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Study: Students, Schools, Districts Benefit from Teacher Leaders

UW study of Auburn Teacher Leader Academy shows promise in helping teachers take on leadership roles

OLYMPIA — A six-year program piloted by the Auburn School District could serve as a model for creating teacher leaders that build stronger schools across the state.

In [a new study](#), researchers from the University of Washington say the Auburn Teacher Leadership Academy (ATLA) in the Auburn School District has made a significant impact on improved instructional practice through teacher leadership development. The study examined ATLA's impact on developing collaborative teacher leadership skills to support student learning. The program, headed up by the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (CSTP), aims to help teachers become better classroom instructors and help build teaching capacity in their peers.

“What this study shows is that developing teacher leaders directly impacts both the quality of classroom instruction and the level of school and district collaboration,” said Nasue Nishida, executive director of the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession. “Auburn has invested in the ATLA program because it provides high-quality, professional development and the time and opportunity for teachers to collaborate and CSTP has been fortunate to work side-by-side with them to figure it out.

“The UW study shows that ATLA teachers were stronger, more confident educators as a direct result of this program. This creates opportunities for teachers to engage with one another and with their school and district in new ways. We believe this is critical for the implementation of various school improvement initiatives, which ultimately benefits students.”

In 2010, CSTP began working with Auburn to provide specialized training with an initial cohort of teachers. Since then, five additional cohorts have been added, representing more than 400 Auburn elementary, middle and high school teachers. ATLA begins with a two-day summer academy to develop teacher leadership skills in a collaborative setting and a deep focus on the CSTP Teacher Leadership Framework. Throughout the year, teachers meet for additional training and support, reflecting on their work, revising their leadership goals and honing their leadership skills.

The study, which examined the district's first five years of teacher leadership work supported by ATLA, reflects a combination of surveys, focus groups and interviews. All told, 48 staff from 19 of Auburn's 22 schools were represented in UW interviews or focus groups. An online survey conducted in the fall of 2015 included 102 certificated staff from 21 schools, and 28 school and district administrators.

“ATLA has transformed our professional development process in the Auburn School District, which has directly benefited the students we serve,” said Doug Gonzales, assistant director of instructional technology for the Auburn School District. “We look forward to building this program out and continuing our work to create more teacher leaders for Auburn.”

There were many key takeaways from the research. For teachers, the study found that ATLA:

- **BUILT CONFIDENCE TO LEAD:** The vast majority of teachers surveyed (88%) and all of Auburn’s administrators (100%) either strongly or somewhat strongly agreed that ATLA increased participants’ self-confidence as a teacher leader.
- **ENCOURAGED WORKING WITH ADULT LEARNERS:** ATLA teachers were able to work more effectively with other adults and understand differences in professional work styles.
- **REINFORCED THE USE OF SYSTEMS-LEVEL THINKING:** 83% of ATLA teachers agreed somewhat or strongly that the ATLA training equipped them to use systems-level thinking in decision-making. Ninety-two percent of principals agreed teachers had improved in their ability to use systems-level thinking in decision-making as a result of ATLA training.
- **EXPANDED TEACHER NETWORKS:** Survey data for teachers and principals indicated that ATLA supported collaboration with other teachers across the district and within buildings.
- **PROVIDED QUALITY TRAINING:** 90% agreed ATLA training helped them communicate more effectively with colleagues and 90% said the training was directly applicable to their work as a teacher.
- **IMPACTED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT:** 80% of teachers and 92% of administrators agreed somewhat or strongly that ATLA positively impacts the achievement of students in their classes. Teachers (86%) and administrators (92%) indicated ATLA helped improve the quality of instruction.

For schools and districts, the study found that ATLA:

- **IMPACTED TEACHING:** Teachers agreed that ATLA supported formal and informal leadership roles and led them to make changes in their teaching.
- **INCREASED TEACHING CAPACITY:** 97 % of principals agreed that ATLA enhanced teachers’ capacity to engage in school or district improvement initiatives.
- **ENCOURAGED TEACHER LEADERSHIP:** 85% of teachers agree ATLA encouraged them to pursue new teacher leadership opportunities. And 96% of principals agree ATLA increased teachers’ leadership and/or instructional coaching skills.
- **IMPROVED COLLABORATION:** A majority of teachers (84%) and administrators (96%) agree that ATLA has supported collaboration in their building.

“We are excited about the possibilities the ATLA model presents for other schools and districts looking to build teacher leadership,” added Nishida. “Context matters. It’s important to realize that a teacher leadership program could look dramatically different in a district like Bellingham or Highline or Sunnyside but still deliver the same professional learning to their teachers. We hope this study inspires other districts to consider new ways of developing and utilizing teacher leaders in schools.”

About the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession

The Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (CSTP) is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to building a strong, supported and effective teaching force for Washington’s students. To learn more, visit www.cstp-wa.org.