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Leading on Leadership: A Profile of the New York City Teacher Incentive Fund Grant That Created Teacher Career Pathways

Case Study

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Background

In 2012, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) faced a problem that many districts struggle with: the schools with the most needs did not necessarily have the tools or the professional learning opportunities needed to substantially improve teaching and learning. This was particularly true in the district's middle schools, where achievement scores in reading and mathematics had regressed in several previous years and teacher turnover was higher than in elementary and high schools. New York City district leaders recognized that if students are to succeed in high school, college, and career, then achievement in middle school is critical to that trajectory.

To intervene at the middle school level, the district proposed a novel plan: target efforts to support the best teacher talent to the schools with the most need by creating a “career lattice,” allowing the most effective teachers to stay in the classroom while taking on leadership roles to help other teachers. They would also receive an additional compensation for their work as teacher leaders. In addition, some teachers moved to the district level to support teacher leaders, taking roles as Teacher Team Leaders (TTLs) and working with several schools and leaders.

This idea was the foundation for the U.S. Department of Education's award of a Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant to the NYCDOE. The positions that were part of the TIF program, in addition to TTLs, came to be called Model Teacher (MT) and Peer Collaborative Teacher (PCT). MTs used their classrooms as laboratories, demonstrating exemplary teaching while opening the doors to teachers and leaders to observe. PCTs act as coaches to individual teachers as well as moderating teacher team meetings as they design and facilitate professional learning opportunities. So, for example, if a teacher team decides to learn about a new curriculum related to analyzing literature, a PCT might collect materials, lead team meetings, and coach individual teachers, while an MT would implement the curriculum and allow colleagues to observe instruction.

To make this innovative plan for teacher leadership a reality, the district needed to partner with one of its most important stakeholders—the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). By building trust and working as collaborators, the district and the union came to an agreement to allow the teacher leader compensation structure created through TIF to be part of the union contract finalized in 2012. The contract itself was a milestone in the union's relationship with the district and provided the foundation for deep collaboration that took place as the TIF grant was implemented.

In 2013–14, there were 78 schools and 299 teacher leaders that were part of the first year of the TIF grant. The program proved to be so successful that the district offered it to interested schools that were not part of the TIF grant, given that principals at these schools were willing to fund the teacher leaders from their own budgets. Today, there are 482 schools and 1,236 teacher leaders involved in the teacher leadership program, and most adopted the program after seeing what was going on in TIF schools, even though these later schools would not be part of the grant program.

“We're really proud of the partnership that we have with our local union, the United Federation of Teachers. We've really worked collaboratively from Day One to establish these new roles for teachers. They represent so much new opportunity in the teaching profession, which I think is the kind of common goal between the NYCDOE and the UFT.”—

Amy Way, Executive Director for Teacher Recruitment and Quality at the New York City Department of Education

Through the union partnership, the design of the teacher leadership program, and the uptake by educators, the district has been able to address some of the problems that persistently challenge educators and students:

Equitable access to excellent educators: The NYCDOE would address this by offering a path for the best teachers to become leaders. They would, in turn, work in the most challenging middle schools.

Pathways to spread best practice: It would open up new career paths for excellent teachers to work with other faculty at their schools, which would encourage all teachers to collaborate to share excellent instructional practices and skills.

Vision of a career path: The most effective teachers would have new options for a career path that would allow them to take on new responsibilities and increase their compensation while continuing to teach, while others could take on district-level leadership roles working with teacher leaders in multiple schools. New teachers, supported by teacher leaders, would receive much-needed early career support, while seeing that becoming an exemplary teacher could lead to leadership and a higher salary as well as prestige. And experienced teachers would benefit as well through ongoing coaching, constructive feedback, and peer collaboration.

This wasn't easy: Making this program a reality took a lot of work on the part of many. But the lessons learned about how to make it a success are best told by those who did the work.

Success Factors

Over the past decade, many performance-based compensation initiatives have struggled to achieve sustainable success. What did NYCDOE do that made the teacher leadership program a success?

