Establishing a Teacher Leadership Initiative Working Committee

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This resource on communication and stakeholder engagement offers district-level staff ideas, tips and suggestions to shape a comprehensive communication and stakeholder engagement plan that will smooth the way for effective implementation of formal teacher leadership initiatives at the district level.

The primary audience for this document is district and school leaders with responsibility for developing and implementing formal teacher leadership initiatives or roles. It begins with a brief discussion of the importance of stakeholder engagement and communication, then takes up the topics of identifying stakeholders, establishing a representative working committee, strategies for building broad-based support and buy-in, and constructing a comprehensive communication plan. The document concludes with key lessons for districts to consider as they move ahead with this work. Readers are also encouraged to refer to the accompanying document, *Communication Tools*, which provides several tools and templates to support districts in developing their communication plans.

Why Focus on Stakeholder Engagement and Communication?

Insufficient engagement of and communication with stakeholders can quickly derail the most thoughtful initiatives. Engagement helps create buy-in and initial acceptance of the initiative and allows different voices and perspectives to be heard and recognized. Communication provides the synergy to broaden buy-in and sustain support for the program. While effective stakeholder engagement and communication can be challenging, they are essential to implementing and sustaining effective formal teacher leadership initiatives or roles.

Experience shows that districts are more successful when they have designed, implemented and continuously improved their initiatives in collaboration with key stakeholders. Having systems in place for seeking collaboration and feedback shows an understanding of and respect for the critical role that educator voice plays in implementing successful teacher leadership initiatives/roles. Common effective practices to collaborate include initial design teams that bring together teachers and principals, a working committee that oversees the initiative, task forces to tackle specific issues encountered during implementation and focus groups that provide feedback on proposed teacher leadership roles. This kind of ongoing engagement—multiple opportunities to be involved in developing and implementing the initiative—is critical both to obtaining educator buy-in and to the ultimate success of the initiative.

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Identifying the Stakeholders

One challenge Ohio districts will face is communicating effectively with multiple and distinct audiences. Knowing who the stakeholders are is the first step in developing effective engagement and communication strategies. In general, districts should consider engagement and communication within the framework of two broad categories: 1) internal stakeholders: those who will be directly affected by the initiative as well as those who have responsibility for approving, implementing and overseeing the new roles or aspects of the initiative,[1] and 2) external stakeholders: those who have an interest in the initiative and its outcomes but may be less directly affected by it.[2]

Internal and external stakeholder groups encompass multiple subgroups, each representing a different constituency with its own set of priorities, beliefs and expectations for teacher leadership initiatives/roles. Districts must continuously grapple with the challenge of conveying consistent, though often tailored, messages to quite different audiences. (To assist in identifying stakeholders, see the stakeholder identification and analysis matrix available in the *Communication Tools* document.)

Establishing a Representative Working Committee

A working committee, composed of representatives of key stakeholders, engages essential players early on in the process and keeps them engaged. A representative committee sends a message to members' respective constituencies that their views and expertise are valued and that they are part of shaping the teacher leadership initiative. A growing research base shows that a prerequisite to smoothly implementing initiatives like formal teacher leader roles in Ohio districts is ensuring that individuals who are most directly affected by the plans—teachers or principals—are part of the work from the beginning. Excluding key internal stakeholders from early planning can create distrust and misunderstanding about the intent and purpose of the work.

One question Ohio districts should take up immediately is whether the working committee is an advisory or decision-making group. In other words, what is the range and reach of the committee's authority? Does it have authority to make decisions? If so, what kinds of decisions?

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[1] Internal stakeholders may include educators (teachers and principals), their unions and associations, district administrators, the superintendent and the local school board.

[2] External stakeholders include parents (who may want to know how, or if, new teacher leader roles affect their children's educational program), community members, state or municipal officials, organizational partners and, in some circumstances, the business community. The media represents a special external stakeholder group; what the local media prints or says about a new initiative can generate or quell enthusiasm for it among both internal and external stakeholders.

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Is the committee's authority limited to recommendations to some other group or individual who will make the decision? If so, in what areas is the committee authorized to make recommendations and to whom does it direct the recommendations?

Representative Membership

Whatever its level of authority, the working committee should be a representative group of key stakeholders. Representation on the committee helps build a coalition for success by ensuring that diverse ideas and viewpoints are discussed and ultimately reflected in implementation and decisions. Who, then, should be on the working committee? In part, this is a district decision based on local need and context; however, the following are among the suggested working committee representatives:

- *Superintendent*—The superintendent's presence—at least at the initial meeting[3]—signals the importance of the work the committee is undertaking.

- *Central office staff*—The working committee should include at least one or two members of the central administrative staff who are key to the initiative.

- *Union or association representatives*—Teacher buy-in often depends on the support of the local teachers' union or association. An official of the local teachers' organization (and, where there is one, principals' organization) should be part of the working committee.

- *Teachers*—The working committee should include practicing classroom teachers.[4] It should also include existing teacher leaders, if such roles exist.

- *Principal(s)*—One or more principals should be on the working committee.

