Noah Zeichner: Teacherpreneur, Seattle Public Schools (WA)

Noah Zeichner is a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) at Chief Sealth International High School in Seattle, Washington. He teaches social studies and, as a CTQ teacherpreneur, leads a variety of district and national initiatives to fuel global education. Noah is now in his tenth year of teaching. His leadership has fueled the community-wide, student-led World Water Week; his district’s development of four new teacher leader roles in 2014-15 to spread global education (and align it with the Common Core); and the development of an international virtual network for teachers to advance sound policy and pedagogical reforms.

The World Affairs Council named Noah its 2013-14 World Educator of the Year for his efforts to promote international understanding in the classroom and develop resources to help educators and community members teach youth about world affairs. Noah’s acceptance speech touched on a series of complex and interconnecting international challenges, including his favorite topic to teach: the global sanitation crisis. He described how he asks students to apply their knowledge about the crisis, taking action on issues related to water scarcity, geopolitics, the environment, and public health.

“Global education is learning how to communicate effectively across cultures, to collaborate in groups, with people who have different worldviews. And most importantly - most urgently—it’s developing the initiative to take action.” - Noah Zeichner, in his acceptance speech for the 2013-14 World Educator of the Year award

Model and approach

Noah has a career-long track record of leadership within his school, where his colleagues and administrators viewed him as the go-to person on everything from instructional technology to the details of a new teacher evaluation system. He wanted to remain rooted in the Chief Sealth community and have more flexibility to engage in leadership work beyond his building, knowing that that broadening his view of the profession and his influence on local systems would have an impact on his school and students. He became CTQ’s first teacherpreneur in fall 2011 to do just that.

Teacherpreneurs are teacher leaders in hybrid roles that combine consistent (usually daily) teaching practice with opportunities to lead beyond an individual classroom. These projects benefit schools and students at a
systems level; are self-directed; involve other stakeholders in collaborative, teacher-led work; and are supported by the district or some other sponsoring organization.

Through spring 2014,¹ CTQ partnered with the Seattle Public Schools (SPS) to secure 40 to 60 percent of Noah’s workweek as released time so he could lead outside his classroom while continuing to teach. At the same time Noah decided to pursue this hybrid role, Paul Fischburg (a career-changer with a deep background in social studies and history) expressed interest in a part-time teaching assignment. They taught as a team during Noah’s first year as a teacherpreneur, which allowed for seamless opportunities to connect his teaching at Chief Sealth and his leadership inside his district and across the nation.

It’s appropriate that CTQ has worked with a teacherpreneur focused on global education and comparative study of education systems. After all, teacherpreneurs’ schedules are similar to the schedules of teachers in high-achieving systems like the ones in Finland, Shanghai, and Singapore.

¹ Noah elected to return to a full-time teaching schedule for the 2014-2015 school year. While he may move in and out of hybrid positions during the rest of his career, he felt that he could not maintain credibility as an expert practitioner after more than three years of part-time release.
In these locales, teaching is treated as a profession of knowledge workers, providing teachers significant amounts of time for planning, professional learning, leadership, and peer observation—rather than student instruction. Similarly, Noah’s weekly schedule combines teaching, collaboration, work with CTQ to extend his learning and leadership as a global educator, and “resource” time during which he supports district efforts on international schools.

That last mode in which Noah works represents an important investment for SPS in new ways of applying teachers’ unique expertise. In 2013-2014, the district “purchased back” 20 percent of Noah’s time so that he could focus on district-level leadership projects, including development of a common template for teachers to plan units aligned with both the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and global competencies. The district also sought help with articulating a leadership structure that would allow more of Noah's teaching colleagues to lead as he has done.

Noah worked closely with district administrator Karen Kodama, who successfully advocated for the district’s development of more teacher leaders focused on global education. Superintendent José Banda has authorized Kodama to draw upon district funds in 2014-2015 to cultivate more teachers as leaders in the alignment of CCSS, global competencies, and new student assessment tools. Four of these positions are expected to be hybrid roles—another step toward scale within SPS—with six other teacher leaders receiving stipends for their involvement.

The impact of “leading from the middle”

Noah’s status as an NBCT, his teaching awards, and the array of projects and programs he has launched at Chief Sealth and district-wide speak to the impact of Noah’s leadership inside and outside the classroom. However, his real legacy may be more subtle than a list of the changes he has led directly: modeling and teaching others how they can lead effectively.

