Teacher Leadership: Setting the Foundation for Collaboration in a Large NYC Middle School

Insights from Year One of the Teacher Incentive Fund Team at I.S. 234 Arthur W. Cunningham

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T his guide examines the ways in which this six-person team in a large school with a mostly veteran staff and nascent team structures set a foundation for collaboration. Key steps, considerations, and tips are outlined below in the process of *how* teacher leaders can increase collaboration among teachers, *when* to expand the work to other groups, and with *whom* to build trust at each phase.

Introduction

Often in schools, collaboration among teachers is infrequent or voluntary. To combat this status quo, many schools are investing in teacher leaders through the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant and are using the opportunity to change the way they think and talk about collaboration. Frequently, teacher teams in schools focus largely on administrative tasks, and teaching is viewed as an autonomous pursuit. In such schools, the introduction of collective practices to improve instruction can feel like either a demand on precious planning time or a nerve-wracking reminder of evaluative observations.

During the 2013–14 school year a group of six teacher leaders at I.S. 234 Arthur W. Cunningham in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, one of the largest middle schools in New York City with a student body of 1,800, took on the task of engaging teachers in meaningful collaborative practices in order to improve instruction.

With a staff of more than 100, approximately 90 percent of 234's teachers have been teaching for nine years or more and 40 percent for more than 20. With funding from TIF, the school identified a group of three Peer Instructional Coaches (PICs) and three Demonstration Teachers (DTs). For the 2015–16 school year, the teacher leader roles will be known as Peer Collaborative Teachers (formerly PICs) and Model Teachers (formerly DTs). This team of six received regular job-embedded support from their Teacher Team Leader (TTL), a centrally based coach.

As they worked to set a foundation for collaborative practices, the teacher leader team at 234 knew that they could face the challenge of resistance, skepticism, or anxiety from many staff members who had not previously engaged in collective learning with a specific focus on instructional improvement. Thus, the team intentionally set out to make the process authentic and convey the message to staff that they were "not supervisors, but rather supports for other teachers." The order in which the teacher leaders sought to reach colleagues throughout the building proved critical to meet this objective. If they started rolling out the work in teams too quickly, they would risk resistance from teachers who did not fully trust their purpose or were averse to scripted professional development. Yet, if they started too slowly, they might not gain the traction needed for colleagues to see the work as valuable. By the end of the first year, as outlined through the steps in this guide, the team had achieved the ***three main objectives*** they established at the beginning of the year:

I.S. 234 Quick Facts

Student Body: 1,800

Staff: 100+

Teacher Leader Roles

2013–15		2015–16
Peer Instructional Coaches	➔	Peer Collaborative Teachers
Demonstration Teachers	➔	Model Teachers

Staff Experience

- 9+ years — 90%
- 20+ years — 40%

1. They **built trust** through peer observations and one-on-one work.
2. They **increased collaboration** among teachers.
3. They **developed models** from which to expand collaboration throughout the school.

STEP 1: Build the dynamics of the teacher leader team

Overview

First 3–5 Weeks

For teacher leaders to pilot collaborative efforts together with their colleagues, trust must first be developed among the leaders themselves. Spending time focusing on the internal dynamics of the team of teacher leaders can make the work feel slow to gain momentum. Yet, as the teacher leader team at I.S. 234 came to understand their new positions, they realized it was critical to lay this foundation first.

Key Considerations

Establish routine, transparent meetings in which everyone contributes. Many of the new teacher leaders had never worked together before. To develop trust, the PICs, who were the first three members to join the team, engaged in four steps. First, they set a weekly 90-minute meeting time that the principal agreed to and protected. Second, during initial meetings, the PICs "set up parameters just for the three of us." Conscious that there was a negative perception of the new role among the staff, PICs agreed among themselves to be open and to believe in the work that they would do. As one teacher leader reflected, "We'll hear things externally, but the bottom line is that the three of us have to trust each other." Third, the team set a routine at the beginning of each meeting in which each person shared recent positive and challenging experiences. One teacher leader recalls that they prevented teams becoming dominated by one or two voices by allowing everyone to feel heard and have equal time. This was supported by the group's use of reflection protocols provided to them by their Teacher Team Leader (TTL). Finally, when new members joined the team at different stages of the year, they devoted a meeting to discussing team dynamics and reestablishing these norms.

