

From Good to Great Discussion Starter Tool

TO BE USED WITH

From Good to Great: Exemplary Teachers
Share Perspectives on Increasing Teacher
Effectiveness Across the Career Continuum



April 2014

[Read the Tool](#)

About This Tool

In the report *From Good to Great: Exemplary Teachers Share Perspectives on Increasing Teacher Effectiveness Across the Career Continuum*, National and State Teachers of the Year shared their views on what helped them become great teachers. This accompanying *Discussion Starter Tool* builds on the report's findings to help policy leaders, school leaders, and—especially—teachers and teacher leaders generate constructive dialogue about the types of supports that should be made available to help all teachers become more effective.

It is vital that teachers themselves partake in policy discussions that inform supports for teacher effectiveness in order to share on-the-ground insights about the most effective approaches for increasing teacher learning in their context. **We recommend using this tool in a small-group discussion setting.**

The report and this accompanying tool are the product of a yearlong collaboration among seven leading organizations working to advance teaching and elevate the profession. Proposed by the National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY) and led by the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders (GTL Center) at American Institutes for Research, the study involved the following partner organizations:

- GTL Center
- NNSTOY
- American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education
- Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation
- Council of Chief State School Officers
- National Council on Teacher Quality
- National Education Association

Study Materials

In addition to this *Discussion Starter Tool*, the following study materials are available online:

- Full report
- Executive summary
- Survey instrument
- Survey results

All these materials are available for download on the GTL Center's *From Good to Great* webpage. Please visit the webpage at <http://www.gtlcenter.org/products-resources/study-teacher-perspectives-factors-influencing-effectiveness>.



For questions about the survey, please contact Ellen Behrstock-Sherratt (esherratt@air.org) or contact the GTL Center directly (gtlcenter@air.org).

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1 Introduction

Effective teachers never stop growing. The research on what factors make teachers effective, however, leaves many important policy questions unanswered—particularly questions about the specific types of professional experiences and supports that maximize teacher effectiveness. Through a first-of-its-kind survey of State and National Teachers of the Year, the report *From Good to Great: Exemplary Teachers Share Perspectives on Increasing Teacher Effectiveness Across the Career Continuum* provides an opportunity for excellent educators to describe what they believe are the professional experiences and supports throughout their career that most contributed to their growth and effectiveness.

Who Are the National and State Teachers of the Year?

Each year, states (including the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense Education Activity) select an official State Teacher of the Year. The selection process varies by state, but each state’s process aims to rigorously validate the State Teacher of the Year’s abilities in the classroom, in communicating with broad audiences, and in representing the teaching profession. These teachers are recognized by their states as among the best, and one teacher each year is selected as among the best in the nation: the National Teacher of the Year.

The National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY) is the organization that represents the educators selected as State Teacher of the Year.

National and State Teachers of the Year. Teachers fundamentally informed and shaped this survey. The survey content was shaped by focus groups of National and State Teachers of the Year that took place at the initial and final stages of survey design, and teacher researchers coauthored the report.

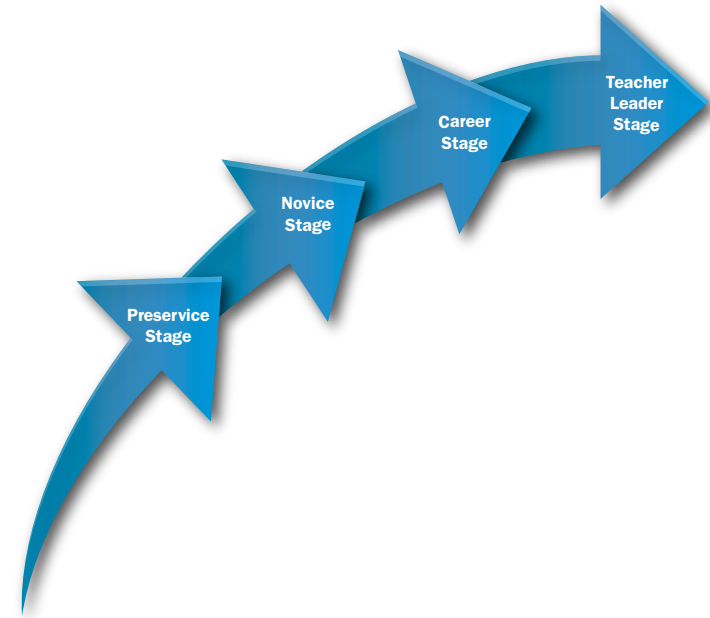
Four Stages of the Teacher Career Continuum.

