



THE DICE ROLL:

Illinois' Haphazard Teacher
Leadership System—and How to Fix It



INTRODUCTION

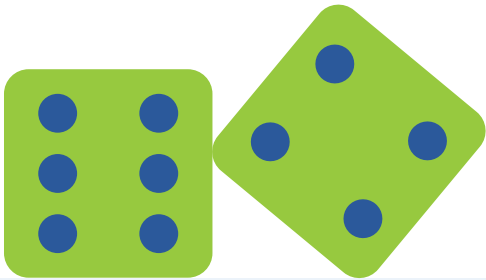
The importance of teacher leadership in shaping educational outcomes cannot be overstated. Teacher leaders play a pivotal role in implementing educational policies and practices that directly impact student learning and well-being. Equally crucial, when teachers are equipped and empowered to lead, they drive better instruction for students, strengthen support for colleagues, foster a more positive school culture, and are more likely to remain in teaching.¹ Additionally, diverse teacher leaders bring varied perspectives and experiences that promote equity and inclusivity.

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has long recognized the importance of teacher leaders and in 2012, in collaboration with the Illinois P-20 Council,² created a teacher leadership licensure endorsement.³ Available to those who hold a graduate degree, this endorsement was designed to “increase the quality of leadership, as well as teaching and learning practices, and recognize the critical importance that leadership by teachers brings to the overall school improvement mission ...”⁴ While this creates a high-quality, formalized path for teacher leadership, it also serves as a barrier. [Teach Plus Fellows have previously found](#) that the teacher leadership graduate degree and endorsement require a significant investment of time and money, with no guarantee of increased opportunity as a result.⁵

There are opportunities at the district and building level for teachers to develop into teacher leaders, but they are far from universal and usually are not intentionally designed. Few schools and districts have planned pathways to support the systematic development of teachers into leaders. In fact, an assistant manager at Starbucks gets more leadership training than most teacher leaders. We checked: A barista making the move to assistant manager gets flown in for two weeks of intensive training, followed by four weeks of apprenticeship at a training store. Too often, teacher leaders assume their role with no training at all, at 3 p.m. on a Friday, when they pick up the keys the last department chair left on a desk on their way out the door. We have to do better. This lack of structured support particularly affects teachers from underrepresented groups, who face additional challenges in accessing leadership opportunities and greater scrutiny when they do hold leadership roles.

We are a group of Teach Plus Illinois Policy Fellows and exemplary educators committed to addressing these gaps. In spring 2024, we held focus groups with educators across Illinois in order to elevate their voices, experiences, and perspectives on teacher leadership. Our goal was to give policymakers a deeper understanding of the inequities and barriers in the teacher leadership pipeline so they will work to create more intentional and equitable pathways to leadership for Illinois’ educators. In this brief, we present our focus group findings and recommendations aimed at building the nation’s strongest pipeline for teacher leadership.

Teacher leaders play a pivotal role in implementing educational policies and practices that directly impact student learning and well-being.



Findings

1. Successful teacher leaders have deep and clear motivations strongly tied to student needs, which push them to take on leadership roles and persist through challenges.
2. Current school and district structures do not promote teacher leadership.
3. The leaders we have are accidentally discovered or informally selected, not intentionally developed.
4. Teacher leadership journeys differ by race and gender.

Recommendations

1. ISBE should create the capacity to support and expand teacher leadership development.
2. Teacher leader advocates should champion microcredentialing as a path towards leadership, and ISBE should support this work with licensure recognition.
3. Teacher and school leader preparation programs should explicitly position teachers as leaders, and include distributive leadership practices and skills.
4. Schools and districts should build distributed leadership structures and intentional leadership development pipelines.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand teachers' journeys to leadership roles, both formal and informal, we conducted 29 focus groups with 78 educators from across Illinois in January and February 2024. We collected qualitative data from both session transcripts and survey responses. Participants were recruited through outreach from Teach Plus Policy Fellows to teachers across a diverse range of districts, reflecting a selection of both teachers and current teacher leaders. These focus groups included:

