



*A Union of Professionals*

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# Teacher Leadership: From Practice to Policy

*Teacher Leaders series*



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## Our Mission

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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We've all lived through the unintended consequences of even the most thoughtful policies. Adhering to a strict class and bell schedule makes sense, unless you teach at the end of the day and regularly lose many of your students to early dismissal and much of your teaching time to "afternoon announcements." And "freshman clusters" sound like a great idea unless your district lacks the infrastructure and personnel to support them. Not teaching to the test is every teacher's dream, but not reviewing for the test is a prescription for student meltdowns and wide-scale failure. But what if we gave stakeholders, namely educators, a chance to research a policy they found irksome (or worse), hone their practices around this policy, and end up fixing what's broken in the process?

Effective teacher leadership recognizes that teachers are essential to the success of a school and the district as a whole. Such leadership can take place in individual classrooms or among teachers, but leadership on a larger scale happens when teachers have opportunities to influence policy. Despite any anti-teacher discourse we might hear in the media, research indicates that "people care what teachers think," with 70 percent of Americans having "trust and confidence in public school teachers."<sup>1</sup> The public as well as policymakers know that teachers are the ones who connect with students every day and have the most knowledge of what is working or not working in the classroom or school.

Teacher leadership is vital to student success, with research finding positive connections between student achievement and teacher leadership and collaboration.<sup>2</sup> Countries with top-performing educational systems, like Finland and Singapore, promote teacher professionalism and connecting teachers with policymakers.<sup>3</sup> Decisions in the United States education system are typically made by people who are far removed from the classroom. Teacher leadership, while certainly not a new idea, is increasingly important in our current climate to ensure students are taught in environments that are focused on their needs rather than on the ideas of far-removed politicians and policymakers, or those who have little experience in public education.

Author and educator Frederick M. Hess says that teachers must play a part in changing the narrative and practice of top-down school reforms and be "ready to step out of their classroom, able to deal with

policymakers in good faith, and willing to make teacher leadership more than an empty phrase.”<sup>4</sup> AFT teacher leaders are doing just that, and Nashua (N.H.) Teachers’ Union president Adam Marcoux explains that this program has helped teachers to rethink their role and the role of the union, and instead of asking, “What is my union doing for me?” they now ask, “How are you getting involved in the union?”

Since 2011, the AFT Teacher Leaders Program (TLP) has helped prepare teachers to facilitate discussions of policy issues that impact the profession both locally and nationally. Participating teachers meet one Saturday a month to discuss issues in their district and state, receive training around framing policy positions, and then conduct research in their classrooms and schools, participate in conversations with policy leaders, and share their findings and recommendations. These teachers then become leaders in their school, union or district, and sometimes have a broader impact in the form of lasting policy changes.

A prominent feature for teachers in the TLP is conducting action research on a topic of their choosing based on a local, state or federal policy they want to study and change. At the end of the program year, all of the TLP teachers present their findings to the cohort and invited guests. For some teachers, that is the end of their work on the topic. Others have been able to use their work and their new advocacy skills to help implement their policy recommendations. Through this advocacy, these teachers show that teacher voice is essential in supporting what works for schools and students.

As mentioned in “Paper 2: Union Role in Teacher Leadership,”<sup>5</sup> formal teacher leader roles manifest themselves in several ways: as peer-to-peer leaders, as school-level leaders and as system leaders. We found that teachers in the TLP chose policies that allowed them to have an influence in one or more of these areas. All of the teachers were able to use their TLP experiences to research and advocate for change based on the evidence gathered through their research.

## Peer-to-Peer Leaders

Most of the teacher leaders’ work involved networking with other teachers, but the efforts in Nashua dealt specifically with teachers leading their peers to make positive changes in their schools. These

teachers work collaboratively with colleagues to better support their students.

Nashua Teachers' Union member James Graham became a peer leader by helping to create and implement a co-teaching system in his high school. He was dismayed by students' performance in the Algebra 1 courses. He hypothesized that roster flexibility and co-teaching would boost the performance of students who were below grade level as well as those performing on grade level, and allow the acceleration of above-grade level students.



