



A Union of Professionals

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Union Role in Teacher Leadership



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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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How Can Teachers Lead?

The AFT has long recognized the importance of teachers as leaders and has supported efforts to recognize them. In recent decades, more organizations have created programs to promote teacher leadership, and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes opportunities for states and local educational agencies to develop and promote school leadership programs. All teachers can lead by sharing information with their colleagues and by learning from one another.* Other leadership roles are more formal, and they can include peer-to-peer leaders, school-level leaders, and system leaders.

- *Peer-to-Peer Leader*—This leader provides direct, personal support to colleagues. A mentor provides support for new or struggling teachers. They can be role models in all areas, from specific areas of instruction and curriculum, to school policies and procedures, to building navigation and politics. A mentor must be knowledgeable and skilled. One example of a peer mentor/coach is through peer assistance and review (PAR) programs. PAR exists in several districts across the country; expert teachers serve as evaluators of their peers while providing constant support on curriculum, teaching practice and other areas that are needed. PAR programs are designed to help teachers who are new to a district or to the profession, as well as teachers who are deemed ineffective or in need of improvement.

A coach is a leader who is a specialist in a particular area and assists colleagues in developing that area. An instructional specialist/coach is focused on assisting colleagues on implementing effective teaching strategies in specific subject areas or with specific student populations. This support can include providing tips on differentiating instruction or on planning lessons with other teachers. A data coach supports instruction through analyzing student data to determine strategies for improvement.

A curriculum specialist/coach has a deep understanding of content standards and can assess how effectively a curriculum is meeting student needs. The leader works with colleagues to help them understand and follow the curriculum. These specialists may also work with other teachers and administrators to develop new curricula and assessments.

- *School-Level Leader*—This leader works with groups of teachers, between classrooms and among staff members. A school leader assumes responsibilities outside the classroom, such as serving on a committee or acting as a grade or department chair.

* United States Census Bureau/American FactFinder. "Children Characteristics: Pittsburgh city, PA" 2009–2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey Office, 2012, accessed Sept. 28, 2016. <http://factfinder2.census.gov>

A multiclassroom leader works with colleagues inside the classroom, leading others by demonstrating lessons, co-teaching, observing, co-planning and providing other on-the-job support. Teachers can learn from watching what excellent practice looks like, and they need the time for feedback and conversation about what they saw and how to implement best practices in their own classrooms. An example of this comes from Japan, where lesson study allows teachers to work together on a regular basis to create lessons, watch each other teach the lessons, and then discuss what worked and areas in need of improvement. This type of leader shepherds that work to ensure continuous collaboration.

A professional learning facilitator guides professional development opportunities among staff members. Teachers can learn from each other and focus on what most directly improves student learning. One example is professional learning communities where teachers are organized in collaborative groups, with a leader to help run and coordinate the PLC.

- *System Leader*—This leader supports learning by taking on roles outside the building, such as supporting school initiatives or representing the school on task forces or committees. Policy leaders can advocate for policy changes through research or community engagement. This leader looks at the bigger picture to advocate for change on the school, district, state or federal level.

Union Role in Teacher Leadership

The AFT noticed the lack of teacher voice in education policy discussions in our country. Why weren't the people in the classroom — the experts — asked for their input on how to help ensure our nation's children have the best opportunities to learn? To help answer this question, the AFT designed our **Teacher Leaders Program** to help prepare teachers to be the ones facilitating discussion of the issues that impact our profession both locally and nationally.

The program identifies and brings together a group of AFT teacher members to learn how to take active leadership roles in their schools, unions and communities. These teachers take time from already maxed schedules to meet with their colleagues one Saturday a month to discuss issues in their district and state. Through their work in the program, they then serve as catalysts to build the profession and strengthen the union and our connection to the community as a means of generating support and understanding of public schools.

Teachers involved in the program receive training and guidance in framing practical policy positions that relate to improved student achievement; conducting research in classrooms and schools; engaging the public and elected officials in community conversations about education; participating on advisory boards, panels, and task forces; developing policy recommendations based on research conducted; and publishing and disseminating findings and recommendations nationwide. Through this work, local unions have played an active role in

defining and developing teacher leaders. Teachers have a voice and opportunity to make school and policy changes that can positively impact their students.

Participants in the program have had opportunities to make substantial changes at their schools, such as putting into practice the Socratic seminar and creating a professional development module; piloting a model classroom focused on inclusion for students with disabilities and English language learners; and providing citywide professional development on working with ELLs. This program also gives teachers a better understanding of their union on both the local and national levels and introduces teachers to an expanse of professional development opportunities.