- + 55 females (70.5%) and 23 males (29.5%)⁶
- + 36 participants who identify as people of color (46.2%) and 41 who do not (52.6%)
 - 5 Asian or Pacific Islander (6.4%), 26 Black or African American (33.3%), 5 Hispanic or Latinx (6.4%), 45 White (57.7%), and 4 multi-racial (5.1%)⁷
- + 43 participants had 15 or more years of experience (55.1%); 21 had between 10-15 years of experience (27%); remaining participants were distributed evenly between 2 and 9 years of experience.⁸
- + A majority (49) of participants were full-time teachers (56.4%) or instructional coaches (6.4%); 14 were school or district administrators (17.9%); all but two of the remaining participants held school or district related jobs as educators.⁹
- + Participants were distributed over a range of urban, suburban, and rural school districts, reflecting elementary, high school, and unified districts.¹⁰
- + 70 of the 78 of participants held a master's degree or higher (89.7%)¹¹

During our focus groups, participants responded both in writing and in discussion to a series of questions from facilitators seeking to elicit their experiences and perspectives on their development into leaders. These questions sought to elicit reflections around the following themes:

- + Characteristics of effective leaders
- + The process of identifying oneself as a leader and developing a leadership mindset
- + School and district-level factors and conditions influencing leadership development, including
 - Challenges and barriers to leadership development
 - Positive supports and conditions for leadership development

Participants' written and oral responses were recorded and coded to generate themes from the data. Responses were analyzed by Teach Plus Policy Fellows and staff to generate findings reflective of educator voices, which are outlined below.



1. Successful teacher leaders have deep and clear motivations strongly tied to student needs, which push them to take on leadership roles and persist through challenges.

The teacher leaders in our sample did not shy away from leadership demands and opportunities. Every participating educator indicated they see themselves as some type of leader in their professional practice.¹² These educators view leadership as an inseparable part of their daily classroom practice with students. For example, one respondent was open about how *“there is little difference between me as a leader and me as a teacher,”*¹³ while another said, *“We can be leaders every day in our classrooms and we should be.”*¹⁴ These responses illustrate how many teachers seek to embody leadership qualities in their daily practice with students.

Respondents pointed to meeting student needs as a strong motivation for taking on leadership roles outside the classroom. For example, one English Learner teacher said, *“I advocate for my students’ educational needs - both academically and socially-emotionally [by being] a skilled speaker, listener, and decision maker.”*¹⁵ Another respondent believed that effective leadership was defined by being a lifelong learner, and that they modeled this for their students *“by boldly taking risks (trying new things) and learn[ing] to self advocate by sharing my perspective and listening to the perspectives of others ...”*¹⁶ Many educators we spoke to positioned their leadership journeys as inextricably linked to their success as educators.

This sense of leadership as a critical part of their mission to serve students helped respondents persist in the face of challenges. About one-fifth of the respondents described challenges they faced as opportunities to acquire experiences, skills, and knowledge and grow professionally and personally.¹⁷ One educator describes a specific time her leadership was unwanted in her school: *“That administrator made that year very difficult and scrutinized everything my students did or didn’t do. [It] made me more focused on making sure that we are meeting the needs of all students and staff.”*¹⁸ From another district, a teacher shares a similar story: *“A member of admin [gave] me directives that involved me being a leader in the building and then in front of my colleagues told me to “stay in [my] lane” in a meeting ...”*¹⁹ *As a teacher leader it is quite difficult because you have a lot of responsibility and little to no authority.”*²⁰ Some respondents who were discouraged in their leadership journey internalized it as a life lesson, an inspiration to work harder, or simply a temporary barrier.

2. Current school and district structures do not promote teacher leadership.

In examining how respondents' schools and districts have promoted and supported leader development, the majority of respondents said their leadership development came from unpaid professional development opportunities outside of their schools.²¹ Close to one-third of our respondents said that they developed leadership skills as a result of relationships with colleagues, including both formal mentoring and informal peer collaboration, which often led to peers encouraging them to take on leadership roles.²² Teachers provided examples of this by stating, *"My principal encouraged me," "Others started coming to me for recommendations,"* and *"Fellow teachers and coaches asked me."*²³ Both of these pathways reflect an inefficient system rather than coordinated leadership development—the former relies on individual motivation and capacity to seek out additional leadership training, while the latter is most often accidental or informal rather than intentional.

"I remember being told that you shouldn't speak until you're tenured."

