Noraa Ransey is certain that she was born to be a teacher. Actually, she can be even more precise: “I love teaching third graders to read — getting struggling students caught up and pushing them to places they didn’t think they could reach.”

Reflecting on 12 years in the classroom, the teacher at North Calloway Elementary outside Murray keeps coming back to how her job clicks for her.

“Those ‘aha moments’ and seeing growth, responding in ways that show that every learner needs something a little different — I see myself in the classroom until I retire. It’s where the magic happens,” she explains.

Ransey’s satisfaction and enthusiasm grow from finding the right job. Her exuberance, however, has also been shaped by steady involvement in a recent wave of teacher leadership initiatives created to bolster the skills and opportunities of classroom teachers.

Since 2010, the umbrella of teacher leadership has spread across the state, opening a cloistered job to new ideas, networks, tools and roles. A chief goal was enticing talented teachers to keep teaching rather than seeking administrative positions that have traditionally been the route to elevated pay and prestige.

Teacher leadership programs are designed to create winners on all fronts: students gain from talented educators who stay in the classroom, teachers find greater professional support and the job of teaching is overhauled to a modern profession that can foster better connected, more skilled practitioners.

KEEPING THE FOCUS ON KENTUCKY SCHOOLS
This series of three briefs on efforts to boost teacher leadership shows how recent initiatives to strengthen teachers through new roles and modern collaborative options improves school culture and leads to better results with students. Also in this series:

■ Common Assignments: A New Way for Teachers to Network
■ Upgrading a Profession: Using Networking to Inspire Teachers, Learning

The Prichard Committee’s partners in presenting these briefs are listed on the back page of this story.
The traditional approach often produces teaching jobs that lead to isolation and frustration over increasing academic demands and complicated social challenges. The path can be daunting, particularly in schools with high numbers of struggling students.

Sarah Yost, an English teacher at Oldham County Middle School in her 13th year, said teacher leadership initiatives provided the footing to make teaching her career.

“The first three years were a steep learning curve, and the next two were about how to improve and find satisfaction,” she recalls of her first jobs in Louisville. “After that, I could think about deepening my own learning.”

In retrospect, she sees four years as part of a University of Louisville teacher-in-residence program and involvement in other teacher leadership efforts at about the same time as chances to learn and grow that ultimately kept her in education.

Now, in Oldham County, Yost teaches full-time and earns a stipend to work with middle and high school teachers in a Network to Transform Teaching program that spreads tenets of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and encourages teachers to seek National Board certification. She earns another stipend to serve on the network’s state steering committee.

The roles make Yost part of state, district and school leadership. “It’s more intellectually stimulating to expand my impact,” she said. “I learn, grow and am respected as a decision-maker instead of just a workhorse.”

For Julia Bishop, a special education teacher at Lee County High School in her 14th year, teacher leadership was a natural extension of her own desire to become more involved in her school and in wider education issues. Encouraged by the superintendent to gain national certification, Bishop made connections that also led to involvement in two teacher leadership networks and guiding an effort in Lee County to identify and address teacher retention issues.

“When I got more involved, I had no desire for going into administration, but I felt like something was missing,” Bishop said.

She said teacher leadership experiences have improved her ability to teach writing, differentiate for individual students, design hands-on learning, and more.

**PATHS TO GROWTH**

In Murray, Ransey took her first step toward leadership through a common path — serving as a teacher member of the school’s site-based decision making council. Lawmakers created that role in 1990 to give teachers a greater say in the direction of school-level improvement. From there, Ransey was encouraged to serve on district committees on English and language arts, discipline and planning.

“I never thought of myself as a leader, but I liked it,” Ransey said. More recently, she responded to a notice that the Kentucky Education Association was looking for teacher leader fellows and was chosen.

“It’s amazing what the ideas of teacher leadership have done for our students and school,” said Ransey, who attributes a rise in student growth data to her outside learning. Working with a network of colleagues on ways to motivate struggling readers is now a routine facet of the way she sees her job.

North Calloway Principal Melinda Hendley said that opening teachers to wider conversations in schools and beyond is part of creating a culture focused on improved student results. Hendley rotates leadership of in-school professional learning groups to encourage all teachers to contribute to improvement work.

“Ms. Ransey is naturally born to lead and strive to get better,” Hendley said. “We want to encourage people to stretch themselves, try new things and have a voice. I have a theory that everyone has to be a leader, which gives all teachers a chance. It’s important to recognize that everyone has gifts, and everybody can lead in their own way.”

