

# Batavia Engages Teachers in What Works

FOR  
TEACHERS  
SCHOOLS  
DISTRICTS



Practicing  
Equity and Ethics



Building Relationships  
and Partnerships



Fostering  
Collaborative Culture



Advancing Instruction  
and Student Learning



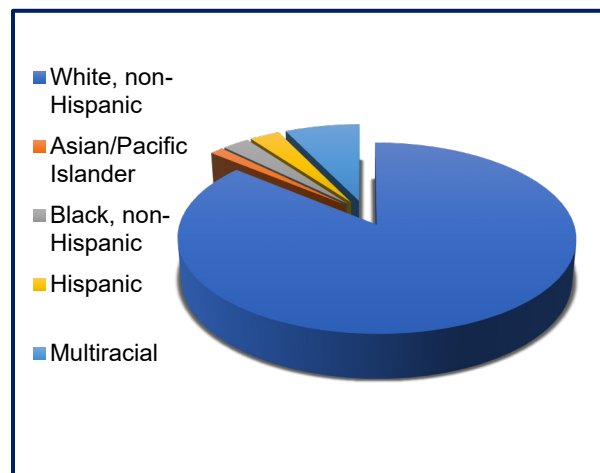
Driving  
Initiatives

## Key Lessons from Batavia Local Schools

- *The Batavia process is structured to enhance the level of teacher voice and incorporate a wide variety of talent.*
- *Teacher leaders work across departments to advance instruction, sharing instruction across content areas as ideas are sparked by listening to students and other teacher teams.*
- *Teacher leadership is founded on teamwork and data-driven decision-making.*
- *District leaders realize the need for academic continuity, assembling teams with representatives from all three buildings and codifying what is happening.*

## Introduction

Batavia is a rural small town east of Cincinnati, Ohio that is experiencing increased suburban development. Batavia Local engages teachers in a wide variety of leadership opportunities to determine and implement what works for students. Batavia Local Schools' 158 educators teach 2,215 students. The enrollment is 86 percent White, non-Hispanic, 7.2 percent Multiracial, 2.9 percent Hispanic, 2.6 percent Black, non-Hispanic, and 1.3 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. Students with a disability constitute 18.5 percent of the student body, and 43.9 percent of students are economically disadvantaged. The district consists of an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school.



Teacher leadership is widespread in the district with its various forms of teacher teams that are a conduit for professional learning and initiative generation and implementation.



## Cultural Approach

“We want as many teachers as possible in teacher leadership positions,” stated an administrator. “Distributed leadership takes effort.” Distributed leadership allows more decision-making to happen at the teacher level and building level. The complement to this approach is that various administrative tasks are also distributed up. The superintendent and district staff have assumed tasks, such as state and federal program reporting, for example, so that principals have more time to work and coach teachers as leaders. “He allows us to focus on our building,” stated a principal regarding the superintendent.

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Batavia has one elementary school and one high school, which share a campus. In Batavia’s elementary and high school, every teacher is part of a committee that is focused on advancing the school. Batavia High is part of High Schools That Work (HSTW), a school improvement process started by the Southern Regional Education Board. Staff identified school priorities based on data, and then each staff member selected a committee in which to participate.

In the elementary school, each staff member sits on a committee that operates as a professional learning community (PLC) on topics ranging from writing to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

These opportunities are informal opportunities for teacher leadership that are also complemented by formal leadership opportunities, including serving on the building leadership teams (BLTs) or as project coordinators (e.g., HSTW site coordinators) and/or high school department chairs. The formal teacher leader roles are either new or significantly redesigned over the last couple of years, which has been an adjustment for the culture. For example, some interviewees shared notions of anxiety among the high school’s teachers, who may have preferred the practice of teachers going directly to a principal for an item instead of working in committees. Similarly, some staff noted anxiety around discussing building level issues in BLTs as opposed to the previous practice of discussing such issues in all-staff meetings. “Change is hard, but I think that the expectations and the understanding of how it is evolving is good for our staff,” expressed a teacher leader. “There’s a protocol; there’s a process.”

