Aurora's Disposition

Practicing Equity and Ethics

Building Relationships and Partnerships

Fostering Collaborative Culture

Advancing Instruction and Student Learning

Driving Initiatives

Key Lessons from Aurora

- *The district sets the tone for teacher leadership by asserting the importance of "dispositional leadership over positional leadership."*

- *Teacher leadership is supported by practical structures and committed leaders at all levels.*

- *Professional learning communities and professional development days led by internal teachers are conduits for dispositional teacher leadership.*

- *Teacher leaders use productive strategies in developing relationships and delivering what is best for student learning.*

Introduction

"Dispositional leadership," the belief that leadership is an attitude and behavior more than a position or contractual duty, is the anchoring tenet of teacher leadership in Aurora City Schools. Aurora City Schools has more than 180 educators serving approximately 3,000 students in a suburban community of Northeast Ohio. The district includes five schools: a high school building, a middle school serving grades 6–8, an elementary serving 3rd through 5th grade, an elementary with grades 1 and 2, and a building with pre-K and kindergarten.

- White, non-Hispanic
- Asian/Pacific Islanders
- Black, non-Hispanic
- Hispanic
- Multiracial
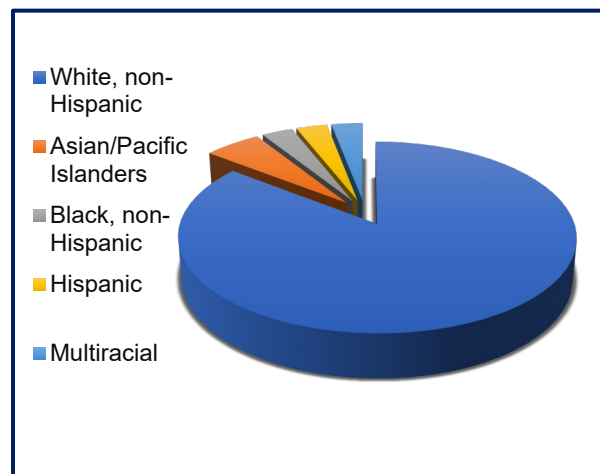
Ohio Department of Education data reports that 7.6 percent of the student body is at an economic disadvantage, and 10.6 percent of students have a disability. The largest racial/ethnic population among the district's students is 85.5 percent White, non-Hispanic, followed by 5.5 percent Asian/Pacific Islanders. Black, non-Hispanic, Hispanic, and multiracial students are approximately 3 percent of the student population each. The district focuses on cultivating teacher leadership by encouraging a perspective that professionals can lead wherever they are

in the district in ways that enhance student learning. While the district does have formal teacher leader roles such as department chairpersons and instructional coaches, interviewees throughout the district highlighted the value of its approach to informal aspects of teacher leadership.

Cultural Approach

The district sets the tone for teacher leadership by asserting the importance of "dispositional leadership over positional leadership." Dispositional leadership is about leading through influence, effort, and mindset regardless of title or position. A district administrator stated,

"My administrators LISTEN!!!"

"There is no one leader who has all the energy… everyone has something important to contribute."

The teachers interviewed affirmed the district administrators' philosophy with unprompted references to "dispositional leadership" and their own assertions of teacher leadership. "The district encourages all teachers to be leaders," articulated a teacher leader. Another teacher stated, "I buy into the district's dispositional leadership…. I think of dispositional leadership as making good choices, thinking about the greater good rather than just what is best for me."

The focus on dispositional leadership does not mean that Aurora does not value the need for formal teacher leadership roles. A teacher leader shared how the academic coaching position was created. "[The administration] put their money where their mouth is. Instead of replacing a retiring district office secretary, they advocated to the board of education for an academic coach and added more money," she stated. "The assistant superintendent goes without a secretary… They take action to support the vision." The district's culture of teacher leadership was reinforced by the allocation of resources for a formal position.

Additional ways that district and building administrators were cited in promoting the teacher leadership culture were the ways they value the voice of teachers and have an open door to teacher ideas. "My administrators LISTEN!!!" asserted a teacher.

Another reinforcement of the culture is the flourishing of initiatives conceptualized, developed, and implemented by teachers for student learning and teacher professional development. "We gave teachers autonomy, and people see what happens," said a district administrator. Self-initiated project leadership is not limited to classroom teachers but is afforded to all educators with a deliberate inclusion of counselors and other professionals as "teacher leaders." One project that came up multiple times is a project initiated by a counselor who participated in teacher leadership training. The initiative trained not only teachers but also support staff in positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS). Bus drivers, cafeteria staff and other non-

instructional employees who interacted with students were trained in PBIS for a consistent student experience.

Another cultural factor in encouraging teachers to take the lead on initiatives is calculated risk-taking. "If a teacher takes risk and fails, they are encouraged and they are given feedback," said district leadership. A teacher leader said, "You have to reach out and extend your comfort zone. Be willing to fail and then improve."

