R3 Framework Evaluation Brief

Pitt County Schools (PCS) recognizes the value of teachers as leaders. Since 2017, the district has implemented a career pathways model that provides qualified teachers various opportunities to advance their position so they can have a greater impact on their schools, while also continuing to teach in the classroom. Two of the primary advanced teacher leadership roles are the Facilitating Teacher (FT) and the Multi-Classroom Teacher (MCT). FTs lead a team of Collaborating Teachers (CTs) in a Community of Practice (CoP) to address a problem of practice at their school. MCTs co-teach with a small group of teachers (aka Co-Ts) to impart their expertise in the classroom.

Over the past five years, the external evaluation of the R3 Framework initiative has documented many successes of the advanced teacher roles, which includes but is not limited to, improved student outcomes, positive perceptions of teacher leadership, and higher teacher retention. In this edition of the *R3 Framework Evaluation Brief*, the evaluation highlights the way in which PCS is expanding its cadre of teacher leaders. More specifically, it tells the story of four teachers[1] who initially collaborated on a team with a FT or MCT before moving into a leadership role at their school or a school in the district.

The brief begins by providing background information on the four participating teachers including their teaching experience, how they initially came onto one of the teams, and why they eventually moved into a leadership role. The brief then summarizes key themes the teachers learned and the qualities they identified of good leadership. The themes were derived from interviews with each of the teachers that occurred in April and May of 2022.

Becoming Leaders

All four teachers began their careers at PCS and have been teaching between four and 17 years. Three of the four graduated from East Carolina University and completed their internship at a school in Pitt County. Two currently teach in an elementary school, while one teaches in a middle school, and another in a high school.

According to the teachers, their principal was the one who initially got them involved in a group with a teacher leader. Three were invited to join a CoP with an FT, and one was invited to

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[1] The teachers were nominated by a district coach from the DEEL office. The invitation to participate was extended to seven teachers and four agreed to share their experiences. To protect their anonymity, their names and personally identifiable information is not provided in the report.

join a co-teaching team with an MCT. Reflecting on the initial conversation with her principal, one of the teachers recalled, "I just knew that it was an opportunity for me to step up and I was looking for that. I didn't really understand what I was doing, but I just heard leadership and fixing problems and I wanted to be a part of that."

Another teacher recalled her decision to join and said, "I felt it would be a good fit for me because I would have someone to bounce ideas off and support me. I was a new teacher and not an overly confident person."

In their own time, each teacher eventually transitioned into a leadership role. Two became FTs, one became a lead mentor for beginning teachers, and one became a department chair. Their decision was influenced by a combination of encouragement from another teacher leader and/or their principal, an internal calling to be a part of something bigger, and their increased confidence from participating in a CoP or co-teaching team. Below are reflections on their decision to become leaders.

> My FT was very intentional about giving us leadership positions and facilitating the meetings…She also encouraged us to look into the Teacher Leadership Institute, Adaptive Schools and different training. Eventually she pulled me aside and said 'this is a role for you. You have been in it long enough, you understand the processes, and this is just a good role for you.' So, when the opportunity arose, I went for it.

> I felt ready. I felt like I had an understanding of the standards. By then, I was active in the school. I talked to the administrator and other teachers around the building. I felt that I had good relationships with them, so I felt like I would be good at being a lead. I had built my confidence after several years of being a part of a team where we reflected a lot on instruction. And my [teacher leader] definitely influenced me and encouraged me to go for it.

> There was a lot going on in the world and there was an overwhelming awakening to say, 'we need to do better' and it made me think 'what am I doing here to help make this a comfortable place for our student underrepresented groups.' They don't have a voice and so it came to me, immediately that I am not doing enough. When the opportunity came about, I knew that I had a way of working with a small group of people…to make adjustments to what's already happening here in order to make it a better place for students because that's why we're here.

> I felt it would give me a chance to be more involved in the school, and because I teach every grade level, I could provide some consistency. I also liked bringing to light different issues and how to solve problems. I really enjoyed the CoP process and what I learned from it.

Takeaways

Teacher responses revealed two main themes about what they learned from their experiences with a CoP or a co-teaching team. One, they all spoke favorably about the benefits of deep **collaboration**, which they had not experienced in any other group or setting. For instance, they learned a lot about their colleagues and the different ways of problem solving by "bouncing ideas off each other" which allowed them to examine problems at their schools from different perspectives.

All teachers agreed that they had to build trust in the group. In the words of one person, "we had a chance to get to know one another and we were able to slowly build our team. We worked on listening, being present, and how to be a role player. This was really key to our success because I don't think we knew good group dynamics beforehand."

