

Teacher Leadership & Development: Exploring Roles for Local Education Foundations

Our Definition of Teacher Leadership

For our purposes, a teacher leader is defined as a teacher who both teaches students and collaboratively leads colleagues to improve their practice. There are numerous other pathways and purposes for developing leadership skills in teachers, with some focused on forging paths for teachers to leave the classroom. We are most interested in roles that provide structured opportunities for highly effective teachers to take on non-administrative leadership roles that give them the opportunity to positively impact classrooms other than their own.

Why Does it Matter?

Retaining great teachers is an increasing challenge for Florida school districts with up to 40% of new teachers leaving their classrooms after five years. To fully implement the Florida Standards, teachers need to make significant shifts in their instructional practices and that requires time, focus and job-embedded growth opportunities.

While there are certainly larger issues involving salary, workload and preparation of new teachers, we believe local education foundations can play a significant role in increasing the professional satisfaction of highly skilled teachers and supporting on-the-job growth of all teachers.

We believe the idea of a “Born Teacher” is a myth and that, just as with any other profession, with practice and feedback all motivated teachers can learn and grow. We know teachers value professional development that gives them access to their colleagues as experts and research tells us that 50% of teachers never get to see highly effective colleagues in action.

Simply put: When teachers grow, students achieve. An investment in teacher development can have exponential returns.

Isn't There Already a Professional Development Department at the School District?

School districts already invest millions in the professional development of teachers, often with outside experts. Teacher evaluations now require classroom observations and new teachers are often assigned coaches. These are certainly important activities.

We believe local education foundations (LEFs) have an opportunity to complement traditional professional development by creating collegial communities of teachers who voluntarily choose to come together to learn and grow. LEFs can listen to their goals and give them the time, structure and space to support one another's development. By working with school leaders, we believe LEFs can identify top teachers with the potential to positively influence their colleagues and give them a platform to do so. The growth opportunities provided to teachers are free from the constraints of evaluation. Teachers engage in them on an entirely volunteer basis. They can withstand changes in administrative priorities and they can also serve as an incubator for piloting new teacher development strategies and encouraging hybrid roles for teachers within school systems.

The CFEF maximizes the individual and collective strength of Florida local education foundations to support local partners and schools.



How Does Teacher Leadership & Development Work ‘Fit’ with Other LEF Initiatives?

Nearly all of Florida’s local education foundations have been awarding classroom grants to teachers for decades. Approximately 22% of the \$64 million our network raises annually to invest in local students, teachers and schools is awarded through classroom and school grants. Each grant application typically asks for outcome reporting and some foundations provide forums for teacher-to-teacher sharing around successful classroom projects. Questions remain, however: How is this investment in classrooms translating to helping to improve classroom instruction? Is the primary need mostly about purchasing items for teachers? Could greater impact be realized by shifting some of those investments to directly supporting the development of teachers?

A tremendous amount of time and effort is invested in Teacher of the Year events by most education foundations in our network. In some instances, there are academies for these outstanding teachers to network and learn, but quite often the sole focus is the recognition event itself. On a statewide level, a significant shift has occurred in recent years with district-wide Teacher of the Year honorees receiving ongoing growth and networking opportunities, floridateacherslead.org.

We believe local education foundations are remarkably well-positioned to leverage their positive relationships with teachers from existing grant and recognition programs. It can be a matter of seeing these investments as a starting point to reframe an education foundation’s work in supporting teachers. We believe it’s worth a conversation on the local level – with foundation leaders, teachers and school district leaders – to consider the possibilities for augmenting and/or connecting these existing programs with teacher leadership initiatives.

How Does the Work Get Done?

Local education foundations are notoriously lean when it comes to their staff and volunteer capacity. There are seemingly endless buckets of needs to meet and generally a wide array of programs to manage. The fundraising and event cycles can be draining.

LEF leaders may also feel they are stepping into an arena they aren’t entirely comfortable with. Funding a grant or recognizing great teachers are straightforward activities. Understanding the complexities and sophistication of effective classroom instruction and what helps teachers improve and refine their skills is another matter entirely.

CFEF members that have already stepped into this arena have approached the challenge of designing and implementing teacher leadership programs differently, depending on their relationships, skill sets and internal capacity. Some have started the conversation informally with a group of teachers already gathered for another purpose. Others have approached school leaders where they have strong working relationships. Still others work collaboratively with their school district’s professional development department, learning about their goals and inquiring how they might further support teacher development.

We suggest another avenue: to tap into teacher leaders who have already been identified in the school district. The CFEF has a database of teachers who are participating in the FDOE LEAD Network, Leadership Florida’s Education Program and other statewide--and even national--teacher leadership initiatives. These teacher leaders are often coming back to their district energized with new perspectives, ready to share what they’ve learned and perhaps replicate the learning community they’ve been a part of on a smaller scale.

It is entirely appropriate, once a scope of work is developed, to contract with a teacher leader to manage the initiative under the umbrella of the education foundation. With this type of work, funds are generally needed more for human capital (stipends, substitute teachers, honorariums for lead teachers) rather than the purchase of hard materials and supplies. It may take a shift in mindset to get the work done but remember that “time is money” in terms of developing a plan for a teacher leadership initiative. There is no reason a corporate or philanthropic partner wouldn’t want to underwrite such an initiative, but it will take some fresh thinking in terms of how to frame the opportunity and what type of sponsor recognition and reporting is provided. Necessary staff and contract help needs to be considered in determining sponsorship costs for an initiative.