The culture of teacher leadership in Aurora received a boost when it trained 20 teachers and a handful of administrators over 2 years in a grant-funded Teacher Leadership Endorsement pilot program at Kent State University. It created "momentum," according to a district administrator. A teacher leader said, "Taking the classes was invaluable because administrators went through the cohort at the same time as the teacher cohort… it made me reflective of the practice." There was a critical mass of administrators and teachers, including those who did not have formal leadership positions, who had a shared understanding of teacher leadership. In the program, each participant had to develop and implement a project in the district. The tangible projects served as examples across the district about what teachers can initiate and implement to aid instruction and learning beyond their individual classrooms.

One interviewee mentioned that some expectations around teacher leadership had to be recalibrated after initial participation in teacher leadership training programs like the Teacher Leadership Endorsement program and the Kent Education Excellence Partnership (KEEP). "There was some frustration with leadership training, and people early on were disheartened about teacher leadership roles not opening up for them," said the teacher. "By the time they got through a few cohorts, the district could see how it should be shaped better. Early cohorts were not sure their talents were being used. The most recent group may feel differently." Other teacher leaders we interviewed who participated in the early cohort did not express the same concerns. An administrator suggested that there may be individual cases where a teacher had anticipated that participation in teacher leadership development would lead to more formal leadership positions.

Structural Approach

Aurora has put both formal teacher leadership positions and outlets for informal teacher leadership. Aurora has formal teacher leadership positions including grade level chairpersons, department chairpersons, academic coaches, and an instructional technology coach. The chairpersons receive supplemental contracts to coordinate teachers, curricula, instruction, and budgets within their grade or academic subject. One of the teacher leaders stated, "In the beginning the department chair role was very secretarial, but now we are more of a springboard. It is more than the note taker. [We think about] what we have now and how do we want to make it better."

Academic coaches are full-time positions and spend time regularly in other teachers' classrooms. Academic coaches model instruction, co-teach, and observe as embedded professional development for teachers.

"I am embedded in the classroom. I don't just hear about it in a meeting; I live it with them in their classroom," an academic coach stated. "My role doesn't focus on submitting documents managing testing, or writing curriculum…"

Informal teacher leadership in Aurora happens in a variety of forms, but the most structured forms of informal leadership occur within district professional development days and professional learning communities (PLCs).

Aurora's teachers present at the district's professional development days. Any teacher can submit a session to be selected in the professional development day, and dozens of sessions were offered at the last professional development event. The teachers see the value of having their peers present and being able to follow up with them after the session for questions or to visit their classes to see the practice in action. In addition, teachers as participants will pick from a "menu, not an agenda" of these sessions. If teachers do not find a session related to their professional development goals, they may choose to do an independent study activity. Several teachers spoke about how much they valued choosing their own priorities for the professional development day. There were a few caveats to the strengths of this professional development day structure, particularly "being an inch deep and mile wide" and the risk of being insular. One teacher noted, "The problem is that we don't hear enough about what else is out there."

Professional learning communities are the nexus for teachers to share their practice, foster collaboration, and advance student learning. Every Aurora school has a common planning time among teachers to support participation in PLCs. The district has provided guidance on effective PLCs and implemented a district-wide book study of *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities* (Dufour, Eaker, and DuFour, 2005). It also conducts a study of the book for every cohort of new teachers. "It prepared us for what a PLC was; otherwise I would have thought it was just a staff meeting," said a teacher about the new teacher book study when she was a resident educator. In the PLCs, formal and informal teacher leaders have a venue to communicate about their instruction, offer opportunities for others to observe their classroom, and share research and resources to advance learning.

Fostering Collaborative Culture

While PLCs structurally foster collaboration, teacher leaders in Aurora also employ certain techniques to foster a collaborative culture. Aurora's teacher leaders discussed championing a shared vision, providing constructive and candid feedback, and encouraging peers to share their strengths.

"People can get caught in the minutiae. An important quality in a teacher leader is to remind your team members why you [as a group] are there," explained a teacher leader. "[The teacher leader] is someone who provides a light." A commitment to student learning was often referenced as the guiding light held up by teacher leaders.

Teacher leaders draw their peers to the guiding light of the work in deliberate fashion. "Point out what they contribute and what they bring to the team," stated an educator. "Continue to remind them that they are part of team and that their voice needs to be heard and it has value. Have a conversation and say, 'Even if this is uncomfortable, you have something to share.'" A few teacher leaders also talked about identifying and addressing concerns of other teachers in order to move team objectives forward.

Advancing Instruction and Learning

Aurora's teacher leaders advance instruction and learning by connecting other teachers to resources, demonstrating and coaching effective instruction, and reinforcing standards and quality in practice. Every interviewee mentioned efforts to connect colleagues to research through book studies, discussing articles in PLCs, or forwarding information to colleagues. The district professional development days as well as external professional development activities were cited as ways that teacher leaders share their expertise and gather knowledge to disseminate to other teachers.

An Aurora City Schools social studies class studying the Jamestown Settlement
Source: https://www.aurora-schools.org/.

Teacher leaders talked about ways they encouraged best practices in instruction, not just in technical sharing of the practice but also in warming up fellow teachers to consider the practice. "We use modeling heavily to build rapport and trust. They didn't want to feel they were doing anything wrong as teachers. We had to focus on what they needed to grow," explained an instructional coach. "Now, they can use video [of their instruction], and I ask them 'What do you notice?' They are more willing to be vulnerable to growth."