In the survey, we asked questions about the stages of the teacher career continuum (see Figure 1).

- **Preservice Stage:** The period of teachers' careers when they were preparing to teach
- **Novice Stage:** Years 1–5 as teachers of record
- **Career Stage:** Year 6 and on, having reached a certain level of mastery but before taking on significant leadership roles
- **Teacher Leader Stage:** The point after which teachers became a State Teacher of the Year and/or assumed other teacher leadership responsibilities

What experiences and supports helped these award-winning teachers become so effective? Reflecting back on their careers, from preparation through mastery and even into retirement, the survey respondents provide the field with insight into the formative experiences of effective teachers.

Figure 1. Teacher Career Continuum



Discussion Points. Now it's your turn to discuss—along with effective teachers in your school, district, or state—how teachers grow from good to great. As you read through this *Discussion Starter Tool*, think about, discuss, and respond to the questions in each section. Your responses will help focus decisions on which professional supports and experiences should be funded and prioritized and which can be delivered more effectively. Such thoughtful discussions are the first step in developing solutions that will enhance the effectiveness of teachers across the nation.

2 Main Findings

◆ Most Important Experiences and Supports at Each Stage

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2. Main Findings

Through the survey responses, we found that teachers value support from other effective teachers and administrators at every stage of their career: Preservice, Novice, Career, and Teacher Leader.

Most Important Experiences and Supports at Each Stage

Preservice Stage. National and State Teacher of the Year respondents reported that among the most important Preservice Stage experiences for improving teacher effectiveness are:

- High-quality student teaching or internship experiences
- Content-specific coursework in their certification area

Novice Stage. These teachers agreed that among the most important experiences for improving teacher effectiveness at the Novice Stage are:

- Access to an effective mentor
- Access to a supportive school principal
- Placement aligned with their license and expertise
- Collaboration with colleagues
- Common planning time
- Professional learning communities
- Self-reflection opportunities
- Self-developed professional growth plan

Career Stage. Great teachers agreed that among the most important experiences for improving teacher effectiveness for Career Stage teachers are:

- Ongoing formal education
- Achieving National Board Certification
- Collaborative school culture
- Supportive school leadership

Teacher Leader Stage. Great teachers at the Teacher Leader Stage agreed that the following leadership opportunities further strengthened their effectiveness:

- Working as a coach or mentor (full-time or while remaining a classroom teacher)
- Facilitating professional development
- Teaching preservice teachers at the university level

Whose Views Does This Study Represent?

Of the 755 National and State Teachers of the Year who were invited to participate in the study, 311 (41 percent) responded to the survey. These effective teachers represent the full spectrum of subject areas taught, types of school locations (urban, rural, suburban), school poverty levels, and grade levels.

Although 50 percent of survey respondents currently were teaching in a PK–12 classroom (as a teacher or in a specialist role), the remaining 50 percent were in school or district administration, universities, or nonprofit organizations. In addition, 15 percent of the respondents already had retired. Likewise, 58 percent had worked in the classroom for 20 years or more.

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3. Preservice Stage

- ◆ Final Clinical Practicum
- ◆ Content-Based Coursework
- ◆ Action Steps
- ◆ Discussion Questions

3. Preservice Stage

To help identify the aspects of preservice training that are most important in developing teacher effectiveness, we asked the National and State Teachers of the Year to indicate which specific aspects of their preparation experience most contributed to their becoming effective (see Figure 2 on page 9).

Findings

Keeping in mind that 58 percent of our survey respondents had more than 20 years of teaching experience and therefore their perspectives do not reflect most preparation programs today, the top-rated preservice supports as they reflected back on their careers were:

Final Clinical Practicum. Trumping all other supports at the Preservice Stage in its importance to developing teacher effectiveness was access to a high-quality clinical practicum (often referred to as student teaching or an internship). We found that fully 88 percent of National and State Teacher of the Year respondents had access to a final clinical practicum that they found to be high quality; nearly three quarters of this group ranked the experience as among the three most important aspects of their preservice experience.

Digging deeper, we asked the National and State Teachers of the Year specifically what aspects of the high-quality clinical practicum were most important. Top on the list was having a **strong cooperating teacher**—specifically in terms of the cooperating teacher’s effectiveness at promoting student learning and providing adult mentorship.