## Structural Approach

The Batavia process is structured to “enhance the level of teacher voice and incorporate a wide variety of talent,” stated an administrator. In addition to the building level committee work with HSTW at the upper level and PLCs at the elementary school, Batavia has established district-wide committees for technology and college and career readiness that involve teacher leaders.



In the elementary and high school, time is contracted into the day either through common planning time or extra time outside of the teaching day for elementary committees and high school departments to meet. The committees and department meetings have components of PLCs and not just operational tasks. The elementary school interviewees were enthusiastic about the work of the PLCs but some expressed concerns about time constraints as the building transitioned to PLC meeting time once instead of twice per week, and time to meet as grade-level teams has also been constricted.

Both schools have BLTs that aid in setting direction and making decisions about the school, such as deciding school-wide programs to enhance math performance or discipline policies. The BLTs also inform the district about resource needs. BLTs have a mix of representation for grades at the elementary level and a mix of departments at the high school. The teams also have a mix of staff and expertise in such areas as Title I and special education.

The high school principal holds individual meetings with department chairs bi-weekly and a collective department chair meeting every three weeks. This routine seeks to recast and recalibrate the role of department chairs and distribute leadership to the chairs and the departments. The principal and chairs noted the leadership development elements in this process are not only for the chairs but for the expectations of the teachers in collectively shaping their department and instruction. Previously, teachers might work independently to request resources or voice concerns to administrators. With this new approach, teacher leaders are charged with collectively engaging with other teachers in the department to identify resources and note any concerns for the teacher leader to take to the principal.

In both buildings, administrators (including the superintendent) sit in on teacher teams, committees and department meetings from time to time to listen and take the pulse of the organization.

## Fostering Collaborative Culture

Several teachers shared dynamics in their committees or teams that aid in collaboration. For example, one teacher noted a strength of his department team is that it finds the “right pace” in its collaborative culture: “We do a good job of having a balanced relationship of pushing when we need to push... but not rocking the boat too much. I think we have a good collaborative spirit amongst us.” A few interviewees talked about fostering collaboration by focusing meeting topics, using technology for online forums and document repositories, and letting team members know about topics ahead of time so that they can prepare to share in the meeting. In a high school meeting room, the importance of collaboration was included on a poster of the year’s goal (see Figure 1).



Several interviewees, particularly staff in the high school, mentioned how voicing concerns and communicating with peer teachers who do not have formal leadership roles is important. “I definitely listen to my colleagues. I then take it to administration,” a BLT teacher member stated and then shared an example. “A concern came up about a change for next year, and it’s not going to affect me. But I hear my colleagues speaking up with concerns and want their voice to be heard about this. So, as a teacher leader in this building and [being] on the Building Leadership Team, I voice their concerns and fight for them... that builds the collaboration and people are then willing to work together more for the students.”

Teacher leaders in Batavia also saw value in communicating about decisions to peer teachers, particularly to understand the reason for decisions. “Staff can come back and say, ‘Okay, I can support that,’” stated a teacher leader. “I might not like it. I might not agree with it, but I understand why the decision was made.” The effectiveness of communication among administrators, building leadership teams, departments and individual teachers is still a work in progress, with interviewees noting both successes and challenges.

Creating a collaborative culture also both motivates and supports peer teachers. A teacher leader discussed the value of expressing gratitude to peers, “I constantly send out emails, or drop little Post-its suggesting, ‘Hey, thank you for what you do, I wouldn’t be able to do my job without you.’... ‘I appreciate you.’ ... ‘Hey, we are coming up on a break, hang in there, we got this!’” However, providing critical but constructive unsolicited feedback to peers was challenging for some teacher leaders. Some teachers, particularly new teachers, did speak positively about proactively seeking critiques from peers in reviewing lesson ideas or rubrics. A means of providing feedback to peers was found in recognizing effort and providing an alternative. “You can start out with ‘I appreciate everything you’ve been doing,’” stated a teacher leader. “Let’s try this because the way it happened this time wasn’t effective for us.” An important part of collaboration is making sure that support for less experienced teachers is also noted, teachers added.

In Batavia, there were also examples of collaborating across teams. A department chair shared how she reaches out to other department chairs to understand what they are experiencing in serving students. The HSTW and elementary PLCs often facilitate collaborative work across subject areas and grades.



