

Sharing the Load

Denver Public Schools' Differentiated
Roles Pilot





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Sharing the Load

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Denver’s Design for Impact	3
Knowing Its Context	4
Defining the Measures	6
Building Strategically	6
Conclusion: The Pilot in Practice	8
Endnotes	10

Introduction

Denver Public Schools (DPS) Superintendent Tom Boasberg faced a problem familiar to public school administrators across the country. He needed to boost student performance, yet his schools were poorly structured to promote the faculty development necessary to make that happen. A primary obstacle, as he saw it, was that principals were responsible for managing too many people.

“In any other knowledge-based profession, it’s an absolute given that you won’t see people trying to coach or supervise more than six or eight people,” said Boasberg, a former telecommunications executive. “Yet in schools, we ask school leaders to coach and supervise thirty, forty, fifty people.”

To address this problem, DPS recently distributed some traditional principal responsibilities among teacher leaders. Building upon its previous teacher leadership initiatives, during the 2013-14 school year the district introduced a Differentiated Roles pilot, in which Team Leads manage small groups of fellow teachers. Unlike teacher leadership roles that add responsibilities to teachers’ regular classroom duties, Team Leads teach for one-half to three-quarters of the day and devote the rest of their time exclusively to management responsibilities. These include observing six to ten colleagues (as frequently as once per week), providing feedback in one-on-one meetings, and conducting formal evaluations. The district hopes the pilot will provide teachers with better support, create strong team cultures, and help with the recruitment, development, and retention of top teachers.

DENVER'S TEAM LEAD ROLE	
FUNCTION	To create strong team cultures that provide teachers with better opportunities for feedback and growth, and in turn aid the recruitment, development, and retention of top talent
FORM	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teach for one-half to three-quarters of the school day and devote the rest of the time exclusively to management responsibilities• Observe six to ten colleagues as regularly as once per week and provide feedback in one-on-one meetings• Lead regular team meetings to discuss problems of practice and common areas for development• Conduct formal evaluations• Receive training on topics such as approaches to coaching, debriefing, and difficult conversations• Receive \$5,000 annual stipend

To assist system administrators as they pursue their own teacher leadership initiatives, this profile from Leading Educators and the Aspen Institute details the steps Denver took to design and implement its Differentiated Roles pilot. Specifically, it examines the initiative’s opportunities and challenges within the context of the blueprint for teacher leadership that we proposed in *Leading from The Front of the Classroom: A Roadmap to Teacher Leadership that Works*. That blueprint provides a guide for implementing teacher leadership that advances student achievement, and it highlights key phases for system administrators to navigate as they leverage teacher leadership to address their highest priorities.

To build teacher leadership that works, system administrators need to clarify the purpose of teacher leadership—what we call **designing for impact**. Concurrently, we advise leaders to **know their context** in order to address potential challenges and opportunities. To ensure deliberate, strategic leadership development, systems must then **define the measures** before implementation begins and monitor progress throughout implementation. Finally, systems need to **build strategically** by designing clear teacher leader roles and responsibilities. This includes effective selection and training processes for teacher leaders as well as strategies for supporting principals and principal managers throughout the changes of roles and responsibilities.

Central to the blueprint is the idea that effective teacher leadership marries **form with function** in order to create transformative change in schools. By function, we mean that the teacher leadership initiatives are not isolated programs but are integral in advancing other pressing priorities. By form, we mean that the teacher leader roles themselves are clearly defined with sufficient time, support, and resources to be effective.

DPS’ Differentiated Roles pilot provides an opportunity to evaluate the blueprint in action. After discussing the district’s efforts to identify a function for teacher leadership that advanced its top priorities, the profile considers how DPS aligned its resources to support the pilot, its approach to defining measures and methods for monitoring performance, and its process for strategically building and implementing its teacher leader roles.

Denver’s Design for Impact

DPS provides a model of a system identifying a purpose for teacher leadership that aligns with one of its most pressing priorities. In 2005 before Boasberg arrived, the district created a comprehensive plan that identified as its top goal having highly-skilled teachers who are, “empowered by robust professional development and timely assessment data.”¹ When Boasberg and the Denver Board of Education updated the plan in 2010, they again stressed retaining, rewarding, and recruiting exemplary teachers as critical to student success.² In order to meet these goals, however, Boasberg and his administrative team believed that they needed to rethink their schools’ organizational structure.

In particular, DPS administrators concluded that principals' numerous responsibilities prevented them from providing the amount and quality of observation and feedback necessary for teachers' development. Elizabeth Stamberger, the Senior Program Manager for the district's federal Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant, which pays for much of the Differentiated Roles pilot, noted that Boasberg frequently mentions the bottleneck that happens at the principal's office. "There is so much information we're trying to get to schools, and the principal serves as the single conduit too many times," Stamberger said. "We are trying to understand how other roles in the school can really increase the capacity of the principal."

