Collaborating to Improve:
Using the District Partnership Pilot and Distributed Leadership to Align Priorities in Teacher Leadership Work

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Introduction

In 2013, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) partnered to launch new career pathways for expert educators. Three new leadership positions were created: Peer Collaborative Teacher, Model Teacher, and Master Teacher. These positions were designed to develop these educators' leadership abilities and extend their reach within their school communities, enabling the system's most talented teachers to drive school improvement. Since 2013, principals, teachers, and teacher leaders themselves

have reported high and often growing levels of satisfaction with teacher leadership.

This research study was commissioned by the New York City Department of Education to understand a nascent effort to enhance this work. The "District Partnership Pilot" aims to connect teacher leaders with the goals of their superintendent through coaching and professional development opportunities, opening possibilities for alignment without preventing autonomy. As of 2017, the pilot is operating in six of New York

City's 32 geographically organized Community School Districts. By drawing upon a series of interviews conducted over the 2016-17 school year with district and school staff, this study examines efforts of a single Community School District as it participated in the pilot, shedding light on key structures, relationships, and networks that contribute to the pilot's success.

Background

When first launching this new model of teacher leadership, the Office of Teacher Recruitment and Quality recognized the importance of comprehensive, ongoing support for new teacher leaders. To address this, all teacher leaders were partnered with a Teacher Team Leader (TTL)—a centrally-assigned coach who would provide school-based, job-embedded professional development and coaching. The TTL offers strategies and guidance that enhance teacher leadership skills, creating ongoing opportunities to practice distributive leadership and facilitate effective, reflective conversations that improve teaching.

While some strategies for leadership are universal, many depend on context. Accordingly, TTLs reported that when teacher leaders were doing work that was not connected to the particular goals set by the school or the local Community School District—or when teacher leaders themselves were not aware of those goals—their efforts often faltered. To address this, in 2016 TRQ launched the "District Partnership Pilot," an effort to innovate ways to align teacher leadership work with district goals.

Notably, in prior years TTLs worked with schools in multiple Community School Districts. In this pilot, TTLs provide support to schools in a single Community School District, engage in collaborative planning with key district staff, and many have a desk in the district office. Additionally, the pilot invests in a series of "Community of Practice" events within each district to promote professional learning. By placing support for teacher leaders within the same locus of supervision for principals, the pilot aims to create better alignment between teacher leadership priorities and those of the school and district.

To examine learning from the initial years of the pilot, this report focuses on the experiences of Community School District 14 (CSD 14), led by superintendent Alicja Winnicki. With prior experience using district-wide structures that encourage distributed leadership and collaboration to drive improvements, Winnicki sought to expand upon that work through the pilot. This report explores two factors that TRQ recognized as essential to the pilot's success in CSD 14: the mechanisms to embed support for teacher leadership within the Community School District, and the structures to provide teacher leaders with meaningful professional development and networking opportunities.

Connecting support for teacher leaders to local district supervisors deepens school-based work.

In District 14 the Teacher Team Leader regularly communicates with the district superintendent and director of school renewal, contributing to aligned school and district goals and consistent support for teacher leaders.

Every Community School District has a superintendent, responsible for direction and supervision as the rating's officer for all elementary and middle school principals in the district, and when applicable, a director of school renewal, responsible for oversight of all schools identified for the renewal program based on poor performance. By strengthening the connection between the District 14 TTL and these two key district figures, teacher leaders found support from District 14 TTL Hannah Brancato more focused on relevant goals, both when coaching individuals and when leading teacher teams. According to Camille Rhoden-Stephens, a second-year Peer Collaborative Teacher from Juan Morel Campos Secondary School, "Hannah grounds our work. Instead of it being all over the place, she helps us to focus and hone in on what our school needs. That support has helped us be a more effective team." School leaders agree, noting that guidance from Brancato helps move school-wide initiatives forward, contributing to the overall focus and quality of the school's professional learning.

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–Mary Theresa Nelson, Director of School Renewal

FINDING 1.1:
Streamlined Communication Matters

Matching a TTL with a Community School District enables communication and collaboration between the TTL, the district superintendent, and the director of school renewal.

The TTL's support work is facilitated by the decision to locate the TTL within District 14. Brancato has a desk in the district office that she uses several times a week and works closely with both the superintendent and the director of school renewal (DSR), describing this collaboration as a "constant conversation." Through regularly scheduled meetings—featuring discussions on how to support teacher teams, how to engage in the inquiry process, and how to outline expectations for instructional leadership—the TTL and district leadership are able to communicate clear and consistent priorities to administrators and teacher leaders. Mary Theresa Nelson, District 14's DSR, explains how this structure helps improve teacher practice. "You absolutely need one go-to person who has a relationship with the district office and who then, through work with teacher leaders, develops a relationship with people in the school. You have to have that pipeline if you

want a cohesive language and if you want to improve practice."

