Rural school districts across the United States are struggling to improve learning outcomes and opportunities for all students. Many rural districts suffer greatly from issues with attracting teachers and keeping them over the long term (Dadisman, et al., 2010). The reasons for such circumstances are specifically associated with working in a rural school district such as lower pay, fewer professional learning opportunities, and professional isolation (Appalachian Education Laboratory, 2005). These working conditions and lack of opportunities make rural districts prime recruitment ground for suburban and small city districts that can pay more and provide more varied pathways to professional growth. For these reasons, rural districts find it challenging to attract and hire high potential educators and retaining their most effective teachers.

These challenges are not insurmountable—and many rural districts are facing these issues head on. They are focused on developing teacher leadership roles through career ladders and other differentiated roles as a key strategy to attract promising teachers and retain effective and experienced educators.

In many districts, teachers typically have one career pathway—which begins as a classroom teacher, progresses to a department leadership position focused on curriculum, then a building leadership position as an assistant principal or principal, and then perhaps moving into central office administration. However, there are teachers who desire opportunities for advancement but also want to remain closer to the classroom at the instructional level.

Many states and districts have responded to this demand through the development of career ladders and differentiated leadership roles for teachers. For rural districts, this strategy has the potential to help attract and recruit new talent to schools while also keeping the most effective educators by providing opportunities for growth and development.

Teacher leadership is a not a new concept. However, in recent years it has taken on a new direction, going beyond the traditional role of serving on committees as teacher representatives or focused on a district or building level issue. Instead, teacher leadership is viewed as an agent of change. In this new context, teacher leadership can bridge the gap between teachers and administrators, providing opportunities for teachers to serve as coaches to fellow classroom teachers. As colleagues to building administrators, teacher leaders assist with the identification of educational challenges while partnering with each other to implement strategic initiatives and policies. Teacher leaders can straddle both worlds, serving as effective voices supporting innovation and improvement.

Through the Ohio Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) project, a partnership between the Ohio Department of Education, Battelle for Kids, and 23 school districts—many of which are rural and Appalachian—participants have had the opportunity to develop teacher leadership positions as a strategy to build district capacity for coaching new teachers, providing professional learning, and partnering with district administrators to introduce new initiatives. Further, these roles are also intended to encourage experienced professionals to stay in the district by providing new areas for professional growth and opportunity. To date, 22 of the 23 Ohio TIF districts have developed teacher leadership roles collaboratively through a concerted focus on identified problems of practice.
The advantages inherent in developing career ladders and teacher leadership opportunities are numerous, including:

- Enhancing and amplifying the capacity of building principals
- Serving in a mentorship role to onboard new teachers
- Providing peer support for struggling teachers
- Serving as an in-house trainer in areas of instructional practice for which teachers have expertise

**Principal Partnership**—This does not mean that principals delegate responsibilities to teachers; rather, a culture of distributed leadership may be born within a school building through the establishment of teacher leadership. The respected teacher leader not only has the positional authority, but is respected among colleagues and can facilitate continuous improvement.

Additionally, the role of teacher leader provides additional professional avenues for talented educators to grow. By providing differentiated roles and opportunities to share their practice with peers as a coach or mentor, supporting distributed leadership structures allows talented teachers to take on new responsibilities. These may be the roles needed to keep a talented teacher from leaving the district or the profession altogether.

**What are career ladders?**

- Innovative professional pathways through which individuals can more broadly impact and expand their role in their organization to support strategic goals and outcomes
- Also known as *career lattices* and *pathways*

**What are characteristics of teacher leaders?**

According to the Teacher Leader Model Standards developed by a consortium of thought leaders from across the country, there are seven domains that describe teacher leadership. These domains were established to set criteria describing the characteristics of teacher leadership position, roles, and responsibilities.

**The state of Ohio identifies seven key areas of teacher practice in the Ohio Standards for Educators**:  
1. Describing the professional expectations for all educators regarding pedagogy  
2. Content-knowledge  
3. Formative assessment  
4. Differentiated instruction  
5. Setting high expectations for students  
6. Collaboration with peers  
7. Communication with peers, students, their families, and district leadership

*Additional information about the Ohio Standards for Educators is available on the following page.*

By unpacking Ohio’s professional standards, districts can begin to consider what these standards look like in practice from a teacher leadership role. By using the teacher leadership standards to support the development of roles, responsibilities, and characteristics, schools are considering roles that are more versatile and meet a specific leadership need.