Connect schoolwide short-term and long-term team goals to personal experience. Over the next few weeks, it was important for the team to set both long-term goals connected to student growth and short-term goals connected to teacher practice, and to reflect on these through personal experience. An effective long-term goal was to see indications of student growth on the Measures of Student Learning Assessment (MOSL) and the New York State exams. In the words of one Peer Instructional Coach, "We had to get into agreement that the ultimate goal is the betterment of the school; it's not just you as an individual teacher leader or your department." This message became a mantra for the team, and to make it meaningful, the group shared concrete examples of growth by visiting one another's classrooms and looking together at student work. The team then set a more short-term, straightforward goal: they would reach 10 percent of the teachers in the school by the end of the first semester by increasing or confirming their openness to participate in a collaborative instructional experience (*see Steps 2 and 3 for details on how the leaders reached these colleagues*).

Focus on honing peer leadership practices before beginning to expand. Before asking other colleagues to reflect on their own practice, the teacher leaders recognized the importance of training themselves to view their own practice nonjudgmentally. Each teacher leadership team member conducted peer intervisitations with all other team members, using debrief sessions to hone protocols, such as the Peer Observation Protocol, for future use. Members of the team deepened their understanding of tools such as the Danielson Framework by studying and discussing the tools' nuances. As one teacher leader reflected, "Offering clarity is a big part of our job, but we have to do a lot of studying on our part to be able to offer that clarity."

When was the group ready to move on?

√   Teacher leaders maintained a weekly meeting time in person for at least eight meetings
√   Each team member consistently shared a meaningful strength or challenge at each meeting
√   All teacher leadership team members visited one another's classrooms at least once

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STEP 2: Visibly demonstrate what you can offer

Overview

First 3 Months

Although the principal at I.S. 234 used full-staff meetings to initially introduce the teacher leaders as supports to other teachers, demonstrations of what they could offer took place in smaller groups both formally and informally. In this way, teacher leaders showed that they were available for support and helped colleagues begin to understand their role.

Key Considerations

Publicize the role and learn teachers' concerns in existing staff meetings. These meetings offered a safe space to more thoroughly and clearly explain the teacher leaders' roles in person. Teacher leaders used these introductions to emphasize that they were not supervisors but, rather, supports for other teachers. From there, they could listen to colleagues and learn what topics were of concern around student learning needs and teaching practice.

Use existing or ongoing initiatives to demonstrate peer leadership skills. Teacher leaders used existing or ongoing initiatives—primarily curricular—as venues to continue to demonstrate their peer leadership skills. (See *Demonstrating Peer Leadership Through Existing Initiatives* on page 5).

Use video, self-critique, and group discussions to introduce the work in full-staff PD. Early in the year, the teacher leaders at 234 spent several weeks carefully planning a set of all-school professional development (PD) workshops. These offered a larger venue to interface with more teachers, and it was critical that they spend the time well. To do this, PICs began by selecting topics that they knew were on colleagues' minds based on conversations and accountability requirements (e.g., lesson planning and questioning techniques). Then they intentionally incorporated three elements that allowed them to avoid replicating a traditional "chalk-and-talk" format: using videos of classroom practice, modeling planning strategies using their own imperfect lesson plans as samples to workshop, and leading group discussions.

Make it easy to have informal conversations. Most of the work to reach the first 10 percent of staff arose through informal one-on-one discussions. The team at I.S. 234 made this easy by creating an air of approachability. They intentionally worked on their own planning at open tables in locations where colleagues congregated informally, such as the teachers' lounge. At this stage, they agreed to any requests for support. One teacher leader noted, "When people had immediate questions and wanted clarity, we had an informal conversation, and that's exactly what they needed." These conversations focused most of all on small-scale lesson planning. Teacher leaders suggested appropriate resources and shared templates with colleagues who asked. Initially, this was manageable because only a few people asked for support. This demonstration of willingness, though, became a challenge during busy times of year. One teacher leader was careful to say "yes" to every request at first, but as the year went on she drew boundaries by telling colleagues, "This is how much time I have carved out for you," and identifying specific periods in the week that she was available.

> Although leading full-staff PD sessions is not a recommended step of the TIF program, the teacher leaders at I.S. 234 were asked by the principal to run all-school workshops within the first few weeks of the school year. These initial sessions were not as effective at recruiting willing collaborators as they had hoped. But by November, the team incorporated insights from their work with their TTL into a more effective full-staff PD.

When was the group ready to move on?