- The three most compelling criteria for selecting cooperating teachers were that (1) they had received training for this role, (2) they had more than five years of teaching experience, and (3) they had taught in the same subject area as the student teacher. At least two thirds of respondents rated each of these characteristics as “very important.”

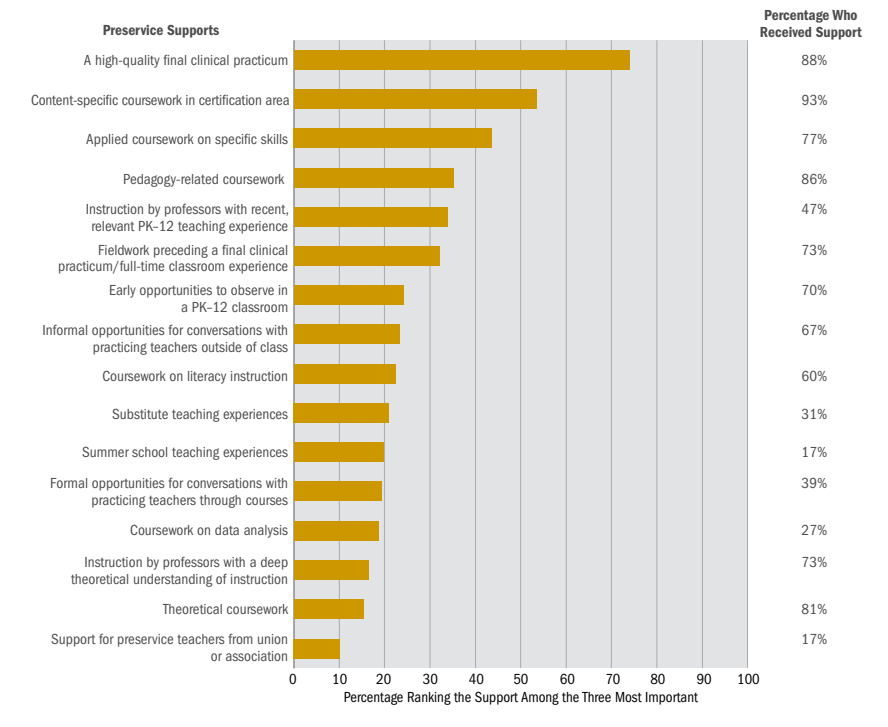
Another aspect of a high-quality clinical practicum that respondents rated highly as an influence on their effectiveness at this stage was that the

practicum last a **full school year**. The full-year experience allows preservice teachers to see how to set up a classroom, build a community of learners, and build parent relationships—as well as close out the school year, including conducting summative testing, analyzing results, and making recommendations for the next school year.

- Only 13 percent of respondents had a clinical practicum that lasted a full school year, so these results must be interpreted with caution. However, of those 13 percent who did experience it, 55 percent believed the yearlong experience was one of the three *most critical* to developing their effectiveness as a teacher.

Content-Based Coursework. We found that 78 percent of the surveyed National and State Teachers of the Year reported teacher preparation coursework in the content area as “very important” to their effectiveness. Just over half of this group viewed content-specific coursework as among the top three *most important* preservice experiences for developing their effectiveness as teachers.

Figure 2. Percentage of National and State Teachers of the Year Who Ranked Each Preservice Support Among the “Top Three” for Developing Their Effectiveness as a Teacher



Action Steps

Policymakers can facilitate strategic partnerships between preparation programs and districts to strengthen and lengthen clinical placements for preservice candidates and to secure effective cooperating teachers for all preservice candidates. Stakeholders can discuss strategies and supports for ensuring high-quality and highly relevant teacher preparation coursework that aligns with and supports clinical residencies. Most important, state policymakers and/or district leaders should engage with teachers and other stakeholders to understand the issues at stake in their own context, starting with the questions below.

