



**Illinois  
State Board of  
Education**

# **Teacher Leader Problems of Practice: Where Are They Now?**

**October 2021**

## Introduction

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) released a Notice of Funding Opportunity for a Teacher Leader Problems of Practice Grant Program in fiscal year 2020. Local Education Agencies (LEAs) within the State of Illinois were eligible to apply. Awards in the amount of \$75,000 were made to two LEAs categorized by Evidence-Based Funding (EBF) as Tier 1 or 2. Two awards were made in the amount of \$50,000 to LEAs categorized by EBF as Tier 3 or 4.

The grant period began July 1, 2019, and was scheduled to end June 30, 2020; however, it was extended one more year to June 30, 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

ISBE was seeking innovative approaches to recruiting, preparing, and utilizing teacher leaders as agents of change in PreK-12 public school districts. Districts, schools, or faculty members of state-approved teacher leadership programs who were interested in empowering schools or districts to build a network of exceptional instructional leaders were invited to propose research projects centered on a problem of practice focusing on teacher leadership.

ISBE was interested in proposals for new, innovative approaches or expansion upon research-based teacher leader practices that show promise for success in recruiting, preparing, or developing teacher leaders. Applicants had to utilize the National Network of State Teacher of the Year Teacher Leader Model Standards to guide their proposals.

Proposals were to include a description of an identified local problem of practice, including data and research to support the work; detail investigative measures that will be undertaken to better understand the problem at hand; and propose actionable solutions or approaches, including ways in which they will be enacted, for remedying the problem.

Recipients agreed to participate in a “Where are They Now?” feature one year after the expiration of grant funds. The goal of this feature is to highlight the sustainability in solving a locally identified problem of practice and gauge long-term impact of grant funding. This feature includes grantees sharing research findings, highlighting continued work, and showcasing sustainability of efforts beyond grant funding. Awardees were Altamont CUSD #10, Bunker Hill CUSD #8, Calumet SD #132, and Township HS #214.

# **Altamont CUSD #10**

## **Sustainability in Developing Teacher Leaders**

We have two issues facing as pertaining to developing and maintaining teacher leaders within our district.

- One of the issues we are facing is time. We believe this has been and will continue to be our biggest challenge in developing teacher leaders. Teachers are faced with many challenges in education today such that time becomes a major issue when trying to manage all of their roles and responsibilities.
- The second challenge we are facing is training. We had a core group of teachers attend a Professional Learning Community (PLC) conference. They gained valuable knowledge into the process and the focus on student learning. The problem moving forward will be funding to continue training staff on the PLC process, the importance of collaboration, the benefits of common formative assessments, and the alignment of curriculum to ensure that it is viable and guaranteed.

## **Long-Term Impact of Grant Funding**

We feel that we have just hit the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understanding all of the integral parts of the PLC process within our district. Grant funding would mean that we could continue to provide valuable training to our staff on all of the different aspects of this process. Funding could potentially help us with time as well. If we could use funding to bring teacher teams in over the summer to complete some of the curriculum alignment pieces of the PLC process, we could then alleviate some of our time constraints during the school year.

## **Research Findings**

With our district just beginning this process, we have now just begun collecting data on the impact this process has had on student learning. We are excited to see what our district achievement data does in the near future. We have relied on Measure of Academic Progress data up to this point to help make curricular decisions, but our goal is to also to use common formative assessment data not only to help in curricular decisions, but also to improve classroom instruction.

## **Continued Work**

Our district has made progress in implementing the PLC process, but have a lot of work still ahead of us. We have established essential standards in most of our core curricular areas and have started to develop learning targets from those standards, but this is a never-ending process and will continue to be updated each year as we collect data on our effectiveness. We still need training on common formative assessments. This will be one of our focus areas this school year. We want our staff to understand the importance of these assessments on not only student learning, but improving classroom instruction.

### **Sustainability Beyond Grant Funding**

The main issue we see in sustaining the PLC process within our district is training. Teacher turnover is an issue, so that is a problem in keeping teacher leaders trained in the value in the PLC process. We feel that the staff that we have sent to training come back all in on the process. The issue is when those teachers are no longer here or when others who have not been to the training are reluctant to buy in. As mentioned earlier, we feel that training and time are the biggest hurdles we are facing in making the PLC process sustainable in our district. Funding may not be the answer, but it will continue to help us move the process forward in developing teacher leaders and improving student learning.

