

TEACHER LEADERSHIP: A Key Lever in School Improvement and Turnaround



A Proposed System for California
Schools by Classroom Teachers



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+++++++ INTRODUCTION ++++++

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides a unique opportunity for parents, teachers, and policymakers to reimagine the process by which we support and improve struggling schools. In contrast to No Child Left Behind, ESSA provides schools, districts, and states the flexibility and autonomy to redesign systems of school support to better meet local needs. As Los Angeles public school teachers with deep experience working in high-need schools, we see the importance and challenge of this work every day. In order to make systematic changes that support long-term school improvement and advance educational outcomes for all students, we believe that teacher leadership should be an essential component of all school improvement efforts.

+++++++ THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP ++++++

Long-lasting school improvement will ultimately depend on the teachers who implement the changes each and every day in the classroom. Teachers, therefore, need to be active participants at all levels of the turnaround effort. Teachers are uniquely positioned to understand the daily problems that schools face. Their voice and input are essential in determining the best course of action for a school. Moreover, engaging teachers in the process of developing a school's improvement plan will lead to greater buy-in and a deeper understanding of the decisions being made. These outcomes will in turn increase the likelihood of successful implementation of school improvement efforts.

Many low-performing schools face high levels of teacher burnout and staff turnover, contributing to a teacher shortage in California's struggling schools. When the people in the building keep changing, it makes it highly difficult to enact lasting improvements. School turnaround efforts need to acknowledge this fact and take specific actions to confront this challenge. Ensuring that there are opportunities for teacher leadership provides one such avenue to retain teachers and combat staff turnover.¹ Clearly defined pathways of professional

advancement and increased participation in the decision-making process enhance teachers' sense of autonomy, enthusiasm, and commitment, and as a result help retain more teachers and increase the likelihood of enduring improvements.²

Turning around a low-performing school is difficult work that challenges the capacity of a school. Administrators and district officials need teachers' help in overcoming the daily challenges that schools face and meeting the long-term demands of institutional change. Redistributing leadership opportunities to classroom teachers provides one way to increase a school's total capacity to make change.³

Lastly, many studies show the significant impact of teacher quality on student achievement. In fact, teacher quality is the single greatest in-school factor that improves student achievement.⁴ Therefore, a key component of successful school turnaround is the improvement of teacher quality. Increasing teacher leadership opportunities will boost teacher quality by providing opportunities for professional development and by helping retain more effective teachers.

++++++ REQUIREMENTS OF ESSA ++++++

ESSA defines two tiers of schools in need of support: Comprehensive support schools and targeted support schools. The law requires states to identify schools at least once every

three years for comprehensive and targeted support, and districts are to receive funds for each.⁵

	Comprehensive Support Schools	Targeted Support Schools
Eligible Schools	+ the bottom 5% of Title I schools + high schools with graduation rates below 67%, + Title I schools with chronically low-performing subgroups that continue to perform poorly after targeted support.	+ Title I schools with a continuously underperforming subgroup + schools that have a subgroup performing at the same level as students that attend a Title I school in the bottom 5%.
Available Funding	\$500,000* for each school	\$50,000* for each school

*Unless the state determines that a smaller amount of money is sufficient

ESSA doesn't specify a set of school intervention programs that states need to implement. Instead, it allows the schools, districts, and states to choose evidence-based strategies that meet local needs. ESSA regulations also reassert the important role of community stakeholders in developing school improvement plans. Local Education

Agencies (LEAs) are required to conduct school needs assessments and develop intervention plans in partnership with school leaders, teachers, and parents. Schools identified for support must also inform students' families about how they can engage in the school improvement process.

++++++ RECOMMENDATIONS ++++++

We believe that California should use ESSA's flexibility to design a system of school support and improvement that leverages teachers' leadership and capacity to make changes in struggling schools. As the California Department of Education and the California State Board of Education create guidelines for distributing school improvement funds, they should establish teacher leadership as a criterion for evaluating and approving school improvement plans. The guidelines should stipulate that LEAs specifically detail

how the school proposes to engage, retain, and develop effective teacher leaders. Furthermore, LEAs should be asked to explain and demonstrate the ways in which teachers will play a strong role in determining and implementing school improvement efforts.

