

# Educational Leadership

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## Sharing the Lead

**Teacher leaders can play a vital role in creating a resilient school culture.**

*Janice Patterson and Jerry Patterson*

Schools across the United States are facing reduced budgets and increased demands. Because of administrator burnout, retirement, and mobility, many schools will meet these challenges with a new principal at the helm, the latest in a series of short-term administrators.

Some schools, however, have an important advantage in meeting adversity: teacher leaders who are passionately committed to helping the school maintain a resilient culture during tough times.

We define a teacher leader as a teacher who works with colleagues for the purpose of improving teaching and learning, whether in a formal or an informal capacity. Formal teacher leaders are generally identified by the school principal. They serve as department heads, grade-level chairpersons, team leaders, mentors for new teachers, peer coaches, or members of curriculum development task forces. Informal teacher leaders are those recognized by their colleagues because of their credibility, expertise, or relationship-building skills. These teachers may offer support to beginning teachers, design and implement staff development activities, make recommendations regarding new teacher candidates, write grants to gain needed resources, or even act as technology experts within the school.

For the past several years, we have studied the influence of leaders in schools facing adversity. Our ongoing research comprises a series of studies that began in 1998. To date, we have conducted in-depth interviews with 21 administrators and 40 teachers and teacher leaders representing 36 schools in 12 U.S. states. All schools in the studies were selected because their students demonstrated achievement levels above state norms on standardized tests of reading and mathematics despite high poverty rates and highly mobile student populations (Patterson, 2000; Patterson, Collins, & Abbott, in press; Patterson, Patterson, & Collins, 2002). This work has shown us the powerful contribution that teacher leaders can make in shaping school culture and building school resilience.

### How Teacher Leaders Influence School Culture

People often refer to school culture using various slogans, such as “the way we do business around here” or “the norms and values of the school.” We define school culture more



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comprehensively as the cumulative impact over time of three sets of dynamics:

- What we say we believe in relation to what we believe;
- What we say we do in relation to what we do; and
- What we actually do in relation to what we believe.

The alignment of the elements in each set of dynamics determines the relative health of a school's culture.

The literature on effective schools in the 1980s emphasized the powerful role that the principal played in shaping culture. This literature assumed that if the principal directed the work of teachers, held high expectations, and aligned the curriculum, then teachers would work cooperatively and the school would be effective. But in our research, as we peeled back the layers of culture, we found that teacher leaders can also play a powerful role in determining the overall health of the school. In fact, because the teacher culture is relatively more stable over time, long-term teachers have more opportunities than short-term principals do to shape what people in the school community believe, say, and do.

Teacher leaders exert a major influence on how the dynamics of the school culture evolve. Both teachers who hold official leadership positions and those who provide informal leadership earn their place as culture leaders through three sources of influence: *credibility*, *expertise*, and *relationships*.

Teacher leaders earn *credibility* when other teachers admire, trust, and respect them for their personal and professional values. These teacher leaders consistently align their actions with the needs of the schools' students. One teacher spoke about a particular teacher leader's credibility:

Mrs. Wilkerson doesn't just talk about doing whatever it takes to be responsive to students and families. She does it. If she gets a call from a parent with a student concern, she's on top of it. She has been in homes at eleven o'clock at night looking for a student. By her words and actions, she conveys "I'm here *now* because I care about you and your schoolwork."

Teacher leaders influence the school culture through *expertise* when their peers recognize their superior teaching skills. The many teacher leaders gaining certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) provide a conspicuous example. This system enables teachers to achieve distinction by demonstrating that they meet rigorous standards for what accomplished educators should know and be able to do. By December 2003, an estimated 32,000 teachers held National Board certification (NBPTS, 2003). In a recent survey, a majority of National Board-certified teachers reported involvement as teacher leaders in such activities as coaching other candidates for National Board certification, mentoring new or struggling teachers, and developing or selecting programs and materials to support student learning. More than 90 percent of National Board-certified teachers responding to the survey said that their certification training gave them additional credibility with their professional colleagues, and 81 percent said that their training opened up new leadership opportunities for

them (NBPTS, 2001).

A third source of teacher leader influence is the ability to forge *relationships*—to connect with other teachers as colleagues. Because teacher leaders work directly with students, they understand the intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions of their fellow teachers' lives in a way that even the best school administrator cannot (Pellicer & Anderson, 1995). Especially in difficult times, teachers turn primarily to one another for support.

These three influences—credibility, expertise, and relationships—can give teacher leaders a strong role in shaping school culture. This role becomes particularly important during tough times.

## **How Teacher Leaders Influence School Resilience**

Resilience means using the school's collective energy to achieve school goals in the face of adversity. Teachers play a significant role in influencing how the school confronts difficult challenges. For some schools, the goal is just surviving the ordeal. In such “toxic” school cultures (Deal & Peterson, 1999), the school community focuses on negative values. Different groups of stakeholders—teachers, parents, students, and administrators—become fragmented and spiritually fractured. The net effect is depleted resilience to face the future.

Other schools do more than survive difficult times—they emerge from adversity with an even healthier culture than before. They succeed in moving ahead through the immediate difficulties while strengthening their resilience for the difficult challenges that they will inevitably face in the future. In our recent research, we identified seven ways teacher leaders can create resilient schools (see fig. 1), three of which we discuss here. These acts illustrate the special contribution that teacher leaders can make in helping their schools stay resilient and move forward during tough times.

### **Figure 1. How Teacher Leaders Can Create Resilient Schools**

#### **Stay Focused on What Matters Most**

- Maintain a strong sense of purpose and school values.
- Avoid unnecessary distractions.
- Maintain perspective for the long haul.

