

*"It is increasingly implausible that we could improve the performance of schools ... without promoting leadership in teaching by teachers."*

—Judith Warren Little (1988)

# Teacherpreneurs as Agents of Reform

Teacher leaders who incubate and execute ideas for school reform.

By Barnett Berry

**I**t has been almost 30 years since Judith Warren Little's clarion call to policymakers to take seriously the role of teachers as leaders of school improvement. Granted, teachers have long served as department heads and grade-level chairs to help principals efficiently manage day-to-day school operations. And during the past decade or so, more teachers have been asked to coach their colleagues, mentor new recruits, and even more recently, facilitate data teams or school-level professional learning communities in response to high-stakes accountability for improved student achievement.

Long-standing calls for teacher leadership are beginning to take hold, and here are just a few reasons for this gradual shift:

- Schools must prepare increasingly diverse students (including a rapidly expanding number of English-language learners) to compete in a global economy that requires them to master more complex knowledge, but few teachers have been well-prepared and supported to teach to the new standards.
- Students need to master the new basic skills of digital literacy, problem-solving, and cross-cultural communication, and educators need to use a variety of new technologies to teach and measure deeper learning.
- Schools, with a growing percentage of students considered "at-risk," must be redesigned to integrate social and health services and after-school programs into the core curriculum, as well as figure out how to spread the expertise of their more effective teachers.

At the same time, the principal's job has become almost undoable—especially with Race to the Top mandates that have literally doubled the workload of the school leader. This is why Tennessee has begun to turn to teachers, not just external consultants and vendors, to train almost 30,000 of



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their colleagues in teaching to the Common Core State Standards; and a district like Denver has launched a “differentiated roles” pilot program that allows teacher leaders in 41 of the district’s 185 schools to spend 25 percent to 50 percent of their time outside of their own classrooms to observe, coach, and manage fellow teachers.

As a long-time scholar who now leads the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ), I am sanguine about these developments. However, for the past 20 years researchers have shown how in most cases teachers continue to serve as targets—but not agents—of school reforms. Ensuring all students are college and career ready and graduate as engaged citizens for our increasingly complex democratic society demands a bold brand of teacher leadership.

If a significant share of our nation’s teachers—those who know students and families the best—are not leading the transformation of teaching and learning, then our society’s vision of a high-quality public education system for all children will continue to fall short. Today’s and tomorrow’s principals need a substantial cadre of teaching colleagues who are idea generators and are able to lead in and out of their schools and districts. Enter the teacherpreneur.

### The Coming Age of the Teacherpreneur

In the United States, education entrepreneurs have been positioned as an antidote to the “enormous difficulties inherent in trying to turn around established (school) organizations,” writes Frederick Hess in “The Future of Educational Leadership.” Entrepreneurs take risks in making decisions about what to do and how it is going to be done. They launch initiatives and accept full responsibility for the results. Teacherpreneurs—classroom experts who teach students regularly, but also have time, space, and reward to spread their ideas and practices to colleagues, administrators, policymakers, parents, and community leaders—do the same.

During the past three years, CTQ has supported two dozen teacherpreneurs who typically have a 50 percent teaching load while incubating and executing ideas for teaching and learning reforms at the school, district, state, and national levels. These CTQ teacherpreneurs, with financial investments from several philanthropies, have served

as virtual coaches, curriculum publishers and curators, student assessment analysts, edugame inventors, parent engagers, and policy researchers. They also have served as school “redesigners” so students have more and better learning time and their teaching colleagues have more opportunities to spread their expertise.

Julie Hiltz, a media specialist at Lutz Elementary School in Hillsborough County, Florida, is a CTQ teacherpreneur, and has developed many of her leadership skills inside of CTQ’s Collaboratory, a 9,500-member (and growing) virtual community of classroom experts. During the past two years she has:

- Engaged more than 900 teachers and principals statewide in webinars and design-thinking workshops to help them develop new leadership skills and new structures for classroom experts to lead.
- Co-created (with teaching colleague Jaroux Washington) the national #TeachingIs social media campaign for Teacher Appreciation Week 2014 and 2015 to reframe the work of teachers and the national narrative on the profession.
- Written extensively about teaching practices and policies in a variety of national media outlets (including *The Washington Post*).
- Helped launch CTQ’s one-of-a-kind global community of teachers and administrators focused on high-quality teaching feedback and powerful professional learning systems.

