The Teacher Leadership Academy: Building Capacity for High Performance

~ By: Georgie Koenig, Head of Professional Development

The Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency Teacher Leadership Academy is a customized professional development service designed to enhance leadership skills within the context of the school that requested the service. The “content” is selected and the “delivery plan” is created in cooperation with the principal. The first step in the process requires the principal to articulate his/her vision and expectations of teacher leaders. Beginning with this end in mind, a team of AEA consultants begin content selection and design work for the academy with the principal.

Micheal Fullan states in his book, Leading in a Culture of Change (2001), “The litmus test of all leadership is whether it mobilizes people’s commitment to putting their energy into actions designed to improve things. It is individual commitment, but above all it is collective mobilization.”

The Role of The Teacher Leader

According to Charlotte Danielson, a teacher leader is a teacher who exemplifies professionalism. A teacher leader positively influences students and colleagues. A teacher leader takes action to improve student achievement through modeling best practices and mobilizing fellow educators to improve instructional practices and the learning environment for all. A teacher leader is a teacher fully committed to collaboration with peers around improving instructional practices in order to create a climate of continuous improvement. A teacher leader is an informal leader, whose actions cause colleagues to view her as a professional resource, a teacher who models best practices, and one others trust for support and guidance. A teacher leader is someone who has collegial relationships verses just congenial relationships.

The No Child Left Behind legislation requires educators to be more accountable for student achievement gains. Teacher leadership is important in today’s educational environment with its ever increasing demands upon administrators and teachers to achieve student learning goals. Administrators cannot meet these accountability requirements without working closely with teachers and teachers cannot meet these requirements working in isolation. Teacher leadership training provides teachers the tools that they need to work collaboratively with colleagues and take on new roles as leaders.

In order for schools to achieve the goals set before them, they need to move beyond an individual sense of self-efficacy, the belief that “I am capable” to a culture of collective efficacy, the belief that “we are capable.” Collective efficacy has been found to be the number one predictor of student achievement, even before social economic status and ethnicity. Teachers believing in the power of “we” are capable of achieving identified goals. Teacher leadership is part of the formula of believing in the power of “we”.

Administrators cannot create an efficacious environment alone. Teachers are a valued asset in developing a school climate and culture where the educators believe that collectively, they have the ability to make a positive difference with students to increase achievement.

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Teacher leaders can play different roles, some more formal than others. Teachers serve as department chairs and mentor new teachers. Other roles teacher leaders fill are: team leader, curriculum specialist, peer coach, note-taker/recorder for team meetings, parliamentarian/timekeeper, professional developer, data coach, school promoter through speaking and writing, faculty representative on district teams or community committees, host teacher, accreditation leader, search committee leader for new staff, technology leader, web page curator, etc... There are many roles needed to create a successful school. Inviting teachers to share their talents by contributing to other areas beyond the classroom allows them to grow in new ways. Teachers begin to feel part of something bigger than themselves and something that is meaningful beyond their individual classrooms.

District Teacher Leadership Programs

Area Nine Teacher Leadership Academies began in 2006 with a partnership between the Mississippi Bend AEA and Muscatine High School. Dr. Kristine Wolzen, Director of General Education, and her team worked closely with the administration of Muscatine High School to customize a program that would best meet their needs.

The results of these meetings lead to the first Teacher Leadership Academy in July of 2006. Eighteen teachers and three administrators participated in the first academy. The academy was so successful a second cohort was started during the summer of 2007 and a third cohort is in the planning stages for the summer of 2008. In the spring of 2007, Principal Jimmy Casas approached the AEA about the possibility of developing a Teacher Leadership Academy for Bettendorf High School. Discussions and planning lead to a Model School Improvement Team (MSIT) Academy for Bettendorf High School, which began in July 2007 and continued to meet throughout the 2007-2008 school year.

Each district developed customized programs with the AEA team to meet their unique needs. Muscatine High School’s Teacher Leadership Academy has trained two cohorts each with a slightly different focus, but having a common base of training. Bettendorf High School’s MSIT Academy has focused on determining a different focus, but having a common base of training. Bettendorf High School’s MSIT Academy began with the school administrators sharing an overview of the purpose of the academy. AEA staff along with the high school administrative team delivered the content. The participants’ learned about leadership, instructional decision making, building purposeful communities, effective teaching, learning and leading, professional development, writing strategies, and assessment. Teachers spent two full days in the summer, two half days and one full day during the school year learning and planning professional development delivery for colleagues. The MSIT members will continue their learning beginning again in July 2008.

Teachers who have participated in the academies had lots to say about what they learned. Here are a few comments that represent what teachers had to say:

“I have a deeper understanding of processes that affect leadership.”

“I learned more of what we do, has to be research based.”

“I learned to give the Principles and Agreements the respect they deserve – they are important to have written explicitly.”

“I learned sometimes it’s important to stop before you go too far. We stopped before we chose a goal so we could think.”

“I learned the importance of monitoring assessment results to inform instruction and to make the necessary adjustments.”

“Celebrate successes – no matter how small.”

By participating in leadership training, building level educators are able to become true professionals who are able to have autonomy in how work gets accomplished, along with being accountable for results.

For more information or to investigate if a Teacher Leadership Academy might meet the needs of your school, contact Dr. Kristine Wolzen, Director of General Education, at (563) 344-6501, kwolzen@aea9.k12.ia.us.

Sources: