

Douglas B. Reeves

## Model Teachers

**H**ow do educators learn? The answer to this question will vary depending on how we define the word *learn*. If the question means, "How do teachers and school leaders learn in order to pass tests in college or to pass licensing exams?" the answer will reflect relatively low levels of content acquisition, memorization, and recitation on demand. We can acquire this sort of learning in isolation: listening to a podcast, reading a text, or sitting in a lecture hall without a meaningful connection to anyone else in the room. But if the question means, as it should, "How do teachers and school leaders learn to improve their professional practice and make meaningful change in their schools?" then we get a different answer.



### The Influence of Teacher Leaders

Too frequently, the phrase *teacher leadership* has been associated with holding an elected position in an association or being assigned additional responsibilities by a school district. Although both of these instances may provide opportunities for leadership, neither completely satisfies the following definition: the act of influencing the classroom practices of professional educators (Reeves, 2008).

The importance of teachers' influence is confirmed by a recent survey my colleagues and I conducted of more than 300 teachers and administrators representing a mix of urban, rural, and suburban schools. In analyzing responses to an open-ended question about the greatest influences on respondents' professional practice, we found that internal factors (such as students, personal experience, colleagues, and family) had a greater influence than external factors (such as professional development, formal school leadership, and curriculum). In response

to a follow-up question about the degree of influence, direct modeling by colleagues was the most powerful factor by far.

Does this mean that the teacher next door is potentially more influential than books and lectures? Yes. The myth that professional development programs and lectures are sufficient to change professional practice has been challenged before (Guskey, 2000; Hirsh & Killion, 2007).

### Provide examples, not policy mandates.

Despite the evidence, however, many schools ignore the power of direct modeling by classroom teachers as the key to high-impact professional learning.

### Putting Teacher Modeling into Practice

Here are some practical ways that you can translate the research about teacher leadership and modeling into action.

*First, provide examples, not policy mandates.* Many schools claim to be implementing professional learning communities, effective assessment practices, and so on. But to narrow the gap between these advertised claims and daily reality, teachers must have accessible models of best practice. To make such models widely accessible, schools in Williamsville, New York, in Seattle; Washington, and in Orange County, California, capture authentic examples of minilessons and effective teacher collaboration on digital video and share them on DVDs and Web-based streaming video. It's often less expensive and more credible when schools create their own models rather than relying on slick, professionally produced videos. Authenticity beats soft lighting and careful scripts every time.

*Second, create a safe environment* for teachers to critically review and rehearse successful prac-

tices. The question that often stops attempts to use local teacher leaders as models is, What if our model lessons are not very good? Let's reconsider that question. In what other profession would we expect the first attempt to represent mastery? Attorneys rehearse their closing arguments, inviting peer review and expecting the fifth rehearsal to be superior to the first. Surgeons, pilots, pianists, and actors all expect to benefit from practice. Educators should not expect of themselves an initial perfection that eludes every other profession.

Third, create a bank of best practices, and expect members of the professional community to make deposits as well as withdrawals. The bank should include more than just success stories; supremely confident teacher leaders will also share their gaffes, posting what they learned from their biggest mistakes. Less experienced teachers may be reluctant to post a model lesson, but they can certainly share an anonymous case study of how a single student achieved a breakthrough

in overcoming a difficult academic, behavioral, or emotional challenge.

Fourth, establish boundaries without micromanagement. Teacher leaders are particularly sensitive to the balance between professional standards that call for consistency, on the one hand, and professional independence that allows for creativity on the other. Just as the most creative architect must operate with nonnegotiable boundaries of safety and regulatory compliance, so teachers must be expected to operate within established boundaries of professionalism. For example, in the hotly debated area of grading and reporting, leaders would be wise to establish boundaries of accuracy, fairness, and effectiveness, and then permit creativity and judgment within those boundaries.

### Risks and Rewards

When schools embrace the strategy of using outstanding teachers to influence the practice of their peers, adequate planning and communication are essen-

tial. Otherwise, the strategies that teacher leaders model might be regarded as little more than suggestions. But when school leaders provide sufficient administrative support and authority, establishing the expectation that professionalism means sharing best practice, the rewards—higher standards of professional excellence, improved engagement by staff and students, and most of all, improved practice—far outweigh the risks. ■

### References

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