

Teacher leadership for a reinvented teaching profession

by Barnett Berry, Rachel Evans, & Noah Zeichner

As the global narrative on teaching begins to shift, research shows that investing in high-quality professional learning systems is key to school improvement.

This is a brief synopsis of the issues addressed in our chapter of *Flip the System: Changing Education from the Ground Up* (Routledge, 2015), edited by Jelmer Evers and Rene Kneyber.

Evidence is growing in the United States that the current reform movement—focus on charters that compete with government schools, short-cuts into teaching that bring in smart teachers, and test score-based teaching evaluations—is not moving the needle on student achievement. And this evidence is beginning to spread in both traditional and social media. As the narrative on teaching begins to shift, researchers from across the globe, such as Dylan Wiliam and Ben Jensen, are showing that the key to school improvement is not hiring brighter teachers or firing bad ones, but investing in high-quality professional learning systems.

The key to creating these effective professional learning systems is teacher leadership. Of late, a new cadre of economists, using sophisticated statistical methods and more nuanced understanding of the teaching profession, have concluded that students score higher on achievement tests when their teachers have opportunities to work with colleagues over a longer period of time and share their expertise with one another. A recent Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report, from their review of policies in top performing nations, concluded that the most effective form of school leadership may very well be “self-sustained teacher collaboration.” And a just-released investigation reveals that teachers “improve at greater rates when they work in schools with greater collaboration quality.”

In *Flip the System: Changing Education from the Ground Up*, Jelmer Evers and Rene Kneyber have assembled a team of researchers and classroom practitioners who show from an international perspective how “teachers’ expertise should be capitalized and put to good use.”

In our chapter, my colleagues, Rachel Evans, Noah Zeichner, and I outline some of the most powerful research evidence as well as our teaching experiences in framing what it will take to advance teacher leadership for a reinvented profession. Rachel and Noah, who have served as CTQ teacherpreneurs in support of an online community of international teachers, continue to teach in the Seattle public schools, and have deep experience in working globally for their students and their colleagues.

Approximately 60 million teachers teach in very different contexts worldwide, which makes international comparisons of their status as leaders in their respective societies problematic. But here are three big lessons:

As Rachel notes, in top performing jurisdictions, teachers speak of professional development in terms of peer-to-peer systems of observation and mentorship while her U.S. colleagues speak in terms of “external trainings;”

Noah notes that teachers can readily learn to lead boldly when they can go public with their teaching – and have opportunities to not just share their pedagogical practices, but work alongside community partners and NGOs to develop a systems-view of the context in which they teach and serve students and families;

I point out that many teachers across the world still have not even seen another colleague teach, but the Internet is rapidly breaking down classroom isolationism among those who teach.

Moving forward, we suggest the following actions:

Document what teacher leadership looks like: We need to make sure administrators and policymakers have more clear examples of what teacher leaders do and how their expertise spreads to their teaching colleagues in ways that benefit students.

Make public the conditions that advance teacher leadership: Many teachers work in top-down, bureaucratic school systems. Leadership from the classroom will flourish only if the right conditions are in place, particularly robust processes of collaborative inquiry, but we need more clear roadmaps on how to actually create the structures and processes required.

Establish a network of networks: There is no shortage of teacher networks. But we need a network of networks that would connect key teacher leaders, with a variety of strengths and interests, to lead, creating their own agendas and inspiring others to expand the possibilities of teaching and learning reforms from the classroom.

Across the globe, there are many diverse efforts to cultivate leadership from the classroom. Flip the System offers a glimpse into the possibilities. Other CTQ colleagues—Tim Walker, Lori Nazareno, and Kim Farris-Berg—have also contributed to this inspiring book, demonstrating how teachers and researchers can work together across networks, time zones, and cultures, as Jelmer and Rene suggest, to “change education from the ground up.”