Taking a cue from other knowledge-based fields, such as nursing, law, and architecture, Boasberg decided that schools needed teams of teachers that were small enough for one person to reasonably manage. The staff-to-supervisor ratio could be decreased by creating managerial positions, but Boasberg instead favored elevating teachers in order to facilitate peer-based learning, capitalize on the district's existing talent pool, and provide top teachers with an enhanced career ladder.

Knowing Its Context

To maximize the impact of teacher leadership, it is not enough to have a high-quality teaching faculty—systems have to be able to identify who is effective.³ Otherwise, a district could select teachers who would not have credibility as leaders of instruction or culture or who are unprepared for leadership. Denver had developed a teacher effectiveness system, known as Leading Effective Academic Practice (LEAP), which melds evaluation and support to promote teachers' professional growth.⁴ The Differentiated Roles pilot built on that system, as well as on an existing emphasis on teacher leadership, which includes a now four-year-old teacher leadership academy. Today, the district counts 1,200 of its 5,245-member teaching staff as teacher leaders who serve as mentors, coaches, and data leads, among other roles.

DPS also tapped into an existing culture of collaboration as it made the shift toward distributed leadership within schools. The district, for instance, developed LEAP through a gradual process in which principals, teachers, and unions had many opportunities to provide feedback. A broad set of central office actors—in departments including human resource, professional development, and curriculum and instruction—also collaborated on the creation of Denver's teacher effectiveness framework and the Differentiated Roles pilot.

Additionally, DPS administrators worked closely with the schools on their applications to participate in the pilot. This enabled the district to identify schools that were best suited for the pilot and permitted schools to tailor their Team Leads to address their challenges and complement their strengths.

DPS moved to put the pilot into place almost immediately after the district learned of its TIF award. Beginning in late February 2013, district administrators helped the 50-plus interested schools to develop their applications. Much of this work, which took place over a six-week period, focused on

designing Team Lead roles to suit a school's specific needs. For example, some schools chose to focus on roles centered around student culture whereas others focused on blended learning. As district administrators evaluated schools' applications, they paid particular attention to whether principals were prepared for distributed leadership, considering input from instructional superintendents who had worked with the principals, the principals' responses to questions about school climate and culture, and data from DPS' annual teacher perception surveys.

The academic literature on teacher leadership emphasizes the importance of placing programs in schools with established cultures of collaboration. At Gust Elementary, one of the 14 schools in the pilot in 2013-14, Principal Jamie Roybal attributed much of the initiative's early signs of success to the fact that she had been focusing on promoting cooperation and relationship-building among her teachers since she arrived at Gust in 2008. Prior to the school's participation in the Differentiated Roles pilot, Roybal was already pulling teachers together to examine student work, share teaching practices, and visit each other's classrooms.

The district selected the first group of 14 schools before the 2012-13 school year let out, which gave schools the summer to adjust their schedules and budgets to accommodate the Team Leads. But the participating schools did not learn of their acceptance into the program until after the teacher hiring process was underway, which led to a late start hiring the additional teachers needed to accommodate the time the Team Leads spent outside the classroom. To avoid this difficulty going forward, DPS began accepting applications in the fall of 2013 from schools that are interested in joining the pilot for the 2014-15 school year.

The district's process underscores the need to establish and leverage trust along multiple dimensions—within the central office, between schools and the central office, and within schools themselves. In Denver, this trust was built by engaging schools and teacher leaders in the creation of the new roles. As the program expands and becomes more established, however, this opportunity may not exist to the same degree with future schools. As teacher leadership initiatives mature, systems will also need to consider how to create genuine engagement and ownership without beginning the design process afresh each year.

Denver's pilot involves considerable costs, as schools must hire additional teachers to cover the time Team Leads are not teaching, and the district awards each Team Lead a \$5,000 annual stipend. While DPS' five-year, \$28 million federal TIF grant covers most of these expenses, district general funds will pay for the initiative in one-third of the participating schools during the 2014-15 school year. As is sometimes necessary to ensure capacity, the district has also sought external assistance, for instance contracting with a partner organization, Leading Educators, to train Team Leads for their new role as coaches and managers.

Defining the Measures

Before designing the roles in a teacher leadership initiative, systems need to define what success looks like and how they will measure it. As part of that process, systems should first clarify long-term measures and then identify the interim measures that lead to those ultimate goals. This step is critical to ensuring that the *form* of the system's teacher leadership fits its *function*.

DPS has collaborated with TNTP, formerly known as the New Teacher Project, to implement a teacher leader time tracker and time-use study in order to assess the fidelity with which teacher leader roles have been implemented. These studies are allowing DPS to assess the effectiveness of various roles, correlate the level of teacher leader satisfaction with how they use their time, and continually assess and reflect on program implementation.