The most commonly named barrier to teachers' leadership development by the respondents was poor leadership and/or organizational culture.²⁴ They spoke of school and district structures where young teachers are actively discouraged from leadership or even speaking up. *"In my*

*early years, I remember being told that you shouldn't speak until you're tenured. We were told to sit back to listen and learn."*²⁵ Another teacher plainly describes the lack of access she experienced, *"It is hard for a first-year teacher to feel like a leader or find opportunities to be a leader."*²⁶ A veteran teacher described an overwhelming lack of support for teacher leadership embedded in the district's culture: *"[Our] admin does not support teacher leaders and colleagues view teacher leaders in a negative way."*²⁷ Others described structures rewarding formal leadership positions at the cost of silencing others, such as one respondent who said, *"In a department-chair system, I am not a department chair, so I don't have a voice."*²⁸ Simply put, it is difficult to develop leadership skills or grow professionally into leadership roles when schools are not built to encourage this development.

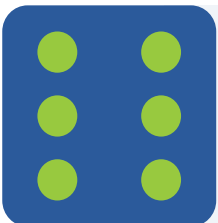
It is worth noting that every participant in our focus groups identified themselves as a leader, meaning this lack of supportive structures did not deter educators in our sample from continuing to seek out opportunities to become leaders, even if they had to work around the systems and structures in their schools to do so. We believe this reflects a subset of teachers that came to the classroom with strong leadership mindsets, or developed them independently, but that these same systems and structures likely discourage a larger number of teachers who might become strong leaders but are less driven to do so. We recommend further study to understand the perspectives of teachers who do not see themselves as leaders, what factors led them to take a back seat, and what could be done to invite them into leadership.

3. The leaders we have are accidentally discovered or informally selected, not intentionally developed.

Close to half of the respondents saw themselves as leaders prior to becoming teachers.²⁹ They assumed leadership roles among their family or friends, or through outside experiences like religious organizations, sports, high school or college student organizations, and prior jobs outside of teaching. These individuals entered the teaching profession with a leadership mindset embedded within them. While we are happy to see capable leaders selecting the education profession, we also recognize that the kinds of early leadership development experiences named by participants are more likely to be available to those with greater privilege, and that relying on those experiences to determine who leads in schools is likely to reinforce existing inequities while excluding underprivileged groups from leadership.

Other respondents did not see themselves as leaders prior to entering education. Their leadership mindset developed through professional experiences, mentoring, or the “shoulder tap,” in which someone with power identified them as a potential leader and guided their development. For example, one respondent said, *“I didn’t see myself as a leader professionally until I was in the classroom and began being noticed for strong behavior management and my instructional practice.”*³⁰ Another said, *“I didn’t always see myself as a leader. I had a vision of a leader as the center of the room. That’s not me. But ... I had roles put upon me and I embraced them.”*³¹ Our respondents did not indicate that these “shoulder taps” were intentional or structurally designed moments. On the contrary, they most often reflected a school leader needing to assign a particular project or role to a teacher, and making a selection of convenience based on availability, willingness, instructional skills, or other attributes not always directly related to leadership skill. We note again the inequities inherent in this approach, as leaders are more likely to tap those who look and think like them—again perpetuating inequities while denying opportunity to historically marginalized groups.

Very few respondents spoke of a designed process where their leadership mindset was intentionally cultivated by school or district structures. Although we acknowledge that there are pockets of excellence where this is happening locally, our overwhelming finding is that the education profession is not intentionally developing leaders. People either entered the profession with their leadership skills already developed or they were fortunate enough to be in situations where opportunities opened up, allowing themselves to be seen as leaders and to see themselves as leaders. These accidental moments were not reflective of an intentional design of leadership cultivation in education.



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4. Teacher leadership journeys differ by race and gender.

The journey towards leadership, and experiences with leadership, look different for those who navigated social constructions of race and gender. As teachers of color sought leadership roles, they often found those opportunities limited. The respondents were candid in how the inequity of race played a significant role in how leaders were chosen and how opportunities were distributed. One teacher of color said, *"I saw teachers who started the same year I did get more building opportunities than me."*³² A respondent who identified as a Black woman spoke of *"times when I have felt as though I needed to work harder to gain the respect I deserved."*³³ Another Black woman emphasized the experience by saying, *"[We are] expected to stay in our lane, so to speak."*³⁴ One respondent spoke of how their racial experiences led to her *"not being able to take the traditional path of leadership,"*³⁵ and she further elaborated, *"The lack of willingness of [school] leaders to understand implicit and explicit bias has hindered my development as a leader."*³⁶ Many respondents who identified as Black and Brown had similar experiences of how they continually navigated structural racial biases in their leadership journeys.