FINDING 1.2:
Making Connections Matters

By discussing goals with teacher leaders, school leaders, and district leaders, the TTL enables alignment.

District 14 superintendent Winnicki sees the development of teacher leaders as an essential component in her work to help principals meet the diverse needs of both their teachers and students, and her collaboration with Brancato an opportunity to drive this development forward. Brancato, who is viewed as a support system by both teacher leaders and administrators, acts as a bridge, regularly meeting with both parties in their schools to keep their work aligned. This series of connections is paying off in several ways. District 14's DSR, Nelson, believes this communication assists in the collaboration between principals and teachers to develop their school goals early in the year. In particular, she attributes this to Brancato encouraging teacher leaders to check in with "the principal to see if their work was in line with the

Comprehensive Educational Plan [an accountability document that each principal must submit to his or her superintendent outlining key school goals].” Likewise, teacher leaders felt this communication enabled them to better collaborate with administrators and align their work to the school's instructional focus and goals. Anthony Fiola, Model Teacher at M.S. 582, illustrates this connection when he explains a key priority that came from conversations with Brancato and his administration. “We want similar structures for all classrooms so students know what to expect when they go from one classroom to the next,” Fiola says, before going on to explain this was a focus of both the school and district.

FINDING 1.3:
Networks Matter
The TTL enables cross-site learning and connection.

District 14 TTL Hannah Brancato's position allows her to leverage her experiences moving from school to school across the district, engaging with the district-wide structures of the pilot, and checking in with the superintendent and other district leadership positions. The result is consistent support for teacher leaders.

Teacher leaders note the benefit of getting Brancato's perspectives on other schools in their district, helping them think outside the “bubble” of their school, giving them ideas about “what things look like elsewhere.” Brancato attributes these connections to her collaboration with district leadership who “have a really good balcony view” and who help her identify “patterns and trends” across schools.

Brancato's position also facilitates intervisitation practices. District 14 Master Teacher, Laura Pawson, who organizes cross-school visits on both leadership and instructional practices, describes Brancato's work as “weaving together” district-level goals with the support that she gives teacher leaders in their own buildings. Similarly, Vanessa Velez, a second-year PCT from M.S. 582 who opened up her classroom doors for a District 14 intervisitation, notes that the TTL and Master Teacher support she got preparing for this visit helped make the intervisitation fit in nicely with the everyday work of her school.

Demonstrating Support for Distributed Leadership: The Story of Superintendent Alicja Winnicki

For Alicja Winnicki, the decision to participate in the District Partnerships Pilot was an easy one. Superintendent of Community School District 14, composed of 26 schools in the Greenpoint, Williamsburg, Bushwick and Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhoods of Brooklyn, Winnicki saw the pilot as a "natural next step" to support the teacher leadership work in her district. She quickly seized on its structures, encouraging her principals to leverage the teacher leadership work to support their instructional agendas and personally attending district-wide Communities of Practice events to voice her support for teacher leaders themselves. Winnicki began regularly scheduling check-ins with District 14's TTL, Hannah Brancato, setting goals for the district work, outlining her expectations, and sharing her expertise on how best to design professional learning opportunities.

Winnicki's involvement in this pilot is the most recent in her efforts to create opportunities for educators to collaborate and expand their reach. During District 14's monthly Collaborative Shares of Practice, teachers and administrators visit one another's buildings to learn about promising practices and then collaborate on ways to refine them for their own contexts. In her professional learning communities for school leaders, superintendent Winnicki encourages principals to bring along a teacher as guest. These Principal Plus One meetings often include teachers without formal leadership roles. "When teachers engage in this kind of professional learning, they tend to lead the work when they go back to their schools," she explains. "They take the strategies and try them out on their own. They lead their own PLC or they open the door of their classroom for intervisitations."

Participating in the pilot has already led to measurable improvements. In only one year, the percentage of teachers in District 14 who reported on the school survey that they had "a great deal of influence" on "setting standards for student behavior" and "selecting instructional materials used in classrooms" increased six and seven percentage points, respectively. ■

FINDING 1

Leveraging Teacher Leadership to Improve Teacher Practice: The Story of Juan Morel Campos Secondary School

In the fall of 2015, Juan Morel Campos Secondary School (JMC), a Renewal School serving more than 500 students in grades six through twelve, began a new experiment: staffing its first formal teacher leaders, creating a team of three. When their work began, Camille Rhoden-Stephens, a Peer Collaborative Teacher on the team, describes the teachers in the school as operating in a "closed system." Working closely with TTL Hannah Brancato through biweekly meetings focused on building instructional leadership skills and designing meaningful professional learning opportunities, the new teacher leadership team got to work to spread JMC's "pockets of excellence" across the school.

