

# THE CONUNDRUM of TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Written by Tony Klemmer



NATIONAL ACADEMY  
OF ADVANCED TEACHER  
EDUCATION

# THE CONUNDRUM

## *of Teacher Leadership*

*Teacher Leadership is heralded as a central fix to the dearth of experienced high-performing teachers in U.S. schools. Creating career paths and additional leadership avenues for experienced teachers will retain them in the profession longer. There is a risk in promoting conventional notions of leadership in a profession that is comprised largely of individual contributors. If classroom mastery coupled with interpersonal skill development are not the emphases of professionally developing our best teachers, we may be left with the unintended consequence of leading our best teachers away from students into newly created “leadership” roles within the profession.*



### THE PROBLEM IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION TODAY

As many analysts have declared, in order to fix public schooling in America, we must attract and retain more top performing teachers in our nation’s classrooms. It is well documented that not enough talented individuals – not enough who graduate in the top third of their college classes – enter the profession of teaching today<sup>i</sup>. Of those talented individuals who do enter, far too many leave within five years<sup>ii</sup>. Reasons cited for the lack of sustained talent in the teaching profession range from the work environment of schools, the isolation of teaching, the lack of long term economic rewards when compared to other career choices, and the limits of upward mobility within a profession of individual contributors.

One suggested solution to this problem is the promise of Teacher Leadership. Give teachers more opportunities to advance within their profession. Give them new responsibilities. Give them new titles. Create senior staff roles in coaching, and peer observing, in Common Core implementation and curriculum and instruction. Create professional development programs to teach them leadership skills and how to manage other teachers and adults in their school buildings.

## What is Teacher Leadership, Really?

Our modern western society has a strong ubiquitous image of “leader as hero,” the individual who, through extraordinary personal effort and skill, steps into the fray to win the day. The modern leader, by definition, has followers, who through the charisma and direction of the leader, support his/her initiatives and literally follow. Models of leadership abound. Transformational, adaptive, distributed, shared, collaborative, parallel, hierarchical, command-and-control, authentic, servant and Level Five leadership name some of the choices. Teach teachers how to lead and create new tiers of responsibility within the profession, and they will stay.

Is this model of leadership really the answer to our dearth of competent, trained senior teachers in our public schools? The risk this approach exposes is an overemphasis on conventional notions of leadership in a profession largely constructed of individual contributors and peer-to-peer interactions. The conundrum of teacher leadership is its meaning in a profession of individuals who do not formally lead anyone.

Teachers still face students with 75% or more of their daily work time. Deepening their instructional practices should be front and center in any call to lead, both for the sake of their students and the students of their peers, peers they are expected to “lead.” There is a risk in applying the blunt instrument of business school leadership lessons in the educational setting. The role of a masterful teacher in interacting with other peers is very different from a first line supervisor in a company or junior officer in the military. Teacher leaders, so called, have very little authority, if any, and an enormous amount of responsibility, unlike their counterparts in other sectors. Their technical skills in moving student achievement are primary, and their ability to interact with other adults requires a critical new suite of skills. Overemphasizing leadership at the expense of classroom mastery, sends two potentially alarming signals to the profession: “Leadership is more important,” and, “You are good enough,” as a classroom teacher.

One charter school leader commented, “These development programs run the risk of thinly veiled prep programs for formal school leadership.” Another stat-

ed, “In one organization I know, if you are a classroom teacher beyond your fourth year, people think there is something wrong with you.” The implication being that, if a teacher has not moved into formal school leadership by then, they have not made the grade.

Leading from the classroom means continually working on the art and craft of teaching students, deepening content and pedagogical knowledge, and developing the interpersonal skills to transfer that body of knowledge and experience to peers, struggling teachers, and less experienced colleagues. This is what Public Impact’s Bryan Hassel described as, “the metacognitive understanding of masterful teaching.” Teachers are far more likely to seek out such peers when needing help than school leaders or outside experts, according to research by Professor Carrie Leana of the University of Pittsburgh<sup>iii</sup>. Honing skills in listening, observing, giving feedback, navigating interpersonal communications, teaming, facilitation, and managing up and across the organization are more valuable in a school context than leadership skills alone. Peer influencer, rather than teacher leader, should be the goal for these talented professionals.

Companies in the private sector have identified the power and importance of cultivating the skills of individual contributors in their organizations to influence their peers and have designed professional learning programs that teach interpersonal skills to complement the technical skill development programs for their best personnel. In one survey conducted in 2009 by Development Directions International, a consultancy that provides such programs to companies, over 60% of individual contributors state their intention to remain individual contributors during their careers and not to seek formal leadership roles<sup>iv</sup>. In a recent MetLife survey of teachers, that figure was 84 percent. These talented business professionals are exposed to deeper technical skill development and training in interacting with other adults to maximize their impact on organizational performance and peer influence. They are valued in their roles directly delivering the products or services to their clients in very much the same way that teachers should be valued in their roles directly working with students and peers.

## Masterful Teachers Supporting Their Peers

If the education sector wishes to attract, develop, and retain masterful teachers, the message should be, first and foremost, to develop their teaching and learning skills – the art and craft of teaching. If, as Malcolm Gladwell famously claimed, experts emerge only after 10,000 hours of practice and effort in their chosen work, then the strategy must focus on retaining teachers well beyond their fifth year in the profession<sup>v</sup>. As Rob Leichner, a 10th year board certified math teacher, department chair, and NAATE program graduate in Charlotte, N.C. said, “I have so much more to learn to become a masterful teacher.”

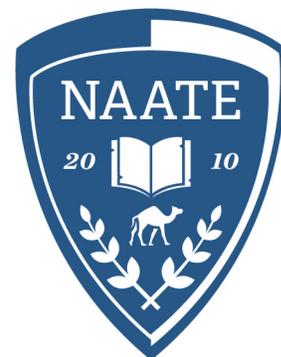
Any professional learning programs designed for elite teachers should strike an even balance between classroom mastery content and interpersonal skills development. The education sector would be better off deemphasizing the words “teacher leadership,” if it has the unintended consequence of creating the false promise of a vertical rise in the organization, more authority, and a formal span of control. Leading teacher peers is more Mahatma Gandhi than General MacArthur, more cajoling than commanding. This is where development programs should focus. Peer-to-peer exchanges and small group work require adeptness at interpersonal skills, not formal leadership training alone, and this is the real and important work of top tier teachers in school buildings.

## Winning the War on Public Schooling

Stephen Ambrose, in his book *Citizen Soldiers*, posits the claim that resourceful junior officers and enlisted men – our ordinary “citizen soldiers” – won WWII from the hedgerows of Normandy to the islands of the Pacific<sup>vi</sup>. They led from the front lines not with rank, title, and span of control, rather with ingenuity, perseverance, and quick thinking, through individual and small crew contributions. This is the kind of leadership needed within the education sector from teachers. Some will rise to school leaders and superintendents, but, if properly identified, trained, and deployed, the vast majority will win the war for quality public education on the front lines in their classrooms and school build-

ings through their teaching and interpersonal skills. In 1939, we had 150,000 trained military personnel in the U.S.; by 1944, we had over 8,000,000. Our country has the capacity to build a trained force of masterful teacher leaders who remain facing students, if it can muster the will. That is the essence of the leadership challenge and opportunity in the classroom teaching profession today.

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**naate.org**

**401.371.0001**

**166 VALLEY STREET, 6M-104**

**PROVIDENCE, RI 02909**

**INFO@NAATE.ORG**