Program Models & Strategies

Golden Apple Academies, annual collegiums, support for mentoring new teachers and other teacher leadership initiatives created for various purposes have been part of the work of many education foundations in Florida for years. New ideas have begun to emerge organically, such as a Teacher Leadership Council created by teacher leaders in Brevard with support from their education foundation.

With encouragement and support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the CFEF launched a pilot project in Teacher Leadership with a focus on peer-to-peer learning in 2016. A total of 15 Peers in Public Practice (P3) initiatives were funded in different school districts. These days of observable instruction opened the classrooms of highly effective teachers to peer teachers interested in developing their instructional strategies in various subject areas. In this model, participants -- both teacher leaders and observers -- engage in debrief sessions to give feedback and reflect together on what was observed.

“Wow. That’s all I can say! We’ve been supporting sharing best practices among teachers, connecting them with community resources and hosting roundtables to hear their needs and concerns for decades, but this is the first time we’ve supported this type of real-world, real-time learning among peers,” said Lisa Church, vice president at Champions for Learning (Collier). “The conversations I heard among teachers at the debrief sessions were so substantive. They were sharing strategies and building trusted relationships that I know will have a lasting impact in our classrooms.”

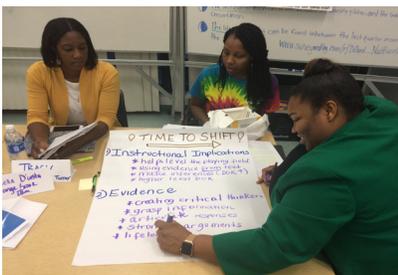
Based on this experience and model, some CFEF members began thinking about how they might continue providing “P3” experiences on their own and what it might look like for the education foundation to be the home of more ongoing teacher leadership activities.

“We learned so much about teachers and teaching just by sitting in on the P3 debrief sessions,” said Rachel Debigare, executive director of the Education Foundation of Alachua County. “We’ve gone on to shift some of our grant funds to underwrite more programs at additional schools throughout the district because we believe we are having greater impact in classrooms. We’re also working in closer partnership with both the district Professional Development department and teachers in general – hosting learning labs and a teacher-led conference.”

Wells Fargo stepped up to keep the momentum going by funding four Fostering Teacher Leadership projects in 2018. The Polk Education Foundation turned to two former state Teachers of the Year who were in their district with the opportunity.

“Our Leading from the Classroom initiative was a great opportunity for us to bring what we’ve learned through our exposure to amazing teachers throughout the state and U.S. to colleagues in our district,” said FL 2017 Teacher of the Year Jessica Solano. “Teachers applied to be in one of two literature-based learning groups who met through a combination of face-to-face and Twitter chat sessions. It was a great leadership opportunity for us and, based on the response we’ve had, the district is thinking about how they can scale-up our model next year.”

Now Florida Power & Light is using the P3 model to offer EmPOWERing STEM Educators for the 2018-19 school year in their service territory with oversight and support from the CFEF. Local education foundations in their 27-county service territory are being invited to submit proposals that focus on math and science teachers.



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What Teachers Have to Say

Of teachers participating in CFEF-supported peer-to-peer learning initiatives to date:

- 98% stated that the program has had a positive impact on their instructional practice six weeks after the program ended;
- 97% stated the program purpose was to develop sustainable practices vetted from highly qualified educators, while only 76% indicated that was true of other professional learning opportunities available to them;
- 80% have tried new instructional strategies in their classroom as a result of their participation.

Individual teachers involved report benefits for both their overall instructional practice and in trying out new strategies:

“I was able to see different techniques used by other highly qualified teachers that I was able to take back and use in my classroom.” Collier County P3 Participating Teacher

“I have seen an increase in my students’ language skills by implementing new strategies I have learned during the observational rounds.” Pinellas County P3 Participating Teacher

“The best outcome as a teacher leader is being able to consciously reflect on your teaching and then getting positive feedback from peers. It was awesome to hear other teacher experiences from observations too.” Collier County P3 Participating Teacher Leader

“I have gained confidence as a teacher and feel like I am more in control because I was able to learn various strategies and apply them.” Brevard County P3 Participating Teacher

First Steps in Exploring a Role for Your Local Education Foundation

- Consider having the district teacher of the year in an ex-officio position on your board so they are at the table and begin understanding the foundation’s existing role and culture.
- Invite teachers to a facilitated conversation about what types of leadership and development opportunities would most help them grow professionally.
- Think about what it would take for the foundation take on a role in teacher leadership in your district. Do you have the staff or volunteer capacity? Can you tap into a district or teacher leader?
- Connect with the FDOE Department of Educator Quality for resources and support. Kelly Zunkiewicz (kelly.zunkiewicz@fldoe.org) is eager to help brainstorm about possibilities and is knowledgeable about national models. She can also readily make the connection to teacher leaders throughout Florida with expertise in various areas and subjects.
- Tap into the experiences of other local education foundations and the CFEF staff. With our culture of openly sharing best practices, sometimes a phone conversation with colleagues and teacher leaders in other parts of the state can get the ball rolling!

More Resources and Links

[Teach Factor Report: Unleashing Teacher Leadership](#) (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching – March 2018)

[Teaching and Learning for College Readiness](#) (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, October 2015)

[Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems](#) (Center on International Education Benchmarking, 2016)

[Learning Job Skills from Colleagues at Work: Evidence from a Field Experiment Using Teacher Performance Data](#) (Journal of Education and Learning, July 2015)