With release time to do so, Hiltz has been able to lead an effort to assess and help improve her district’s new teaching evaluation system and to work closely with her principal, Mary Fernandez, in developing the beginnings of a teacher leadership system inside of Lutz Elementary. Over the past several years, Julie has joined a number of teacher networks, both those formally connected to the CTQ Collaboratory as well as others she has discovered to help improve her teaching as well as advocacy skills. “Julie does so much to bring new ideas and perspectives to our school,” Fernandez said.



### REFLECT ON THIS

- What opportunities does your school or district offer to support teacher leaders?
- Are your teachers connected to their own professional learning networks? What are they?
- What is the culture of risk-taking at your school?



The other half of Hiltz's teaching load is shared by another teacher, which creates time for Hiltz to lead and work side-by-side with Fernandez to transform the school improvement process. Thanks to this innovative arrangement, Fernandez now has more time to mentor and engage with students.

John Milburn, a district administrator who works closely with Hiltz, noted that "Julie has used her work with CTQ not only as a platform for what is important in education in general—but also how it applies to her particular role as a media specialist. Her involvement [as a CTQ teacherpreneur] has been beneficial for our district media program. She brings back what she learns elsewhere ... and makes that applicable to what we do, so we can be a model and still learn from the best of what others do."

We know that under the right conditions, many teachers, like Hiltz, can innovate and lead in bold ways. The 2012 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher found that 23 percent of American teachers are "extremely" or "very interested" in serving in a hybrid role as a teacher and leader. And because of the powerful and symbiotic relationship between Fernandez and Hiltz, we have begun to learn about the important role principals play in cultivating teacherpreneurs.

### Teacherpreneurs In Your School

CTQ has focused primarily on connecting, readying, and mobilizing teachers as boundary-spanning agents of reform. And we are just beginning to formally document school readiness for the kind of teacher leadership demanded by 21st century teaching and learning. Here are four lessons we've learned thus far on how principals can cultivate teacherpreneurs today.


First, principals need to recognize which teachers are most influential with their colleagues and why. Tools, including those under development by CTQ, allow administrators to determine who guides whom and under what conditions, as well as to use rubrics to identify potential teacherpreneurs. And a number of other non-profits, like Leading Educators, have developed instruments to select teacher leaders and prepare them for school-based instructional leadership roles.

Second, principals need to find out the strengths and leadership proclivities of their teaching colleagues. Surveys, like the ones Hiltz and Fernandez have co-created, help school leaders formally document the teacher leadership possibilities. But, as Fernandez has pointed out,

administrators need a new kind of professional development that equips principals in particular to become more expert at creating learning experiences that will ready and support more teachers to lead in bold ways.

Third, principals also need to know how teachers already are networked with peers outside of their schools and how those connections can fuel innovative thinking and action from within the building. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation estimates that 800,000 U.S. teachers are working in more than 30 Teacher Practice Networks it has funded. That is one in four teachers, and many of these practitioners are ready to help principals lead reforms, not just be the subjects of them. One of our nation's long-standing teacher networks, the National Writing Project, has created a variety of highly adaptive structures and processes for teachers to guide one another's learning.

Finally, principals need to embrace the kind of organizational risk-taking necessary for teachers to try new things, like implementing out-of-the-box approaches to reading interventions for students or taking charge of their own professional learning through "lesson study." Trust and risk-taking are created, in large part, through clear communication and expectations. Fernandez also told us that principals (and teachers) simply need more visible models of how educators embrace change and accept risks. Principals must expect their district and state leaders to help them see these models—and experiment in using them. In turn, as lead communicators, principals can become powerful liaisons.

America's public schools face a future of rapid change, intensifying complexity, and growing uncertainty. The principal of a school need not be its sole or even primary instructional leader. Many of a district's teacherpreneurs will prepare and support the most effective teachers for those roles. Principals should blur some of the lines of teaching and leading so more teachers innovate, and more students learn the skills needed for 21st century jobs and a rich civic life. 

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