

## Sharing the Wealth: Five Practices for Fostering Shared Leadership

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*“So many of my principal colleagues are micromanagers and many of them were superstars in the classroom. But you won’t be a good principal if you do everything.” —Principal*

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### Introduction

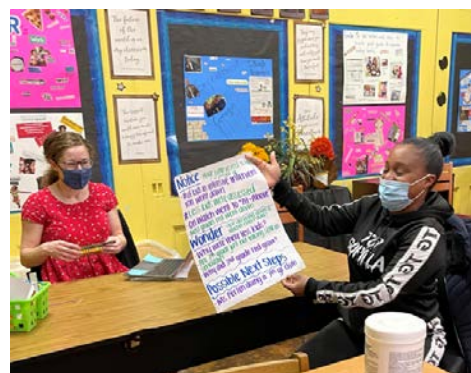
Schools often take a top-down approach to decision making. Administrators set directives and mandates, expecting compliance and automatic investment from teachers. Without a seat at the decision-making table, teachers feel left out and like they have no say. Meanwhile, administrators find themselves frustrated that the decisions they thought were brilliant aren’t landing right with staff. Schoolwide, the absence of collaboration and communication results in minimal transparency and reduced trust. Disinvested teachers [leave the school](#) because they [don’t feel heard](#), overworked administrators experience [burnout](#), and student learning suffers.

It doesn’t have to be that way. In Spring 2021, Teach Plus published a report, [The Levers of Teacher Leadership: Growing Student Achievement, Improving Schools](#), that identifies essential keys to success in transforming school buildings into examples of teacher leadership in action. The report underscores what teachers in the Teach Plus network know well: Teacher leadership is a highly effective lever for school-wide improvement, increasing capacity of and empowering educators, improving workplaces, and growing student achievement and academic success. Drawing on this report, which examines Teach Plus’ work in five School District of Philadelphia public elementary schools, and [extensive research](#) on teacher leadership, we present in this memo a better approach to school leadership: one that **centers teachers as decision-makers and leaders in the school community**.

### Five Practices

In partnership with Teach Plus, the schools in Philadelphia implemented a combination of five best practices for fostering a culture of shared leadership:

1. **Professional Learning:** Delegate facilitation to teachers and use teacher input to direct teacher learning.
2. **Hiring:** Invite teachers to serve on the hiring committee and make hiring decisions.
3. **Instructional Observation:** Conduct instructional rounds and walkthroughs in collaboration with teachers.
4. **Leadership Team Meetings:** Include teachers in the school’s leadership team meetings and defer to their ideas.
5. **Engagement Surveys:** Survey teachers about their needs/perspectives and use that data to drive school change.



## Impact

Although schools implemented these best practices in their own unique ways, they each saw significant impact on the culture of shared leadership in the school.

“Our principal lets us have a **voice** and it spirals through the whole staff ... Nobody feels like we’re being micromanaged anymore. It’s now ‘you’re doing a great job— can you share that with me?’” —*Teacher*

**97%** of teacher Leaders reported **improved shared leadership**, and **100%** reported **improved collaboration** in their school

**All 5** principals highlighted the **value of teacher autonomy**



"The notion that a principal can be the end-all and be-all for instructional leadership and can plan and facilitate every grade team meeting is unrealistic and not the way to move a school forward. So I was excited that Teach Plus was bringing that responsibility of **spreading the leadership, spreading the wealth to our school**. And I find that the **more power people have, the more invested they become**." —*Principal*

"Allowing us to build our teams and find **strategies that will work for US in OUR classrooms**— that’s the recipe for success." —*Teacher*

## Breaking Down the Five Best Practices

1. **Professional Learning:** Delegate facilitation to teachers and use teacher input to direct teacher learning.

**How?** Teachers are paid and coached to plan and facilitate PLCs. Tasked with running weekly grade-team meetings, teacher leaders create agendas, research best practices, and work with their colleagues to identify student needs, supported by Teach Plus Leadership Coaches. Teachers lead data analysis sessions, facilitate video protocols to analyze their own teaching, and practice implementing instructional practice changes with their colleagues. Additionally, **administrators regularly call upon teacher leaders to facilitate** school-wide professional development sessions.

**Why?** Adults are self-directed learners and need to be trusted to learn in collaboration with their peers. Instead of one-off or disconnected professional learning, **teachers can take responsibility for guiding their learning**. The Philadelphia Teach Plus teacher facilitators shared that their teaching improved both because of the collaboration with their peers and because of what they learned about effective meeting facilitation. One teacher described the opportunity to lead her team as “putting power back into the teachers.”