√   Teacher leaders bonded as a group (e.g., they may have gotten together outside of the building at least once)
√   Teacher leaders announced their roles and responsibilities at department or grade-level meetings
√   Teacher leaders provided support or additional resources to roughly 10% of colleagues

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Demonstrating Peer Leadership Through Existing Initiatives

April, a teacher leader with twelve years of teaching experience at I.S. 234, knew very well the importance of gaining her colleagues' trust before she took on her role as a Peer Instructional Coach. "Reputation is a huge thing," she explains. "People know you get a bonus. They know you get extra time. People will say to you, 'I really need you to show me why you're getting this.'" **She had come to realize that the way to demonstrate her leadership was not to be the "person at the top of the pyramid with a title" but, rather, to be "the one who connects the most and pushes for change through those connections."**

In September and November, April led two different sets of all-school PD workshops with her fellow PICs. Those sessions had been useful for introducing the peer leader role, but to reach her colleagues by more than just "osmosis," as she referred to it, April realized she would need to demonstrate what she could offer in smaller venues. At the start of the school year, April had been tasked by her administration to attend an extensive training by Scholastic, the producers of the Code X curriculum that the school had adopted for the ELA department that year. She realized that this was the perfect entry point to use the existing connections and curricular initiatives she was involved in as opportunities to demonstrate that she knew what she was doing. During the first semester, she worked with her seventh-grade ELA team to put together maps aligned to this newly adopted curriculum, she led workshops about Code X, and she made a short booklet to clarify aspects of the curriculum for her fellow department members. On two Mondays each month during extended-day planning time, April invited department members to her room and provided support on the new curriculum. She realized that offering this type of clarity for her fellow department members allowed her to showcase her leadership skills in a comfortable setting. Since people had many questions about the new curriculum, she found that "they were grateful that we were working to be on the same page."

Although the Code X work was independent of April's official role as a Peer Instructional Coach, she realized she could use intervisitations to encourage deeper learning. "When we met in groups to work on Code X, I noticed an openness for some teachers to host groups, even across grades. The pressure might have come from the new curriculum, but it made people think, 'Maybe I need to use this time to intervisit and see how this is run.'" She helped to facilitate peer observations between department members, and by the spring, she began to use Code X as a way to offer coaching support to the sixth- and eighth-grade teams as well, gradually expanding out from her original network. "I feel like I can use Code X to lay more inroads with eighth grade," she explains. "If I'm using my time to help them get the things they need, that will help them open the doors to TIF [the teacher leadership program]."

STEP 3: Leverage existing relationships to start intervisitations and structured inquiry

Overview

At I.S. 234, peer observation and inquiry work began to allow for increased collaboration and improved instruction throughout the school by **cross-pollinating practices and fostering reflection among teachers**. Yet it took careful planning to implement these practices with a staff initially uneasy about the role observations had traditionally played in evaluations. To test strategies and ease into the process of conducting initial peer observations, the teacher leaders at 234 were careful to approach colleagues with whom they had existing relationships and with whom they perceived a willingness to participate in reflective practices.

Key Considerations

Reach out to your four most willing colleagues. Since staff at I.S. 234 had not successfully conducted peer observations or inquiry cycles in prior years, teacher leaders decided to focus their recruiting efforts on teachers with whom they already had worked closely and could count on to communicate others that the work had merit. They identified three groups of colleagues to invite to engage in targeted intervisitations: colleagues with whom they had already worked in the same department, those with whom they had "working friendships," and teachers with students in the same grade level. To do this, the teacher leaders used a peer observation protocol provided by their TTL. The team expected early work to progress more organically but sought a balance between flexibility and structure. As one teacher leader reflects, "that's a difficult thing to juggle. If [professional development] is too structured, teachers reject it. If it's not structured enough, they don't even try it."

Help these four colleagues to graciously spread the word. Once teacher leaders had conducted classroom visits with four teachers who were then able to discuss the work with other colleagues, they actively reached out to teachers outside of their immediate networks. One teacher leader anticipated that close colleagues would "drop names" when speaking with other teachers so that "the work I did with one teacher would filter down to five or six people." The team at I.S. 234 found two methods particularly effective in reaching out to additional colleagues: making recommendations for colleagues to visit other teacher leaders' classrooms to see particular

examples of instructional practices, and hosting "Lunch and Learns," informal meetings over lunch, to showcase tools that they had created as a team in a low-stakes environment.

Lay the foundation by conducting data analysis within the leadership team first. A more structured approach to student data analysis also helped move work with colleagues forward. But before introducing colleagues outside of the teacher leadership team to data analysis tools, the teacher leaders conducted one round of an inquiry project—entitled the Student Learning Inquiry Project (SLIP)—among themselves. They formed pairs and used a protocol provided by their TTL to examine patterns in student work from an assignment given in one of their classes. The process guided teacher leaders to place the grades in quartiles (i.e., groups consisting of students who scored a one out of four, two out of four, three out of four, and four out of four) and analyze the work of the students who scored in the lowest quartile. Based on these insights, the team developed a change strategy to implement, test, and review. (See *The Power of Evidence* on page 8.)

