

# Mere Mortals:

## Teachers Are the True Superheroes of a School's Success

### Lessons in Teacher Leadership **By Joe Mills and Lorilee Cabrera Liberato**

**W**ho are the leaders in today's schools? Can a principal work as a visionary, manager, professional development provider, school counselor, community liaison, and achievement booster or do we need a superhero in every school? What does leadership look, sound, and feel like in today's data-driven, media-spotlighted school? It certainly doesn't take long to find newspaper or documentary pieces about how schools are failing students. What kind of leadership should we seek?

We believe that teachers are (without always being acknowledged as such) the heart of a school's leadership community and are, in many districts, already working alongside principals to breathe new life into our conceptions of leadership. Modern teacher leadership looks different than in well-loved movies of past generations like *Lean on Me* and *To Sir, with Love*. In those portrayals, one teacher single-handedly becomes the hero, the leader not only of a class, but of the school and community.

Today teacher leadership is much more collaborative (DuFour et al. 2006; Kruse, Louis, and Bryk 1994). Teachers now recognize the need to take action from within to make schools places where teachers, children, and families thrive. We are fortunate to work together in a midsized Northeastern city where children have been the beneficiaries of reimagined teacher leadership and we're eager to share that story.

#### **Our Story**

In our work as literacy coaches, we have seen teachers rise to the occasion and become leaders when they have meaningful opportunities to work together. We believe inquiry-based, data-driven, teacher-led

PLCs are the heart of school leadership, not only because they have a significant, positive impact on teacher effectiveness and on student learning (Palmisano 2013; SEDL 2013) but also because they create the conditions for teachers to take the leadership reins. As we put PLCs into place, we studied *The Model Standards for Teacher Leaders* (ASCD 2011). It holds that teacher leaders support and improve teaching and learning by:

- fostering a collaborative culture
- using research
- promoting professional learning
- promoting the use of assessments and data
- improving outreach and collaboration with families and community, and
- advocating for students and the teaching profession.

The following scenarios are examples from our experience of how teachers, collaborating within PLCs, breathe life into the *Model Standards for Teacher Leaders*. The names have been changed to protect the identities and secret locations of the superheroes!

We began with the conviction that a collaborative PLC culture is fostered by embracing diverse expertise, providing a forum for all voices, and giving opportunities for shared decision making. This belief was challenged, however, when we began working with a large second-grade team. How could there be enough time and opportunity for eight individuals to inquire into a single problem of practice? But it only takes one teacher who rises to the occasion. Rose, a second-grade teacher, stood out as a leader from the start. Her optimism, respect for other's views, and listening skills gained her peers' respect.





She frequently volunteered to try a new classroom practice first, and she opened her classroom for peers to observe their discussions in action. We were surprised and delighted when the group agreed to videotape and share their practice with others.

We had similar worries when we worked with a team of fourth- and fifth-grade teachers with extremely different pedagogical beliefs, experiences, and practices. But focusing our inquiry on student data helped us find common ground. Everyone on the team was interested in helping students understand text more deeply. As we researched different aspects of comprehension and planned and implemented new approaches, our inquiry morphed into something the whole district was interested in joining. The PLC eventually led the district's first public research lesson! They inquired into how conversation leads to deeper comprehension and how it can support written response to text. Their professional learning led to improved results in student writing and contributed to increased scores on state summative assessments, not to mention closer alignment of the teachers' practices.

These are only two examples of how education's real superheroes, disguised as teachers, are making a difference in schools across the country. They do this with scant resources and precious little time. Imagine what could be accomplished if the resources invested in programs and external "fixes" were allocated to provide time and structures for these superhero teams to carry out their collaborative missions on a daily basis!

#### References

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