**School Districts Turn to Teachers to Lead**

**Rising demands push principals to tap teacher talent**

**By** [**Denisa R. Superville**](http://www.edweek.org/ew/contributors/denisa.superville_7151043.html)

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Marilyn Boerke, the principal of Liberty Middle School in Camas, Wash., a district of 6,400 students along the Columbia River, applauds the district's philosophy that encourages teachers to serve in school leadership roles and actively creates opportunities for them to do so.

Teachers are being recruited by the district—and many are stepping up—to run professional-development sessions, coach their peers, and help adapt curriculum to the common-core standards.

"We were dying on the vine as building administrators trying to manage everything that we needed to manage," said Ms. Boerke, who has been a principal for nine years.

As principals' responsibilities continue to grow, Camas and other like-minded districts are tapping their teacher corps to create meaningful leadership roles that are meant to address a number of pressing issues in public schools: reduce stress on building administrators, improve teaching and learning, and help retain new and veteran educators.

The teacher-leadership concept is not entirely new: In a sense, teachers have been leading for as long as they have been teaching. But the movement was infused with new vigor last year with the announcement of the [**Teach-to-Lead Initiative**](http://teachtolead.org/), a partnership between the U.S. Department of Education and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The nation's two largest teachers' unions and the associations representing principals and administrators have also signed on to the program, which is aimed at training and guiding teachers to take on leadership roles in both policy and practice.

Even before that most recent boost, many districts and states-including Camas in Washington state and the state of Tennessee-have been tapping the expertise of their most effective teachers to help roll out major policy initiatives such as the common standards and new teacher-evaluation systems.

**Clearly Defined Roles**

The arguments for expanding teacher-leadership opportunities are many, but boil down to this: Principals simply cannot be expected to do the job alone. Advocates say that developing a competent back bench of teacher-leaders may help stem high principal-turnover rates—studies show that 50 percent of principals leave their schools after three years—and increase retention for both new and veteran teachers.

"Effective principals understand that they need to tap into the talents of their most effective teachers to make sure that they have the largest impact on student achievement," said Lindsay Sobel, the executive director of [**Teach Plus**](http://www.teachplus.org/) Massachusetts, a chapter of the national organization that trains teacher-leaders to work in challenging urban schools, including in Chicago, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, and Memphis, Tenn. The group's signature T3 initiative prepares teacher-leaders to work in turnaround schools. "When that's done in a very thoughtful and structured way, that's when you see the real change. It's not just a matter of principals delegating, but [a matter] of a real, thoughtful implementation of teacher leadership."

Groups that are focused on preparing teacher-leaders say the roles must be clearly defined and fit the school's and district's needs. Leaders should go through a rigorous selection process and should be those who have displayed stellar leadership skills and are superior teachers. They should have access to professional development and training in areas that include leading and working with adult leaders, curriculum, and communication. They should receive a stipend or other compensation as recognition of the role's importance to the school.

The intentional development of teacher-leadership roles is still nascent in the United States when compared with England. There, teachers know from the first day on the job the leadership roles they can assume and the training-education, professional development, and practical experiences-that they need to get there, according to Jonathan A. Supovitz, the director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, in his recent paper, [**"Building a Lattice for School Leadership,"**](http://www.cpre.org/sites/default/files/researchreport/2027_leadershipengland.pdf) which compares leadership development in the United States and England.

Some districts have been actively working to fix the deficiency that Mr. Supovitz identified. Boston and the District of Columbia, for example, have built career ladders into their teachers' union contracts and provide additional compensation for each step.

**'Transparent and Inclusive'**

Through Leadership Initiative For Teachers, or LIFT, teachers in the District of Columbia's system can move to "advanced," "distinguished," and "expert" teachers, earning more money along the way and qualifying to serve in greater leadership capacities. An advanced teacher can serve as an ambassador who helps with teacher recruitment and selection, for example, while a distinguished teacher can apply for a number of prestigious fellowships, including one that allows select educators to work on K-12 policy issues and another for high-performing secondary mathematics teachers.

In 2013, the district also created Teacher-Leadership Innovation, or TLI, a hybrid teacher-leadership position that allows teachers to spend up to half their time in the classroom and half serving in a leadership role. Some coach and mentor other teachers, lead new approaches to teaching writing, or develop positive behavior incentive programs.

The TLI fellows receive a $2,500 annual stipend, which is paid for in part through the federal [**Teacher Incentive Fund grant**](http://www2.ed.gov/programs/teacherincentive/index.html), a competitive-grant program to promote teaching initiatives in poor communities.

Scott Thompson, the deputy chief of human capital for teacher effectiveness the District of Columbia system, said the program has had a positive impact on principals and on improving school culture.

"What we see is that when teachers are included in decision making processes, when they are included as leaders, the broader set of teachers in the school feel like the decisionmaking is more transparent and inclusive," Mr. Thompson said. "They feel valued, they are more likely to feel that the school is a place where the principals care about teachers [and] listen to their voices."

In Marion County, Fla., individual principals examine their schools' needs and try to match those needs with their teachers' strengths.

Jayne Ellspermann, the principal of West Port High School in Marion County and the 2015 National Principal of the Year, actively invites talented teachers to shoulder additional responsibilities outside the classroom, based on their expertise, interests, and career goals. Fourteen of Ms. Ellspermann's former teachers have gone on to become principals.

One, Benjamin Whitehouse, who Ms. Ellspermann hired as a world history teacher in his first year out of graduate school, is now principal of the district's North Marion High School.

After learning that Mr. Whitehouse was interested in administration, Ms. Ellspermann helped him try out different hats-from club adviser, to testing coordinator, athletic coach, and eventually assistant principal in charge of discipline.

"It was much easier for me stepping into my first year [as a full-fledged principal] because I had done pretty much every job there was to do in high school at that point," Mr. Whitehouse said.

**Not Just a Steppingstone**

While some see the teacher-leadership roles as a steppingstone for future principals, others see them as inherently important roles that should exist at every school and that are critical to building strong, successful schools.

In the Camas district, for example, administrators leaned on teacher-leaders to draft the district's template for writing and measuring student-growth goals, which are required under Washington state's teacher-evaluation system. Without the teacher-leaders, the task would have fallen on principals, who were already juggling a host of other duties, said Ms. Boerke, the principal of Camas' Liberty Middle School.

There was also another positive outcome from using teacher-leaders: The resulting model was accepted by teachers because they had devised the framework, the time frame for evaluation, and the tools of evidence that would be used, she said.

Ms. Boerke said teachers can also lead professional development in ways that administrators cannot. By relying more on the expertise of their teachers, Ms. Boerke said she has additional time to observe what is happening in the classrooms.

"Now I can go in and see what the teachers are doing, knowing very well what their growth goals are," Ms. Boerke said. "And I can give them just-in-time feedback on maybe tweaking an assessment or asking a question in a different way to get to what I know their learning goal is."

"I just love my work again," Ms. Boerke said. "If we want to retain principals, this is what we need to do—it's share the workload, share the responsibility for teaching and learning. ... When those test scores come out, I feel like I have a team, that we can work through what went well, what didn't go well, as opposed to me seeing it all by myself. More brains are better than one. Anytime you collaborate with like-minded people, amazing things can happen."

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