*James Graham and NTU colleagues using formative assessment to plan differentiated instruction.*

Graham was able to test his theory by co-teaching a class for one unit and comparing the scores from those students with the scores from students in the traditionally taught classes. Students in the co-taught classes showed favorable results, so Graham took his research and recommendations to his principal, which led to a larger conversation in the school around co-teaching. Now the school has four concurrent sections of Algebra 1, in which these colleagues can offer further differentiation through co-teaching. This differentiated instruction led to larger policy changes for the entire high school.

## School-Level Leaders

Many teachers from the TLP focus their research on topics that will have a broad impact on their schools. The teachers from Nashua who developed co- and team-teaching plans for their schools had an impact beyond just supporting their peers, as frequently happens. Other teachers focused on policies that would impact building-wide issues.

For example, Nashua social studies teacher Gary Hoffman focused his research on the number of early dismissals and interruptions during classes at the end of the day compared with morning classes or those in the middle of the day. From the strength of his research, Hoffman was able to set up a meeting with the district's superintendent, assistant superintendent and his building's principal on the feasibility of a rotating schedule or other alternative solutions to the problem. Although the meeting was too late for immediate changes in the current school year, administrators were able to identify the problem of disruptions and significantly cut the number of announcements at the end of the day that interrupted class time.



*A student in Valerie Powell's classroom using new equipment.*

Other examples of these school-level leaders include teachers from Toledo, Ohio. Fourth-grade special education teacher Valerie Powell, from the Toledo Federation of Teachers (TFT), advocated for more computer technology for students in her school. She studied the



“free appropriate public education” guarantee (under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Individuals with Disabilities Act) and wanted to ensure the same opportunities were afforded to special education students as their general education peers. Due to her research and advocacy, Powell’s school purchased a cart with 30 laptops and headphones, as well as an interactive whiteboard in her classroom, so that she could enhance the educational support she was providing to her special education students. This computer cart is now available not only to her class but also to the school at large, a change that arose from the application of her research, evidence and leadership as well as her advocacy to improve the teaching and learning conditions in her school.



*Therese Gordon and Kristin Haney in Arlington Elementary School.*

Toledo middle school teachers Therese Gordon and Kristin Haney recognized that students in their school were learning in unsafe and inadequate portable buildings. Their school board’s plans for redesigning Arlington Elementary failed to address the portable buildings that were falling apart on the school grounds. Students had been using those buildings for classes since a recent reconstruction of the building, and the new plans would have left them as they were. Haney and Gordon were able to rally community support and

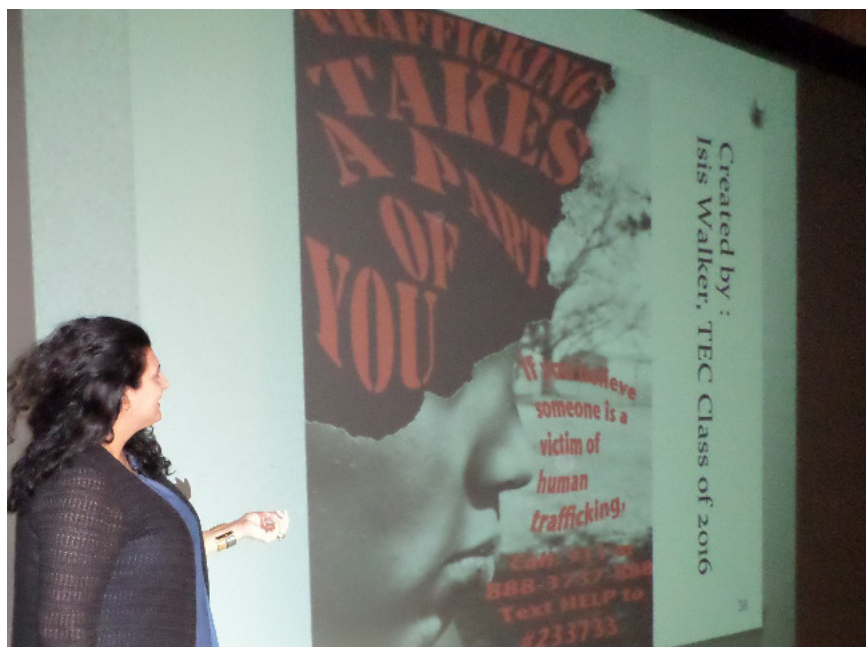
persuade their school board to change the school design—after it had been approved—to add an entire wing to the school to house classes for grades 6-8. The two teachers used the skills they learned in the TLP to fight for their students. Gordon says that “without the support of this program and our union, we wouldn’t have felt that our voices were being heard.”