Questions for Kicking Off the Conversation in YOUR Context

1. What are the largest preservice programs or institutions in your school, district, or state? How much time do preservice teachers typically spend in student teaching or internships through these institutions?
2. What efforts are under way to expand the availability of yearlong clinical experiences in your school, district, or state? What would need to happen for creating longer, higher quality clinical residencies? Who would need to be involved?
3. At the institutions near you, how are preservice candidates matched with districts and schools? Could this process be improved?
4. At the institutions near you, how are cooperating teachers identified, selected, and prepared for their position? Are the minimum requirements rigorous? What additional criteria should be considered?
5. What ongoing supports and training do cooperating teachers need? What are the key ways in which leaders from teacher preparation programs and districts can help to strengthen the effectiveness of cooperating teachers?
6. What are the best opportunities for preparation programs and districts to collaborate to improve the quality and relevance of teacher preparation coursework? What are the five most important improvements that would make this coursework most useful for new teachers?

4 Novice Stage

- ◆ Important Experiences and Supports
- ◆ Characteristics of an Effective Mentor
- ◆ Action Steps
- ◆ Discussion Questions

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4. Novice Stage

We asked the National and State Teacher of the Year respondents to think back to their first five years of teaching, consider various experiences, and indicate how those experiences affected their development during this Novice Stage.

Findings

Important Experiences and Supports. We found that at least 80 percent of the National and State Teacher of the Year respondents rated every Novice Stage support that we asked about as “very important” or “somewhat important” to their effectiveness, with most supports seen as at least “somewhat important” by more than 90 percent of respondents. However, the specific experiences and supports that respondents rated *most* important during the Novice Stage (see Figure 3 and Figure 4) were:

- Access to a mentor
- Access to a supportive principal
- Placement that aligned with their talent, training, or certification
- Collaboration with colleagues
- Common planning time
- Professional learning communities

- Self-reflection opportunities
- Self-developed professional growth plan

Figure 3. Percentage of National and State Teachers of the Year Who Ranked Each Novice Stage Experience Among Their “Top Three” for Developing Their Effectiveness as a Teacher

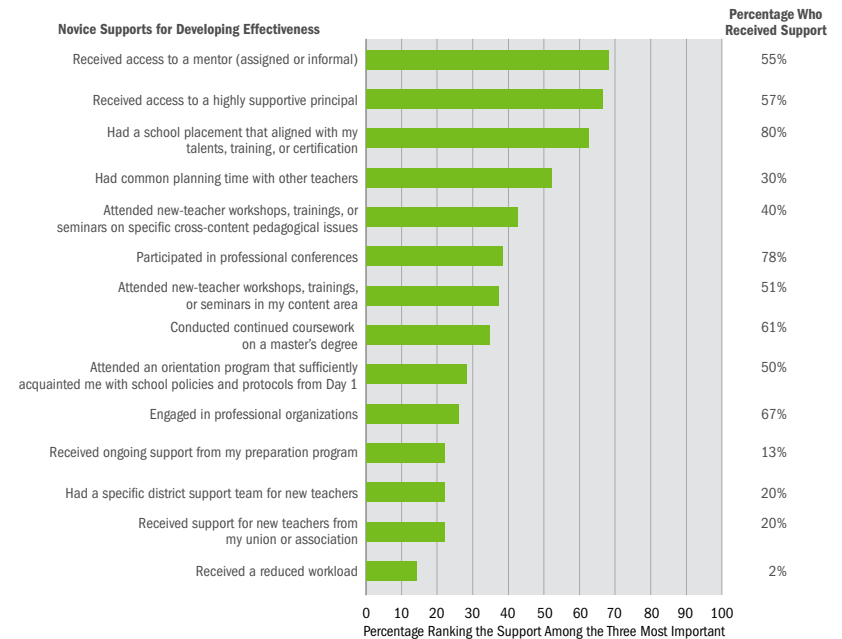


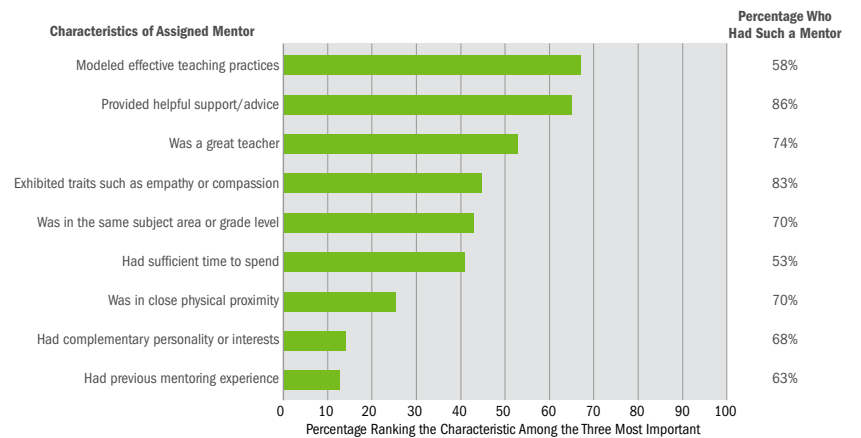
Figure 4. Percentage of National and State Teachers of the Year Who Ranked Each Novice Stage Support Among Their “Top Three” for Strengthening Professional Learning



