

Supporting Early-Career Teachers to be Teacher Leaders

KSTF seeks to support and prepare **leading teachers**, and we do so—intentionally and purposefully—from the very beginning of their careers.

As we share this goal with others, it isn't uncommon for us to get some questions. These questions usually come in two—completely reasonable—forms. First, how can new teachers be leaders? Don't leaders need more experience, expertise, and knowledge in order to lead? And second, how can you prepare new teachers to be leaders when they have so many other things to master (like, not insignificantly, learning to teach well)?

We understand why people ask such questions, because our own work with teacher leadership began with similar premises. Our Teaching Fellows program had for many years, as the theme of its fifth and final year, some version of “teacher leadership.” Embedded in the selection of that theme was the idea that only once we had supported teachers in gaining confidence and skill in teaching could we turn our support to helping them lead. But as we often do at KSTF, we followed the lead of our Fellows and saw that they, well before they got to their fifth year of the Fellowship, were leading. Some lead formally, being appointed to positions by their schools and districts. Some lead informally, mobilizing collaborations with their colleagues to tackle problems at their school, often by including colleagues in work they were learning about in professional development (either at KSTF or elsewhere).

We now think about teacher leadership in ways that open up a very important role for early-career teachers to play—both as leaders and as teachers preparing to lead—and our support through all five years of the Teaching Fellows program and into the Senior Fellows program is designed around that idea. The questions we get asked (and our own initial forays into teacher leadership) seem to be based on the assumption that teachers need significant experience before they can be leaders. However, we've learned two important things that counter this assumption:

1. **Teacher leadership isn't something that needs to wait for experience to be gained or for permission to lead to be granted.** All teachers can lead and all teachers can contribute to a teaching profession that leads, particularly when one views leadership **as both reflexive and distributed**. Early-career teachers can lead when they work with other teachers to improve themselves and each other. Of course, teachers and teacher leaders with hard-won experience and expertise can make important contributions that new teachers are not able to, but that shouldn't discount that new teachers can, from the beginning, contribute to improving education in and beyond their own classroom.
2. **Early support and encouragement for and opportunities to practice teacher leadership can accelerate teacher leadership for new teachers.** We recognize the challenges that all teachers, but particularly early-career teachers, face in leading from the classroom and look for ways to reduce the complexity and risk in their early efforts to lead. In this way, teachers learn to lead by leading and reflecting on their efforts.

Over the next year, we will be blogging about our work in developing teacher leaders from the beginning of their careers, sharing our developing frameworks for this work as well as some of the strategies we use and why we use them. We'll explore the assumptions we make above, and hope that we can convey an expansive view of teacher leadership that opens up room for all teachers, even new ones.

In our first three posts (shared over the next couple of months), each of our three teams who work with Fellows across the five years of the Teaching Fellows program will discuss one way they approach the work of supporting new teachers as teacher leaders. **Jen Mossgrove** (who leads the team working with first- and second-year Fellows) will describe how the cohort model of the Fellowship

provides a safe teacher community for Fellows to practice collaborative improvement with colleagues, which we see as the foundation of teacher leadership. **Michele Cheyne** (who leads the team working with third- and fourth-year Fellows) will describe how they support Fellows to thoughtfully analyze collegial relationships in their schools and help them to understand their role in those relationships, even as new teachers. Finally, **Roseanne Rostock** (who leads the team working with fifth-year Fellows) will describe one framework that the team uses to help Fellows understand their school as a system, and the way that systematic understanding can help them see new possibilities for change.

We hope you'll join in the conversation with us!