**RALLYING AROUND LEADERSHIP**

Teacher leadership initiatives flourished over the past five years, from widespread networks backed by state-level groups, to lesson-focused efforts sparked by funding from education foundations, as well as professional growth experiences designed and shepherded by the state education department.

From these programs, teachers created a common definition to describe the mission of teacher leadership — “to elevate teachers as experts and leaders.” The state’s Teacher Leadership Framework specifies six different spheres where professional experience can push teachers forward: leading from the classroom; through modeling and coaching; in groups and teams; to increase teacher voice and influence; to connect to the...
Expanding Horizons: Using Leadership to Keep, Build Top Teachers

larger community and world, and to professionalize teaching.

Teacher leadership has led participants to seek and share ideas and support; find outside sounding boards to tackle teaching challenges; acquire new lenses for improving student work; and increase creativity or rigor in developing assessments, learning plans or strategies to engage students.

Yet while success stories exist across the state, a major challenge awaits in making the benefits of teacher leadership a built-in feature for a teaching force that exceeds 42,000.

Believers who have seen the impact of teacher leadership experiences say that fundamentally rethinking teacher career paths, redefining roles or budgets to expand options for teachers, and building a responsive professional community are issues that state leaders and school districts should begin to tackle.

MAKING NEW ROUTES ROUTINE

Brad Clark of Lexington has his own story of teacher leadership transformation: Six years into teaching elementary grades, he felt frustrated that traditional practices and policies weren’t meeting the needs of students. Clark looked for new ideas and approaches. “I was always trying to find different ways of doing things,” he said. “There are great mentors at every turn, but poor systems of support at scale. There is a lot of dormant talent that sits in schools.”

In 2013, Clark joined the Hope Street Group, an organization working to help teachers find ways to understand and shape state education policy. He eventually led the group’s Kentucky branch, which has a broader focus of developing teachers’ skills to build networks and lead improvement efforts.

Now the national director of professional learning for Hope Street, Clark sees a need for local school leaders to define needs and priorities and rethink ways to get there. “There has to be infrastructure,” he said. Schools should design better ways to build teachers’ competencies and skills with clear feedback, communication and support, he said.

Meme Ratliff of Louisville, a veteran of teacher leadership programs and a co-founder of JCP’s Forward, a locally driven teacher engagement and leadership effort in the Jefferson County schools, noted that it is important to ease teachers into any new process.

“As a collective, we tend to jump ahead to look for formal roles for teachers, often forgetting the need for teachers to first become aware of the work and become invested,” she said. Borrowing from Hope Street Group training, she said it is important to recognize the stages of awareness, engagement, empowerment and formal leadership. “We should attempt to bring folks along at their own pace,” she said.

To upgrade teaching, school leaders need to recognize how budgets could be channeled in significant new directions, noted Stephanie Dean, vice president of strategic policy advising for Public Impact, a North Carolina group pushing for innovative approaches to K-12 improvement.

“There are more possibilities within existing budgets than people have imagined,” Dean said in a visit to Kentucky to speak to education advocates in June. Staffing systems should make sure teachers have the right kinds of support and can extend their reach to be able to lead teams, support one another and better reach all students, she said.

The input of teachers who have seen the promise of new approaches should be at the forefront of wider efforts to cultivate teacher leadership, added Cindy Parker, a retired state education department administrator who now works with the Central Kentucky Education Cooperative on nurturing local teacher leadership efforts.

“We can solve a lot of our own problems and challenges by letting teachers lead and by building from within,” Parker said. In addition, she noted, Kentucky’s colleges of education can be powerful allies in developing new approaches to strengthen the profession and keep strong teachers in the classroom.

“Teachers embrace being able to share assignments, assessments and student work,” Parker said. “It is exciting because it empowers them and helps their students.”

Ransey, the Murray teacher, said that teachers need to know that their growth is a priority and see clear support in finding solutions to the variety of challenges that arise in classrooms.

“I want to continue to grow and learn. I wish that all along, I could have been collaborating like I do now,” Ransey said, adding that being able to provide more for her students and school is deeply rewarding. “In the classroom is where I’m happiest and my strengths are most effective. I’m one of those people who, on the last day of school, doesn’t want it to end,” she said.
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