The National Education Association (NEA) also has taken strides to promote teacher leadership. It established a [Leadership Agenda](#) with three frames for Next Generation Leadership for teachers and other educators. First, the NEA believes that great teaching begins with instructional leadership in the classroom where teachers are also multiclassroom leaders whose doors are open to colleagues and to the community. Second, teachers should also be encouraged and nurtured to become policy leaders so they can have an impact on teaching and learning. Third, development is essential for teachers as school leaders who work collaboratively inside and outside of the union to create solutions to improve teaching and learning.

Programs Targeting Teacher Leadership

A variety of other organizations in this country have focused on building teacher leadership through one or more leadership roles, and the AFT has utilized or partnered with several programs that we feel support the development of teachers as leaders.

- *Center for Teaching Quality Collaboratory*—This virtual community helps connect teachers across the globe to share insights, ideas and innovations. Teachers can interact through the larger collaboratory or through smaller groups for more focused discussions. One of the smaller labs is Teacher Powered Schools, where teachers are school leaders with the autonomy to design and run schools, and thus are fully responsible for the success of their school. Teachers make the decisions that influence school success, on such issues as curriculum, budget and selecting personnel. Teachers can also be department or program leaders within the school. There are approximately 90 of these schools across the country; AFT locals in Cincinnati (Ohio), St. Paul and Minneapolis (Minnesota), and Rochester (New York), as well as the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, have contract language that supports teacher autonomy, such as allowing them to design and run schools.
- *Teach to Lead*—The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the U.S. Department of Education have led a joint initiative to provide opportunities to support existing teacher leaders. This includes providing resources, facilitation of stakeholder conversations, and the

encouragement of professional collaborations to develop and amplify the work of teachers. There have been a series of regional summits and labs to highlight existing work and to share resources among various networks; several AFT members have participated in this work as policy leaders who help to inform, guide and develop systematic improvements that will benefit students.

- *Teachers of the Year*—The National Network of State Teachers of the Year is an organization of teacher **policy leaders** who seek to transform the teaching profession by using their respected voice to advance the practice, and to support great teaching and learning for all students. The goal of this group is to advance teacher leadership through policy as well as in the field, with an aim to create the kind of profession that attracts, develops, retains and values talented teachers. One example of the group’s work is the publication of model standards for teacher leadership developed in collaboration with several other education organizations, including the AFT and NEA.

Teacher Leadership in Action

Teachers in a Minnesota school took on a **curriculum leadership** role in 2011 and wrote their own math textbooks. Existing textbooks did not meet the curricular needs of their students or align with state standards, so teachers worked together to create new virtual textbooks. Through the leadership of these teachers, the school was able to save money on the purchase of textbooks, provide students with books that helped them meet standards and improve their math proficiency and create a collaborative working environment. Schools across the country have started to use this customized textbook model as a way for teachers to take ownership of what happens in their schools.

Teachers from the Washington Teachers’ Union (D.C.) are taking on the role of **policy leaders**. Through their roles in the local union, several teachers saw the need for education among their colleagues and community on the implications of and opportunities for action from the enactment of ESSA. They created a series of presentations to be shared to help educate, engage and energize stakeholders. These presentations were made in the spring of 2016.

Mona Al-Hayani, a teacher from Toledo, Ohio, and vice-president of the Toledo Federation of Teachers, used the action research and advocacy skills she developed through her year in AFT’s Teacher Leaders Program to address the problem of human trafficking. She recognized a need and became a school leader, developing a districtwide practitioner training focused on awareness and mitigation of human trafficking. This training will have long-lasting effects for her school and community.

Peer assistance and review programs combine evaluation with **mentoring and coaching**. A handful of AFT and NEA districts across the country use this program, based on The Toledo Plan, which gives experienced teachers the opportunity to provide their colleagues with ongoing instructional support and guidance in all areas of teaching. PAR leaders are experts in content

and practice, and while they leave the classroom for their tenure in the program, most typically return to the classroom with renewed energy and an expanded teaching repertoire. PAR programs are typically instituted from a labor-management agreement.

The Oliver Partnership School in Lawrence, Mass., is an example of a teacher-powered school. Since this elementary school opened in 2013, teachers have been making decisions on curriculum, instruction and assessments. Teachers in the building embody a **variety of types of leaders**, working collaboratively to help support the learning of all students. Teachers have a voice in daily school decisions, which leaves them feeling enthusiastic about the school and their work.



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Item number: 39-1016003