## System Leaders

Some teachers look beyond their own schools to problems they see in their districts, states or on the national level.

In researching issues with the district’s “freshman cluster” courses, Toledo high school teacher Amy Netter discovered problems with scheduling many different students into four core classes, especially the science classes. At the conclusion of her research, she made several recommendations to the joint curriculum committee, including adding a full-time data coordinator and another science class, and scheduling a common lunch for these students. Before Netter’s presentation, the committee was unaware of the issues.

TFT Vice President Mona Al-Hayani, who is a high school teacher in Toledo, recognized the serious problem of human trafficking

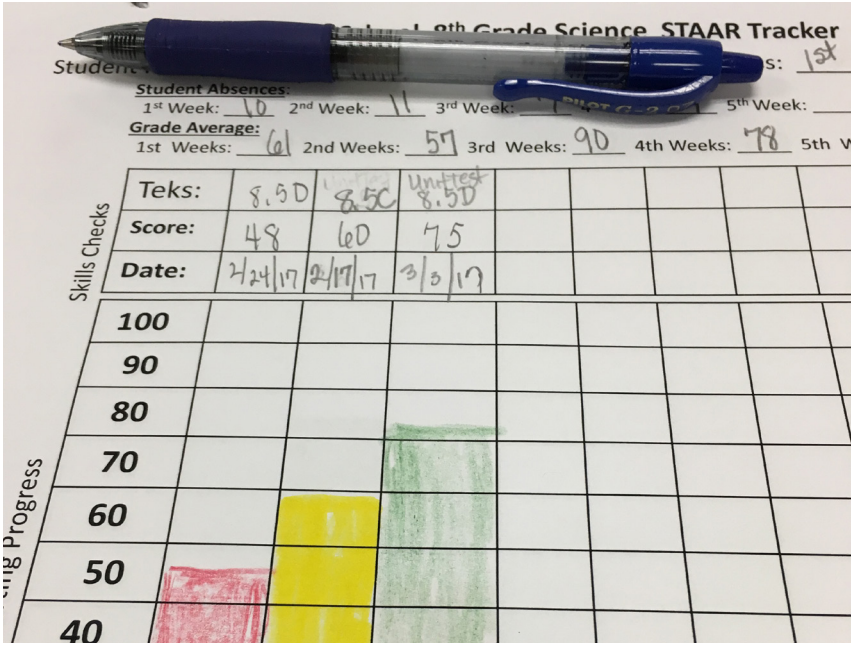


*Mona Al-Hayani presenting to new teachers.*



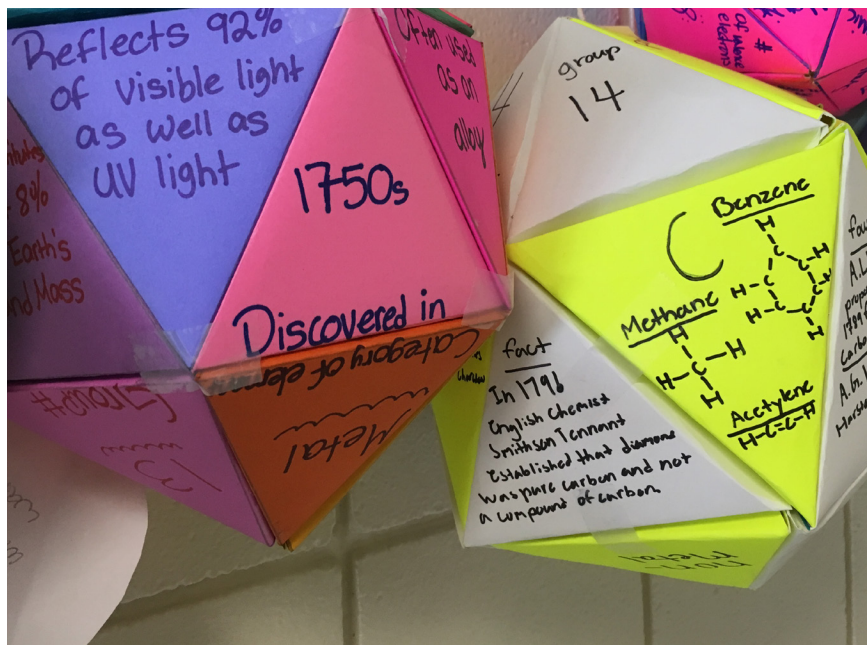
that affects people across the globe but in particular in Toledo. She was asked to work on a project for the AFT Human Rights and Community Relations Department, and she used the research, advocacy and presentation skills she developed through the TLP to create professional development that she delivered to every employee in her district—from central office staff to bus drivers. Al-Hayani has worked with the AFT, the Lucas County Human Trafficking Coalition, Toledo Public Schools and the Toledo Federation of Teachers to expand her professional development reach; her training is now a required part of the mandatory reporting training for all teachers in the district, and she recently addressed a cadre of 200 new teachers as part of this work.

Middle school science teachers Jane Lee-Rhodes and Cindy Hopkins, members of the Corpus Christi AFT (CCAFT) in Texas, studied student attitudes and confidence on the state standardized test in science, known as TEKS. Based on the teachers’ research and recommendations, the district built in two weeks of review for the test (which had been forbidden in the past).



*Student Tracking Skill Sheet used in Corpus Christi.*

Another teacher in the district, Regina Snyder, joined the program the following year and replicated this research. Lee-Rhodes used her role in the TLP to be a system leader, and she says that “the more teacher leaders get involved in Texas policy, the more they have to say and the more they can say it—the better they can talk about it.”



*Student work from Jane Lee-Rhodes' classroom.*