One person described her group as a "family atmosphere, meaning if you fall down, I've got your back kind of thing…I felt that in watching my grade level team work together, we each had something to contribute. I was able to say as a newer teacher, 'wait, I know what we can do' or 'let me give this a try.' My relationships with the kids and my reflections with my team gave me enough knowledge to be able to speak up and want to contribute to change."

Similarly, another teacher talked about the respect and community in the group. "I didn't feel like anybody was better than anybody else if that makes sense. All of our ideas and values were respected. We were on the same page, and we were a cohesive group."

The second key theme was the **intentionality** of the work. More specifically, in the CoP the team had a problem that they were working to solve and a process for: identifying root causes, implementing strategies, and then determining the impact of their work. For the co-teaching teams, there was a process for planning, sharing, and reflecting on instruction. In the words of one teacher, "I love that we were intentional about what the problem was and what we wanted to do to solve it, and just learning from these who I called experts in the building." Other teachers' perspectives about the focused efforts of their team are highlighted in their comments below.

> The data driven stuff of proving if we [were] effective or not was the most beneficial to me. It drives all my work now. I go into my approach with the question, how can we show that this is going to be effective? Because really at the end of the day, if we don't have anything to show for it, if it's not working, then don't waste your energy on it let's try something else. I like that we're able to try different things to see what's working and what's not and it was it's kind of okay to say something's not working.

> Usually, you kind of vent problems within your grade level meetings and you don't always own the problem. But in this case, we all agreed that this is our problem, but we can actually do something about it. We were going to make the decisions, collect the data, and hopefully solve this problem.

The data piece was interesting because we were trying to gain information about the students and what they would like to do and what they needed. And some of it was not what I had thought about before. So that part I really liked …At one point we had to shift gears with our data collection [but by letting the students] share out ideas and thoughts, it allowed us to get some data without doing a survey. It was so good to hear students say, 'it was great to be able to express my feelings and my thoughts and my concerns.' Students are appreciative of the fact that they have a place and a way in which to voice their concerns. So even though we needed the data, we didn't even think about the fact that the data collection had its own benefit. It was a real 'a-ha' for us as a team and something that we want to continue doing.

Leadership

The teachers reflected on their roles as new leaders, what they learned, and what it meant to be a good leader. Common among their descriptions of good leaders was someone who **honored people's expertise** because they understood how it felt to be valued when they were in a CT or Co-T role. One person captured the general sentiment by saying, "I think that the ability to bring a group of teachers with a lot of experiences in a room and to let them know that they are respected, they are heard, they are appreciated, is probably the most rewarding thing that you can do as a leader."

Likewise, someone else stated, "Everyone wants their voice to be heard, and it really feels like our voices have been heard. It's made a difference. We can all look at data and know that wow, this is because we implemented this plan."

Another teacher talked about the process of building this quality in her leadership style. "I'm a perfectionist and I started out just kind of doing it all, because I wanted everything to look good and do it right the first time. They wanted to help and wanted to do more. I learned that I had to relinquish some of the work, so that they could feel empowered and have the buy in. The process of delegating the work, 'can you do this, can you be responsible for the articles,' while I originally thought was imposing was actually very important. Most of them are veteran teachers and they have been here longer than me, and I learned to lean in on their expertise."

They also described good leaders as people who encouraged and provided **opportunity for self-reflection**. One teacher stated, "that's something I've been trying to work on with my colleagues, because you want to support their ideas and get them to that point that they are ready to try something. Once they've taken ownership of it, they feel better. That makes a world of difference to a newer teacher because they sometimes don't realize they are actually doing more than they think, but just haven't thought through it."

Another teacher noted that self-reflection was important to her own growth. "At the time, I didn't like to do it because I wasn't confident. But now I'm very appreciative for it because I think it helped me understand myself and understand how to communicate with other people. I encourage it with others because it makes your relationships better and especially with the students."

Closing

The words and experiences shared by the four participating teachers reflect similar sentiments expressed by other teacher leaders. Collectively, their insight speaks to the value of providing teachers the opportunity to use their expertise on a larger scale while also giving them the structure and processes to influence others in collaborative ways. Equally important, the teacher leadership opportunities have kept good teachers in the classroom. Indeed, several teachers indicated that they were looking for other positions but that leadership roles "inspired [them] to stay in the classroom."

Finally, they are better teachers because of what they have learned, and they were confident that it shows in their students. "Ultimately, we do it for the kids and out of all of this, I feel like our kids have reached the greatest benefit. Every teacher that comes in the building wants to make a difference in a child's life. The kids are still at the forefront of work… and at the end of the day, we are putting into place programs and plans and initiatives that are greatly benefit in our children, *and* we have the data to show it."