- *School board member*—Whether a district chooses to include a school board member on the working committee may depend on the nature of the work the committee will assume. If a committee is simply offering ideas to district leadership, board representation may make less sense than if the committee is developing and determining details about the initiative.

- *Parent(s) or community member(s)*—Districts should consider the extent to which parents and community members add value to the working committee. For example, does having a parent representative on the committee help build an element of buy-in for the initiative?

The makeup of the working committee should reflect the district's priorities and the nature of the work. A working committee that enables stakeholders to feel they are contributing to the success of the initiative serves them well. In addition, the committee's work should be consistent

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[3] After the first meeting or two, the superintendent might appoint a designee for subsequent meetings.

[4] How these teachers are appointed turns out to be important to their credibility as representatives of their constituency. Sometimes the local teachers' union or association appoints these teachers, or they are appointed by the district and the union or association. Sometimes they are part of a recognized group within the district, such as those holding National Board Certification; they are teachers of the year or Presidential Award winners; or they may be members of a designated district teacher leadership group. Who these teachers represent—grade levels or subject areas, for example—depends on the nature and context of the initiative.

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with district efforts on teacher leadership work and district strategies to engage stakeholders in decision-making.

Committee Size

Committee size is a local decision and depends, in part, on local context and circumstances. The committee should be sufficiently large enough to be appropriately representative of key stakeholders and constituents, yet sufficiently small enough to allow time for substantive discussions and deliberations. As a rule of thumb, committees of approximately 10–15 members are optimal.

Roles and Responsibilities

As noted above, the district should clearly define the scope of the working committee's authority (decision-making or advisory) before the work begins; this will shape the committee's roles and responsibilities. Then, the district should determine roles and responsibilities of the committee members. To assist, the district should consider questions such as: What are the goals of the initiative? What are the milestones? What issues is the initiative trying to address? Fleshing out the details and determining a strategy for implementing the initiative will require thoughtful and careful planning. Thus, the working committee needs to stay engaged in the long term, not just in the initial planning phase.

Agreeing on Meeting Logistics and Basic Timelines

Making some key logistical decisions up front will help the committee work in a timely and efficient manner. When will the committee meet? How often? Where? Who will chair the committee? By what date will the committee accomplish its initial tasks? By what date does the committee plan to accomplish project milestones? Determining a set of deadlines for tasks will help to keep the work on track.

Having Productive Conversations

Ensuring that a working committee comprising myriad stakeholders will accomplish its goals can be challenging. Not everyone on the committee is likely to be of one mind about the direction and specifics of the initiative. Working committees recognize that part of the task of developing and implementing a successful initiative requires respecting different points of view. Establishing a set of collectively determined norms that guide committee work helps to create a foundation for members to work together.

Sometimes, despite the best intentions, the committee may reach an impasse. If further progress seems stymied, the committee or the district may consider bringing in a neutral third-

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party facilitator to help the conversation move forward. The facilitator—someone with the ability to hear what everyone is saying—can help the committee to find common ground and move forward.

Building Broad-Based Support and Buy-In

Building broad-based support and buy-in among an array of stakeholders represents a central challenge and ongoing task. Earning educator buy-in requires time, patience and a willingness to view from multiple perspectives the challenges of altering aspects of teachers' work lives, such as introducing new roles and opportunities through Ohio's teacher leadership initiatives.

Developing a Multiple-Strategy Approach

Districts may use a variety of strategies to communicate effectively with multiple and disparate audiences. We describe a sample of these below.

Communicating With Internal Stakeholders

- *Written materials*—Districts should design a set of clear, concise and comprehensive written materials as early in the process as possible. Newsletters, brief informational flyers and FAQs all can serve to keep educators abreast of the initiative. Districts may find it useful to tailor written materials to specific audiences—teachers, principals and central office staff. The trick is simultaneously to tailor materials so they appeal to target audiences while ensuring that each audience is receiving essentially the same message.

- *Websites*—Districts may develop dedicated pages on the district websites that offer details about the initiative, such as a description of the teacher leader roles and information about how teacher leaders are identified.

- *In-person meetings*—School-based meetings are helpful to inform teachers and principals about new initiatives. Districts may consider conducting a kind of "traveling roadshow" to schools with a district representative (or district and union or association representatives together) to provide information to school personnel and answer questions.

- *Surveys and focus groups*—Districts may use surveys and focus groups as communication tools. Carefully constructed survey and focus group questions can provide information to potential respondents about the teacher leadership initiative. In addition, responses can provide information to the district about how educators view the initiative, what they understand about various dimensions of the initiative and where they lack sufficient understanding. Thus, surveys and focus groups can enhance buy-in by making educators feel they are part of the process and that their ideas are contributing to shaping the initiative. They also can ensure that educators have a clear grasp of the initiative and its implications for their work lives. This feeling of engagement and being listened to is enhanced to the extent that officials use survey results to make mid-course corrections.