One teacher leader spoke of the importance of facilitating consistent quality in instruction within her department. "We didn't want it to be teacher lottery," said the educator. "If you get this teacher, great! If not, you are out of luck." Teacher leaders have to be models of quality

instruction. As one teacher stated, "You have to have credibility as a teacher first. You can take leadership classes until doomsday, but you have to be credible."

Aurora's teacher leadership work has also contributed to advancing instruction in the field at large, as its efforts during the teacher leadership endorsement pilot have been included in *Creating a Culture of Support for Teacher Leaders: A Vision for Change and Hope* (Gornik and Samford, 2018).

Driving Initiatives

Teachers start and drive many initiatives in Aurora. A senior district leader asserted, "We culturally support teacher leadership, from small to big. It doesn't matter the size of the initiative. The root of that is we want our students to be independent, self-directed learners. If our teachers aren't independent or self-directed learners, they can't teach our children to be so."

All the teachers we interviewed, including those with informal leadership roles, talked about ways they have taken the lead on developing and implementing initiatives. A senior leader sees great value in this approach. "If ownership is top down, implementation is very slow. If it is bottom up, it happens more quickly," stated the administrator.

> "If our teachers aren't independent or self-directed learners, they can't teach our children to be so."

Yet, teachers need to have the skill to develop and drive initiatives. The capacity to lead projects may vary among teachers. An Aurora principal acknowledged the role of administrators in supporting growth of teachers to lead. "Some people don't have full capacity to do what they want to do, but have tremendous ideas," stated the principal. "For those that need support, I need to think about how to build capacity and walk through the system with them. I may help them narrow their focus… point them to professional development, an article, book, or research. Other teachers, I can say 'go for it' and help them get there."

Practicing Equity and Ethics

Teacher leaders in Aurora shared examples of how they work to meet the educational needs of all students and reflect on their practice. Several references were made to helping the most challenged students learn and differentiating instruction to reach all students. An academic coach shared how she was working with a teacher to help a non-verbal student read. Self-reflection on educational practice was important to several interviewees. Teacher leaders spoke of their own reflection as well as encouraging others to be reflective of their practice.

Interviewees felt that everyone has an equitable chance for teacher leadership opportunities. People felt that anyone could informally lead. However, there was recognition that teachers who may not be as assertive about their desire to lead may feel that their voice is not heard. Some teacher leaders, formal and informal, talked about how they reached out to peers to encourage them to lead or become a part of a project. Senior leadership talked about their work to encourage principals to select department and grade-level chairs based on qualifying characteristics and not seniority. There is at least one example in the district where the most junior teacher in experience is serving as a co-chair of the grade.

Building Relationships and Partnerships

Aurora teacher leaders had several mentions of building relationships with higher education partners and other school districts for mutual growth and professional development.

Strengthening relationships among staff members was also strategic. When interviewers asked teacher leaders about providing constructive feedback, they often referred to strong relationships with peers as a foundation to providing feedback. "A relationship is important to establish before giving feedback," a teacher leader shared. "That makes it easier to give feedback—good, bad or indifferent. I have gone to someone on a disagreement and was able to communicate about their concerns." Another non-administrative leader mentioned that it was important that messages come from the right person with the right relationships at the right time. She mentioned that this was not only valuable among colleagues but also with students and parents.

Only a couple of teacher leaders shared examples of engaging parents and families beyond their traditional practices as classroom teachers. One educator talked about working with other districts to educate parents on mental wellness and having forums with parents where parents drive the topics. In a teacher-led initiative, a teacher leader talked about how he engaged parents in piloting the situational reporting project to share student progress without grades. "Through our weekly newsletter, we talked about [tracking] their progress online," the teacher leader explained. "We provided a detailed letter, did a video to explain it and a link to get more information. We asked [parents] for feedback. We wanted to know what they thought going forward."

Concluding Thoughts

Aurora's dispositional teacher leadership approach was evident in the interviews and examples provided. The philosophy is supported by practical structures and committed leaders at all levels. However, first and foremost, its approach for teacher leadership is centered on doing what is best for students. As one educator stated, "Our district understands that teacher

leadership will take us to the forefront of addressing trauma, academics, and social-emotional learning."

While Aurora may be a comparatively well-resourced district, other districts can practically implement components of its teacher leadership strategy. A district administrator stated, "If I had to do teacher leadership with less resources, I would start with relationships. If kids don't like you, they don't care. Focus on things you can control. Focus on best practices. Find agencies that can help connect the district to resources. See how they can give all students an opportunity to thrive."

About the Teacher Leadership Case Study

The Ohio Department of Education, in collaboration with C H Smith & Associates, conducted case studies on teacher leadership in five Ohio school districts in 2019. A convenience sample of several teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders in multiple building and district roles was drawn for each district. From the sample, an individual or group interview was requested in order to capture information about promising practices in teacher leadership and understand how components of Ohio's Teacher Leadership Framework are in effect throughout the state.