Stakeholder Engagement

From the very beginning, the district designed its TIF program to bring stakeholders together, even as it was implementing a new educator evaluation system that had many on edge. The evaluation system, required by the state, would include student achievement growth as one of its metrics. NYCDOE staff saw the implementation of a new evaluation system as an opportunity to build a new coalition with its teachers and administrators, and with the teachers' union, the UFT. By using ratings from the new evaluation system as part of the selection criteria, the district could offer new career paths to the district's most capable teachers. While effective teachers would get an opportunity to expand their sphere of influence, along with extra compensation, the district would benefit by sharing the teachers' expertise with other educators.

Even before the union and the district signed a new contract that included the teacher leader pathways, they partnered to implement the TIF grant. In 2013, they collaborated on a pilot to introduce two teacher leadership pathways, both of which included extra compensation for teachers who took on the extra responsibilities. The district and union teamed up to recruit 78 high-need middle schools into the program. The following year, they signed a new teacher contract that included three teacher leadership pathways, each with extra compensation.

The teacher leadership program was not handed down as a mandate to principals, but offered during a recruitment phase. School leaders who believed in shared leadership were those who chose to participate. "When I heard about this I wanted to be in the program," said Leander Windley, principal at I.S. 318 Eugenio Maria De Hostos in Brooklyn. And while would-be teacher leaders applied for these new roles, they began reaching out to their colleagues to create a collaborative climate. "Prior to TIF, everyone shut their doors," said Kimberly O'Connor, Model Teacher at I.S. 318 Eugenio Maria De Hostos. But by engaging teachers, that changed. "Now we are in each other's classrooms all the time," she said.

Rigorous Selection

Once schools had joined the project, the district created, in collaboration with the UFT, an application for teachers interested in the teacher leadership positions. As the first step in the process, teachers completed an online application describing their interest and qualifications for the position. If, after a thorough review, they were selected to move forward in the process, they were then jointly interviewed by NYCDOE and UFT officials. Both interviewers had to agree on the applicant. A teacher approved by the interviewers would then have their application added to a

potential pool of teacher leaders to be reviewed by building principals. The principals then chose who they wanted to interview and, subsequently, selected the best teachers from the qualified pool to meet the needs of their school (though many selected teacher leaders were already in the participating schools).

The success of the stakeholder engagement efforts may have made the selection process even more rigorous—700 teachers applied for 160 openings to become a Peer Instructional Coach (now renamed as Peer Collaborative Teacher—PCT), one of the first positions that was part of the TIF pilot.

Continuous Improvement

Implementing the program was the first step, but improving it became an ongoing part of the project. From the beginning of the pilot year in 2013-14, NYCDOE began collecting data about program participants. These included surveys, interviews, and focus groups involving teacher leaders, principals, and other stakeholders; indicators of impact on educator performance, such as recruitment, retention, compensation, and advancement; and impact on student performance.

NYCDOE also provided TTLs to act as support staff from the district office to help teacher leaders implement their new roles. Through feedback from new teacher leaders, TTLs were able to identify the kinds of professional support and learning that would help teacher leaders create collaborative and robust instructional communities in the schools where they worked.

By collecting data early, NYCDOE officials were able to detect changes in attitudes, behavior, and performance among teacher leaders and teachers working in schools with teacher leaders.

Program Outcomes

As NYCDOE implemented policies and procedures that had both broad buy-in and rigorous but evolving implementation, the district has been able to establish a sustainable approach to leveraging the skills of its most effective educators to improve teaching and learning in high-need schools. When district officials applied for the TIF grant, they emphasized differentiated roles and compensation as a way to retain great teachers and entice them to teach in high-needs schools. The outcomes of the program have far exceeded what was expected. Teachers and school leaders in TIF schools report that the overall professional practice in their schools has improved, and they have found the leadership program to be instrumental in creating better schools for students.