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Communicating With External Stakeholders

Initial communication with external stakeholders needs to provide an overview of teacher leadership initiative/roles. It also should answer essential questions such as: Why is my district or school implementing this initiative? What is the initiative about? Are there funding implications? Who is affected and who is eligible to participate? How will the initiative contribute to district goals, including student performance? Regular program updates and progress reports provide the basis for ongoing communication with this set of stakeholders. Districts may approach this communication task in a variety of ways, including:

- *Written materials*—Districts may distribute informational one-pagers or other brief descriptive pieces to local libraries and at gatherings such as district and state education conferences.

- *Conferences and town hall–style meetings*—Districts may hold specific meetings for their school communities to keep parents and other community members apprised of the initiative.

- *Informational short videos*—Districts may develop short videos describing the initiative, and make these videos available to parents and other external stakeholders.

Ensuring Understanding

Knowing and understanding what the teacher leadership initiative components are and how to apply them may seem central to stakeholder support and buy-in. However, ensuring understanding is a step districts often skip. Even when educators accept the general idea of the initiative, understanding can come up short when program elements begin to kick in. Districts establishing new teacher leader roles need to ensure that educators understand the roles and how the roles affect the school and other educators. For example, what responsibilities are included in each role? How are teacher leaders identified for the roles? What kind of support do teacher leaders provide to other educators in the building?

Maintaining Continuity When Leadership Changes

Districts may face changes as the composition of local school boards shift or new superintendents are hired. Undergoing changes in leadership means that individuals who were not part of the development of the initiative, and may know little about it, now have the authority to make decisions and communication about the initiative. A break in leadership continuity can contribute to unclear or inconsistent messages about the initiative. Communication then should include regular checking in with district leadership so that those at the top of the organizational chart remain fully informed as the initiative develops.

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A Special Situation: Communicating With the Media

The ability to communicate effectively with the local media serves districts well. A good working relationship with local media enhances the prospects that an article about the initiative will be accurate and positive. Districts should design a media strategy and/or relationships that are nimble enough to create opportunities for proactive communication and positive publicity, anticipate issues that might arise and deal with issues as they emerge. (A media planning tool can be found in the *Communication Tools* document.)

Putting It All Together: The Comprehensive Communication Plan

Developing a comprehensive communication plan for implementing teacher leadership initiatives both provides a road map for implementation and anticipates challenges that might arise. It brings order and organization to the two tasks of engagement and communication. Communication needs will change as the initiative develops, and as such, the plan should change and evolve as needed. Districts will need distinct types and methods of communication when they introduce the initiative, when implementation begins and as the initiative evolves. Districts need to consider the purpose of communication at each stage of the initiative and develop a plan that they carefully construct around a set of well-considered, initiative-specific communication goals. While communication plans should be tailored to each district, effective plans have a number of elements in common:

- *Audience*—The plan should describe the audience(s) for whom each communication is intended. Does a particular communication aim at internal or external stakeholders? Does it target a subset of a stakeholder group, such as teachers, principals, parents or the media?

- *Content*—The plan should detail the content of individual communication activities. What is the focus of each piece of communication? What is it meant to accomplish?

- *Method*—Specifying the method of communication is a critical part of a well-thought-out plan. How will the district convey information—through written material, at meetings, electronically?

- *Owner/Lead*—Deciding in advance who is responsible for communication in general and for each communication activity also is key. Knowing whose job it is both to oversee communications and to accomplish each communication task makes it that much more likely that a comprehensive plan will guide communications work.

- *Frequency/dates*—A comprehensive plan lays out anticipated communication activities at least over a full school year. Communication activities should link to communication goals and coincide with elements of the initiative about which they are communicating. Plans that effectively guide communications efforts set target dates for each communication activity.

When is this activity to be completed? How often is the activity to be repeated, or is it to be one time only?

- *Feedback mechanism*—Comprehensive communication plans include a feedback mechanism. They embed a means to periodically check on the reach and effectiveness of communication activities; "take the temperature," particularly of internal stakeholders; and provide data to the working committee and other district officials to enable them to make mid-course alterations to the initiative as necessary.

A well-designed and executed communications plan is an important tool for Ohio districts to use as they build and sustain support for their teacher leadership initiatives. (For an example, see the comprehensive communication plan template in the *Communication Tools* document.)

Conclusion: Key Lessons

This primer has suggested a few essential lessons for districts to consider in their communication and stakeholder engagement work:

1. *Communication is a continuous work in progress.* Districts cannot communicate too much. Communicate early and often!

2. Among the key initial tasks is to *identify the internal and external stakeholders.* Districts should understand who they need to engage in the work and pinpoint those groups and individuals with whom communication is essential to building buy-in and support for the initiative.

3. *Develop a representative working committee.* The exact composition of the committee will vary with the district, though this primer suggests the kinds of representation districts ought to consider. Ensuring that the working committee adequately represents major stakeholders is key, as is establishing early on the committee's clearly defined tasks and responsibilities.

4. *Develop a comprehensive communication plan.* The communication plan can serve as a road map. A plan that details the nature, form and content of communications and builds in a feedback mechanism can go a long way toward smoothing implementation.

This document was adapted from "Project Communication and Stakeholder Engagement" by J. Koppich, C. Rowland, D. Fireside, J. Keleher and D. Wogan (2016).