Hopkins, now the program facilitator for CCAFT, notes that the teacher leaders have become invaluable to her district and are often contacted by the central office and administrators for input on policies and procedures. The district does not have a mentoring program or Professional Learning Communities, and Hopkins sees the TLP as helping to fill that void.

## Conclusion

These are just a few examples of teachers creating policy through research and lessons learned from their own practice. Through the AFT Teacher Leaders Program, educators have new opportunities to engage beyond their own classrooms. They become problem solvers and give credence to the work they do every day. The program also

has helped administrators, district leaders and the community to recognize the work that teachers do and the dedication they have to improving their students' lives at every level. The critical professional role that teachers play is recognized and valued in other countries, where educators are allowed regular time during the day to network with other teachers, share best practices, and collaborate to practice and perfect their lessons. We aim to give teachers the same opportunities to collaborate and the same professional voice and respect here in the U.S.

Teachers can lead at all levels—peer, school or system. They must be encouraged and given the tools and opportunities to influence policy. The Teacher Leaders Program was developed with the knowledge that teaching must be a more collaborative practice, and in turn, classrooms will be places “for positive social and cultural transformation.” The AFT and other organizations are fighting to ensure that students across the country have every chance for success. And that means listening to and learning from the people who know the most about those students—their teachers.

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1 Hess, F. M. (2015). *The Cage-Busting Teacher*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, p. 101.

2 Barry, B., Byrd, A., & Wieder, A. (2013). *Teacherpreneurs: Innovative Teachers Who Lead but Don't Leave*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

3 Ibid.

4 Hess, F. M. (2015). *The Cage-Busting Teacher*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

5 American Federation of Teachers (2016). *Union Role in Teacher Leadership*, <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/unionteacherleadership.pdf>

6 Meyers, E., Paul, P.A., Kirkland, D.E., & Dana, N. F. (2008). *The Power of Teacher Networks*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, p. 70.



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