

Teachers Who Lead

Written by the MetLife Fellows in the Teachers Network Policy Institute (TNPI)

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In the schools we attended, things were predictable. The principal, usually a man, was in charge of everything. All school-related decisions were made by him; curriculum was pre-ordained by the district or school board. Teachers remained in their classrooms and were seldom consulted about matters beyond the classroom. That was the model, and it was not questioned by the public, by politicians, or by teachers themselves. That model has changed in many ways and in most schools in the United States.

One of the reasons we have seen change is that the world we live in has changed. What children need from their teachers and school has been drastically altered by rising expectations, by lowered family cohesiveness, and by radically different expectations of employers. Schools are being asked to do much more than ever before. In order to meet the growing needs of our students, teachers have to be more than we were. We are being challenged to create a professionalism never talked about in teacher education classes. What we see, are asked to do, and the ways we are expected to cope are new to us, and they are new to the political leaders who set educational policy.

Principals have been asked to expand their professional lives to include shared decision making with classroom teachers, often an uncomfortable expectation, and one that principals have not been trained to undertake. The results have been mixed at best, and dismal at their worst. Teachers have often been expected to lead as department chairs, grade level chairs, curriculum developers, and in parent and labor relationships.

As research by Teachers Network Policy Institute (TNPI) MetLife Fellows Matt Wayne, Jane Fung, Penny Arnold, and others shows, teachers are in a unique position to help policy makers and the public focus on the important issues that affect learning and achievement and understand the impact of policies as they affect teaching and learning. "Advocacy for teacher professionalism and expanded leadership roles is based on the understanding that teachers, because they have daily contacts with learners, are in the best position to make critical decisions about curriculum and

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instruction. Moreover, they are better able to implement changes in a comprehensive and continuous manner" (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory).

Rising expectations for teacher leadership have led to many paradigm shifts. The pressure for reform of public schools has led to a call for new ideas, new visions, and more than that, new ways of thinking about what goes on in our public schools. To undertake these fundamental changes there are some conditions necessary for leadership. According to Carnegie Scholar Ann Lieberman, teachers must be part of the overall vision for schools, their talents and abilities must be taken into account when school reform is undertaken, they must be given time to experiment, reflect and create and collaborate with their peers, and they need to be given opportunity and encouragement to develop the necessary leadership skills.

We must put teachers at the center of reform, and keep good teachers in education. When we can actively involve teachers in decision-making, in the governance of the schools, in making decisions about curriculum, and in learning inside and outside of their own classrooms and schools, student achievement will be enhanced.