In order to meet this requirement, LEAs should have substantial flexibility in developing innovative ways to promote teacher leadership in struggling schools. The following set of recommendations aim to provide

specific provisions that LEAs could choose to implement in targeted and comprehensive support schools. These recommendations are not meant to be a comprehensive approach to school turnaround. Promoting teacher leadership alone will not close achievement gaps and solve the problems of struggling schools. A comprehensive

plan of school support and improvement will have to consider school leadership, community engagement, and resource equity in addition to teacher leadership. However, without teacher leadership, schools will struggle to make significant and enduring changes that improve student outcomes.

I: Targeted Support Schools: Recruit and train high-quality current classroom teachers with a track record of success with a specific subgroup to lead professional development on evidence-based instructional practices for teachers at targeted support schools.

We believe that highly qualified teachers, with an in-depth understanding of the targeted school's goals, should lead the creation of a long-term professional development plan. Intervention in targeted schools should be done in a strategic, data-driven way that takes into account the skills and strategies needed for a particular subgroup. Research has shown that there is a strong correlation between student achievement and changes in teacher practice.⁶ Targeted support schools should create learning communities of teachers led by a teacher leader recognized for excellence in improving outcomes for a specific subgroup of students. In this model, teachers can learn new strategies from an educator with a specific expertise, try these new ideas in the classroom, and then return to their learning communities to share their experiences trying out new ideas. Providing professional learning environments that are

teacher-led and held over a period of time can lead to impactful results.

An expert teacher who leads professional learning in targeted schools could serve in a hybrid position. Retaining high-quality teachers is a critical issue in California, and this hybrid model would allow schools to retain highly-effective teachers in the classroom while also offering educators career advancement in a teacher leadership role. The Department of Education's ESSA Title II guidance specifically encourages schools to work with teachers to create such measures in order to foster teacher retention. Schools should be given the autonomy to create a hybrid role that best meets their needs. This approach recognizes that great teachers are more likely to stay in schools where they have meaningful input into developing and implementing solutions that will improve student learning.

II: Comprehensive Support Schools: Ensure collaboration between teachers and school leaders in analyzing findings from school-level needs assessment in order to determine a specific school-wide intervention from a menu of evidence-based practices.

All teachers should play a major role in a school's comprehensive needs assessment. Teachers have firsthand knowledge of their students and directly impact their students'

academic performance as well as their social and emotional well-being on a daily basis. Research has shown that there are major benefits for students when teachers

make significant schoolwide decisions.⁷ Teachers should be trained on using a comprehensive needs assessment and be present in the decision-making process. Teachers should be given leadership roles to not only analyze and evaluate the data, but also to make recommendations based on the findings. Through the needs assessment, one school may recognize an immediate need for a social-emotional curriculum due to high levels of behavior issues, while another school may have a low level of behavior issues but identify a critical need to improve the achievement levels of their English Language Learners.

In order to effectively improve student performance, schools should have the ability to choose the type of professional development that best meets their needs. The traditional top-down approach of assigning professional development according to district mandates often does not adequately take into account a school's needs. When professional development has little to no basis in an individual school's needs, it is irrelevant and ineffective. Instead, schools in collaboration with teachers should use the findings of the needs assessment to determine the best interventions and school improvement strategies for their school site.

III: Comprehensive Support Schools: Provide collaborative professional development between high- and low-performing schools in demographically similar communities to facilitate important shifts in instructional practice at comprehensive support schools.

Teachers from comprehensive support schools should work together with teacher leaders from high-performing schools to work towards important shifts in instructional practice needed to improve the low-performing school. Rather than setting up schools to compete with one another, we believe a successful accountability system should be based on collaboration. In an accountability system in which schools are only concerned about their own achievement, highest-performing schools will remain at the top and lowest-performing schools will remain at the bottom. In order to close this gap, California's school improvement system must bring schools together to share best practices and learn from one another to improve our education system as a whole.