Characteristics of an Effective Mentor. To guide teachers and school leaders in carefully selecting mentors, we provided a list of mentor characteristics for survey respondents to rank. Only 37 percent of respondents had an assigned mentor (although this percentage is higher for those who entered the profession more recently). Bearing in mind this limitation in the data, the mentor characteristics

that stood out as having most influence on the effectiveness of National and State Teacher of the Year respondents was having mentors (both assigned and unofficial mentors) who modeled effective teaching practice and provided practical advice and support that was relevant to them as new teachers (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Percentage of National and State Teachers of the Year Who Ranked Each Characteristic of Their Assigned Mentor Among the “Top Three” Most Important Characteristics for Developing Their Effectiveness as a Teacher



Action Steps

Local and state policy leaders can create more opportunities to connect teacher leaders with new and struggling teachers through rigorous mentoring and induction programs. Policymakers can work with teacher leaders to design, implement, and promote multiple opportunities for novice teachers to work with quality mentors and focus on professional growth. Policymakers also can consider implementing formal structures aimed at supporting time and space for collaboration between teachers of all levels and investing in school leadership roles targeted toward supporting novice teachers. Most important, state policymakers and/or district leaders should engage with teachers and other stakeholders to understand the issues at stake in their own context, starting with the questions at right.

RESOURCE | The GTL Center’s Policy Snapshot titled *Supporting New Teachers: What Do We Know About Effective Induction Policies?* (coming soon) provides one useful place to start supporting novice teachers. It offers research, practical examples, and policy considerations to guide states in thinking about building a systematic, comprehensive approach to teacher induction and mentoring.

Questions for Kicking Off the Conversation in YOUR Context

1. What kinds of opportunities do novice teachers in your school, district, or state have for receiving mentoring or support from experienced teachers? What opportunities do they have for observing the practice of experienced and effective teachers?
2. What are five ways in which your state or district can create more opportunities for novice teachers to collaborate with other teachers?
3. How can professional learning communities be used as one opportunity for more intentional collaboration between new teachers and experienced teachers?
4. What options are available to ensure that new teachers are placed appropriately—in light of their training, certification, and interests? How feasible is the possibility of reduced workloads for new teachers?
5. Do all teachers in your state or district have access to effective, supportive school leaders? What additional supports, training, or resources do school leaders need to better meet teachers’ needs?

5. Career Stage

- ◆ Ongoing Formal Education
- ◆ National Board Certification
- ◆ Traditional Professional Development
- ◆ Collaborative School Culture and Supportive Leadership
- ◆ Leadership Opportunities
- ◆ Action Steps
- ◆ Discussion Questions

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5. Career Stage

We asked the National and State Teacher of the Year respondents to consider how important various experiences were for increasing their effectiveness after they had been teaching for five or more years (see Figure 6 on page 17).

Findings

The top-rated supports at this stage were:

Ongoing Formal Education. We found that fully 92 percent of National and State Teachers of the Year did enroll in ongoing formal education as Career Stage teachers. Half of these respondents reported that this ongoing education was among the top three most important experiences that contributed to their ongoing growth at this stage.

National Board Certification. The process of achieving certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was seen as highly valuable for those respondents who experienced it. Notably, 68 percent of those respondents who achieved National Board Certification ranked it among the three most important experiences during this career stage. However, this result should be treated cautiously due to the relatively small number of National

