
Learning to Lead Instructional Shifts in ELA

Benjamin Fenton, Chief Strategy Officer, New Leaders

Introduction

States across the country have adopted more rigorous academic standards that require significant shifts in English language arts (ELA) instruction. The new standards ask teachers to place much greater focus on building a coherent body of knowledge through content-rich nonfiction; to ground reading, writing, and discussion in textual evidence; and to help students at all levels master complex, grade-level texts and academic language. Many educators have found these changes daunting, particularly when new assessments have outpaced curriculum and training.

At the same time, principals often lack the capacity—in time and sometimes in content-area expertise—to support teachers in making the leap to new standards. Teacher-leaders can play a critical role in addressing these challenges. They provide coaching and support to improve instruction across multiple classrooms and may include department or grade-level chairs, instructional coaches, or assistant principals. They can also guide teams of teachers in reviewing student data and designing standards-aligned curriculum and lesson plans and provide coaching and feedback to teachers as they work to help students tackle more challenging texts and analytical tasks. For teacher-leaders to effectively support their colleagues, however, they need training in adult and instructional leadership skills.

Even before the adoption of higher standards, improving student performance in reading and writing has proved notoriously difficult, in large measure due to the strong influence of out-of-school factors on language and literacy development. Time and again, we've seen schools serving high-need students achieve breakthrough math gains while making

only incremental progress in ELA. This challenge only becomes more pronounced in middle and high schools, where many students arrive years behind grade level in literacy skills and where developmental and language barriers are particularly stubborn to overcome. Teachers need a strong grasp of curriculum and instruction and the ability to implement targeted interventions in their classrooms to move ELA achievement for such students. Yet often they lack the resources or training to implement such approaches.

In this article, we describe the experience of a teacher-leader at a New York City high school who successfully coached a team of ninth-grade English teachers to improve students' reading and writing achievement over the course of one year. The teacher-leader was a participant in New Leaders' Emerging Leaders program, a yearlong training program for teacher-leaders that develops adult and instructional leadership skills on-the-job as participants supervise a team of teachers at their schools under the guidance of a coach. By participating in training that included intensive practice, feedback, and application of leadership skills, as well as expert-led analysis of Common Core ELA Standards and their implications for instruction, the teacher-leader was able to raise instructional quality and thereby boost ELA achievement

across the classrooms she supervised.

Heather DeFlorio Ascioffa: Helping High School Students Use Evidence to Support a Claim

Heather DeFlorio Ascioffa is a high school English teacher at Queens Metropolitan High School in Forest Hills, New York, a diverse, zoned high school that serves a population where 57 percent of students are low-income, 51 percent are Black and Hispanic, and 15 percent have special learning needs. The majority of Metropolitan students enter high school reading between the sixth- and eighth-grade levels, with a significant handful of students reading at a lower lexile and several reading at a higher one.

DeFlorio was already serving as the English Department lead at Metropolitan when she enrolled in Emerging Leaders with a goal of eventually becoming a principal. In consultation with her principal, she decided to focus on ninth-grade English instruction, leading a team of three teachers during her Emerging Leaders training year. The transition to high school from middle school had historically been difficult for Metropolitan's students, especially with the increased rigor required by the implementation of Common Core Standards in New York, and DeFlorio was familiar with the research indicating that students who struggle in ninth grade are far less likely to graduate high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

DeFlorio's year of training completely changed her perspective about teacher leadership, helping her understand that the role needed to be intensively focused on what went on in the classroom. As head of the English department, she had simply kept tabs on the needs of the department:

Principals often lack the capacity—in time and sometimes in content-area expertise—to support teachers in making the leap to new standards.

facilitating meetings, occasionally reviewing data—“on a surface level”—with her teachers, and conducting some walkthroughs with her assistant principal. Through her leadership training, DeFlorio gained skills and strategies that helped her move her colleagues toward instructional excellence.