**Figure 1: Poster in Batavia High School meeting room**  
Source: C H Smith & Associates.



## Advancing Instruction and Learning

As mentioned above, collaboration among staff is important in Batavia. The Ohio Writing Project highlights cross-departmental collaboration departments to advance. Batavia middle school and high school teachers met to explore how writing could be incorporated in multiple subject areas. In other facets within the buildings, teacher leaders—particularly department chairs or PLC leaders—talked about reaching out to other departments or teams to understand what they were experiencing and how their efforts to increase student learning may overlap.

Teachers engaged in BLTs are also facilitating connections with departments to garner resources to advance instruction. For example, the high school team discussion on math performance recognized how students were struggling. Now, the math department (in partnership with the BLTs) is creating intense math labs where students can receive individualized instruction from their teachers.

Sometimes students' feedback sparks sharing of instruction across disciplines. One teacher noted how students may share a technology, like podcasting, or a lesson they are doing in another subject area. The students' piqued interest encouraged the teacher to reach out to his colleague to replicate the instructional technique.

Several teachers at the elementary school credited the PLCs with bringing issues and opportunities forward and creating professional development opportunities that may not have come to everyone's attention. "I see additional conversations that may not have happened [previously] at the level that we needed to be talking about it," stated a teacher leader.

Encouraging teachers to be engaged with data in teacher teams and BLTs has been critical to advancing instruction. One teacher asserted how she helps her team be more comfortable with reviewing and addressing data, saying, "When we would bring data in, we [need to address it]. They may want to do a book study and we can absolutely do that, but how is this going to align with their end of course data?"

Teachers are also engaged in more professional development as a strategic priority of the district. Many of these teachers are bringing back resources and readily sharing their knowledge with peers. "We've got one teacher who just finished AP training. It's a resource for the other two teachers covering the same subject although they are not teaching AP," stated the teacher

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leader. “Although the course is for juniors, it is helpful for us to share information about AP with the freshmen and sophomores, so they are learning to implement those skills at a much younger age.”

Resident educators are also encouraged to bring in their fresh perspectives. “I can bring my knowledge and background and best practices that I have learned recently,” stated a resident educator. “I can bring out updated studies and investigations,” stated another resident educator.

Whether through formal or informal teacher leadership roles, many teachers spoke of sharing articles and resources with their peers, particularly via the various teacher teams.

## Driving Initiatives

Teacher leaders, encouraged by administrators, are driving initiatives at all levels in the district. “We have had breakthroughs with district-level committees,” highlighted an administrator. “We identified a goal in our readiness programming between 8th and 9th grade transitioning. We realized the need for program continuity. It was good to have representatives from all three buildings and codify what is happening.”

The team structures at the building level are also conduits for work. HSTW teams are a large source of teacher-initiated projects. One teacher leader pointed out the strength of the data-driven initiatives in the school’s implementation of HSTW. “You have every staff member working on creating goals that are measurable and then analyzing the data and realizing what’s working,” stated the teacher.

In the district overall, it was also noted that when things are not working, teachers have the wherewithal to make adjustments. One teacher leader talked about how she and a colleague were planning an initiative, but the plan was falling through. The administrative team worked with them to brainstorm options to keep the project going.

The administration reinforced the need to implement initiatives that teachers bring to the district or building level. “We implement what teachers come up with after we have done the hard work of processing and analyzing it,” stated an administrator. “If you don’t implement, teachers don’t want to come back and do it again. If it feels like unproductive work, no one wants to waste their time.”

Teacher leaders also spoke of the importance of providing honest critiques and feedback to the district on initiatives. “I think it is important for the administrators to keep hearing that voice of what we deal with on a daily basis,” stated a teacher leader. “It’s important for people to stand up, tell them what we think... and give them that perspective so they’re not looking with tunnel vision.”



## Practicing Equity and Ethics

Any teacher can take on informal leadership opportunities in the district as they participate in teacher teams. Interviewees also believed that selection for formal leadership opportunities were generally fair, noting that teachers who have shown interest, had experience, and had expertise were given greater preference for participation in building leadership teams while keeping in mind the need for diversity in subject areas and other characteristics.