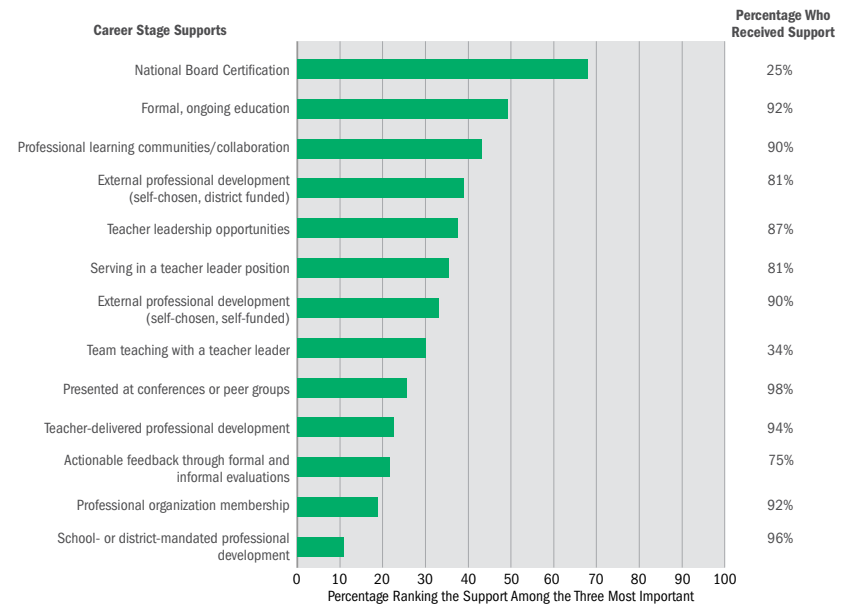
and State Teachers of the Year who achieved this recognition; although much higher than the national average of 2.7 percent, the percentage of National and State Teacher of the Year respondents who achieved National Board Certification was 24 percent.

Traditional Professional Development. The large majority of respondents (80 percent to 96 percent) had experienced the full variety of more traditional types of professional development: school- or district-mandated, self-selected, self-funded, and professional development provided by teachers. Further, respondents reported that they largely value these experiences. That said, while nine out of 10 respondents value self-selected professional development, that number dropped to three out of four for their district-mandated professional development experiences.

Collaborative School Culture and Supportive Leadership. We also asked respondents about aspects of their teaching and learning environment and resources that may have led them to become the effective teachers they are today. Two such supports that respondents considered highly important to their effectiveness were a collegial, collaborative school culture and colleagues (which were ranked in the top three by 61 percent of those who had those supports) and access to supportive school leadership (which was ranked in the top three by 50 percent of those who had that support). In total, 84 percent of respondents reported having worked in a collegial, collaborative school environment and 80 percent benefited from supportive school leadership.

Leadership Opportunities. More than one third of National and State Teacher of the Year respondents ranked having served as teacher leaders and having career advancement opportunities as among their three most important growth experiences during their career stage.

Figure 6. Percentage of National and State Teachers of the Year Who Ranked Each Career Stage Support Among the “Top Three” for Developing Their Effectiveness as a Teacher



Action Steps

Federal and state policymakers can fund research to determine the aspects of ongoing formal education and other Career Stage professional learning supports that teachers find important for developing their effectiveness. Then, policymakers can target supports to promote effective elements of these programs. Along with gaining insight into and targeting support for effective professional learning programs, policymakers can support structures that create the time and space for collaboration among teachers at all levels. Finally, investments can be made into the recruitment, retention, and development of strong and supportive school leaders. Most important, state policymakers and/or district leaders should engage with teachers and other stakeholders to understand the issues at stake in their own context, starting with the questions at right.

RESOURCE | As a starting point, leaders may wish to consult the GTL Center's Professional Learning Module on teaching conditions (coming soon to the *Professional Learning Modules* webpage at <http://www.gtlcenter.org/technical-assistance/professional-learning-modules>).

Questions for Kicking Off the Conversation in YOUR Context

1. What can states or districts do to identify and incentivize aspects of ongoing formal education that will support increasing teacher effectiveness? Does the state or district otherwise encourage teachers to seek ongoing opportunities for formal education?
2. Several policies and structures—such as professional learning communities, opportunities to observe, and time to collaborate—can support collegial and collaborative environments. Given your school or district context, how can these structures be strengthened or formalized?
3. How many effective principals are there in your state or district? What is the distribution of effective principals across schools?
4. Does your state or district gather teacher perception data on working conditions or school culture? How are these data used to inform principal practice or school-level supports?

