

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

The Importance of Teacher Leaders in a District

Some states have created an opportunity for educators to earn an advanced degree in leadership without becoming an administrator. These teacher leader programs help develop capacity and provide a means of recognizing teachers who take on extra roles beyond regular classroom responsibilities. Teachers in this role are usually known as instructional coaches, facilitators, or coordinators.

What is their role? The primary role for teacher leaders is to positively impact student achievement. Some responsibilities may include mentoring or coaching other teachers, developing or leading professional development sessions, serving on leadership teams and committees, or collecting and monitoring data. Districts often hire teacher leaders to work with a specific range of grade levels or to be content specialists. They can also be expected to serve as experts in a particular field or grade level, to lead curriculum development efforts. One of their most important responsibilities is facilitating the lines of communication among all parties.

Why is there a need? Actually there are numerous reasons. Teacher leadership programs emphasize the concept of shared leadership in a district. A facilitator may attend a conference as a district representative and upon return, share the information with staff through local professional development. This approach is helpful for districts experiencing financial cutbacks or those trying to minimize lost student contact time with teachers. It can also relieve an additional initiative from the plate of the principals.

Teacher leaders also are extremely helpful when it comes to making decisions based on data. The need to increase student learning results has encouraged educators to collect and analyze data, and respond to student needs accordingly. Classroom teachers can save valuable instruction and preparation time by relying on a teacher leader to pinpoint data trends and suggest instructional strategies for improvement.

Retaining quality teachers is critical to the success of any school district, and the educational field as a whole. Even though college programs have extensive training for young educators, it is impossible to prepare them for every aspect

of their actual teaching experience. Many districts now incorporate a mentoring program, directed by the instructional coach, which provides support in instruction, resources and classroom management.

Why does it work? A coaching relationship with another colleague can benefit the classroom teacher through modeling, team teaching, or mentoring in a non-evaluative way. This personalized support provides immediate feedback that allows for noticeable improvement as changes are made in previous practices. Research shows that using cooperative learning with peers at any level translates into great gains.

Shared leadership provides a balanced foundation for any initiative. Whether it is curriculum development or implementing a new instructional strategy, the coach's job is to support practices and share responsibility for ensuring success. Some coaches are specialists in content and others are experts of specific grade levels. Either way, this knowledge and experience allows coaches to help teachers prepare for student learning transitions and make sure content and skill development builds when curriculum is addressed.

Districts utilizing teacher leaders create a critical communication link in the school improvement process. When educational leaders have training and are used correctly, the qualitative and quantitative gains a district can make are immeasurable.