DPS also tracks other immediate outcomes, such as staff culture. In order to gauge the extent to which school leaders engage their teachers, the district created Teacher Perception Surveys. It also created Student Perception Surveys, and in early analytics, teachers in Team Lead positions and the teachers on their teams both had higher scores on this metric.

Additionally, DPS implemented a district-wide CollaboRATE Survey to assess the extent to which employees feel the district is aligned with its stated values. With the addition of teacher leadership, DPS predicts scores on these surveys will increase more in schools with Team Leads, as teachers are given more voice and leadership is distributed. Denver is also tracking the number of observation and feedback sessions, predicting that with increased teacher leadership, the frequency of feedback will increase along with the rate of improvement on the district's teacher evaluation system. Other short-term measures include shifts in student culture and interim assessment data. In the long term, DPS hopes to see shifts in the role principals play, higher retention rates for the best teachers, longer principal tenures, and, ultimately, increased student achievement.

Building Strategically

Defining the Team Lead Role

DPS' development of the Differentiated Roles pilot began with the creation of teacher leader roles that carried significant responsibility, as well as the time to carry out those duties. While the evaluative aspect of the Team Lead job distinguishes it from almost every other teacher leadership role in the United States, Boasberg does not consider that to be its defining feature. Rather, he views that part of the role as a necessary component of his larger goal, which is the creation of "strong teams of teachers with strong and effective and empowered leaders." To achieve this result, he maintained that "those leaders are going to want to have a say over who's on their teams and how the performance of members of their team are judged." Building stronger teams, Boasberg added, "is the most important thing we can do toward our most important priority, which is attracting, developing, and retaining strong teachers."

Team Leads, however, may face challenges as they attempt to realize that vision. “It’s very difficult for a person to play both a developmental role and an evaluative role,” said Tom Kolditz, a Professor of Leadership and Management and the Director of the Leadership Development Program at the Yale School of Management. “It’s not that it can’t be done, but it’s trickier than when people can focus on one of those things or the other, because development requires a certain amount of trust. And when someone is in your classroom or working with you in an evaluative role, it’s much different.”

Henry Roman, the president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, agreed with Kolditz’s assessment. Evaluation and coaching, he said, are “not one and the same thing from the perspective of our employees and teachers,” particularly given the consequences that negative evaluations now carry under SB 191. But Roman said that the Team Leads’ dual role can work under the right conditions. “It becomes easier to work with the coaching as well as the support and evaluation the higher trust you have in the building, the better the school climate, the more collaborative approach you have between principal and teacher,” Roman said. “When you have those components in place, I think it becomes less of a concern, and it’s indicative of a highly functional and dynamic school, and we need to work in that direction.”

Jen Stern, DPS’ Executive Director of Talent Management, contends that the Team Leads’ focus on regular observation and feedback will yield an evaluation process with which teachers are comfortable. “They wouldn’t necessarily want for somebody who comes in once or twice to be the voice of how they are doing, versus somebody who is in their classroom really frequently and much more intimately aware of how they are doing,” Stern said. Despite the difficulties involved in integrating teacher support and evaluation, there are examples of successful union-district collaborations, such as the Peer Assistance and Review programs in Toledo, Ohio, and Montgomery County, Maryland, that bode well for Denver.⁵

Selection, Training, and Support

After the district selected the 2013-14 pilot schools, those schools decided which teachers would serve as Team Leads. The district set minimum standards for the position, which included having an effective rating on LEAP. LEAP evaluates teachers based on student outcomes such as state test scores, as well as on the quality of their professional practice as determined by observations and other factors. At Gust Elementary the staff had many conversations among themselves and with Roybal about which teachers were best suited to serve as Team Leads. In the end only four teachers applied for four Team Lead positions. At the significantly smaller High Tech Early College High School, by contrast, the school hired some of its Team Leads internally, while bringing in others from outside the school.

Following their selection, Team Leads received several days of training during the summer on the district’s evaluation framework. The trainings that Leading Educators led also focused on approaches to coaching, debriefing, and difficult conversations. Additionally, Team Leads reflected upon their leadership styles and considered the obstacles they might encounter as a result. During the school year the district’s 54 Team Leads meet monthly for additional professional development with district

coordinators. While these meetings provide Team Leads with a cohort of teacher leaders, Gust Elementary Team Lead Maggie Martin said the variations in the role from school to school have complicated that process. “The schools are so different in the rollout that it’s seeming like it’s really difficult in professional development to meet people where they are,” she said.

In addition to aiding Team Leads during the school year, the district is planning to ramp up the support it provides to principals in the pilot schools. Part of that work will focus on making sure principals understand and are ready for the shift to distributed leadership. As DPS’ Stern noted, “Being a great school leader when you are in charge is not the same as being a great school leader when you are sharing the leadership with teachers in the building.”