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Teacher Leader Stage

- ◆ Collaborating With Colleagues
- ◆ Teaching Preservice Teachers
- ◆ Action Steps
- ◆ Discussion Questions

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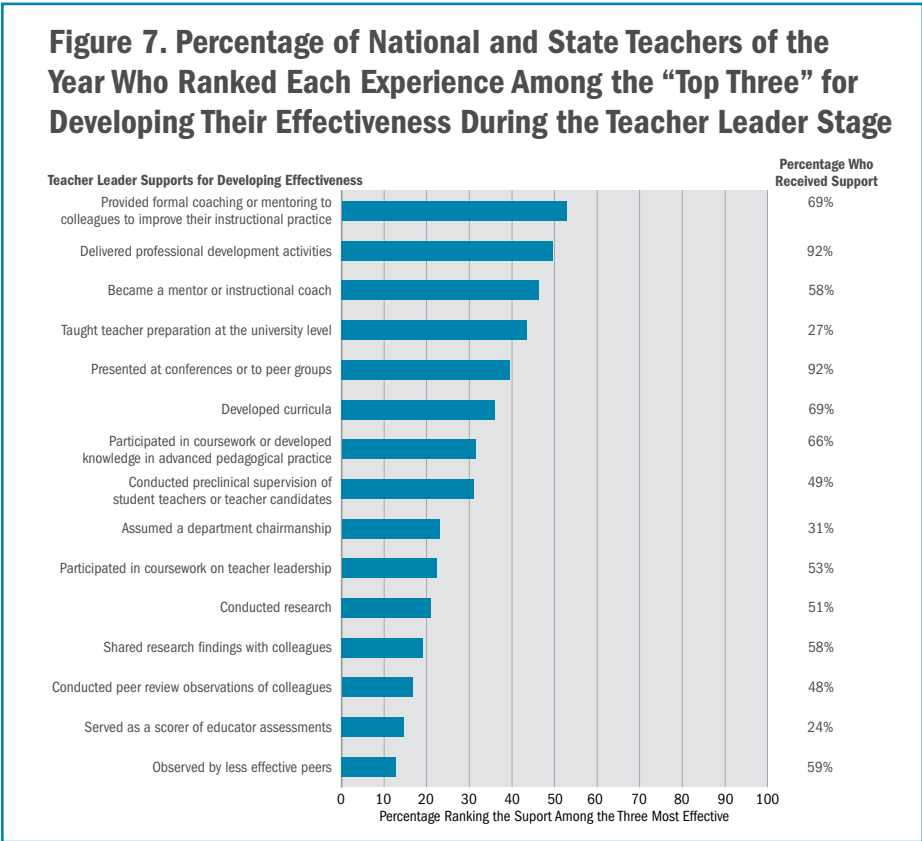
For this stage, we asked the survey respondents to consider various experiences and indicate how those experiences affected their development after taking on a teacher leadership role and/or winning the State Teacher of the Year award (see Figure 7).

Findings

The top-rated supports at this stage were:

Collaborating With Colleagues to Improve Teacher Effectiveness. The professional experiences that the highest percentage of National and State Teachers of the Year ranked as among the three most important experiences for further fueling teacher leaders’ effectiveness in the classroom were (1) providing formal coaching or mentoring while remaining a classroom teacher, (2) facilitating professional development, and (3) becoming a mentor or coach.

Teaching Preservice Teachers. Only 27 percent of respondents had the experience of teaching preservice teachers, but that experience was highly rated for further strengthening the effectiveness of those who did.



RESOURCES | One useful place to start is by reviewing resources such as the GTL Center’s Ask the Team briefs—in particular, *Leadership and Lattices: New Pathways Across The Teaching Profession* and *Leveraging Teacher Talent: Peer Observation in Educator Evaluation*. Both briefs are available at <http://www.gtlcenter.org/technical-assistance/ask-the-team>.

Action Steps

Leaders in schools, districts, and states can create more opportunities—including formal and informal leadership roles—for teacher leaders to connect with and work with other teachers, especially new and struggling teachers. In particular, they can create leadership roles that will support teacher leaders in advancing their careers while staying in the classroom. Teacher leaders can help build bridges between preparation, practice, and leadership for all educators. Most important, state policymakers and/or district leaders should engage with teachers and other stakeholders to understand the issues at stake in their own context, starting with the questions below.

Questions for Kicking Off the Conversation in YOUR Context

1. What types of *formal* teacher leader roles are available in your school, district, or state? Are these roles attractive positions for those who hold them? Are there enough opportunities for all teachers who are interested in leading while remaining in the classroom?