For example, Ohio’s Standard #1 states that “teachers understand student learning and development and respect the diversity of the student they teach.” One could expect that a teacher leader position focused on Standard #1 should also support a culture of collaboration amongst their peers to discuss and share best practices in their understanding of pedagogy. A teacher leader in a rural district focused on Standard #1 may also be responsible for mentoring and onboarding new teachers who are not familiar with the rural context to help them develop their understanding of the region’s culture and history as it relates to the students and community they serve.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Leader Model Standards</th>
<th>Ohio Standards for the Teaching Profession</th>
<th>Examples of Teacher Leadership Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DOMAIN 1:</strong> Fostering a Collaborative Culture to Support Educator Development and Student Learning</td>
<td><strong>STANDARD 1:</strong> StudentsTeachers understand student learning and development, and respect the diversity of the students they teach.</td>
<td>Teacher serves as a mentor or coach to beginning teachers through the Resident Educator Program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DOMAIN 2:</strong> Accessing and Using Research to Improve Practice and Student Learning</td>
<td><strong>STANDARD 2:</strong> Content Teachers know and understand the content area for which they have instructional responsibility.</td>
<td>Teacher leads efforts to align curriculum to new state standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DOMAIN 3:</strong> Promoting Professional Learning for Continuous Improvement</td>
<td><strong>STANDARD 3:</strong> Assessment Teachers understand and use varied assessments to inform instruction, evaluate, and ensure student learning.</td>
<td>Teacher serves as assessment literacy or formative instructional practice trainer for building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DOMAIN 4:</strong> Facilitating Improvements in Instruction and Student Learning</td>
<td><strong>STANDARD 4:</strong> Instruction Teachers plan and deliver effective instruction that advances the learning of each individual student.</td>
<td>Teacher serves on district leadership team focused on developing and implementing strategies for differentiated instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DOMAIN 5:</strong> Promoting the Use of Assessments and Data for School and District Improvement</td>
<td><strong>STANDARD 5:</strong> Learning Environment Teachers create learning environments that promote high levels of learning and achievement for all students.</td>
<td>Teacher collaborates with peers to design project based learning unit with students that promotes high levels of engagement by all students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DOMAIN 6:</strong> Improving Outreach and Collaboration with Families and Community</td>
<td><strong>STANDARD 6:</strong> Collaboration and Communication Teachers collaborate and communicate with students, parents, other educators, administrators, and the community to support student learning.</td>
<td>Teacher serves as community outreach lead on career pathways for students meeting with local chambers of commerce and other area employers to secure age-appropriate career awareness opportunities for students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DOMAIN 7:</strong> Advocating for Student Learning and the Profession</td>
<td><strong>STANDARD 7:</strong> Professional Responsibility and Growth Teachers assume responsibility for professional growth, performance, and involvement as an individual and as a member of a learning community.</td>
<td>Teacher serves as on a regional, statewide, or national policy committee related to teaching standards.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The examples of leadership described above encompass three main types of career ladders: performance-based ladders, job-expansion ladders, and professional development ladders. Their associated roles also include increased compensation for additional duties and responsibilities. However, these increases are not typically built in to an individual’s base pay and instead qualify for stipend pay.

1. **Performance-Based Ladders**: Teachers earn additional compensation based on examination results or evaluation results, which qualifies them for additional roles and responsibilities. For example, in Washington, D.C. teachers have the opportunity to qualify for various teacher leader roles, which also means an increase in pay, based on annual performance on their evaluation.

2. **Job-Expansion Ladders**: Teachers may earn additional compensation for taking on out-of-classroom activities or a new role, such as curriculum development, mentoring other teachers, or leading professional development activities. Hillsborough County Schools in Florida, is experimenting with teacher leadership positions in which the teacher retains 50% of their teaching load and are assigned as an instructional coach for the other 50% of their professional role. In some cases, though not necessarily in every situation, these hybrid roles also carry additional compensation in the form of a stipend.

3. **Professional Development Ladders**: Teachers earn additional compensation based on participation in activities usually required for license renewal or upgrade. Examples of these types of activities include participating in staff development, professional development, or obtaining college credit, an advanced degree, or National Board certification. For example, in the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative, several participating school districts include teachers who are providing dual enrollment courses at the high school and are provided with stipends or an additional planning period to support their preparation.
How do teacher leaders work with their building principals?

In today’s education reality, many school administrators are overburdened with more demands than there is time. Administrators welcome and support a distributed leadership model within their building, where excellent teachers assume certain building-level responsibilities. For example, teacher leaders assist with peer observations, curriculum development, providing and organizing professional learning as well as mentoring and coaching novice and struggling teachers.

How are other school districts and states using career ladders?

Many school districts across Ohio and throughout the United States have embraced teacher leadership and career ladders for teachers. These positions are created in response to an unmet need within the district whether that be retention of effective educators, growing existing teacher talent, or serving in other teaching or coaching capacities where a need exists. In many districts, teacher leadership positions are used as a key personnel strategy to recognize teachers’ expertise and provide them with advancement and leadership opportunities.

What do we need to consider when developing ladders for teachers?

