

## CHAPTER 4

# Teachers as Leaders: The Heart of the High Leadership Capacity School

Teachers who choose the path of teacher leadership . . . become owners and investors in their schools, rather than mere tenants.

—Roland Barth (1999)

All people yearn for vitality and purpose. Teachers who exhibit vitality are energized by their own curiosities, their colleagues, and their students; they find joy and stimulation in the daily dilemmas of teaching and are intrigued by the challenge of improving adult learning communities. Teachers become fully alive when their schools and districts provide them with opportunities for skillful participation, inquiry, dialogue, and reflection. Such environments foster leadership.

It is no surprise that teacher leadership is at the heart of the high leadership capacity school. Because teachers represent the largest and most constant group of professionals in schools and districts, their full participation in the work of leadership is necessary for high leadership capacity. This is a comforting thought, because the path to leadership is so clear, yet also a

disquieting one, because many find the path difficult.

Why do so many principals and superintendents find teacher leadership so difficult to come by? There are several reasons: a philosophy that reserves the work of leadership for formal authority roles, a hierarchical view of authority and power, and an insistence that teachers could be coaxed into leadership if presented with the right incentives, to name a few. Such attitudes produce short-term, shallow, and unsustainable results. Using external incentives to motivate teachers, for instance, can have a deleterious effect on leadership. Short-term incentives that elicit mechanistic responses from some teachers can generate resentment in the long run by encouraging reliance on such rewards. True development is bound to be stunted by incentive systems

- Schools in Kansas City, Kansas, employ a School Improvement Facilitator (SIF) to serve one or two schools as a change agent to facilitate the learning conversations in the school. The SIF is chosen from outstanding teacher leaders, is highly trained, and participates in networks with similar leaders on an ongoing basis.
- The intervention resource teacher in Cupertino, California, offers support for at-risk children and functions as a whole-school change agent by helping to develop curriculum, providing in-service training, coaching and mentoring new teachers, and serving as a liaison to initiatives outside the school. This role falls somewhere between teacher and administrator, and draws from the best of both worlds.
- The assistant principal in Calgary, Canada, is not only responsible for many management duties but also serves as a schoolwide change agent, like the SIF and the Intervention Resource Teacher. Careful attention is given to selection, nurturing, and performance of the assistant principals in Calgary, including a major annual conference and systematic professional development. (Assistant principals are teacher leaders in Alberta, as school administrators are part of the teaching force.)

## Leadership Actions

Many actions are essential to teacher leadership, but I will give special attention here to conversations related to coaching, learning communities, mentoring, and networking. To foster teacher leadership, we begin by initiating conversations. These come in many forms, including

- **One-on-one**, in which coaching questions are asked and ideas are shared;
- **Inquiring**, which revolves around dialogues about data;

- **Partnering**, in which educators engage with parents and community members; and
- **Sustaining**, during which long-range plans are developed.

All of these conversations share the following common elements (provided, of course, that they are undertaken with positive intent):

- Shared purpose
- Search for understanding
- Reflection on beliefs and experiences
- Revelation of ideas and information
- Respectful listening (Lambert et al., 1995, 2002)

As we have seen in Chapter 2, dialogues are the best types of conversations for evoking thoughts and feelings about our students and ourselves. Being listened to carefully and listening carefully to others has an almost magical effect on what we say: issues and problems are held at arms length and examined from all sides, instead of being subjected to quick opinions and ready solutions.

## COACHING

Coaching stems from the same principles as dialogue, but entails an even more personal approach, since it usually occurs one on one. Although instructional coaching has been with us for many decades, very little attention has been given to *leadership* coaching, in which questions are meant to expand the respondent's focus from being a reflective practitioner to being a leader. This is reflected in the Continuum of Emerging Teacher Leadership in Appendix C, when respondents evolve from exhibiting the characteristics in the left-hand column to also exhibiting those in the right-hand column. In Figure 4.1, selected actions from the four categories of the continuum—adult development, dialogue, collaboration, and organizational

change—are matched with accompanying coaching questions.

As these examples suggest, coaching is an invaluable aspect of leadership development. And because student learning and adult learning are parallel ideas, leadership coaching can be linked with instructional coaching quite easily. Many of the same questions can be asked in both cases, including, “What is your desired outcome for your students/team?” “What role will you play in helping to achieve your objectives?” “What evidence will you look for to assess whether your student/team goals have been reached?”

