



A Union of Professionals

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Leadership in Teaching



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Our Mission

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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What Is Teacher Leadership?

Teaching is the most important in-school factor in student learning, but top-down accountability policies, such as teacher evaluations based on standardized test scores, have focused on sorting and firing teachers rather than on supporting them, providing the tools they need and treating them as the experts they are. These policies have discouraged innovation and demoralized teachers. The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives us an opportunity to shift away from a test-and-punish accountability system and move to a system that focuses on helping children engage with curriculum and provide other opportunities that reignite the love for learning.

We must build a new system that includes professional capacity and accountability. Leadership is crucial to ensuring that teaching is recognized for the professional status it deserves; and teachers need time, tools and trust to obtain and hold these leadership positions. Like other professions, such as medicine and law, ownership of standards and continuous improvement of quality of practice should be held by those in the profession.¹

So what is teacher leadership? In its simplest form, it is a set of skills demonstrated by teachers who have an influence that extends beyond their own classroom.² In essence, most teachers can and do demonstrate leadership skills through their daily interactions with students and peers. However, it takes a collaborative structure to elevate those skills into something that can have a transformative effect on students and schools. Teacher leadership in its most effective form utilizes teachers beyond the traditional four walls of an individual classroom with a top-down structure of authority, and recognizes that teachers are essential to the success of the school and district as a whole. Examples of leadership include working with colleagues as a mentor or coach, working on a school level as a department chair or multi-classroom support, or on a system level supporting building initiatives or broader policy work (see Policy Paper 2: Union Role in Teacher Leadership, for more).

High-performing schools and systems rely on all stakeholders to work to improve student achievement. For teachers in particular, this often has meant leaving the classroom to take on administrative roles or taking on additional

unrecognized or uncompensated work. That, however, takes good teachers out of the classroom and implies that teaching is only a means to an end rather than a fulfilling and important profession in itself. To improve student performance, we must allow teachers to have leadership roles that let them remain in the classroom and contribute to the school in different ways. Teachers need a voice in schools—not simply by having input on day-to-day school functions, but also by having substantial control over the curriculum, instructional tools, assessments and resources. This authority is part of what it means to be a professional, and if teachers are to feel like and be seen as professionals, they need to be treated as the experts they are.³

Policymakers in the U.S. often try to compare our nation to other countries on international benchmarks without looking at the structures behind those test results. Countries with successful education systems, such as Finland and Singapore, develop the profession of teaching so that all students have access to great teachers at every level.⁴ Through this use of professional capital, these countries are able to attract, develop and retain the best teachers. They also focus on social capital—how those teachers and other stakeholders work together to move the profession forward.

The OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) states that leadership in schools is the improvement of instructional practice and continuous learning by all regardless of role.⁵ This idea of distributed leadership, where staff and school boards participate in roles and responsibilities in different ways, can contribute to improvements in school

outcomes.⁶ Leadership spread among teams, rather than individuals, helps school development by contributing to increased effectiveness. Top-down management and accountability, which our country has seen time and again in the past few decades, do little to develop teachers as professionals or to build human capital within the school and district.

Leadership Opportunities

Teachers already are taking on active leadership roles in their schools, but this is an ever evolving process that needs support from all stakeholders. As Andreas Schleicher, director of OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills, says, "Collaboration doesn't just fall from the sky."⁷ We must create structures and strategies where everyone works together to improve teaching and learning. There are already a number of ways in which teachers can be leaders, and there are many organizations that focus on building teacher leadership, such as the Center for Teaching Quality and Teachers of the Year.

With the advent of ESSA, along with state and local commitments, we can increase opportunities for teachers to be leaders. States and districts now will have the flexibility to create new systems that can provide teachers with the opportunity to be true leaders in and out of the classroom. ESSA provides grants to states to fund yearlong school leader residency programs for principals and other school leaders, especially to serve students in high-needs schools. Professional development of peer evaluators and educators is included as an activity that could be funded to help improve student achievement. Career pathways, induction and mentoring programs, and other professional development that improves instruction and student achievement are also included, as well as an emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) instructional leaders.

Teacher leadership opportunities are necessary and contribute to that professional oversight as well as to school success in a variety of ways.

- *Career Ladders*—Leadership opportunities help to create career ladders of increased responsibility for teachers beyond their traditional in-class role. Teachers, particularly those in their first 10 years of teaching, have higher attrition rates when they feel that their school or district is not meeting their desire to grow as teachers and leaders.⁸ Leadership opportunities help keep high-quality teachers in the classroom, which saves on long-term costs and ensures experience and expertise in schools.
- *Human and Social Capital*—Teacher leadership increases human capital and contributes to school improvement efforts. Schools benefit from the guidance and contributions of those who have spent the most time in the building and therefore have the most deeply rooted institutional memory. Human and social capital are predictors of student improvement, and schools need both the stock of high-quality teachers and the networks of relationships and collaboration that teacher leadership offers.⁹ Countries with top-performing school systems constantly develop the professional capital of all teachers.¹⁰
- *School Climate and Culture*—Teacher leadership helps to develop and enhance school climate and culture, which contributes to improved student achievement.¹¹ Leadership, when shared amongs teachers, principals, and students, helps to foster in all parties a stronger sense of empowerment, engagement, self-efficacy and motivation, which are all factors in creating a positive school climate.

- *Student Outcomes*—Schools that are staffed by experienced, collaborative teachers over an extended time period generate the largest student achievement gains. Lesson studies in Japan, where teachers work together to develop and improve lessons, have shown an increase in student achievement gains. Likewise, a longitudinal study of data on students in North Carolina showed a link between extended teacher collaboration and student achievement gains.¹²
- *Support for Principals*—Teacher leaders can provide increased schoolwide support for principals who have limited time or expertise. Schools need engagement from all stakeholders, and when teachers are included in decision-making, they are more likely to implement and sustain change while maintaining high-quality practice.¹³

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