## **Bunker Hill CUSD #8**

### **Sustainability and Long-Term Impact**

Most rural schools are small; as a result, administrative capacity and opportunities for teacher networking are minimal. Because principals in small schools must take on so many roles, they often do not have the capacity to take on additional projects for school improvement. In addition, small schools may have just one teacher at a grade level or subject area, which makes it difficult for teachers to collaborate or find leadership opportunities. With this grant, we sought to address both concerns by training and supporting teacher leaders who would bring peers together to collaborate and offer principals a leadership resource to expand their impact.

Leadership coaching and development for teachers is a one-time expense that pays long-term dividends. Once teachers have acquired leadership skills, they can continue to exercise them for the benefit of students. One program participant said the leadership skills she developed in the program “improved my current committee work in my school as well as my role as a National Board facilitator working with other teachers.” Another participant worked to implement support programs for students. As students and teachers coped with remote learning over the past year, she worked to expand after-school “learning cafes” into multiple off-campus locations where students could receive extra help from teachers. She said, “The Rural Teacher Leadership Collaborative had a snowball effect for me,” as her continued leadership of this project led to greater opportunities for students beyond the scope of the grant.

In addition to the ongoing leadership impacts from program participants, part of the grant-funded program included training and coaching of teacher leaders to make the work they led sustainable, whether they remained directly involved or not. One participant led a project to implement more technology-based instruction and has since handed the long-term leadership of this effort to one of her team members, who became a district technology coach. In our follow-up survey, she wrote, “Having a ‘team’ for my change effort has definitely had long-term impact as one of the team members is now the ed tech coach. I think that the program helped me to ease our district teachers into using technology and that will never go away.” This not only serves as an example of a teacher-led effort crystallized into district policy, but after ensuring its sustainability the teacher leader who launched the effort is now free to take on new challenges as they emerge.

All of the teacher leaders who responded to our follow-up survey indicated that they were continuing to lead the work they began during the program, that they had moved on to lead a different initiative in response to changing needs, or that the project was ongoing in some sustainable form that no longer required their direct leadership.

These responses suggest that the initial investment in teacher leadership provided by this grant has led to significant long-term impacts, and that those impacts are especially valuable because teacher leaders have addressed new problems as they emerged and responded flexibly to changing needs. In addition, these impacts have been achieved at little to no ongoing cost to districts, demonstrating the sustainability of teacher leadership development to create a more flexible distributed leadership model.

### **Research Findings**

Project results were measured through two key metrics: self-reported leadership growth and objective measures of project success in terms of both changes to teacher practice and outcomes for students. All program participants reported growth in their leadership skills, and all participants achieved their goals for changes to teacher practice. None of the projects could verify student outcome results as end-of-year progress was not measurable due to school closures because of the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, but mid-year progress data and anecdotal evidence suggested that six of the seven projects were on track to meet outcome goals as well. The remaining project did not collect sufficient mid-year evidence to suggest any conclusions about outcomes. (See Appendix A for individual project details.) From these results, we conclude that leadership training and coaching for teachers effectively led to practice changes among their colleagues, which are likely to lead to improved student outcomes (although data collection problems prevent us from drawing that conclusion with certainty).

Additionally, we conclude that National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) in this program demonstrated greater leadership growth and a higher project success rate than the average in comparable Teach Plus programs that did not require participants to be NBCTs. This suggests that NBCTs are a valuable and relatively untapped resource, and that investments to support their leadership development could multiply the impact of the major investments ISBE has made in developing practice expertise by subsidizing National Board Certification for teachers by enabling these teacher leaders to share their expertise with colleagues.

### **Highlight Continued Work**

The need for and benefits of teacher leadership as a school improvement strategy were evident through the growth in leadership and the impact on students from the Rural Teacher Leadership Collaborative. The partnership with Teach Plus made it clear that Chicago has built a large ecosystem around teacher leadership, but those opportunities are far fewer outside Chicago and its suburbs.

In Chicago, a host of organizations -- such as Teachers Supporting Teachers, Public Impact, Leading Educators, and Teach Plus -- run a variety of teacher-led initiatives that give teachers the ability to make an impact beyond the four walls of their classrooms. Teach Plus, for example, supported more than 50

teacher leaders in Chicago through its Change Agent, Kindergarten Readiness Innovator, and Network for School Improvement programs. Although Chicago does not have a teacher leader clause written into its teacher contract, the district supports this work and also brings together the organizations in a Teacher Leadership Collaborative to share best practices. This ecosystem creates opportunities for growth and leadership for teachers outside the principalship.