#### LEADERSHIP MENTORING

Leadership mentors are usually teacher leaders themselves. In Chapter 3, we saw how the mentoring relationship between Principal Trevor and Jennifer led to her development as a teacher leader. This mentoring process involved coaching, feedback, modeling, provisions for leadership experiences, training, and participation in arenas outside of the classroom and school. Mentors often see greater possibility in their mentees than do the mentees themselves, who tend to live up to their mentors’ expectations when a deep belief in their capacities is expressed. The mentoring process can help educators to become better at problem solving and decision making, offers both support and challenge, and facilitates a professional vision (Lipton & Wellman, 2001).

#### TEACHER LEADERSHIP SELF-ASSESSMENT

The Rubric of Emerging Teacher Leadership in Appendix B and the Continuum of Emerging Teacher Leadership in Appendix C can help educators assess their own leadership actions by helping them identify the skills and understandings critical to teacher leadership, as well as by serving as a supporting framework for conversations related to coaching, mentoring, and professional development.

## 2 High Leadership Capacity Schools As Learning Communities

The activities and relationships discussed above exist within a learning community: an environment that is vibrant and unified around the shared purpose of student learning. High leadership capacity schools are excellent learning communities, as both environments involve most of the same features, including shared vision, inquiry, reflective practice, and collective responsibility. The members of learning communities are bonded to a whole that is larger and stronger than the sum of its parts. In Chapters 2 and 3 we saw how schools enabled teachers to share ideas and knowledge that led to ways of creating shared knowledge together. A high leadership capacity school is one in which teachers choose to lead because their environment has allowed them to do so.

#### NETWORKS

Networks provide teachers with an extended learning community in which to develop their professional self-concepts. In regional or national networks, teachers see themselves as part of a broader profession and are listened to with an intensity and respect that may not exist in their schools; hearing and seeing how other teachers think and interact allow them to fine-tune their perceptions of their own roles as teachers. The National Writing Project is an excellent example of such a network. According to Lieberman and Wood (2001), its practices include:

- Approaching every colleague as a valued contributor
- Viewing teachers as experts
- Creating forums for sharing, dialogue, and critique
- Turning ownership of learning over to the learners

### 3 Enculturation of New Teachers and Principals

Enculturation can imply a process of training educators to assume traditional roles that protect the status quo. You know the rhetoric: “Don’t speak up for the first three years,” “Don’t sit in that chair,” “Don’t ask questions,” “Our last principal didn’t ask us to do *his* work!” “Our motto is ‘sink or swim.’” But enculturation can also mean helping new teachers and principals to hit the road running, welcoming them to the staff from the very beginning, and encouraging them to become part of a strong learning community. This second definition is the one I wish to focus on here.

#### NEW AND BEGINNING TEACHERS

Thoughtful enculturation is critical to sustainability and can help weave the cloth of community together so that sharp shifts in the school culture—the arrival of many new teachers, for example—do not disrupt the flow of the school’s improvement processes.

Janet Gless, associate director of the New Teacher Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz, points out that support for beginning teachers can contribute to building leadership capacity. Veteran teachers benefit by assuming the important professional leadership role of mentor, thus accepting responsibility for the professional success of their colleagues (much as they do, in their roles as classroom teachers, for the success of their students). Veteran teachers powerfully influence their new colleagues by modeling the professional norms and behaviors that contribute to quality instruction and teacher leadership, such as engaging in reflective inquiry about classroom practice, focusing on and accepting responsibility for student learning, striving continuously to learn new skills and adapt them to classroom practice, and

valuing collegueship and professional dialogue in the service of high professional standards.

In Saratoga, California, new-teacher mentors are known as “buddy teachers” and help newcomers with such tasks as preparing the learning environment, getting ready for their first open house and parent conferences, securing materials and resources (including discretionary funds for purchasing materials), orienting themselves to programs and texts, and generally negotiating the many logistical and management duties of teaching. All teachers in Saratoga serve as buddy teachers, and thus remain familiar with the challenges facing new teachers. This awareness enables the voices of novices to be heard and acknowledged. In addition to buddy teachers, all new teachers are assigned “consulting teachers” to observe their teaching, coach them, and engage them in professional planning and self-assessment. By learning the principles of adult learning and successful practice, developing coaching skills, and creating learning experiences for their colleagues, new-teacher mentors, buddies, and consultants develop important leadership skills of their own.