Recognizing the potential of their new roles to support the professional growth of their colleagues, the JMC teacher leaders worked the first year to create buy-in for this new support system. Using a nimble approach that differentiated communication to teachers based on their working styles, the teacher leadership team started working with individuals, then slowly using intervisitation to get teachers into one another's classrooms. Conversations, emails, and surveys allowed teacher leaders to gauge what their colleagues wanted to see modeled in their peers' classrooms, creating a sense of choice and investment in the intervisitations, while at the same time making explicit how these opportunities "tie back to the feedback we were

getting as a school and our problem of practice."

The team went out of their way to support a broad array of teachers in the building, allowing teachers who aren't necessarily leaders to "shine" and "encouraging people to try new things." According to Rhoden-Stephens, this inclusive approach has helped JMC's teachers understand that the teacher leadership work in their building is about collaboration and collective learning: "When they realize it's not about us showcasing best practices, teachers are more willing to participate. More willing to be vulnerable in front of us. More willing to say, 'You know what, I really don't know how this works and I'd really like you to help me sort this out.'"

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As the 2015 year came to a close, the team organized focus groups in the school, which Master Teacher Laura Pawson considers one of the "strongest moments" of their work that year. "We asked every single staff member to reflect on certain practices in our school and where we needed to grow," she says. "That we validated their voices and expertise, and let them know that everything we were planning for next year would be rooted in their feedback was really powerful."

By 2016, JMC's teacher leadership team had doubled, increasing momentum and providing a new set of challenges. With support from Brancato, the team carved out "buckets" of work. From organizing intervisitations to leading the team's inquiry work, these areas of responsibility led to more productive team meetings and a spirit of collaboration that has extended across the school. "There's certainly a culture of camaraderie amongst teachers that has developed," says Ashley Hart, a Peer Collaborative Teacher. "Before, people worked in isolation. Now teachers are asking each other for help; we find support in one another."

This year the team has also deepened their work through the district-wide Community of Practice events, in which they delve into inquiry work alongside teacher leaders from other buildings. Pawson notes that these meetings have helped hold her team "accountable" for meeting its teacher leadership goals, and appreciates the opportunity to think deeply about their problem of practice, saying they are "a time to refocus on what we're doing and why we're doing it." In addition, this winter the JMC team used its learnings and successes to host a district-wide intervisitation on its teacher leadership practices. Highlighting JMC's work in developing intervisitations within the school and coaching teachers, the visit offered both new and experienced teacher leaders from other schools the opportunity to see and reflect on how core aspects of teacher leadership work are realized in another context.

Perhaps most importantly, the system of distributed leadership created a sense of stability, easing recent leadership changes in the school, with the school moving through three different principals in under a year. When current principal Esther Shali-Olgi joined the school in November, the teacher leaders were a vital resource, joining her instructional cabinet meetings. Working with Shali-Ogli, the teacher leaders have led a number of major initiatives, developing an instructional focus, a grading policy, a school-wide problem of practice and theory of improvement, and a scope and sequence of professional learning. Shali-Olgi describes being thrilled with this close collaboration, noting that it ensures "everything is aligned."

For Shali-Ogli, the work of her teacher leaders has been integral to improving practice in a low-performing school. "They really are the peer leaders of the school. They are that step in between a teacher and the administration, where, when you get an observation back and it's Developing, what do you do? How do I fix this? You go to the teacher leader who you feel most comfortable with and say, 'This is what I'm having a problem with. How do I work on it?' ■

FINDING 2

District-wide community of practice events provide teacher leaders with meaningful professional learning and networking opportunities

Community of Practice events give teacher leaders the opportunity to engage in inquiry work while collaborating with others in similar leadership roles.

Five Community of Practice meetings are held each year. Here, District 14 teacher leaders participate in facilitated discussions where they identify a problem of practice—that is, a challenge they are seeking to address in their own school—and then engage in a series of questions about that problem in order to generate a theory of action to address it. This inquiry process is intended to give teacher leaders a plan they have developed to guide their work. Held in different schools across District 14 after regular school hours, the two-hour meetings are attended by all District 14 teachers leaders, as well as district leadership who regularly stop by to voice their support. The meetings are facilitated by Brancato, who collaborates regularly with district leadership to ensure that the design of each session contributes to teacher leaders' growing body of knowledge of the practices that help students and peers learn best, and is aligned to district priorities.