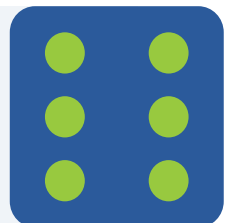
● **"They needed my body and not my voice."**

Unfortunately, those challenges persisted after our respondents assumed leadership roles, as microaggressions contributed to an environment in which their voices were not trusted and their abilities to leverage leadership opportunities to impact change were limited. One respondent

stated, *"It's hard sometimes being seen as a leader of color that wants to do more than discipline."*³⁷ Another educator spoke of how she, as an African-American woman, experienced *"meeting the Black teacher quota where they needed my body and not my voice."*³⁸ In other words, she felt she was selected for a leadership role to give her school the appearance of diversity, but denied the opportunity to be part of decisions that might challenge the status quo by offering a new perspective. Others vocalized leadership structures where respondents *"had to prove themselves"* because they were not white: *"As a woman of color, I always feel people are waiting for me to mess up or fail. Waiting on me to say the wrong thing or be obnoxious ... I feel it's an uphill battle."*³⁹

A number of respondents who faced identity-related barriers or challenges deliberately accepted responsibility for making an inequitable system more equitable through their own efforts. Respondents spoke of having to *"make choices to put myself in the forefront to become a model for young women that may be feeling the same way that I did,"*⁴⁰ while another communicated how she had to find her leadership voice amongst *"other affirming Black women."*⁴¹ One respondent summarized to the extent to which they hope to impact change: *"It is my sincere aspiration to reciprocate this support by holding the door open for others, ensuring that I never close a door behind me but instead leave it open for those who may follow."*⁴² No respondent spoke of working within a system that actively cultivates leadership spaces where people of color are equitably represented.

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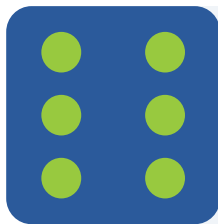




1. ISBE should build capacity to support and expand teacher leadership development.

In order to prioritize intentional pathways to leadership, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) needs the capacity to provide strategic leadership on this essential step in the teacher pipeline continuum. The agency should work to intentionally cultivate leadership mindsets among teachers and provide support for the equitable recruitment and development of teacher leaders. We suggest several possible strategies as a starting point for the agency:

- + Provide guidance about how to implement distributive leadership practices in schools and districts, facilitating leadership opportunities through supportive school leaders.
- + Provide guidance about how schools and districts can identify, nurture, and develop teacher leaders, creating leadership pipelines in schools and districts.
- + Provide guidance about how schools and districts can address issues of bias and lack of representation to ensure leadership is more representative of student populations.
- + Develop a rubric to help districts understand where they are and where they need to be to create and develop teacher leadership pipelines.
- + Conduct a landscape survey to determine how districts are implementing teacher leadership, identify exemplars that can be replicated, and identify barriers to implementation for further study and solutions.
- + Develop and manage grants that provide leadership coaching and development to the outstanding teachers Illinois recognizes each year, enabling them to expand their influence beyond a single classroom and impact more students.
- + In collaboration with practitioners in the field, pursue federal grants supporting distributed leadership models



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To enable the agency to conduct research and provide resources to school leaders, we estimate the total budget needed at approximately \$500,000. In addition, the agency's work would be strengthened with the formation of an advisory committee of experts in teacher leadership to provide guidance from a practitioner perspective and support for implementation in the field. A similar structure supported the launch of the Department of District and School Leadership, and we recommend it be repeated here.

2. Teacher leader advocates should champion microcredentialing as a path towards leadership, and ISBE should support this work with licensure recognition.

Teachers are seeking a more personalized approach to their development as teacher leaders, and microcredentials (MCs) offer a powerful strategy for developing teacher leaders that has not been fully realized. MCs can impact the ways teachers are seen as leaders, enabling them to explore, refine, and demonstrate the skills required for leadership roles even if they don't have prior experience. They can also assist in moving teachers who don't see themselves as leaders into embracing a leadership mindset, because teachers can dip a toe into the leadership development pool without committing as much time or money as a master's degree or teacher leader endorsement.