Help one departmental colleague each to investigate a piece of student data. After successfully conducting one round of an inquiry project together, each PIC reached out to one person in his or her department to conduct a second round. To make this easier for colleagues, and to demonstrate their support, teacher leaders offered to grade the work against a Common Core–aligned rubric and input the data into gradebooks. While teacher leaders at I.S. 234 found that this was not ideal, since they were not doing this part of the work *with* other teachers,

asking colleagues for student work beforehand and using their designated TIF periods to do the grading and organize the data into quartiles for analysis facilitated the process and incentivized colleagues to participate. The teacher leaders then drew from the quartile data and their familiarity

with the student work to hold a structured 45-minute discussion to look at student performance with their colleagues. To do this, they used the same protocol they had previously used on their own and with their Teacher Team Leader.

When was the group ready to move on?

√ Teacher leaders made contact with 15% of the staff to conduct peer observations or engage in one-on-one coaching

√ Teacher leaders hosted one or two voluntary sessions (e.g., "Lunch and Learns") to spread word about their work

√ Each teacher leader visited with four teachers

√ Teacher leaders reviewed student data in two cycles: first with members of the teacher leadership team and, second, with one or two colleagues outside of the teacher leadership team

√ There was a sense that the teacher leadership team was known in general throughout the school

The Power of Evidence: Practicing data inquiry with the Teacher Leadership Team
Names in this story have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved.

"I came in reluctantly, and initially I wasn't going to do it," explains Sandra, an eleven-year veteran who was hesitant about taking on the role of teacher leader at I.S. 234. But as she worked through a review of student data with her colleagues, her skepticism gave way to buy-in. Sandra was not immediately convinced of the value of inquiry. She was already accustomed to examining student work, but she reflected, "In previous years, when I gave my own assessments, I scored them and looked at the scores briefly for information, but I never really analyzed them to try to figure out what they meant."

At the start of the four-week data inquiry project, the teacher leader team divided into pairs and used a protocol provided by Irene, their school's Teacher Team Leader, to look at student work from one of their classes. Sandra partnered with one of the other teacher leaders on the team, and together they looked at an assessment from a lesson she gave on multiplying and dividing decimals. "It was a short test," Sandra explains, "but there were a lot of twists and turns." Sandra graded the test against a department-wide rubric, and based on the grades, the pair placed students into quartiles (i.e., students who scored one out of four, two out of four, three out of four, and four out of four). They focused on the lowest quartile to look for trends in the mistakes that those students made.

"At first I thought it was just skills. I thought they were having trouble multiplying decimals," Sandra recalls. "But the project asked us to pinpoint the issue, and soon we realized it had nothing to do with the operations." Sandra and her partner looked step-by-step at what the students were doing. They wondered, as Sandra explains: "Why are they multiplying when they are supposed to add? The students were not looking at the key words to give them clues that they weren't supposed to add." Once Sandra and her partner realized that the students were having more trouble decoding the word problems than implementing the skill, they developed a change strategy to implement a new template for students. Sandra explains that the template "provided a way for the students to walk through any word problem and pick out what was important, what they needed, and then check their work to make sure it was a reasonable answer."

Sandra modeled how to use the template in a follow-up lesson while her partner observed. A few days later they gave a similar task to the students. Once again, they collected the scored work and placed it in quartiles. "We saw them underlining key words, and you could tell that they were checking their work. They were going through the same process, and we were pleasantly surprised to see that all of the 33 students scored 100 percent. We thought, 'We're on to it!'"

The inquiry project changed Sandra's perspective on approaches to using data authentically, and she saw the protocol as a valuable tool to use with other teachers. At the end of the project, she thought, "I really wish I could share this with other teachers. I could see how they could benefit." This laid a powerful foundation for future work.

STEP 4: Offer support to observe and debrief classes for teachers with specific needs

Overview

Months 5–8

As they reached out beyond initial networks, the team tried to identify the next 10 percent of the staff that would likely feel the most urgent need for support. Within this group they identified three categories: teachers newer to teaching who could use assistance understanding tools such as the Danielson *Framework* or *Common Core Learning Standards*, teachers applying for tenure who might need assistance with portfolios, and teachers preparing for upcoming formal observations.