2. **Hiring:** Invite teachers to serve on the hiring committee and make hiring decisions.

*How?* With Teach Plus' encouragement, principals emailed their staff to see if any teachers wanted to join their hiring committee. A few interested teachers volunteered, and just like that **over half of the hiring team was made up of a diverse group of teachers**. Teachers now enthusiastically offer their time reviewing applications, interviewing candidates, and discussing hiring decisions. One teacher noted that her principal "never made the ultimate decision" and instead defaulted to the team about who to hire or not. When the school shifted its yearly goals to center racial equity, teachers helped rewrite the interview questions to center candidates' cultural competence and their commitment to serving low-income communities of color.

*Why?* In most schools, teachers spend more time collaborating with each other than with administrators. So why not give teachers a say in who they work with? **Giving teachers this level of authority signals a high level of trust and makes decision making more collaborative.**

3. **Instructional Observation:** Conduct instructional rounds and walkthroughs in collaboration with teachers.

*How?* Administrators invite 2-4 Teach Plus teacher leaders to join them on quarterly [instructional rounds](#) that take place over the course of a few hours. As a group, they first come together to discuss a problem of practice which helps set a specific lens for their classroom observations. Then, in small groups, they visit classrooms together and take low-inference notes. Finally, they come back together to share noticings and wonderings, as well as set next steps. A different group of teachers participates in the process each time so **everyone has an opportunity to see teachers in action**.

*Why?* At first, some administrators were frustrated that despite years of coaching and professional development, teachers still weren't implementing grade-level and standards-aligned instruction. It wasn't until they started including teachers on their instructional rounds that they saw a shift. Having teachers be part of conversations about grade-wide and school-wide instruction gave them insight into what was happening outside of their own classroom. Instructional rounds **gave teachers a unique space to get the same birds-eye view that the principals had**.

4. **Leadership Team Meetings:** Include teachers in the school's leadership team meetings and defer to their ideas.

*How?* Administrators restructured the makeup of their leadership team to include a grade-level teacher leader representative who is compensated for the additional time and coached by a Teach Plus Leadership Coach. Before the start of each school year, the team now comes together during the Teach Plus Summer Institute to brainstorm schoolwide priorities and set goals for the coming year. That space is essential for collaboratively laying out the direction of the work and getting buy-in from teachers. **Teach Plus teacher leaders serve as ambassadors** of the work, selling their colleagues on the priorities for the year and garnering enthusiasm for the school's strategic plan. Throughout the year, teachers work alongside administrators in biweekly leadership team meetings to share progress updates, learn about instructional trends and central office updates, problem solve schoolwide dilemmas, and analyze school data.

**Why?** Giving teachers a seat at the decision-making table helps them feel more connected to the inner workings of the school, which **builds transparency and improves communication**. A larger leadership team that includes teachers means there are more point-people who staff can go to with questions. And with over 50% of the leadership team as classroom teachers, teacher needs and perspectives are front and center while making decisions. One teacher shared that the collaborative leadership team meetings “show that teachers and leaders have a universal dedication to the school.”

5. **Engagement Surveys:** Survey teachers about their needs/perspectives and use that data to drive school change.

**How?** With support from Teach Plus Leadership Coaches, some principals started regularly surveying teachers. They adapted the [Gallup Employee Engagement Survey](#) and added a few additional questions to get feedback on specific school initiatives. They also made space for qualitative feedback on what was working and what could be improved in the school community. The leadership team — with teachers on that team, of course — then **analyzed the results and discussed next steps that everyone would own**. As a result of the survey feedback, one school revised its process for communicating with teachers about student disciplinary decisions. They also started implementing restorative practices programming, in part led by teachers. Another school put interventions in place to combat teacher burnout and improve teacher retention. That same school also used input from their staff survey to make key budget decisions, including hiring an external racial justice consultant.

**Why?** Most principals want to know what their staff wants. An anonymous survey that intentionally invites authentic feedback and constructive criticism is the quickest path to **gathering better data on how staff really feel**. It won't always be easy to read, but data on staff perceptions and needs should drive the big decisions in the school and can help illuminate deep-seated challenges in the school community.

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*“You don’t have to work alone. You don’t need to have all of the answers.  
Your teachers are eager to share their opinions and help steer the ship.”*

*—Teach Plus Leadership Coach*

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