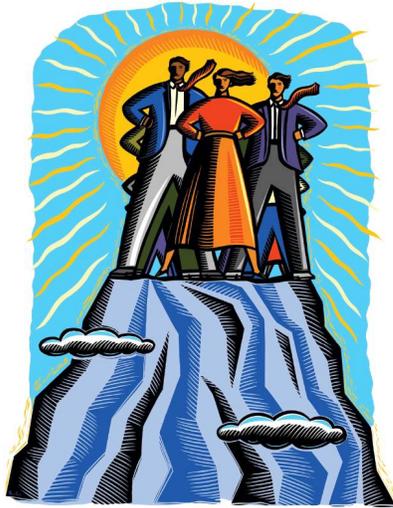


The Time Is Ripe (Again)

Roland S. Barth



Is this a promising time for teacher leadership? As someone who's been in education for 50 years, serving as both a teacher and a principal, I've found that it's *always* been a promising time for teacher leadership. It's just never been a *successful* time. It's never happened on a wider scale.

So what continues to stand in the way of teachers assuming serious leadership of schools? Five obstacles strike me as the most inhibiting.

First, many principals need to control what goes on in school. Principals are ultimately responsible. If I, as a principal, delegate or accept a teacher's leadership of something and it goes badly—say, staff development or developing the science curriculum—the superintendent isn't going to call that teacher. He or she

is going to call me. So I have to be really careful about relinquishing control. And most principals just don't want to relinquish it.

There's also a taboo in our profession against one teacher elevating himself or herself above the others. You see it with merit-pay discussions, but you also see it when one teacher takes responsibility for something in the school and the other teachers are just worrying about their own 30 kids. The teacher who takes a leadership role can expect to be punished by fellow teachers.

It's just a very leveling profession. Teachers are, in a way, their own worst enemy when it comes to unlocking leadership because they don't welcome it, typically don't respect it, and often feel threatened by one of their own taking it on. Anyone who bumps above the level is subject to condemnation: "Who the heck do you think you are?!" I'm not talking about trends—I'm talking about *people* impeding teacher leadership. Some of the people are called principals, and some are called teachers.

Another big issue is that teachers' plates are full. Teachers already have a huge amount of responsibility for their students. With the increasing accountability we're seeing, they're going to be very careful about deflecting time and energy to that science curriculum committee rather than to getting their kids up to grade level in reading. It's an add-on for most teachers to assume additional responsibility for a school.

There's also the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle adversarial relationship that exists between teachers and principals, between unions and management. If I'm a teacher who's taking on a part of what's seen as the principal's responsibility, I'm siding with the enemy. What teacher wants to be criticized for siding with management?

And finally, schools have been coopted by a business model over the years. We hear the language of business in school. I even heard a principal talk about "our product line here." Give me a break! By and large, the business model doesn't model leadership of the line workers—Toyota, Saturn, a few companies have tried—but mostly the job of the line worker is, know what's expected of you and do it fast and well. That business model does *not* favor teacher leadership.

Take any one of these obstacles, and they're pretty serious. Take them collectively, and they make realizing teacher leadership very hard indeed.

Three Promising Trends

Despite these formidable challenges, the time may be ripe for change. Three circumstances bode well for teacher leadership.

A Need to Share the Load

For a long time, people have realized that the principal alone can't run something as complex and enormous as a school. But now I think *principals* realize that. Principals are also beginning to understand that one way they can get teachers invested in what they're doing is to let them sit at the table with the other grown-ups and take on a leadership role.

When I was an elementary school teacher, I noticed there were two classes of citizens in the school: those who worried about their classroom and those who worried about the school writ large. By and large, it was the teachers in one place and the principals in the other. I vowed that if I ever became principal, I would change that.

And I did. Every September I used to ask every teacher, "What piece of this school do you want to take responsibility for?" I had a long list—the parent committee, staff development, and so on—and they could pick the one they cared passionately about. Usually they revealed their interest in one of two ways: Either they said, "I want to jump on this and make it better." Or they'd complain about something—like how the faculty meetings were run. I took those complaints as a hopeful sign that the teacher cared about that issue. So a few teachers would then get together to plan how those faculty meetings *should* be run.

Teachers were not just permitted to take on leadership roles in the school—they were *expected* to take them on. If all teachers are expected to be leaders, no one is breaking the taboo about standing higher than the others because everyone is on the same higher level.

