills and making a significant impact systemwide.

Finally, we would suggest that teacher leaders receive coaching in how to develop a professional portfolio that would highlight their leadership abilities. We would also suggest that these teachers be given the option of participating in a mock interview for an administrative position. Teachers who aspire to leadership at the principal level need encouragement to start thinking like an administrator.

The Mountain Brook school system has demonstrated its commitment to growing teacher leaders in a culture of excellence. The Teachers as Leaders program will likely continue to empower teachers to utilize their leadership skills and contribute to the Mountain Brook Schools at a higher level as it fulfills its mission to offer education that is effective, challenging, and engaging.

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The one thing I'll never forget about Teachers as Leaders is ...

The most significant learning occurred for me when ...

One thing I could have done without in Teachers as Leaders was ...

Something that surprised me was ...

As a result of participating in Teachers as Leaders, I have had a change of heart/mind in regard to ...

My leadership abilities are currently being demonstrated in ...

I have the interest and expertise and would like to be given time to engage in the following leadership work in my school or in the Mt. Brook system ...

My 1-5 year goals include ...

I would like to pursue a leadership position at a higher level than my current position:

Yes No Undecided

Possibilities:

I need the following support/encouragement to reach my goals:

My advice to future Teachers as Leaders participants would be ...

I would like to nominate the following Mt. Brook staff member(s) for future Teachers as Leaders programs:

Feedback I wish to give Dr. Mason and Dr. Stiles about Teachers as Leaders is ...

Additional comments:

You have my permission to use any of my comments in presentations or articles about Teachers as Leaders

Please do not use my comments

Your Name is Optional

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