Teachers Embraced the Program

Both those working as leaders and those in schools where leaders work see the program as improving instructional practice in their schools, leading to better education for students. The buy-in from teachers seeking a leadership role was apparent almost as soon as the program was announced, with 700 teachers applying for one of the roles in the pilot program. “The teacher leadership program gave us an opportunity to grow as a teacher while being a teacher,” said Jennifer Dauman, Peer Collaborative Teacher at I.S. 318 Eugenio Maria De Hostos.

But when the teacher leaders joined the faculty at the 78 middle schools in TIF, they faced some challenges. For one thing, teacher leaders had to acquire and develop new skills. Dauman admitted, “It was so much harder to be leading work in front of adults. I was very comfortable with kids, but this was different.”

They also had to build new relationships with the other teachers in the school that centered around improving teaching. “Our first goal was to build trust with teachers and to get them to buy into the program,” said Catherine White, Peer Collaborative Teacher at I.S. 347 School of Humanities in Brooklyn.

“The teacher leaders had to go in and tell people they weren’t there to get them, it wasn’t a gotcha program,” said John Barbella, principal at I.S. 347 School of Humanities. Instead, teacher leaders had to work with other teachers—sometimes meeting one on one and sometimes in small groups—to talk about teaching practice, brainstorm solutions to teaching problems, and bring resources to help teachers with their work.

“I know that if I take the time to work with a teacher leader, my teaching can sometimes be flawless.”—

Katherine Archipolo, classroom teacher at I.S. 318 Eugenio Maria De Hostos

Their efforts paid off. As the program took hold in the TIF middle schools, teachers started to build a new and better way to work. For PCTs, this meant asking faculty what they wanted to work on as a group and then bringing materials and ideas to teachers to support their instruction. Sometimes PCTs met with teachers in small groups, sometimes one on one. Model Teachers (MTs) opened their classrooms to faculty so they could observe instruction and use the observations to fuel the work they did as a group.

“This is my happy medium. Before, the only way to take on a leadership role was to become an administrator, but now I can do it without leaving my classroom.”—Catherine White, PCT at I.S. 347 School of Humanities

In one school, teachers decided they wanted to increase and improve student-to-student interaction about mathematics. Together they identified and shared some strategies. They designed a conversation rubric to keep track of their students’ interactions. The DT in the school began using the strategies while other teachers observed. And, according to the data they collected, student interactions increased and were of higher quality. “We live and breathe the data,” said White.

For the teacher leaders, the TIF project has had a significant impact on their work. “The opportunity to be a teacher leader has definitely improved my own classroom teaching,” said Kimberly O’Connor, Model Teacher at I.S. 318 Eugenio Maria De Hostos. “I would not be the teacher I am today without TIF.”

For the other teachers in TIF schools, the program has changed the way work is done. “I know that if I need help I can go to any teacher leader and get it. And I can go watch someone teach, and I learn a lot from the observations,” said Archipolo.

“Teachers who aren’t in English Language Arts saw what we were doing and now it’s spreading to their departments.”—Kimberly O’Connor, Model Teacher at I.S. 318 Eugenio Maria De Hostos

The data reinforce the anecdotes. More than 80 percent of teacher leaders reported a commitment to teaching, and almost two-thirds of teachers who worked with teacher leaders more than once a month thought those meetings helped improve their instruction.

School Leaders Embraced the Program

NYCDOE leaders believed that having the union work closely with them in recruiting schools would lead to a stronger program with more buy-in from teachers and from school leaders. As part of the

recruitment process, NYCDOE and UFT leaders coordinated to host town hall-style meetings to engage the entire school community and build communication with all stakeholders.

The buy-in from principals has proven to be far more important than anyone imagined as they started the project. To make the TIF program work well, administrators had to shift the way they did their work too and take on a more distributed leadership structure. That meant giving teacher leaders more responsibility for setting the instructional agenda, carrying out activities with teachers to improve teaching and learning, and directly answering teachers' questions and concerns about instruction. "In my school, it's no longer a straight top-down kind of leadership. There are more roles for people in my building to take on leadership," said Barbella.

