

Teacher Leadership

*That Strengthens
Professional Practice*



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Teacher Leadership: Breaking New Ground

The concept of teacher leadership is not new; indeed, every educator has encountered colleagues whom they would describe as leaders, individuals to whom they look for professional advice and guidance, and whose views matter to others in the school. The educational literature on teacher leadership is, furthermore, fairly extensive. To this point, however, the critical characteristics of teacher leaders, as distinct from teachers who are assigned to leadership positions, has not been fully described. This book fills that void and is offered in recognition that many teachers don't regard teacher leadership as a stepping stone toward administration; rather it represents its own way of working in schools and making a contribution to student learning.

The principal characteristic of teacher leadership, as described here, is that it is completely *informal*. Teacher leaders don't gain their authority through an assigned role or position; rather, they *earn* it through their work with both their students and their colleagues. Teacher leaders play a highly significant role in the work of the school and in school improvement efforts. Precisely because of its informal and voluntary nature, teacher leadership represents the highest level of professionalism. Teacher leaders are not being paid to do their work; they go the extra mile out of a commitment to the students they serve.

Part I begins with three stories of teachers who illustrate these characteristics. Subsequent chapters describe teacher leadership in some detail and enumerate what it is that teacher leaders actually do. In other words, what do teacher leaders do that is different from the work of excellent teachers who are not teacher leaders? Lastly, Part I concludes with a discussion of the critical matter of school culture and the impact it has not only on what teacher leaders do, but also on how they do it.

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Leadership Stories

The term “teacher leadership,” which has been much in the professional news of late, has been used in a number of different senses. Its meaning, as used in this book, is best illustrated by three examples.

A New Way to Do Field Trips

In 1997, Margaret¹, a 4th grade teacher in Michigan, took her students (as she had for many years) on a field trip to the local historical museum. The outing was fairly typical of such excursions: some preparation for what the children might see, a lot of “herding” by Margaret, a few parent volunteer chaperones, and children attempting to conceal (not very successfully) their boredom with presentations by the museum staff. In fact, Margaret remembers, the children exhibited “considerably more motivation for spending their money at the museum gift shop than learning about Michigan’s history.”

By the next year, things had changed. Margaret was dissatisfied with the quality of the learning in which her students were engaged. In fact, she was beginning to wonder whether the annual field trip was a wise expenditure of the district’s scarce resources. So

¹All the teachers described in this chapter are based on real individuals. Margaret’s story describes a project created by Margaret Holtschlag, a teacher in Haslett, Michigan. The project is now supported by the Michigan Department of Education and the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs, and sample lessons are available at www.biglesson.org. Elena’s story is an adaptation of an authentic situation. Tom’s account is a composite of several different people.

she arranged to meet with the education staff at the museum to consider alternatives. The result was the BIG History Lesson, in which Margaret's 4th graders spent an *entire week* at the museum!

Naturally, such an effort required a lot of planning, including meeting with the staff at the museum, locating a room the class could use for the week, and arranging for transportation and parent helpers each day, to say nothing of structuring the week's activities to take full advantage of the many resources of the museum.

The concept has been extended since 1998 to include the BIG Zoo Lesson, the BIG Nature Lesson, the BIG Science lesson, and the BIG Culture Lesson, reaching 2,500 Michigan students in grades 1–8 from 12 districts in 2004–05. While at an off-campus site, students participate in lessons particular to that site and integrate work in language arts, mathematics, science, and history. Moreover, students engage in daily reflection on their activities, partly for closure and partly to structure the next day's activities.

One of the greatest benefits reported by both teachers and students is the opportunity for in-depth work. For example, in the BIG Zoo Lesson, students observe a single animal each day for a week, exploring such concepts as group behavior, camouflage, eating and sleeping habits, and use of tools. Such sustained focus is simply impossible in a traditional trip to the zoo. Some students report returning to the zoo with their own families, and instead of the normal walking around and commenting, "There's a zebra; those are the monkeys," they can share their own, much deeper, understandings of animal behavior.

Margaret's BIG Lesson concept has found eager converts all across the state and has attracted financial support from both public and private agencies. Margaret's own job has evolved; she coordinates the program part-time, helping to find additional sites, offering workshops for teachers, planning BIG Lesson weeks with teachers, and maintaining the Web site. In her "other" life, she has continued as a technology teacher three days a week in her original school.

Testimonials from both students and teachers attest to the value of the BIG Lesson concept. It is an idea that arose directly from the work of teaching, from the "bottom up." It is not the sort of idea that would have emerged from policymakers at the state level or indeed from most principals' offices. To be sure, other individuals and the context helped shape what the project has become, but the energy for it arose from the work of a teacher with an idea.