Education systems around the world, such as in England and China (Shanghai), have demonstrated success when partnering a low-performing school with a high-performing school in a school turnaround.⁸ In England, a study examined the effects of inter-school

collaborations on student achievement. Participating schools demonstrated improved student achievement, and within two to four years, started outperforming non-participating schools. Similarly, in Shanghai, inter-school collaboration involves contracting high-performing schools to work with low-performing schools—usually for a two-year period—in order to turn around the academic outcomes of those low-performing schools. All stakeholders affected by this approach unanimously recognize the positive effects it has on improving student achievement in low-performing schools.⁹ Based on the successes of inter-school collaboration already implemented, we believe a strong accountability system should incentivize, create, and fund opportunities for collaboration between high-achieving and low-achieving schools.

The benefits of inter-school collaboration are mutual and most effective when low-performing schools are paired with higher-performing schools of similar demographics. Positive inter-school collaboration happens

when demographics and shared visions of collaborating schools are as similar as possible. Therefore, we believe that 1) school partnerships cannot be forced but should be encouraged as a highly-effective means of intervention and 2) the highest-performing 50 percent of schools should be eligible to be a mentor school in order to allow for more variety in the demographics of schools that qualify. For example, a high-achieving school primarily comprised of one socioeconomic status may have a hard time understanding the needs of a lower-achieving school primarily comprised of a different socioeconomic status. Additionally, when schools of similar demographics are paired together, the shared understanding and experiences of the schools lead to greater cohesion that proves beneficial to teachers and students at both schools.

One approach to inter-school collaboration is joint professional development meetings. Districts should identify teacher leaders from

within comprehensive support schools to play integral roles in instructional coaching, mentorship, and school improvement efforts. Funds provided to districts for comprehensive support schools could be used to compensate teachers from either the higher-performing or lower-performing school to fill these leadership roles. For example, in Shanghai, two to three highly-qualified teachers from the higher-performing school are placed in the low-performing school to mentor teachers and oversee school turnaround efforts. Following this example, LEAs should determine highly-qualified and effective teachers from the higher-achieving collaboration school and leverage their positions as teacher leaders to create a school turnaround management team. This team would consist of two to three highly-qualified teachers from the higher-performing school who would mentor teachers in the comprehensive support schools through observations, feedback, modeling, and coaching.

+++++ **BEST PRACTICES FOR ALL SCHOOLS** +++++

Though ESSA details a set of requirements for comprehensive and targeted support schools, we believe that there should be needs assessments for all schools in California in order to identify troubling trends and proactively address achievement and resource gaps. Below, we provide an additional recommendation for the State Board of Education to consider in creating accountability guidelines for all California schools.

IV: Best Practices for All Schools: Require all schools to collaborate with teachers to conduct a school-level needs assessment that identifies a school's strengths and areas of growth.

The revised California school accountability system will assess schools on multiple indicators, including academic indicators, such as student performance and growth on assessments, and non-academic indicators, such as school climate. We believe that there is a need for a strong, comprehensive school-level needs assessment for all schools to determine if schools are meeting their targeted growths in each indicator. Data

should be examined across multiple years as well as disaggregated between various subgroups so a school can pinpoint where additional focus and support should be provided. As part of the continuing school dialogue, data sets should be reviewed throughout the school year to provide ample opportunities to see progress and address possible areas for additional support.

+++++ CONCLUSION +++++

The Every Student Succeeds Act presents a significant opportunity to reshape the traditional models of school intervention and support and thus improve the educational outcomes for all students. Successful school improvement efforts depend on many factors such as equitable resources, school leadership, and family engagement, but one essential factor is teacher engagement and leadership. The California State Board of Education and the California Department of Education should require all school improvement plans to include provisions related to teacher leadership. In order to ensure long-term and systematic improvements at struggling schools, California needs to listen to teachers, leverage their capacity, and provide opportunities for them to lead.

+++++ ENDNOTES +++++

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