Key Considerations

Actively offer and follow up with support for teachers who feel the need and see the value.
The teacher leaders at I.S. 234 reached out to colleagues who had an immediate need for support (see the three categories listed in the overview above) but who were also willing to see the larger, long-term value behind instructional coaching. This combination was crucial, since change takes time and there is always a danger of losing a connection once a need is not felt as urgently. To maintain connections, it was important to follow up with colleagues in the weeks following initial support to solidify a working relationship. "You may have filled their need," one teacher leader noted, "but check in with them once in a while and they're going to see you in a different light." For colleagues less inclined to continue the collaboration, teacher leaders made sure to emphasize how much they themselves gained from the experience. In the words of another teacher leader, "I told those people, 'You have made me feel so welcomed; you have given me way more than I have given you.'"

Use a known framework to observe and debrief a class. Observing and debriefing a class can be a valuable way to reach colleagues, and having a well-defined framework for discussing instructional practice can provide an objective lens through which to view a teacher's practice. Since all teachers in New York City public schools use the Danielson *Framework for Effective Teaching* as a common language in conversations about teaching

practice, especially among school leaders, knowing the *Framework* well and being able to interpret it was a crucial service teacher leaders could offer colleagues. However, it was not always easy to assure teachers that examining performance against the *Framework* rubric was not judgmental. In the words of one teacher leader, "We're in an age of measurement, and some teachers are really frustrated by quantifying this incredibly human experience." To counteract this sentiment, teacher leaders brought a printed version to check-ins before observations and explained that they would use the rubric as a tool to reinforce existing practice. They focused on one component that the teacher wanted to work on to make observations feel relevant to his or her goals. Teacher leaders took low-inference notes and reported back observations, highlighting good practice and noting missing pieces.

Differentiate debriefing depending on a teacher's experience. The teacher leaders at 234 differentiated the ways in which they helped colleagues to "see" their practice by considering the needs of particular teachers before tuning their approach to providing guidance. For instance, when working with a teacher with fewer than three years of experience, the teacher leader made more direct suggestions for specific strategies. However, for a more veteran teacher with a deeper array of experiences at their disposal, they asked probing questions, which allowed the teacher to "find the answer within him or herself."

When was the group ready to move on?

√ Leaders used the majority of available periods to intervisit or meet with teachers to debrief
√ Each leader had built a continuous relationship with four or more teachers
√ Leaders had worked with approximately 20% of teachers

STEP 5: Pilot small-group work and prepare rollout into team structures for year two

Overview

Months 9 & 10

By the spring, the team at I.S. 234 had reached about a quarter of the staff. They ended the year by using the many one-on-one experiences they had started throughout the year as the foundation on which to build small collaborative groups. They were both optimistic and cautious about using the inquiry and intervisitation tools across the school. The team focused on setting realistic internal goals and planning for continued one-on-one coaching to pace the expansion of collaboration among teachers in the coming year.

Key Considerations

Help small groups of two or three teachers to start collaborative work. Having engaged in coaching discussions, classroom visits, and data-inquiry discussions with various colleagues one-on-one, the teacher leaders at 234 invited pairs and groups of three within departments to use the same tools in their own small groups. They reviewed with these groups the protocols and tools they had used with other teacher leaders and colleagues while setting the expectation that teachers would modify and personalize the tools to "make it work for them." The best process, as one teacher leader suggested, was to "put the tools on the table, be amicable about it, and say, 'I trust you,' and, 'Let's touch base in two days,' and, 'Let me know how it's going.'" By doing this, the teacher leaders "checked in without really checking in and had a really good idea of how it was progressing."

Consider which teams and expanded group of leaders will best move the work forward. The end of the year offered an opportunity for the teacher leaders to take note of what worked so that they could remember it going into the following year and use their new familiarity with a growing group of teachers to plan how those teachers could form collaborative teams the next year.

To help in this process, the leadership team read excerpts from the book *The Power of Teacher Teams* by Troen and Boles, and reflected on four questions:

1. Which teachers can we lean on to embrace and support the work?
2. What are teachers' priorities for next year that we can leverage for the first meetings?
3. How can we prepare leaders within the teacher teams so that leadership is distributed?
4. What is the best way to foster equity among teacher teams?

When was the group ready to move on?

√ Teacher leaders led one or two all-school, grade-level, or departmental PDs addressing student performance needs
√ Teacher leaders collectively analyzed student data with two distinct groups of teachers
√ The teacher leadership team developed a vision for the scope of their work in year two
√ Teacher leaders designed a protocol and a draft schedule for teacher teams to share responsibility and rotate leadership roles

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