Teacher induction programs that provide adequate sanctioned time for new teachers to work with their mentor colleagues can help develop leaders from the very beginning. Induction programs teach new recruits to communicate their dilemmas, discoveries, and accomplishments to other colleagues, and allow new teachers to begin their careers understanding the value of an environment that supports adult learning and, by extension, teacher leadership. Effective induction programs help new teachers to focus on their capacity to make a difference in the learning of individual students, thus helping keep their passion for teaching alive. Guided by professional standards and the understanding that teacher learning is essential for successful practice, new teachers can emerge as leaders early in their careers.

of a school, the more these constraining factors seem to dissolve into the background. But in a Quadrant 1 school, these barriers dominate, allowing educators to blame external forces and avoid responsibility. It is not uncommon to hear the following types of comments in a Quadrant 1 school:

- “If the 6th grade teacher had taught my 7th graders to be responsible for their homework, we wouldn’t have these problems.”
- “I’m not paid to do administrative work; let the principal make the decision.”
- “Joe left in his third year. He didn’t understand what it meant to teach here. He was always volunteering to work with the principal and that doesn’t bode well at our school.”
- “I teach the students who are ready to learn.”

By the time a school nears Quadrant 4 status, those who had previously built barriers will now be participating, or at least not undermining the efforts of those who are. Having gained experience with leading, support, and feedback, Quadrant 4 educators can help cultivate leadership among colleagues. As teachers become more skillful in their work with one another, their confidence grows, they come to see themselves differently, and the boundaries of teaching broaden to include the classroom, the school, the community, and the profession.

Teachers who have been in their positions for at least three years will have developed some routines, both in the classroom and in the rest of their professional lives, that must be “unlearned” if they are to become true leaders. Of course, we see from our students’ experiences that unlearning long-held habits is often difficult. A constructivist approach to leadership is therefore particularly important. We begin the journey away from old habits of mind by examining

current assumptions, beliefs, and experiences: How do I now think of teacher leadership? What assumptions do I hold? What experiences have I had? Teachers who are unwilling to do this are often thought of as resistant.

### Intervening with “Resistant” Teachers

Unfortunately, some teachers have been disappointed once too often by unfulfilled promises, or have drawn tight boundaries around their professional lives, and are consequently resistant to change. Even if there are only a few such teachers in a school, they can draw energy from the whole and may even sabotage the community’s work in an effort to sustain the status quo. Resistant teachers often refuse to participate in productive ways, envision themselves as learners, contribute to the learning of other adults, or observe norms of civil and professional behavior.

The school environment is the most significant contributor to resistance: teachers who resist building leadership capacity in schools with Quadrant 1 norms will perform differently in Quadrant 4 schools. Each environment brings out different inner resources and attitudes from individuals, creating the theater in which behaviors are learned and practiced.

In a Quadrant 4 school, teachers tend either to develop the relationships suggested in Figure 4.2 or leave the school (either by transferring, changing professions, or retiring). The relationships suggest an interdependent learning community in which teachers take collective responsibility for the school. When encouraging teachers to improve their practice, it is essential to provide them with support from administrators and colleagues in the form of clear expectations, classroom observations and instructional coaching, professional development, rich opportunities for satisfaction with intrinsic rewards, supervision, and evaluation. Working with a

continuum line at the top of the rubric that best represents you. Select three areas of potential growth toward greater teacher leadership and discuss your plans. Suggest to team members how they might support you.

5. At a faculty meeting, divide into pairs and discuss the following question for five minutes: "What strengths do I bring to the role of leader?" After discussing, write for five minutes on the same question. In small groups, share the strengths that you have identified for yourself, paying close attention to any patterns within the group. Examine the Rubric of Emerging Teacher Leadership for the strengths your group has just discussed. Discuss what you have discovered and possible uses of the rubric.

6. In pairs, refer to the Roland Barth quote above. Using Figure 4.1 as a reference, develop three questions each that could enable you to move toward greater teacher leadership.

7. Set a time to meet with your partner from activity six above to coach each other in leadership. Use the questions that you have developed as well as any others that occur to

you during the session. Probe for specificity (e.g., "Tell me more about what you are thinking," "What would that look like?" "Give me an example.").

8. Establish coaching sessions twice a month. Combine these sessions with peer instructional coaching. Debrief as a whole group in staff or team meetings.

9. Develop a personal plan for teacher leadership. Consider the following questions:

- What major understandings have you developed about yourself as you have experienced and read about teacher leadership?
- Visualize the teacher leader you would like to be. What does she do and say?
- How does she respond to others?
- What additional skills, knowledge, or attitudes will you need in order to achieve your desired image of a teacher leader? How will you develop these skills, knowledge, and attitudes?
- What do you want your students to say about you 20 years from now?