Banda explained to us what impresses him about Noah’s teacher leadership:

Noah is personable and collaborative. He’s about teaching, learning, and working with kids and not about politics. He cares deeply about the role of public education in America’s democracy. But Noah is able to compartmentalize his personal politics while having and leading those important conversations among educators and community members to advance the teaching profession and student learning.

Students, teachers, building administrators, and local community members seem to experience Noah’s leadership in similar ways. Noah’s principal at Chief Sealth, Aida Fraser-Hammer, told us:
Noah engages students and makes them want to come to school. His students—even the hardest to reach—must look for meaning to learn meaningfully, and Noah knows how to help them find it in his teaching.

She continued:

He has a growing group of teachers around him who now have the same vision and goals. They work together outside of school, but it is his extra time as a teacherpreneur that pushes things forward. But he leads not so much in word but in deed. He is committed to global education [the focus of Chief Sealth’s academic program]. He puts in more time than he is paid for. But whatever he learns, he brings it back to the group.

It is difficult to quantify Noah’s impact on his colleagues, given the fractured professional learning and evaluation systems in which most American teachers work. (This is actually an issue that Noah is helping to tackle, leading a team of seven teachers from across the world to report on their varying experiences.) In talking to Noah’s peers, though, and it is hard to miss his influence on his colleagues. David Katz, chair of the Language Arts department at Chief Sealth, observed:

First and foremost, he has defined for us, better than any consultant or administrator has, what it means for us to be an international school and what it means to teach global competencies to our students. In doing so he has quietly shown so many teachers, here and elsewhere, what it means to be an effective teacher for the schools of today and tomorrow.

Language arts teacher Amber Allison underscored David’s point:

Now so many of our students are engaged in international study and volunteerism related to global education and solving social problems. Before Noah, no one was organizing opportunities for students beyond classes. Now many are.

“He brings so much inspiration to so many of the teachers here,” language arts teacher Heather Griffin asserted. “Let me tell you how he leads — he starts conversations, he convenes people through similar interests, and he shows others how they can do the same.”

Aida told us that she’d heard about Noah even before she became principal at Chief Sealth. “He was well-known among a number of administrators for the popularity of his classes,” she said. Administrators and teachers throughout the district are also familiar with Noah through his facilitation of World Water Week (WWW). Aida noted, “His commitment is so obvious in the things that he leads and endorses.”
In WWW’s fourth year, teachers from Chief Sealth International High School and Denny Middle School have joined Noah in taking interdisciplinary approaches to helping students learn about global struggles for clean water. Students themselves helped drive the learning. Noah’s colleague Paul noted, “Now over 100 students are leading various aspects of WWW—and it is hard to determine who is leading this week-long, project-based conference: students or Noah.”

“There is great value for a school to have a teacherpreneur like Noah whose work extends well beyond the school building.” – Aida Fraser-Hammer, principal, Chief Sealth International High School

“But his strength as a teacher leader,” a community partner of Noah’s told us, “is his ability to help so many teachers teach differently—and think about all of the students in their school to be ‘theirs.’” We heard this from Paul, too, as he described how Noah helps his colleague build connections that “do not traditionally exist in a typical school.” Heather agreed: “The interconnections he has nourished have been paramount for our school, and his influence needs to grow across the district and state.”

Connecting the connector

Noah’s great strength as a teacher leader is in the communities he nurtures and builds. So perhaps it’s not surprising that what has most driven his own growth as a leader are the opportunities to connect with others. Noah has worked closely with Chris Fontana, executive director of Global Visionaries, a Seattle-based nonprofit that guides young people to become socially and environmentally conscious global leaders. Chris has been a mentor to Noah over the last eight years as they’ve worked together on projects like preparing Seattle Public Schools teachers to teach Global Leadership, which helped Noah form a vision of better-networked international schools that he’s brought into being in the past few years.

CTQ’s support of teacherpreneurs is designed to expand on their existing strengths in ways that align with the demands of their individual scopes of work. In Noah’s case, he was already an exceptionally gifted teacher leader. What he had not had yet, though, was the opportunity to become even more regularly connected to people and perspectives outside his immediate community. CTQ was able to link Noah with opportunities to speak, write, and lead at a wider scale, and support his work along the way. For instance, he was nominated to the Washington state Professional Educator Standards Board in fall 2011, has been published in the Phi Delta Kappan and other major education outlets, and has represented United States teachers at a number of international meetings on education systems, policy, and practice.

We believe Noah would eventually have done all these things on his own. However, the additional time a teacherpreneur role has afforded him and the supports of the CTQ Collaboratory and staff have accelerated his ability to lead on a global scale without having to leave the community in which he is rooted.