"The program is building teams, trust, and a culture that can sustain itself."—John Barbella, principal at I.S. 347

School of Humanities

The shift to break down traditional structures in school leadership has led to a number of changes. Principals have more time to observe teachers informally and have a stronger sense of the school itself. "I'm getting into classrooms all the time," said Windley. "It used to be if I walked into a classroom the teacher might flinch. Now, it's routine, and if I see something good I always write it up."

Principals can see the impact of TIF in their students as well. Some report that test scores have risen. Others note that the students can sense the difference in how their teachers are working together.

"We've seen a 9 percent increase in student scores in math."—John Barbella, principal at I.S. 347 School of Humanities

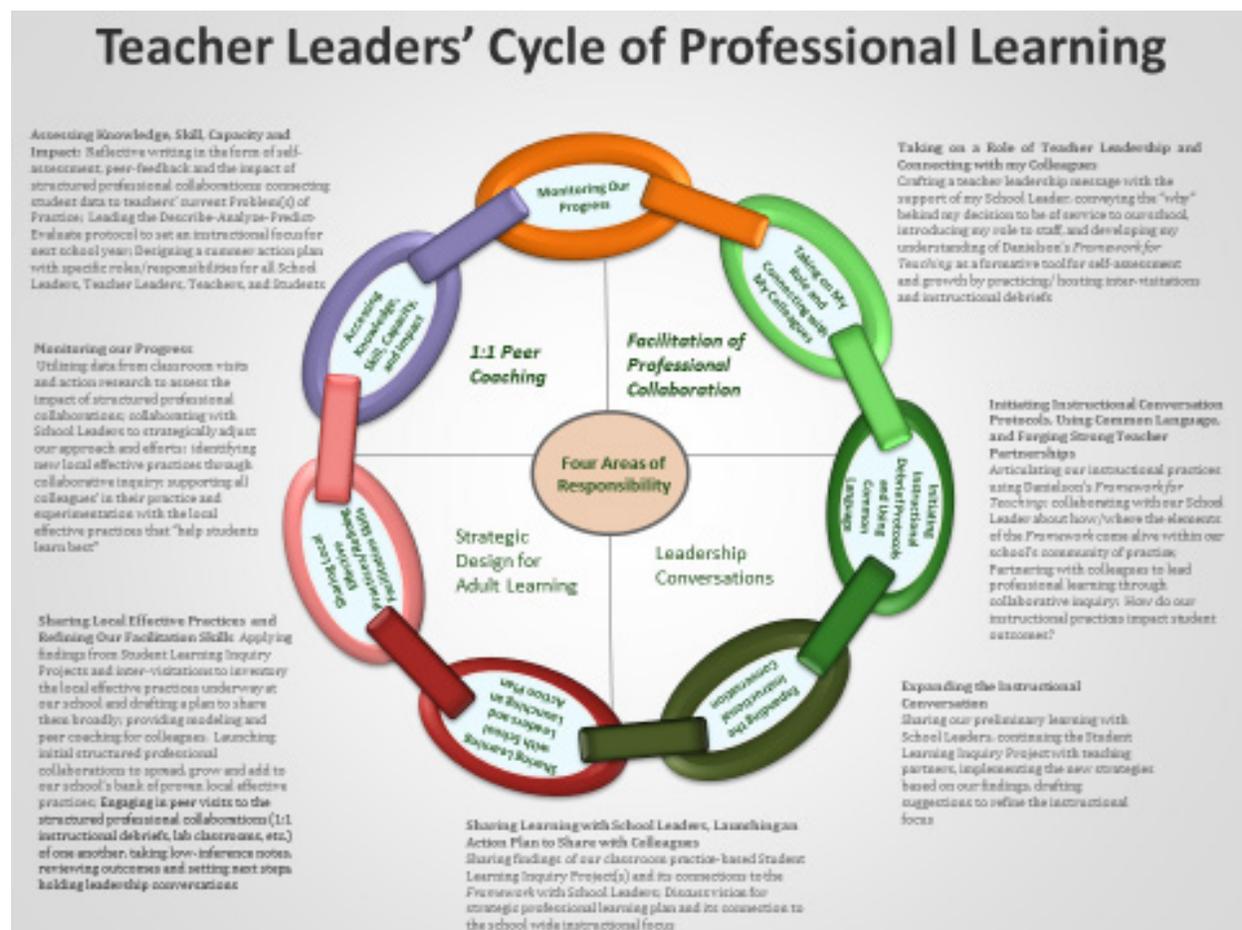
The shift in the distribution of leadership asks principals to let go of their absolute control over activities in the school building. That shift has allowed teachers to take on the responsibility of ensuring that effective teaching takes place. Principals have seen a change in the professionalism in their schools as a result. "If I have to leave the building for any reason, I know that the teachers can run the school without me," said Barbella. "When my back is turned, I know that good teaching is going on in our classrooms," said Windley.