#### **Remain Flexible in How You Get There**

- Develop a high tolerance for ambiguity.
- Recover quickly from setbacks.
- Learn how to work within imposed constraints.
- Be willing to see diverse perspectives.

#### **Take Charge**

- Identify what's important in apparently confusing conditions.

- Learn how to successfully manage competing demands.
- Know where to go for support and resources.
- Don't waste energy on resilience-draining issues.

#### **Create a Climate of Caring and Support**

- Help everyone in the school feel cared for and supported.
- Develop creative incentives, recognition, and rewards.
- Secure resources for nurturing in the face of adversity.

#### **Maintain High Expectations for Students and Adults**

- Create a no-excuses belief that *everyone* can succeed in adverse conditions.
- Hold firmly to high standards even during tough times.
- Don't let adversity be an excuse for becoming a victim.

#### **Create Meaningful Participation and Shared Responsibility**

- View everyone as a resource rather than as a potential problem.
- Invite naysayers into the conversation about moving ahead.
- Seize the school's collective energy to overcome adversity.

#### **Maintain Hope in the Face of Adversity**

- Expect the world to be filled with disruptions.
- Seek opportunities instead of obstacles.
- Think *How can we?* rather than *We can't*.

Source: Patterson, Patterson, & Collins, 2002.

### ***Stay Focused on What Matters Most***

During times of adversity, resilient teacher leaders emphasize productivity and do not allow themselves or others to get distracted from the main goal of promoting learning for all students. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, teacher leaders hold others accountable for staying focused on student learning. For example, one teacher leader involved in peer coaching described this incident:

I walked into the classroom and saw a student working on something that didn't match the learning objective defined by the new teacher in her lesson plan. I asked the student, with the teacher not far away, how this tied in to what the class had been studying. The student couldn't answer me. Later, I talked with the teacher

about the incident. I offered to help her think about how she structured the day and reminded her that instructional time slips away and you need to grab every second, especially in low-achieving schools like ours. I wasn't judgmental; I only wanted to help her, and she knew that. Besides, she'd rather hear it from me than from the principal.

The teacher leader used her personal expertise to communicate clearly that "this is what we do here." Her unambiguous suggestions left no doubt in the novice teacher's mind that the school expected her to use instructional time wisely and that the teacher leader would help her reach that goal.

Teacher leaders also use their expertise to influence learning at the school and district levels. For example, master teachers in the Boston Residency Program host novice teachers in their classrooms four days each week. A National Board-certified teacher in California developed a ready-to-use middle school program for the Oakland Unified School District. And a cadre of teacher leaders in Chicago started their own small urban high school emphasizing teacher collaboration and teacher leadership (Varlas, 2003).

### ***Create a Climate of Caring and Support***

Almost without exception, the teacher leaders we interviewed expressed the importance of honoring individuals' needs to build a positive culture. These teacher leaders believe that teachers and students are most productive when they work in a context of caring, support, and trust.

One teacher leader helped build a caring climate in her school by asking new teachers,

What has to happen for you to love your job? Be realistic. Write it down and I'll do whatever it takes to make it happen.

Another teacher leader told us about the role she played in supporting a 4th grade teacher, Alice Spivey, who became seriously ill during the day. Alice confided to the teacher leader that she was reluctant to leave because her class still had material to cover for the standardized exam scheduled in two weeks. The teacher leader took charge of preparing the students for the standardized test while their teacher was in the hospital and arranged for staff members to deliver food to the teacher's home as she recovered from her emergency surgery. The teacher leader reacted as a colleague who understood the concerns of the ill teacher and took steps to alleviate them. This demonstration of caring and support nurtured the resilience of both the individual teacher and the school culture as a whole.

### ***Maintain Hope in the Face of Adversity***

Although teacher leaders sometimes long for a calm, productive environment, they know that it will not always exist. Adversity happens. By quickly taking positive action to solve problems, teacher leaders can give others hope.

Consider the impact of teacher leader Mike Jarrett, a veteran social studies teacher at Jackson High School. When a fire broke out at the school, Mike quickly organized the teachers to retrieve everything possible from the burning building. Their quick actions saved several school

computers and printers, other audiovisual materials, student and personnel records, instructional materials, and band equipment. In the weeks that followed, Mike mobilized action. He coordinated the cleanup effort and involved many teachers and community members to restore a sense of order. Before the school reopened, Mike and three other teachers made several trips in his truck to pick up supplies and equipment donated by other schools and businesses across the state.

Mike Jarrett was not able to prevent the school from burning, but he *was* able to model hope for students and staff. He refused to act as a victim and complain “if only it hadn't happened.” Instead, he asked, “How can we move ahead?” and then rallied others to help find answers.

## **Nurturing Teacher Leaders**

Teacher leadership is not about individual “teacher power,” but about mobilizing the capacity of teachers to strengthen student performance and develop real collaboration within the school. In our research on resilience in schools, we repeatedly find that in tough times, teachers turn to teacher leaders for help—and teacher leaders rise to the occasion.

School principals who value and support teachers in developing their skills recognize that school goals can only be accomplished with a committed cadre of teacher leaders. These principals involve teachers in setting direction and resolving issues related to teaching and learning. They provide professional development opportunities to strengthen teachers' leadership skills. They create a professional learning community that encourages inquiry, reflection, and risk taking.

The school administrator who demonstrates trust and respect for teacher expertise will make strides in developing resilient teacher leaders. In turn, resilient teacher leaders will use their expertise, credibility, and relationships to help the school achieve important goals, even in the face of adversity.

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