One concern raised was that it can be easy for a “good” team member to remain in a leadership position indefinitely while other teachers do not have an opportunity to lead. There was at least one case when a building administrator sought to increase the diversity in teacher voices by asking a teacher leader to remain on the BLT but step away from chairing the department, so another teacher had a chance to lead the department.

Teacher leaders also shared examples of trying to get more teachers involved. One program coordinator talked about spreading professional development opportunities among staff members so that more teachers are encouraged to grow and then come back and share this knowledge within their teams.

Teacher leaders were also focused on ensuring that all students are treated equitably. One teacher talked about facilitating communication among arts and special subject teachers, core subject teachers and intervention specialists to ensure a student with multiple disabilities who was entering in the middle of the school year was getting the appropriate accommodations in the arts courses. The elementary school is progressively working through discipline strategies in a PLC and at the BLT to make sure there is consistency and equity in discipline strategies. As referenced before, teachers, encouraged by teacher leaders, are also looking more closely at data to determine which students are being left behind and delivering to them the instruction and environment they need.

Ethical approaches to teacher leadership were referenced, including articulating concerns when lines may be crossed. Teachers shared examples when they could challenge each other respectfully in teams to come up with the best outcome.

## Building Relationships

Teacher leaders find ways to strengthen relationships in the district. “You’re nice to people,” asserted a teacher leader in describing the essence of building relationships. “You help out other teachers ... you cover class, you talk to them. When they’re having a bad day, you help them problem solve.” Reaching out to resident educators about their needs was also noted. “It is important to make an effort to go to those younger teachers and get their voice,” suggested a



teacher leader. “Sometimes those younger teachers don’t even feel like they can or should have a voice.”

Several teachers noted that participating in the BLT and other school-wide committees facilitates relationships. “I just got my first five-year license,” stated a teacher. “I thought it might be nice to sew myself into this community of teachers [by taking on leadership activities].”

When asked what sparked her interest in taking on teacher leadership activities, a teacher leader highlighted the importance of building relationships and working with others to be a better teacher: “I don’t think you can become a better teacher without being with leaders ... without being with colleagues that have the desire to improve instruction.”

Committees have also centered on building relationships with stakeholders. A HSTW team aimed to have more staff eat lunch together. “Our goal was to find ways to connect teachers and then the idea was to do it socially, in a friendly way, with the hope that it would lead to collaboration,” explained a teacher leader. “You’re not going to collaborate with someone you don’t know very well. If we could get people to know each other better, it would be easier to collaborate.” Another high school committee focuses on communicating with the community about events, state report card information and other matters. Some interviewees in both the elementary and high schools mentioned building strong community ties, while others saw connecting to the community as an area of improvement.

Several teachers interviewed mentioned that they live or grew up in the district. At least one teacher leader mentioned having their own children enrolled in the district. Some of those teachers talked about the ability to connect with parents and the community based on that context. However, teacher leaders are also actively involved in seeking career experiences for students and are developing relationships with the community businesses and organizations for the benefit of students.

Batavia has participated in a variety of networks related to grant-funded initiatives, including Race to the Top and the Ready early learning grant. In these projects, they develop relationships with other schools, districts, and community organizations. One teacher leader discussed how the Ready project was able to produce family night for Pre-K-2 students and their families. The success in engaging these families has seeded ideas about how these events might serve older children if resources were available.

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Some teacher leaders have myriad ways they reach out to parents, particularly teachers working with students with disabilities or emotional disturbances. Teacher leaders are also thoughtful about helping peers develop relationships. “A lot of times a new teacher just needs someone to bounce ideas off of,” stated a teacher leader. “They may ask me to read an email before they send it to a parent. Parent communication really doesn’t come up in some of their teacher training. They may ask me how to read [the intent of] a parent email and try to figure out what they really want.”

## Conclusion

Teacher leadership in Batavia is capitalizing on structures, such as PLCs and HSTW teacher teams, to amplify teacher voice and advance student outcomes. Teacher leadership is founded on teamwork and data-driven decision-making.

Teacher leaders are driven by the greater good for their school and district. “There is no glory in my job, but I am proud of what I do,” stated a Batavia teacher leader.

### 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.*