Other principals have noticed the shift in TIF schools where teachers have taken on leadership roles, and they want to know more. "I have principals wanting to tour my building and learn about how teacher leadership works in my school," said Windley. "They can see that it works and they want to get it into their schools."

The NYCDOE Continues Its Commitment to Sustaining and Expanding the Program

In 2016–17, the teacher leadership program in New York City had grown to include 482 schools and 1,236 teacher leaders—supported with sustainable local funds and expanding far beyond the 78 schools and 299 teacher leaders initially in the TIF program. As NYCDOE leaders understood the value of the teacher leadership program, they also committed to sustaining and expanding it to schools throughout the district.

One part of sustaining the program that the district committed to early on was assigning staff from the district office to serve as TTLs. The TTLs provided support and professional development to the teacher leaders in schools to help them learn how to best support the adult learning going on among the faculty in their buildings. Much of this work focuses on skills to coach adults, facilitate collaboration, and design adult learning opportunities. Teacher leaders report that some of the strongest support they receive comes from having a TTL observe their teaching and provide feedback on their coaching, facilitation, and their teaching. NYCDOE plans to continue to refine and improve the support and professional development for teacher leaders as it expands the program. NYCDOE continues to commit resources to funding teacher leaders in some locations and is also helping school leaders find ways to support teacher leaders through building-level funds.



To continue to build interest and buy-in among teachers, the district has started the Emerging Teacher Leader program to help those looking to become teacher leaders learn the skills they need to take on the role. Part of this work has included creating online, stand-alone resources on the NYCDOE website, where teachers can find materials to help them prepare to become teacher leaders. In addition, NYCDOE has recruited a group of superintendents who want to build interest in teacher leadership among school leaders and teachers.

Spreading Teacher Leadership

When educators around New York State saw the success of the NYCDOE program, they wanted to learn more about teacher leadership and bring it to their own schools. In response, the U.S. Department of Education joined with NYCDOE, UFT, and other stakeholders to host the first Teach to Lead summit in the state of New York. The program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, has held a number of summits at the national level as well as some regional meetings. School teams from across New York applied to attend by submitting their own plans to enact teacher leadership programs, and those selected met in New York City for 2 days to work with others to improve those plans.

Finally, as part of the online resources, NYCDOE is working with Teaching Matters to create a set of microcredentials related to teacher leadership. These online modules help teachers learn the skills needed to be a teacher leader and then submit materials—such as video, lesson plans, student work, or other artifacts—to demonstrate competency in a particular skill. Then staff at Teaching Matters score the microcredential, and if the score is high enough, the teacher is notified that she has been certified in that skill.

In summary, this brief shows the success of NYCDOE's TIF grant through words and stories of the people who were part of it—teachers, school leaders, and district administrators. There is more information about NYCDOE's teacher leadership program in a report by Eskolta called, *Beyond Incentives: Three years of cultivating teacher leadership career pathways in NYC schools*. The report synthesizes 3 years' worth of evaluation data about the program and offers findings and recommendations.