Teacher-driven access to leadership development is particularly important for teachers of color and other underrepresented groups. Because MCs don't depend on being selected or identified by current leaders, they offer greater opportunity for teachers from underrepresented groups to develop and demonstrate leadership skills. Formal recognition of these skills can provide an important alternative to the bias-infused informal recognition our system too often relies on now.

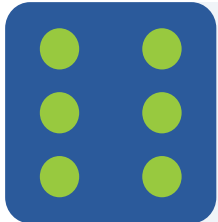
A teacher leadership role at ISBE could help vet MC programs, provide PD credential hours, and help develop pathways that bundle multiple microcredentials into state licensure endorsements. In this kind of system, teachers would demonstrate and be recognized for specific leadership skills. These skills could then be packaged together into bundles that prepare teachers to succeed in a particular kind of teacher leadership role, making leadership development more accessible, timely, and targeted. Current teacher leaders could also take advantage of MC experiences through a portfolio of work showcasing their teacher leadership experience in fulfillment of the requirements.

3. Teacher and school leader preparation programs should explicitly position teachers as leaders, and include distributive leadership practices and skills.

Every teacher is a leader in their classroom, yet classroom leadership skills are often seen as separate and distinct from teacher leadership. The development of teacher leadership mindsets in teachers begins with connecting classroom leadership to professional leadership, and helping educators see how leadership skills are transferable beyond the students in their classrooms.

Teacher preparation programs should help pre-service educators see themselves as leaders of a complex environment within their classroom. Developing leadership skills within the classroom and then explicitly connecting them to leadership of adults will equip young teachers with the confidence to navigate workplace dynamics. This includes teaching "soft skills" as leadership skills, and helping educators understand how to empower students to lead. Pre-service teacher leadership instruction should also include career growth study and identification of potential leadership roles that educators might grow into. Pre-service teachers must envision their entry into the profession as a part of a larger career trajectory.

Well-prepared teacher leaders can be limited by the systems in which they work, and so principal preparation programs should include inclusive, equitable, and distributive leadership practices. This must extend past the simple act of identifying capable teacher leaders to the full cultivation of future leaders and implementation of distributive leadership models within their schools. Implicit and explicit bias training is also an essential component for potential school leaders to increase their awareness of how bias can become a barrier to more diverse teachers as leaders, and how to mitigate bias within their schools.



The development of teacher leadership mindsets in teachers begins with connecting classroom leadership to professional leadership, and helping educators see how leadership skills are transferable beyond the students in their classrooms.

4. Schools and districts should build distributed leadership structures and intentional leadership development pipelines.

While there are many statewide levers that can support or incentivize teacher leadership, school- and district-level practices are the biggest drivers of leadership development. Distributed leadership structures and leadership development pipelines must be established within schools and districts to create an environment that sustains teacher leadership for impact.

For districts without established teacher leadership structures, we recommend starting with excellent classroom instruction. There are outstanding teachers in every school, many of whom have already been recognized for their instructional talents through programs like Those Who Excel, Golden Apple awards, or National Board certification. Whether recognized through external programs or not, school leaders should leverage the expertise of exceptional teachers for whole-school improvement by building their leadership capacity. If outstanding teachers receive explicit leadership support, they will be able to dramatically extend their impact across school communities.

Not every school has the capacity or expertise to offer this kind of leadership development to teachers. Where support is needed, external teacher leadership coaching partners like Teach Plus Change Agents, Teachers Supporting Teachers, or Public Impact's Opportunity Culture can provide opportunities for these stellar teachers to kick-start teacher leadership in a school. These partnerships are ideal for state, federal, or school improvement grant funding because one-time investments in teachers can permanently increase their leadership capacity and help them lead school improvement for the remainder of their careers. Because most teachers remain in the same district for the bulk of their careers, this investment is particularly likely to lead to lasting improvements in leadership capacity.