There is a need and desire for this type of ecosystem in other parts of the state. The needs and demands of principals are high everywhere, and empowering teachers to be change agents in schools will help. Teach Plus has done this work statewide not only through the RTLC, but also through its Kindergarten Readiness Innovator Program, which worked with a statewide group of pre-K and kindergarten teachers, and through IL-EMPOWER, which has supported teacher leadership projects in Berkeley and Melrose Park. However, smaller districts like Bunker Hill may lack the capacity to run a program like this on their own. We believe that ISBE can play a key role in fostering teacher leadership both through funding programs like the RTLC and through its convening power, bringing together schools to create a teacher leadership ecosystem in areas outside the Chicago metropolis.

#### **Additional Information**

This grant project demonstrated that teacher leadership is an effective strategy for improving instruction and school climate in rural and small schools, and that this strategy is most impactful when teacher leaders have already demonstrated instructional expertise and leadership potential and are supported with effective professional learning and personalized coaching. In addition to the learnings from individual projects, the regional network model used in this program was shown to be an effective strategy to share costs and build collaboration. This grant project was also uniquely impacted by remote learning as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Although none of the teacher leaders' project plans directly prepared their schools for remote learning, all of them were able to help make their schools' response to school closings more flexible and responsive as they took on leadership roles to help teachers and families adapt. This unexpected result demonstrates the importance of teacher leadership to creating a distributed leadership model with the ability to continuously adapt in response to student needs.

## **Calumet School District #132**

#### **Highlight the Sustainability in Solving the Locally Identified Problem of Practice**

In order for districts to successfully become a Professional Learning Organization (PLO) and to sustain the program, below are several foundational objectives for districts to implement that are fundamental. Leadership starts from the top. To successfully become a PLO, the school board must buy in and support the initiative. Further, administrators and teacher leaders should provide regular updates to the school board concerning PLO progress. And, the board should codify PLO language into its policy manual. Similar to the school board support and buy-in, the superintendent and other administrators must support the program. If administration does not support the program, the program will not be

implemented with fidelity and/or implemented at all due to the fact that administrators, such as the superintendent, provide recommendations to the board regarding district objectives.

Administration must ensure alignment of the district's strategic plan to the day-to-day work of the district and ensure staff are clear about the overall priorities of the district.

Develop a simple and transparent process for teachers to become teacher leaders. Criteria should include input from teachers and building administrators; years of experience; teacher evaluations; respect from peers; and school, district and community engagement. Suggestions from teacher leaders in both districts included the following criteria:

- Are approachable
- Are Trustworthy
- Have a desire to be a teacher leader
- Have experience as a classroom teacher
- Have good leadership and communication skills
- Are positive
- Good pedagogy
- Consider an application process
- Are organized

The district should consider evaluating administrators in part based upon how they are working collaboratively with teacher leaders. And, there should be districtwide training for staff so that there is an awareness of the model.

Administration must engage in program planning and create goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timebound (SMART) to successfully implement the model. Finally, the district must ensure teacher leaders are given professional development that revolves around the Teacher Leader Model Standards, leadership training, PLO implementation resources, and clarity concerning their role and duties. And there must be time for teacher leaders to plan and meet with their teams.

### **Gauge Long-Term Impact of Grant Funding**

Without question, the Professional Learning Organization model promoted organizational health and increased staff satisfaction as evident based on our survey findings. As noted in the Illinois Teach Report (2018), districts teachers desired opportunities outside of the classroom to grow and develop, which the PLO model provided. Moreover, fostering teacher growth prevented teacher turnover and burnout because it allowed teachers to have opportunities to advance in their districts while remaining classroom teachers.

We were ecstatic that our district experienced student growth; we believe our collaborative approach to learning by way of the PLO model was the foundation for this student growth. This finding aligned with

our review of research. Specifically, when Chubb and Moe (1990) noted: “All things being equal, a student in an effectively organized school achieves at least a half-year more than a student in an ineffectively organized school over the last two years of high school.”

An essential key finding related to equity. Our transition to become a PLO fostered student equity. We provided additional equity for students by ensuring internal and external stakeholders had a voice regarding the educational process of students. When stakeholders do not have a voice, it leads to inequity and creates organizational tension.

### **Share Research Findings**

Our district looks forward to opportunities to present in various educational conferences around the state. Conferences includes the Illinois Principals Conference, Regional Offices of Education Conference, and ISBE ESSA Conference.

### **Highlight continued work**

Teacher Leaders are helping to lead the way to promote student growth by facilitating various Professional Learning Community team meetings. Teacher leaders are provided targeted professional development opportunities, which enhance their leadership and facilitation skills.

PLO assessment surveys of (parents, students, and staff) are regularly reviewed by the administrative team in addition to other key data reports (e.g., attendance, discipline, student achievement data, climate survey data).