2. What types of *informal* teacher leader roles are available?
3. Do teacher leaders have opportunities to mentor and lead novice teachers? To coach struggling teachers? To serve as cooperating teachers for preservice teachers?
4. Is there regular time built into the school-day schedule for teacher leaders to support other teachers or work with administrators without overburdening them or taking them out of the classroom? If not, what would it take to build time for this work in the school day?
5. How can your state or district create supports and resources for principals on distributed leadership strategies so teachers can have leadership opportunities?
6. The list on the following page shows the teacher leadership roles that the surveyed National and State Teachers of the Year had experienced. Which of these teacher leadership opportunities exist in your context? Are there other teacher leader roles not included on this list?

Where Are the National and State Teachers of the Year Leading?

The National and State Teachers of the Year indicated that upon becoming a teacher leader, their most and least common leadership roles and professional learning supports were as follows:

- Ninety-two percent facilitated professional development.
- Ninety-two percent presented at conferences or to peer groups.
- Eighty-nine percent had experience serving on national, state, or local forums, workshops, or conferences.
- Eighty-five percent met with policymakers.
- Eighty-three percent organized whole-school, whole-grade-level, or whole-team projects.
- Eighty-two percent had informal leadership roles in improving colleagues' instructional practice.
- Eighty-one percent served on school or district leadership teams.
- Seventy-five percent served on national, state, or local education policy and/or public policy committees, task forces, or think tanks.
- Sixty-nine percent provided formal coaching or mentoring to colleagues.
- Sixty-nine percent conducted curriculum development.
- Sixty-six percent developed collaborative projects with the community.
- Sixty-six percent took coursework or developed knowledge in advanced pedagogical practice.
- Fifty-nine percent were observed by less effective peers.
- Fifty-eight percent were instructional coaches or mentors.
- Fifty-eight percent shared research findings with colleagues.
- Fifty-three percent took coursework on teacher leadership.
- Fifty-three percent had formal leadership roles where they were jointly accountable for colleagues' student outcomes while continuing to teach.
- Fifty percent conducted research.
- Forty-nine percent conducted preclinical supervision of student teachers or teacher candidates.
- Forty-eight percent conducted peer review observations of colleagues.
- Forty percent took coursework on adult learning.
- Thirty-three percent served as union or association leaders, negotiating team members, board members, committee members, or delegates to the assembly.
- Thirty-one percent assumed department chairmanships.
- Thirty percent had a role where they reached more students than normal by using blended learning.
- Twenty-seven percent had formal leadership roles where they were jointly accountable for colleagues' student outcomes but were not continuing to teach.
- Twenty-seven percent taught teacher preparation at the university level.
- Twenty-four percent had roles where they reached more students than normal by leading a teaching team.
- Twenty-four percent served as scorers of educator assessments.

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7 Conclusion and Next Steps

As the first comprehensive national survey of effective teachers’ views on developing teacher effectiveness, *From Good to Great: Exemplary Teachers Share Perspectives on Increasing Teacher Effectiveness Across the Career Continuum* contributes to the current body of teacher effectiveness research both in its design and outcomes.

The exploratory study sheds light on the experiences—from high-quality preservice clinical experiences to opportunities for teacher leaders to help less effective teachers improve—that these exemplary teachers believe mattered to their development. Because the National and State Teacher of the Year respondents represent a more veteran population than the teaching force at large, the findings offer a unique breadth of perspective on how these teachers got from good to great as they moved across the career continuum.

Yet the study has a number of limitations, which warrant both additional research and thoughtful, context-specific dialogue to inform more smart policy that meaningfully engages teachers each step of the way. Each professional experience and support discussed in this report requires further unpacking to determine whether it is inherently important or unimportant, whether certain characteristics make it more or less important to effective teachers, and how it can be made

to be as helpful as possible. The perspectives of additional effective teachers also should be solicited, particularly from those teachers who have benefited from each experience or support more recently and those teachers who are experiencing the developing approaches aimed at increasing teacher effectiveness through evaluation feedback and other present-day reforms.

The purpose of this *Discussion Starter Tool* is to help to spark more of these and other conversations with teachers and other stakeholders about improving teacher effectiveness. But these research-driven, educator-informed discussions themselves are not the goal; rather, these discussions should be seen as the impetus for, or a key element of, the development and/or refinement of state teacher effectiveness policy and districts’ decisions about the (re)allocation of professional development and other school resources. In this way, not only our teachers but also our policy-making processes can begin to move from good to great.

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