Read his Phi Delta Kappan article here
Innovative solutions

While Noah’s pedagogy brings global leadership into his classroom, the time and space he has to spread his expertise beyond Seattle means that his leadership has global reach.

Unique challenges

Although some of Noah’s colleagues wished he had more face time with more students, Amber noted, “Because of his teacherpreneur role, the breadth of his skills and enthusiasm have expanded so much.” Paul raised an important issue about the unique bandwidth needed to work and lead in different contexts as Noah does. “Having a job that’s half-time teacher and half-time something else like ‘curriculum leader, policy analyst, and community advocate,’” he noted, “has been tough to define and manage.” Paul worries about Noah because he may be taking on more than anyone should be able to handle. “I wonder when he sleeps,” he said wryly.

While Noah’s own schedule is flexible, logistical challenges to spreading his leadership still remain. Other teachers have little time to spend on collaboration on any topic, let alone issues that pertain to a larger group of students than appear on their own rosters. In addition, the pace of teaching in today’s school reform context—laden with conflicting policy mandates, too many programs to implement and too many students to teach and serve—prevents many teachers from leading outside their classrooms. Seattle is no exception. The good news is that more and more administrators and union leaders in the district realize that they need to find a way to help not just Noah, but many more teachers develop and use their leadership skills.

A number of Noah’s teaching colleagues told us that it is “difficult for most teachers to collaborate strategically,” as they “rarely get together to share ideas—and then implement them.” As Carolyn Autenrieth,
a National Board Certified Visual Arts Teacher told us, “Many days I am working up to 12 hours - teaching classes, working as a club adviser, and sometimes serving as a ‘surrogate parent’ to a number of students - and while Noah has taught us so much, most often we do not have the time to implement many of the good ideas he has gathered from his international work.”

Aida reminded us of how critical it is for teachers to have time to lead as well as learn. She noted:

*I want what Noah does in teaching and leading for all the teachers at Chief Sealth. But we have to give them the opportunities and time within the day to collaborate. We have to work from the top down—our school board and district administration have to provide opportunities for this type of teacher leadership.*

Of course, administrators like Aida have their own challenges in finding time and space to engage with teacher leaders like Noah as often as they might like—and this might slow the spread of teacher leadership.

“First of all,” Chris Fontana said, “too many administrators have too many demands on them, living a day-to-day mentality, and then they cannot find the focus to really support a teacher leader as part of their regular work.” Until administrators’ time can also be freed, Chris sees a continuing need for more nonprofits like CTQ to focus on supporting teachers to find and take their leadership path. “Your organization is doing so much to give Noah the chance to continue to perfect his craft and get more masterful each year,” Chris pointed out, “and we need more of what you do.”

Jonathan Knapp, president of the Seattle Education Association, pointed out there is a new role for unions to play in this regard as well:

> “Teachers and their unions want more and more to be seen as leaders on policy and pedagogy. But the full impact of those possibilities has yet to resonate in minds of our members. We need to change our game. We need to help organize teachers so they are no longer isolated. We need to make sure teacher leaders like Noah can help others. There are many more who could be like him.”

**Lessons for leading without leaving**

While Noah’s work and leadership are exceptional, we believe he shouldn’t be an exception. Examples from Shanghai to Noah’s home district of Seattle point the way toward not just replicating this teacherpreneurial experiment, but scaling robust teacher leadership opportunities that connect schools and students with new ways of learning about the world.
For other schools and districts that support teacher leaders, or are considering doing so, what are the takeaways from Noah’s story in SPS?

- **Extra time yields extraordinary results.** Noah had long been a leader of other teachers, offering informal mentoring and broad collaboration with colleagues. But principal Aida Fraser-Hammer noted that “it is his extra time as a teacherpreneur that pushes things forward” as he draws more teachers into work to design district-level programs and deepen student engagement.

- **The best teacherpreneurs “lead from the middle.”** Teachers, administrators, and students alike say that Noah is a successful leader not because he directs others, but because he engages and supports them as co-leaders in his work. “He starts conversations, he convenes people through similar interests, and he shows others how they can do the same,” says colleague Heather Griffin.

- **Technology keeps teacher leaders connected with the world while based in the classroom.** Noah has taught in Ecuador and joined delegations to Singapore and Brazil to explore their education systems. But virtual tools like the CTQ Collaboratory allow him to engage with global networks without losing instructional time with his students. He can be “well-traveled” from the comfort of his classroom.

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