### **Showcase Sustainability of Efforts Beyond Grant Funding**

The PLO model is continuing to operate per local school district funds. Our district has earmarked budget allocations for ongoing professional development training.

### **Any Additional Information**

Our district presented at the ISBE ESSA Conference in 2020. Our PLO model and findings were widely accepted by workshop participants.

We are thankful to the Illinois State Board of Education for its willingness to support innovative student learning initiatives.

## **Township High School District #214**

### **Sustainability in Solving the Problem of Practice**

District 214 in Cook County implemented Equity Ready! during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years. This project helped move the district from conversations pertaining to equity to developing an equity framework, providing teacher training, and creating Professional Learning Communities at each of our



six high school campuses to build capacity in all of our schools for creating an equity-focused environment to support the success of students and the recruitment and retention of diverse faculty.

The district is undergoing an equity audit by Systemic Education Equity LLC during the 2021-22 school year. The purpose of an equity audit is to identify areas of strength and needed improvement with particular attention to historically marginalized groups. It is a fact-finding process that aids in the development of tangible recommendations to mitigate inequities. The equity audit process engages the collection and analysis of comprehensive quantitative data with critical qualitative information. It is a five-phase process to be completed in one year. The expected outcomes of an equity audit is the development of strategic, accountable, measurable, and sustainable action for districts to continuously monitor and improve for critical, transformative social justice.

Prior to Phase 1 of the equity audit, the district must assemble a District Equity Leadership Team. The team should be composed of approximately 25-30 staff members. It must include the superintendent, several Cabinet members, and at least one administrator at each school level in the district. It should also include historically marginalized populations, such as staff members (e.g., certified and/or classified) that identify as BIPOC, LGBTQ, minoritized religions, non-native English speakers, and/or people who are differently abled. It is further recommended to include staff members who work with special populations, such as English Learners and students with Individualized Education Programs.

*Phase 1: Five-hour meeting with District Equity Leadership Team*

- Engage in District/School Assessment on Equity.
- Select quantitative collection from data with an equity lens.
- Determine focus group and stakeholder inquiries.

*Phase 2: 3-4 months*

- Assemble agreed-upon data in the provided Quantitative Data Reporting Program.

*Phase 3: Conduct 36 online focus groups with staff, students, families (parents, guardians, caretakers) and a close-ended survey to all staff, students, families (parents, guardians, caretakers).*

*Phase 4: 3-5 months*

- Equity auditor and team analyzes quantitative and qualitative data (district and school-specific)

*Phase 5: 2-3 months*

- Superintendent (or designee) receives a draft equity audit report. The purpose of the draft is to review and identify any errors or needed edits. No changes or modifications to the findings are accepted to the draft. A final version is provided to the district upon completion of edits.

### **Long-Term Impact of Funding**

This grant project provided the resources needed to begin our equity journey. Rather than be a one-and-done project, we have made a significant commitment to continuing this work in the district. We hired a director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion who is developing a strategic plan to guide our work over the next several years.

**District 214 Equity Goals:**

1. Create a district definition of equity, diversity, and inclusion.
2. Modify our Senior Survey to add questions to ascertain the student experience related to equity.
3. Identify and verify that all technical systems have correct gender, pronoun, and family structures.
4. Review and partner with organizations for free physicals for incoming freshmen.
5. Develop equity-oriented interview bank questions and look-fors.
6. Develop a strategic communication plan around our equity efforts and results.
7. Evaluate our curriculum and instructional materials through a culturally responsive Lens.
8. Develop and use an equity rubric for textbook adoption
9. Develop a systematic way to track professional learning around the topic of equity.

**Project Findings**

District 214 has made a commitment to anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion in order to address racial disparities and inequities in opportunity, achievement, and outcomes. This commitment requires an examination and transformation of policies, practices, beliefs, and behaviors. Key activities provided to staff during the 2020-21 school year were affinity groups; an equity series of seven sessions for administrators, licensed staff, supervisors, and support staff; and Institute Day presentations from Cecily Relucio of the Surge Institute on equity in the classroom.

1. Provide all students with deeper and personalized learning by building teams of educators with distributed expertise.
2. Empower educators by developing new opportunities for role-based specialization and advancement.

Student demographics show that our population has slightly changed over the past few years.

As part of the diversity, equity, and inclusion work, the district is making efforts to hire more diverse staff. We have made some progress in that area. Hiring practices are focused on diversifying our staff. The district's Education Pathway for high school students is also geared toward recruiting diverse students to participate and then giving them priority in the district hiring process so we "grow our own."