The Emerging Leaders program requires that all participants set student learning goals—or SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, timely) goals—with their teams at the start of the year and track progress toward those goals. DeFlorio and her team established a SMART goal that aligned with the school-wide goal of college readiness for all students: they wanted 60 percent of ninth graders to master the Common Core ELA Standard of being able to support a claim with detailed textual evidence and another 40 percent to have made progress toward that standard. An in-class assessment early in the year had revealed that none of the entering freshmen were meeting that goal.

For DeFlorio, there were two key parts to moving her team forward. The first was ensuring it was high functioning: she needed to build buy-in, trust, and a willingness to share and collaborate. The second was monitoring and guiding instruction in all four classrooms so that every student was engaged and challenged with appropriately rigorous content aligned to the team’s learning goals. Clearly, classroom improvements could not occur if DeFlorio’s teachers did not view the work as valuable, but her team was initially resistant to change and even to the idea of collaborating with one another. Through her leadership training, DeFlorio learned to counter this resistance by holding one-on-one talks with her teachers, finding out what each of them needed, and showing them how they could obtain what they wanted through active participation on the team.

For instance, one teacher had an integrated co-teaching class and needed help differentiating materials

Once her teachers were forced to work together in planning a lesson, they recognized how helpful it was and were inspired to collaborate more closely outside of the meetings.

and lessons for students with a wide range of abilities. DeFlorio was able to explain to her how the team could provide this kind of support. Another teacher acknowledged that she was not asking enough of her students but didn’t quite know how to raise the bar. DeFlorio let her know that they would work together as a team to develop assignments and lesson plans that met the level of rigor required by ninth-grade Common Core Standards. Additionally, when DeFlorio discovered that her team was ignoring her request to plan lessons together, she had them do it during the team meeting. Once her teachers were forced to work together in planning a lesson, they recognized how helpful it was and were inspired to collaborate more closely outside of the meetings.

While DeFlorio had some prior understanding of data-driven instruction, her training gave her a deep understanding of how to use data to understand not just *what* students got wrong, but *why* they got it wrong, and how to develop strategies to counter those deficits. To that end, DeFlorio and her teachers brought samples of student work to each biweekly meeting, which the team analyzed together. She also began going into their classrooms to see how they were carrying out the strategies they had discussed and to provide real-time instructional support.

From her very first classroom observations, DeFlorio was able to see there were pronounced variations in the expectations to which teachers were holding students. For instance, for a lesson on analyzing a scene from

a play, one teacher asked students to draw a picture of the scene, label it, and explain why each element was important. Another teacher asked students to write two paragraphs using textual evidence to analyze the scene and then participate in a Socratic-style discussion about it. DeFlorio wanted to see all her teachers carry out the kind of instruction she observed in the second classroom, but she learned from her training that she should avoid being overly prescriptive, which can sometimes make teachers defensive and resistant to change. She had to utilize newly acquired leadership strategies to move her team in the direction she wanted them to go.

DeFlorio began by implementing a cycle of interclassroom visitation among her teachers so they could see the differences in their in-class assignments and how some teachers were setting a higher bar for their students. Second, she led an inquiry-based discussion at their meeting—What was the objective of the lesson? Do you think your assignment (drawing a picture) was moving students toward that objective?—that allowed her teachers to arrive at conclusions on their own and to recognize the need to adjust their approaches. Finally, she shared with her team a tool she learned about in Emerging Leaders, the cognitive-rigor matrix, that teachers could use to evaluate whether their assignments were appropriately demanding and get ideas for raising the level of difficulty when they were falling short.

Ultimately, the team agreed upon a strategy they would all use every day in their English classes. Students would have to participate in a Socratic-style discussion about the text they were reading for the class (they collaborated to develop discussion questions that would elicit in-depth thinking) and write two paragraphs about a quote drawn from that text (over the course of the year they read four novels, starting with *Persepolis* and ending with *Lord of the Flies*, as well as two plays, including one

by Shakespeare). For their writing assignments, students had to explain the meaning of the quote and analyze it using evidence to support their point of view. By reviewing these daily assignments in their biweekly meetings, along with essay-based interim assessments that evaluated students' mastery of supporting a claim with evidence, the team saw that by January, 75 percent of their students had mastered the standard. This achievement far surpassed their yearlong SMART goal of 60 percent, so they reset the goal to 90 percent and set out to help the remaining 25 percent of ninth graders—most of whom were students with disabilities—achieve the same level of mastery.

From examining the work of this group of students, the team determined that some were having a hard time understanding the quote, while others struggled with the analysis component of the assignment. To address these distinct issues, the teachers helped students break down the meaning of the quote by having them “chunk” it into shorter sections and gave them strategies to help them get started on analysis, including discussing the quote with a partner, circling words that stood out as important, and writing down what they thought was the “big topic” of the quote. Initially, the teachers went over strategies with the students before they started on the analysis. Soon the students were able to work on their own with just a handout. Ultimately, the students were able to draw upon the strategies from memory. By June, another 15 percent of students—90 percent of all ninth graders—had mastered the standard.

Teacher Leadership and the Necessity of High Quality Training

There is growing recognition that bolstering teacher leadership is a key to accelerating school improvement, and this case study illustrates how strong teacher-leaders can accelerate student learning by working closely

with teams to track student data and design and implement standards-aligned lessons, assignments, and assessments. Teacher leadership can strengthen schools in other ways as well: it can make the job of principal more sustainable (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010), it can increase the success of new initiatives by generating a sense of ownership and buy-in, and it can reduce staff turnover by providing teachers with opportunities for career advancement (Marvel, Lyter, Peltola, Strizek, & Morton, 2006).

But perhaps the greatest impact on student achievement comes when teacher-leaders have the skills to cultivate in their teams a sense of shared accountability for student learning and to help their colleagues improve instructional practice via observation, modeling, and feedback (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Rockoff, 2008; Marsh, McCombs, & Martorell, 2012). Teacher-leaders can be particularly powerful instructional coaches because they are trusted by their colleagues as advisors and counselors (Darling-Hammond, 1998) and they can deliver relevant, actionable feedback that teachers internalize and apply in their classrooms. For example, one study found that at 17 schools where teachers received 3 years of literacy coaching from trained colleagues, student learning gains were 32 percent larger than they were before the intervention began (Biancarosa et al., 2010). Research has also found that less-experienced

teachers demonstrate particularly strong and persistent gains when they are coached by a fellow teacher (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009).

However, simply appointing teachers to leadership roles (what Katherine Bassett, Executive Director and CEO of the National Network of State Teachers of the Year, calls the “Shazam! You’re a teacherleader!” approach to teacher leadership) is unlikely to produce meaningful learning gains. As we describe in our recent report, [Untapped \(Valdez & Broin, 2015\)](#), great teaching doesn’t automatically translate into strong leadership. Studies have found that being able to effectively coach fellow classroom teachers requires understanding of how to work with adults (Marsh et al., 2012). Even teacher-leaders with a record of achievement in the classroom need quality training, including real-world learning opportunities, to develop the skills required to lead colleagues to excellence.

Unfortunately, few districts provide such opportunities. A survey by the Council of Great City Schools (2015) found that while 86 percent of urban school districts have formal teacher-leader positions, only 32 percent of districts offered specialized training for teachers stepping into these roles. As a result, teacher-leaders often struggle with ambiguous expectations about what they should do and have few strategies to help them effectively tackle new leadership responsibilities. DeFlorio’s experience as an English department head prior to her leadership training exemplifies this reality. She was unclear what her role should be and did not understand how to draw on her own success as a teacher to elevate instruction across multiple classrooms.