Conclusion: The Pilot in Practice

Roybal, the Gust Elementary principal, said she is already seeing the benefits of distributed leadership within her school. In the past, she said, she was only able to ensure that her teachers were observed twice a year, or three times if they were lucky. But she contends that does not really count as feedback. “Actual feedback is observing, establishing next steps, and then going back in a week later and looking for those next steps and having another feedback conversation about the achievement of the next steps, and then planning additional goals and next steps and continuing,” she said. That is not something she has been able to give her staff on her own, she said.

With the Team Lead pilot in place, Roybal saw her staff engaging in feedback loops for the first time. Team Lead Maggie Martin’s new routines provide a glimpse of how the process works at Gust. Martin teaches literacy in her third grade homeroom each day until 1 p.m., after which she focuses on her responsibilities as the Team Lead for a cohort of 10 teachers. During the beginning of the school year, she spent most of this time in her team members’ classrooms, prioritizing the seven whom the school considered “high-touch,” either because of their lack of experience or prior evaluations. Martin aimed to visit these teachers’ classrooms every week, focusing her observations on the systems her colleagues had in place to ensure a strong classroom environment and the maximization of instructional time. After each observation, she met with the teacher to provide feedback. To prepare for the evaluations she began conducting in October, Martin also spent the first month of the school year calibrating her ratings of teachers according to DPS’ teacher effectiveness framework. After observing teachers with one of the school’s administrators, the two scored the teachers separately, and then met to compare their ratings to ensure they were properly attuned.

To guide her Team Leads’ feedback sessions, Roybal provided them with a template to identify strengths and develop thoughtful and intentional questions. Additionally, Roybal rehearsed feedback conversations with Martin and other Team Leads and videotaped some of their early meetings in order to critique their approach to giving feedback. This hands-on assistance from Roybal complemented the Team Leads’ summer training and monthly meetings with the Leads from all the pilot schools.

In addition to her one-on-one observation and feedback sessions, Martin also leads hour-long meetings with her cohort every other week to discuss a common focus or problem of practice. In one cohort meeting, for instance, the teachers reviewed brief video clips from each other's classrooms in order to critique their systems. At a follow-up meeting, they planned to review a new set of videos to assess whether the cohort members used the feedback to improve.

Even in October, Martin already began to see small advances with her cohort. A second grade teacher, for example, struggled early in the year to implement systems that promoted student collaboration. After raising this issue with the teacher during a feedback session, Martin returned for another observation less than a week later. She was more than pleased with what she saw. "When I went in, she wasn't teaching them the Think-Pair-Share structure. They knew it, and they practiced it with her that day," Martin said. "To walk back in and think, 'Okay, she's not just trying to appease me, she's going to teach it to them now while I'm here.' But to know that sometime in the last three or four days she really took the time to teach them that and thought about that and put that into her practice without me being in here, that was really an encouraging moment."

Martin also feels that she herself is a better teacher than ever before, both because she gets to focus on teaching one rather than two classes of third graders and because of her time observing and working with other teachers. Additionally, by giving her a new challenge and increased interaction with other adults, the Team Lead role has also renewed the fifth-year teacher's commitment to the profession, just as DPS hoped it would.

Long-term success for the pilot will not come easily. Not all schools have the culture of collaboration Martin and Roybal believe is crucial to the program's success. There are also the program's costs to consider—roughly \$100,000 per school. In addition, preparing schools and Team Leads for this new role was a time-intensive process, which required collaborative planning among faculties and between schools and the district. Finally, the cost-benefit analysis undergirding the program's theory of action has not yet been proven. As Roybal explained, "I am pulling four of my most highly-effective teachers out of the classroom half-time. These are the teachers that showed the highest growth in their classrooms. That's frightening. So we are gambling so that these highly-effective teachers are able to make that impact on ten other teachers."

At present, this is a bet that Denver is willing to take. While Boasberg stressed that the district needs to learn from the pilot and evaluate its progress, he is already expanding it significantly for the 2014-15 school year. According to the superintendent, ensuring that schools can create the teams that make the most sense for them will be a key to their success. "I don't think there is one structure that is right for every school," he said. "But I do think that it's really important that we work hard to establish much stronger teams in our schools with a recognition that it is going to look different from school to school based, one, on the nature of the school, and second, on the nature of the people within the school."

Endnotes

- 1 Denver Public Schools, *The Denver Plan*, Draft 2 (updated February 1, 2006)
- 2 Denver Public Schools, "Letter from the Superintendent," and "Executive Summary," *2010 Denver Plan: Strategic Vision and Action Plan*, (March 18, 2010): 3-8.
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- 4 Denver Public Schools, *LEAP (Leading Effective Academic Practice)*: <http://leap.dpsk12.org>.
- 5 The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, Harvard Graduate School of Education, "A User's Guide to Peer Assistance and Review" <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/par/>.



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