Critical Considerations

- Building support for the leadership role is key to successful implementation. Individuals must feel supported in their role.
- Time devoted to the leadership role is often a deciding factor in an individual’s success. Ensuring proper time is available for the role is critical.
- Teacher leadership positions can be permanent or temporary in nature.
- Consider whether compensation for a leadership position should be built-in to an individual’s base pay or if the additional pay should be delivered in the form of a stipend.
- For positions that are temporary and where an individual may move in and out of the position, a stipend or the benefit of an additional planning period may be the more affordable and more flexible approach.
- School districts that lack resources to provide additional pay for changed roles and responsibilities may be able to offer other non-compensatory benefits such as priority enrollment for professional learning.

Selection Criteria

- Individuals who are selected as teacher leaders should meet certain qualifications (e.g., type of certification, leadership endorsements, effectiveness ratings, rapport with colleagues, etc.) for the positions and have a certain level of experience, knowledge base, and skill set necessary to fulfill the roles and responsibilities. In other words, selection should be based upon the expectations associated with the task or job.
- An application process is recommended to ensure that teachers view the selection process as fair and unbiased.
- Further, individuals who take on these roles should be respected among their peers, capable of leading others, and demonstrate the ability to positively enhance the learning environment for all.
- Teacher leadership is a strategy to retain the best teachers and grow districts' leadership bench—expanding opportunities to more teachers to accomplish this.

Accountability

- Teacher leaders want to perform at high levels and be held accountable for their work. For this reason, many districts require teacher leaders to achieve a certain level of evaluation rating each year to maintain their leadership position. In Ohio’s context, a teacher should be rated “Skilled” or above to be considered a candidate for a teacher leadership position since they represent more experienced and knowledgeable teachers who engage in best practices.
- Clearly articulate the roles and responsibilities associated with the leadership position. This means that an actual written description of the leadership position should be shared and discussed to ensure clarity and avoid confusion. Clearly identified work roles are a necessity and provide a level of fairness to both the teacher and the administrator.
- During the planning for teacher evaluations, an individual’s roles and responsibilities as a teacher leader should be included as part of his/her evaluation and conversation with the principal. A teacher leader should serve as a positive example to colleagues.
- Teacher rules around pay and non-compensatory benefits associated with leadership and additional roles and responsibilities are within the purview of the local school district. Ohio’s local control environment makes for many different examples of what districts offer to their teacher leaders in recognition of their additional service and in many cases beyond their teaching responsibilities.

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Case Studies: Learning from District Success

Georgetown Exempted Village Schools
Through the Ohio TIF project, Georgetown has developed teacher taskforce leaders and teams to focus on critical issues the district is committed to working on and advance in the coming year. The team develops and pilots a project responding to or supporting a district goal, while documenting implementation, lessons learned, and student or teacher outcomes. These outcomes are presented to the staff at the end of the year and, based on results, have the possibility to be distributed and more widely implemented the following year. For example, last year a group of K–12 reading teachers worked together to videotape expected learning outcomes from each grade level to create tighter vertical alignment in instruction through stronger collaboration amongst the staff to improve reading outcomes for all children. Georgetown teachers who applied to lead and participate in these action-research projects reported that their experience was not only professionally powerful for them as individuals, but also provided them with an opportunity to share their learning outcomes and impact with peers. The district plans to continue these teacher taskforce teams with local funding once the federal TIF grant expires as a way to design focused teacher teams around problems of practice and grow leadership opportunities.

Morgan Local School District
As an example of distributed leadership, Morgan Local is experimenting with a teacher leader role modeled after the Peer Assisted Review (PAR) program. PAR is a program intended to support professional growth through coaching, monitoring progress, and evaluation for all teachers. Morgan Local adapted the program to fit their local needs with a program that is more focused on supportive growth and coaching with less emphasis on the evaluative piece. The process as adapted by the district begins when a principal refers a teacher (based on his/her Ohio Teacher Evaluation System results) to the PAR coach for additional support or an individual teacher requests some coaching and support from PAR for their own professional development. The coach spends time with the teacher on his/her relationships, styles, management, and instructional practice to support growth and improvement. The goal of the intervention is to ensure all teachers become effective and continue to improve as educators. Since implementation of the pilot, principals have noticed improvements and received positive feedback on the coaching and support provided.

Resources to Learn More about Teacher Career Ladders
To read more about the Teacher Leader Model Standards, please visit www.teacherleaderstandards.org.

To read more about Ohio’s Standards Educators and the Educators Standards Board, please visit http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Teaching/Educator-Equity/Ohio-s-Educator-Standards/StandardsforEducators_revaug10.pdf.aspx.

Sources


Learn more about Ohio TIF districts’ efforts to help all students graduate prepared for success in college, in careers, and in life by visiting www.BattelleforKids.org/OhioTIF.