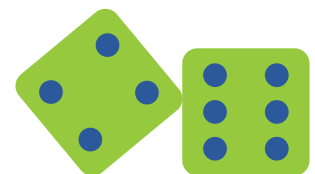
CONCLUSION

Teachers are driven to lead in order to better serve their students, and this sense of purpose helps them navigate and persevere through various challenges and obstacles. Unfortunately, too many schools lack clear pathways and supports to promote teacher leadership, and as a result too many teachers are fighting to be heard instead of leading change to better serve their students. Opportunities for leadership should be unambiguous, transparent, and available to all teachers. The teachers we interviewed largely became leaders through chance and circumstance. In other words, they did not have access to or knowledge of any organized opportunities to develop into successful leaders. Teacher leadership development should not be left to chance. On the contrary, educators should have clear-cut avenues to leadership, and be invited in.

In addition, there must be intentional efforts to diversify teacher leadership by creating equitable and inclusive ways for all educators—especially those from underrepresented and historically marginalized communities—to take on expanded roles in their schools. We must also acknowledge and account for the fact that leadership journeys are often impacted by race, gender, identity, and cultural backgrounds and experiences. Teacher leaders should reflect the student populations they serve.

There is a strong body of research demonstrating the impact of teacher leaders and distributed leadership in schools as a force for change and student impact. We hope this report will help shine a light on how those teacher leaders are—or are not—being cultivated and developed, and offer paths to strengthen the pipeline from teacher to teacher leader. We believe teacher leadership is more than a nice feature to have in schools—it is a must-have that school leaders and education policymakers simply must be more intentional about in order to create high-functioning schools that better serve students.

Teacher leadership development should not be left to chance.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABOUT TEACH PLUS

Teach Plus is dedicated to the mission of empowering excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all. teachplus.org



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ENDNOTES

1 <https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Mitigating-Teacher-Shortages-Teacher-leaders.pdf>

2 https://education.illinoisstate.edu/downloads/csep/Appendix%20A-Final%20P-20%20Council%20Teacher%20and%20Leadership%20Endorsement%20Recommendations_FINAL.pdf

3 <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/teacher-leader-prog-stds.pdf>

4 <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/25ark.pdf>

5 https://teachplus.org/wp-content/uploads/files/publication/pdf/teach_plus_il_tle.pdf

6 Question: "What is your gender identity?" Response (n=77): female (70.5%) male (29.5%)

7 Question: "What is your racial and ethnic identity? Choose as many as applicable." Response (n=77): Asian/ Pacific Islander (6.4%) Black/African-American (33.3%) Hispanic/Latinx (6.4%) White/Caucasian (57.7%) Multi-racial (5.1%)

8 Question: "Including the 2023-24 academic year, how many years of teaching experience do you have?"

9 Question: "What is your current role?" Response (n=77): Full-time teacher (56.4%) Instructional coaches (6.4%) School or district administrators (17.9%)

10 Question: "What is the community and school district in which you currently teach?"

11 Question: "What degrees or certifications do you hold? (Select all that apply)" Response (n=77) Associate degree (7.7%) Bachelor's degree (41%) Master's degree (78.2%) Doctorate degree (11.5%) Other (19.2%)

12 Question: "What qualities or characteristics define an effective leader? How do you embody these qualities in your own classroom practice?"

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Question: "Have you ever encountered any challenges or barriers that hindered your development as a leader? If so, what were they, and how did you overcome or address them?"

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Question: "In what ways has your school or district promoted and supported your development as a leader?"

22 Question: "Can you recall a specific instance where a school or district-level factor discouraged you from seeing yourself as a leader? How did this experience influence your leadership mindset or development as a leader?"

23 Question: "When did you first see yourself as a leader? Did you see yourself as a leader before deciding to be a teacher? Please describe any specific moments or memories associated with realizing you could be a leader."

24 Question: "Have you ever encountered any challenges or barriers that hindered your development as a leader? If so, what were they, and how did you overcome or address them?"

25 Ibid.

26 Question: "Have you ever encountered any challenges or barriers that hindered your development as a leader? If so, what were they, and how did you overcome or address them?"

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

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32 Ibid.

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34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

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37 Question: "Have you ever encountered any challenges or barriers that hindered your development as a leader? If so, what were they, and how did you overcome or address them?"

38 Question: "In thinking about your mindset shift to leadership, what was unique about your journey? Did you have any important opportunities or challenges you think others might not have had?"

39 Ibid.

40 Question: "In thinking about your mindset shift to leadership, what was unique about your journey? Did you have any important opportunities or challenges you think others might not have had?"

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.