

Teacher-Led Professional Learning

BY MEGIN CHARNER-LAIRD, JACY IPPOLITO, AND CHRISTINA L. DOBBS

The landscape of professional learning is changing rapidly. In recent years, many initiatives have emerged that allow for teachers to learn in new ways that transcend traditional models of professional development, in which teachers typically attend off-site workshops and courses led by outside experts. Teacher leadership and teacher-led professional learning are certainly not new concepts. However, dwindling funds for outside trainers coupled with the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards, new models of teacher evaluation, and new standardized tests are prompting administrators to turn to teacher leaders in order to build and sustain professional development projects that address these very challenges and initiatives.

The Content-Area Reading Initiative (CRI) in Brookline, Mass., is an example of a multiyear teacher-led initiative that is showing positive results as a model for teacher-led professional development. Funded collaboratively by Brookline Public Schools, the Brookline Education Foundation, and the Brookline High School 21st Century Fund, CRI was designed from the ground up by teachers and leaders at Brookline High School who were looking to improve literacy-focused teaching and learning across the curriculum. The broad goal of CRI is to support high school content-area teachers in designing, implementing, and refining effective disciplinary literacy instructional practices. This goal aligns neatly with the requirements of the Common Core—that all content-area teachers build students' reading, writing, and communication skills in content-specific ways.

For the first two years of the four-year project, teachers from three departments—English/language arts, history, and world languages—applied to participate, and six teachers were chosen from each department to form three department-based teams. A unique facet of the CRI model was the choice to have each departmental team choose its own leader, who was provided time (a course release) and support (a small stipend and consultation with university partners) to take on the role of guiding each participating team of teachers as it developed and incorporated new disciplinary literacy practices. Notably, these teacher leaders were not yet experts in the use of strategies to build students' content-area literacy. As such, they were also learning alongside the teams of teachers they led. Two

years into the project, participating teachers report that they have learned new ways to approach instruction, have experienced their most significant learning in collaboration with colleagues, and have developed a newfound appreciation for the role that disciplinary literacy instruction plays in their content areas.

As university partners who supported the development of new disciplinary literacy and collaborative learning skills and who gathered data to document the trajectory of the project, we believe there are four specific ways this model leverages teacher leadership and encourages instructional reform: by developing leadership from within, increasing teacher collaboration and risk taking, keeping the focus on professional learning, and building momentum for larger initiatives.

Developing Leadership from Within

CRI asks teachers to look to each other as experts and colleagues in the learning and improvement process. Through ongoing professional learning community (PLC) meetings, teachers worked together in inquiry cycles—a model that asks educators to look deeply into specific questions of practice, to collectively develop new approaches based on those questions, and then to collect data on the effectiveness of those new approaches. During the project, the teacher leaders emerged as the linchpin to success with this process.

CRI teacher leaders were engaged not only in learning new instructional practices but also in learning how to navigate new leadership roles. For each of the teacher leaders, this was an ongoing process. As one noted, "I love the idea of people leading from within. I don't want to be out in front waving a flag." Yet, leading from within meant learning how to lead in a way that did not preclude opportunities for initiating new content-area literacy practices in their own classrooms.

Each team leader struggled to balance these competing demands at first, focusing almost exclusively on planning and facilitating meetings, which initially slowed experimentation in their own classrooms. The history team leader, for instance, realized halfway through the first year that she had focused most of her energies on learning to lead and had not spent as much time shifting her own classroom practice. The ability to listen to her team members reflect on efforts to integrate new literacy-focused practices into their teaching not only provided her with new ideas but also

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children's learning. Not all preK teachers naturally know how to build these kinds of relationships, even though some people assume that's the case, says Bornfreund. And some advocates of community-based preK programs worry that school-based preK teachers are not as focused on relationship quality and emotional support as they should be, in part because of mounting pressure to demonstrate academic gains. Because it is embedded in the classroom, coaching can help ensure that warm, positive relationships are front and center.

In Washington, D.C., where the public schools have universally available preK for all three- and four-year-olds, coaches focus on relationship quality by using CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System), which has been described by its developers at the University of Virginia as an interactions-focused framework and assessment tool. It has three primary dimensions with specific benchmarks: emotional support (for example, warmth and encouragement), instructional support for specific concepts, and clear classroom organization and management. The district's coaches observe and assess all teachers with CLASS at the beginning of the year and then work with administrators to decide which teachers need the most support, how often, and on what topics. They support teachers on everything from establishing smooth classroom routines, to leading activities built into research-based curricula chosen by the schools, to organizing learning stations, reading corners, and other physical aspects of the classroom in ways that facilitate relationships and learning.

Looking for New Measures

In addition to its use as a coaching tool, CLASS is a promising way to evaluate process quality in preK, many experts believe. Head Start programs are now required to use it, and New Jersey may require its preK programs to do so soon, even while it continues using tools focused specifically on literacy, math, and other quality components, according to Wolock. Moving toward this kind of process-focused assessment is a big shift, says Bornfreund. PreK programs have historically focused on the more easily measured structural features, like child-staff ratio, typically collected with the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) or monitored through state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, which assign scores to programs that policy makers and parents can use to compare and make decisions.