A Curriculum to Create

The Common Core State Standards also represent an opportunity here. The standards specify what students should know and be able to do, but they don't specify how teachers must teach those things. They're intentionally leaving it up to each school to put together an effective curriculum that will lead to the accomplishment of those standards.

Principals aren't about to write a curriculum. They're inviting teachers to do this, to design the methods of instruction. Teachers have usually been told what they're going to teach and how they're going to teach it. This new development is a profound form of teacher leadership.

Already, over the Internet, teachers are sharing their experiences designing the curriculum. Teachers in other schools are asking them, "So how did you do this?" They're getting professional recognition for their efforts in this area—recognition they haven't received in previous years.

New Models of Leadership

Today we see a proliferation of all kinds of alternative schools—charter schools and pilot schools, among others. If you look at their organizational and decision-making structure, you'll see that many accord teachers a major decision-making role, such as the ability to choose their new colleagues, evaluate one another, and design the curriculum.

First, Unlock the Passion to Teach

Promoting teacher leadership also means supporting teachers' passion to teach. Teachers tend to keep two sets of books. One lists what they have to do to comply; the other lists what they believe is best for their students. As a teacher, I learned what I had to do to be successful, and I jumped through those hoops. At the same time, the things I cared most deeply about—the reason I signed up for the profession—had little to do with jumping through those hoops. Most teachers sign up for different reasons than those they're evaluated on.

For example, a lot of teachers are committed to experiential education—taking kids on field trips, getting them involved in the community, or taking them to the park and having them pick up leaves and categorize them. Yet schools don't really acknowledge, let alone appreciate, the power of experiential learning. So you do the worksheets, the workbooks, the didactic instruction, enough to get the supervisors off your case, and then you've earned the right to take your kids on a field trip. But you've got to succeed on the first set before you can move on your own set.

There's great power in that second set of books, though, and here's how I discovered it. As a principal, I was convinced the teachers had all these interests and passions they were just locking in the car in the parking lot each morning before coming in to teach. So we organized what we called *optionals* once a week for two hours in the afternoon. Every teacher would teach something they really cared about. The students would choose which classes they wanted to attend.

Everyone got involved—the librarian, the custodian, the secretaries—so the class sizes were small. Everybody got a green light for their topic of interest. You want to teach kids how to build a model airplane? Understand the subway system? Great—do it! What I found was that teachers were bringing that second set of books to these classes. They suddenly came to life, recognizing that their second set of books had value and that kids thrived on things the teachers really cared about.

If you can unlock the second set of books, and not let it get locked up in the car each morning, or even merge the two sets of books, that's crucially important in supporting not only teachers' passion to teach, but also their passion to lead.

Lead—and Win

I've always been haunted by the phrase, "I'm just a teacher." It says that I'm not really so important, that I'm *just* a teacher. But if you're a teacher, you're already a teacher leader. Just ask your 28 students. They'll tell you who the leader in that classroom is. The teachers may be good leaders or bad leaders, but they're incontrovertibly leaders.

The shift comes when you also take on a piece of leading the school. There's tremendous satisfaction that comes from making that jump, from being an owner rather

than a renter here. The thinking goes, “I’m taking ownership of my school and making my corner of it a little bit better.”

Although higher education hasn’t provided for me much of a model of inventive teaching over the years, it does offer a noteworthy model of teacher leadership. Professors lead major committees on matters such as program evaluation and curriculum. They participate in making decisions about finance, use of space, graduation requirements, and scheduling. And they’re instrumental in selecting new colleagues—as well as their own school administrators. Indeed, few important decisions are made without them.

Another important outcome of teacher leadership relates to learning. We’re always looking for conditions under which the learning curves of teachers, principals, or students go right off the chart. When you’re responsible for something, whether it’s the science curriculum or the supply closet, you’re invested in making it work. You have to talk to other people and to other schools to get ideas, to figure things out. All of a sudden, you come alive as a learner. Teachers who aren’t alive as learners start to percolate when they take on leadership roles.

Look at the beginning teacher or principal. Both have steep learning curves. All the energy they invest and the learning they experience get transferred to other areas like classroom management or curriculum. It’s the same with kids. When students take responsibility for something important in the classroom or school, their learning curves go way up.

A school should be a community of leaders—not just a principal and a lot of followers. The principal, teachers, students, and parents should all be first-class citizens of that community. Our business ought to be to promote profound levels of learning in school—and teacher leadership is one of our most powerful assets for doing so.

Editor’s Note: Roland Barth’s comments are from his August 2013 interview with *EL* Senior Associate Editor Amy Azzam.

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