Resource 8. Summary of the Research Literature on Teacher Leadership

Defining Teacher Leadership

Over time, there have been a wide variety of teacher leadership definitions. Wenner and Campbell (2017) synthesized the literature on teacher leadership and found five consistent themes in definitions of teacher leadership:

1. Extends beyond the classroom;

2. Supports professional learning in their schools;

3. Is involved in decision making;

4. Has a goal of improved student learning; and

5. Focuses on improvement for the whole school.

Teacher leadership can include a wide range of activities, from volunteer activities that do not require any change in title or job responsibilities (or even approval from school or district leaders), such as participation in a Teach to Lead summit and formal teacher leadership roles that are integrated into broader staffing structures in schools and districts. Apart from a few innovative staffing models (such as Opportunity Culture), nearly all teacher leadership roles (whether formal or informal) require action or responsibilities beyond the classroom and some direct instructional responsibilities for students (Kilinc, 2014; Wilson, 2016).

Research indicates that many teachers want teacher leader roles (Berry, 2013), yet many teacher leader positions have not been stable over time because of financial pressures at the district level (Margolis, 2008; Margolis & Huggins, 2012). There is also some evidence that vague or unclear definitions of teacher leader roles may lead to negative perceptions over time (Margolis & Huggins, 2012). To create clarity regarding future efforts, states, districts, and schools engaged in teacher leadership efforts must build a shared understanding of teacher leadership that is grounded in specific roles and opportunities.

Describing the Impact of Teacher Leadership

Research that describes the precise design and impact of teacher leadership is limited. Instead, most studies over the past several decades have been descriptive or relied on self-reported data. Many of the existing studies are qualitative and focused on small sample sizes (fewer than five schools).

To date, most research on teacher leadership has described the ways in which it may be leveraged for school and system improvement rather than its actual impact. These findings have included how teacher leadership can lead to the following improvements in teaching and learning:

- Increased commitments from teachers to their schools or districts, which in turn can lead to increased commitments to system goals (Hulpia, Devos, & Van Keer, 2010);

- Improved quality of professional learning through direct support and sharing of expertise (Yager, Akcay, Dogan, & Yager, 2013; Charner-Laird, Ippolito, & Dobbs, 2016);

- Increased collaboration and communication between school staff, which can lead to improved school climate and more targeted instruction, which in turn can lead to improved student outcomes (Wilson, 2016; Beachum & Dentith, 2004);

- Increased collaboration and shared decision making, which can lead to greater retention rates for new and experienced educators (Weiss, 1999);

- Increased openness around teaching, including sharing of materials and observation of practices, which can lead to an increased sense of collective responsibility for student performance (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006); and

- Increased shared learning experiences, growth mind-set, and improved instructional efficacy (Citkowicz, Brown-Sims, Williams, & Gerdeman, 2017; Nistler, Gerdeman, & Williams, 2018).

There is also research describing how teacher leadership can lead to the following improvements for teacher leaders themselves:

- Provide opportunities for teachers to grow professionally through opportunities such as leading collaborative team inquiry or providing professional learning to other teachers, which can lead to improved instruction (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008);

- Provide opportunities for exemplary teachers to advance in their careers without relinquishing direct instructional responsibilities, which can increase retention rates of exemplary educators over time (Charner-Laird et al., 2016; Donaldson, 2007); and

- Provide exemplary teachers with opportunities to try leadership roles without having to commit to a purely administrative role, which helps to build sustainable leadership pathways over time (Hohner & Riveros, 2017).

Many schools and districts have expressed interest in using teacher leadership to support differentiated leadership approaches that build the capacity of school leaders to be effective instructional leaders. Recent research on school leaders' use of time and responsibilities has shown that many school leaders face too many demands to adequately serve as an instructional leader for teachers. For example, recent studies have found that school leaders are typically able to focus on instructional leadership tasks for only 8% to 17% of their working hours (Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010; Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013). However, instructional leadership is an important factor in school outcomes, because effective instructional leadership has been linked to increased collaboration among teachers, improved instruction, and improved student outcomes (Goddard, Goddard, Kim, & Miller, 2015).

By sharing instructional leadership responsibilities with teacher leaders, school leaders can build their capacity to support effective instruction and student support systems. For example, there is evidence that while school leaders often influence general teaching practices, teacher leaders tend to influence more specific practices (e.g., reading comprehension supports) (Sun, Frank, Penuel, & Kim, 2013). Support from school leaders is also a critical success factor for fostering

and sustaining effective teacher leadership systems over time (Wynn, Wilson, & Patall, 2007; Jacques, Weber, Bosso, Olson, & Bassett, 2016).

Very few studies have described the impact of specific teacher leadership initiatives or systems. However, a few have associated positive impacts of such initiatives or systems with teacher leadership:

- Research has found that collaboration, shared decision making, and positive school climate are associated with retention rates (Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016).

- One meta-analysis found a small effect of professional learning communities on student achievement (Catalina, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011).

- Multiple studies have found positive impacts on student learning, and one study has found a positive impact on teacher retention associated with the TAP™ (teacher advancement program) model developed by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) (NIET, 2017).

- A recent study found positive impacts on both reading and mathematics achievement for students taught by multiclassroom educators through Public Impact's Opportunity Culture program (Backes & Hansen, 2018).

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