However, Rachel Gordon, a sociologist at the University of Illinois at Chicago, cautions against using any of these tools for high-stakes purposes, such as whether a program should be funded or endorsed. Neither ECERS nor CLASS was developed for accountability purposes, and quality cut-off scores written into state or district policies are somewhat arbitrary, she says. "Rather than write specific measures and cut-offs into policy," she advises, "I'd suggest that [policy

makers and administrators] need to step back and think about the purposes of preK and the rationales for monitoring quality and then refine existing measures or design new ones with those things in mind." ■

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gave her the push necessary to try them herself. As a result, halfway through the first year she began to experiment with explicit instruction about how to predict and then approach the types of essays one might encounter on a history exam. Ultimately, the history team leader was led by the work that her colleagues carried out, which, in turn, inspired her to revise and integrate new ideas into her own practice.

Over time, team leaders became more comfortable in their roles and were able to react to the dynamics of team conversations as they arose and make adjustments. The teacher leaders developed important leadership skills over the course of the first year, with university partners supporting them in adopting and adapting discussion-based protocols and managing the varying needs of their team members. These leadership skills helped catalyze the success of the initiative.

Increasing Teacher Collaboration and Risk Taking

By learning alongside colleagues, the teacher leaders in the CRI project earned a great deal of "street cred." While they were facilitating weekly meetings of content-area teams and sharing important information and ideas with teachers, university partners, and school leaders to highlight and advance the work of CRI, they were simultaneously modeling the very professional learning that the CRI initiative was designed to spur.

By virtue of acting as *leaders who learn*, the teacher leaders helped colleagues invest deeply and broadly in the collective effort. Individually and together the teacher leaders registered at both literacy and content-focused professional conferences to share the project's work, and this inspired team members to join them.

By asking the question, "What can we gain from observing each other's classrooms?" and then inviting colleagues into their rooms first, the teacher leaders created safe opportunities for peer observations. When they offered their own classroom dilemmas as fodder for group analysis and feedback, the teacher leaders created a space for others to bring their own challenges to the group.

At every turn, the teacher leaders acknowledged that they were not experts as group leaders and in crafting next steps in their classrooms, that they

weren't always sure of what to do. They acknowledged their own steep learning curves as leaders and teachers and their need for the group's support to keep going. By trusting their colleagues and asking for support when they needed it, the teacher leaders modeled risk taking and levels of collegiality that enabled everyone to try new ways of working.

Keeping the Focus on Professional Learning

From the beginning of the CRI project, the teacher leaders sought advice from each other and from the university partners about how best to support the learning of their group members. In fact, two teacher leaders pursued training individually as facilitators of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) in order to build their capacity to facilitate professional learning through dialogue. By planning and working as a trio, the teacher leaders kept the focus on professional learning—about literacy practices and teacher leadership, as opposed to turning to conversations about logistics or school politics, as often occurs when teachers meet.

Because they were elected by their peers, the teacher leaders felt great responsibility to help the group stay focused on experimenting with new pedagogies, designing content-based literacy strategies, and reflecting on how students were responding to instruction. All too often, following traditional professional development opportunities that do not provide ongoing, school-based support, teachers easily lapse back into older ways of thinking and working, both collegially and in individual classrooms. The ongoing support, planning, and guidance that the teacher leaders provided in CRI helped to ensure that this "slide back" did not occur.

As with any new learning, it is a constant challenge to push forward. The teacher leaders, by virtue of keeping a dual focus on learning and leading, spurred on each other and their colleagues. Support from outside the teams was certainly important (e.g., from school leaders and university partners); however, the teacher leaders acted as the glue that held teams together and kept them focused on the project's learning goals.

Building Momentum for Larger Initiatives

True professional learning requires uncertainty, risk, and experimentation. Whereas traditional professional development often suggests that there are easy answers that simply must be communicated to unwitting educators, in the CRI project the teacher leaders never assumed there were simple answers or quick fixes. Nor did they assume that their job was to fix problems or provide answers. Instead, challenges that seemed easy to describe (e.g., students are struggling to learn academic vocabulary) were treated as inquiry projects worthy of in-depth study by teams over a period of weeks and months.

In the midst of such inquiry, teacher leaders shared instructional ideas, but always with a focus on digging

deeper and providing feedback, as participants sought even more effective ways to meet student needs. This way of working—always taking an inquiry stance—as leaders guiding groups of colleagues created a culture that is slowly being adopted by the larger school (with support from a principal who shares this vision of professional learning). By not responding with easy (or incomplete) answers or rushing to solutions without taking time to diagnose challenges, the teacher leaders built the capacity of the entire group to tolerate ambiguity in the face of change.

As a result, two years into the four-year initiative, the 18 founding CRI teachers and teacher leaders report that their instructional practices have changed in many ways, including incorporating explicit discipline-specific vocabulary instruction, trying new systems to promote independent reading in the disciplines, and explicitly modeling the research and inquiry skills that students need to be successful in various disciplines. Now CRI teachers, particularly with the support and example set by teacher leaders, are taking their work to the next level. While some are considering applications for grants to further support their work, others are spending the summer and subsequent academic year explicitly documenting and disseminating early project successes (e.g., strategies for vocabulary instruction or approaches to research and independent reading) within and across departments while closely collaborating with department curriculum coordinators.

Creating and supporting teacher leaders who not only lead but also learn alongside their colleagues requires not just institutional tolerance of ambiguity and experimentation but also school leaders who understand that teachers need the freedom and outside support to not only *take part in* but also *lead* genuine cycles of inquiry. Teacher leaders such as we've described are not instantly established, but they can be grown through encouragement and a shift toward school-based, inquiry-driven learning at all levels. ■

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For Further Information

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