Teacher-leader training that integrates purposeful leadership practice into participants’ daily work at schools and gives them expert coaching and feedback can help clarify the role and its responsibilities, familiarize teacher-leaders with strategies to overcome real-world challenges that arise when working to change adult

Teacher-leaders often struggle with ambiguous expectations about what they should do and have few strategies to help them effectively tackle new leadership responsibilities.

behaviors, and endow them with the key competencies—high-functioning teams to lead, data-driven instruction, action planning to improve instruction, and coaching and feedback—that result in student achievement growth. Such training is made more powerful when participants must carry out real-world assignments at their schools and capture them on video. Participants can see themselves in action and receive feedback so they learn exactly where they are succeeding and where they need to improve. When teacher-leaders are given such opportunities for job-embedded practice and feedback, significant growth in student learning follows: DeFlorio and her team far surpassed the student achievement goals they set for themselves.

Conclusion

Strong teacher leadership works to elevate instruction and student learning in ELA classrooms for the same reason it works across a school: it gives teachers the structure and guidance they need to effectively reflect as a team on where students are, where they need to grow, and the best ways to help them get there. This kind of close collaboration and team planning around instruction is characteristic of high-performing district and charter schools, and it is an approach that teachers and principals welcome: in surveys, educators report that working with and observing colleagues is their most effective professional development (Public Agenda, 2003).

While different states have taken different approaches to establishing more rigorous academic standards, they share a common characteristic of being challenging to implement: they demand far more of students and require significant shifts in how teachers approach their work. Districts across the country report that “understanding what high-quality, standards-aligned student work looks

When teacher-leaders are given such opportunities for job-embedded practice and feedback, significant growth in student learning follows.

like in practice” and “establishing high expectations and creating structures to support them” are two of the most pressing needs at their schools (Bellwether, 2015). A robust system of teacher leadership is a critical strategy for meeting these needs. It allows teachers to collaborate and hold each other accountable, to observe and learn from their colleagues, to ensure that high expectations are consistently established across classrooms, and to address weaknesses and learning gaps that are easy to overlook when teachers work alone.

As our *Untapped* research and the case study we shared here demonstrate, however, teacher-leaders must have a robust understanding of what standards-aligned instruction looks like and the ability to enact data analysis in a way that is not simply an exercise in compliance but actually improves and enriches instruction and curriculum. And, critically, they must have personal and adult leadership skills that enable them to build trust and buy-in across teams and to overcome the inevitable resistance that occurs when individuals are asked to make significant changes in how they approach their work. ●

References

Bellwether Education Partners (2015). Unpublished data.

Biancarosa, G., Bryk, A. S., & Dexter, E. R. (2010). Assessing the value-added effects of literacy collaborative professional development on student

learning. *Elementary School Journal*, 111(1), 7–34.

Council of Great City Schools (2015). *Assistant principals and teacher leaders in America's great city schools*. Unpublished data.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1998). Teacher learning that supports student learning. *Educational Leadership* 55(5), 6–11.

Jackson, T., & Bruegmann, E. (2009). *Teaching students and teaching each other: The importance of peer learning for teachers*. New York, NY: The National Bureau of Economic Research.

Marsh, J. A., McCombs, J. S., & Martorell, F. (2012). How instructional coaches support data-driven decision-making: Policy implementation and effects in Florida middle schools. *Educational Policy*, 24(6), 872–907.

Marvel, J., Lyter, D. M., Peltola, P., Strizek, G. A., & Morton, B. A. (2006). *Teacher attrition and mobility: Results from the 2004-05 Teacher Follow-Up Survey* (NCES 2007-307). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Mascall, B., & Leithwood, K. (2010). Investing in leadership: The district's role in managing principal turnover. *Leadership and Policy* 9(4) 367–383.

McCallumore, K. M., & Sparapani, E. F. (2010). The importance of 9th grade on high school graduation rates and student success. *Education* 130(3) Spring.

Public Agenda (2003). *Rolling up their sleeves*. New York, NY: Author.

Rockoff, J. (2008). *Does mentoring reduce turnover and improve skills of new employees? Evidence from teachers in New York City*: The National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w13868>

Valdez, M., & Broin, A. (2015). *Untapped: Transforming teacher leadership to help students succeed*. New York, NY: New Leaders. Retrieved from: http://www.newleaders.org/wp-content/uploads/NewLeaders_Untapped.pdf