Finding 2.1:

Communities of Practice provide a model for facilitating adult learning.

Teacher leaders note the benefit of being given "space to dig deeply into a problem" and to "get to the root of the issue," adding that the meetings also help hold them accountable for moving their work forward. Seeing their peers' problems of practice offers teacher leaders a not only a valuable opportunity to critically examine how inquiry work is done in their own school, but also to share content-specific ideas about how others have approached similar problems in the past. Anthony Fiola, a Model Teacher, elaborates: "It was interesting to hear other problems of practice, hear why they basically chose that one, and then give them feedback and then allow yourself to get feedback as well. Those were important ideas... learning how other schools do it was helpful."

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—Vanessa Velez, Peer Collaborative Teacher

Finding 2.2:
Communities of Practice provide teacher leaders with a network of peer support.

Community of Practice events provide teacher leaders an opportunity to regularly get together with a familiar group of colleagues in similar roles, countering the sense of isolation that can sometimes accompany their work, especially if they are the only teacher leader, or one of just two, at their school. Brancato notes that teacher leaders have extolled the benefit of "seeing the same faces regularly throughout the year" with whom they can share successes and challenges. Camille Rhoden-Stephens, a Peer Collaborative Teacher, says that it's helpful to have these structures that encourage teachers to break out of their isolation, adding: "You get to see something through the scope and lens of someone else's school and you get to have an 'aha' moment to say, 'Okay, it's not just my school. It's not just my kids.' You have the same struggles, so you're dealing with this in this way. I can probably tweak it and bring it to my school and deal with it another way."

Finding 2.3:
Communities of Practice events provide knowledge-sharing opportunities to speed learning and improve plans.

The Community of Practice events allow teacher leaders to discuss the expectations of their roles and share strategies for meeting these expectations in their own unique contexts. Vanessa Velez, PCT from M.S. 582, notes that at times this year, as she was learning her way into her leadership role, she felt like "a fish out of water," and that the meetings sped up her learning—both about the requirements of her role and how to fit into her school context. "I learned so much just by meeting people and being able to see what was going on with their work and how I could make that come alive in my school and make it my own," Velez says. Brancato echoes this sentiment, noting the district-wide events are valuable in part because "people can bounce ideas off each other and come to a common understanding of what's a Model Teacher versus a PCT."

District Community of Practice Three: Refining Your Problem of Practice and Drafting a Theory of Action

Shortly before 3:00 p.m. on a sunny Monday in January, teacher leaders begin trickling into Master Teacher Laura Pawson's art classroom at Juan Morel Campos Secondary School. The educators are gathering from around the district for a District 14 Community of Practice event, the third of five for the year. The agenda clearly states the objective for the session: by the end teacher leaders are to have refined their problem of practice connected to their school's instructional goals and drafted a theory of action to guide their inquiry and leadership work moving forward.

As the session begins, its facilitator, Hannah Brancato, the TTL for District 14, asks participants to share in small groups their major accomplishments thus far this school year, as well as their goals between now and June. At each of the four large tables in the room participants jump into conversation, sharing challenges, frustrations, and successes. One teacher explains to her discussion partners that she's been able to meet with her middle school teachers twice a month, while another notes that she's on track to have codified a set of "tried and true" resources for her colleagues by June.

From here the group segues into a discussion of the Instructional Core, first breaking into school teams and then pairing with another school to analyze their problem of practice within that lens. One group discusses their work to increase students' acquisition and retention of vocabulary, while another is interested in improving the consistency and coherence of the supports ENL students receive from teachers to boost their achievement. The groups are asked to develop a theory of action—a list of the specific actions they will take to work on their problem of practice. As they immerse themselves in this activity, Superintendent Winnicki stops by to address the group. She notes the difficulty of the work they are engaging in, the intellectual muscle it takes, and how much they will learn from the

process. "The expertise here is beyond valuable," she tells them, adding that she is excited for them to take it back to their own schools.

After a round of feedback on problem of practice and theory of action posters, where participants pepper one another's work with yellow sticky notes, they check back as school teams to discuss the comments. The teacher leadership team working to increase student vocabulary finds itself deep in discussion around a comment asking "What is the teacher practice that needs to be adjusted?" Simultaneously, the school working on creating consistent support for ENL students cheers at a breakthrough in response to a sticky note with the comment "I wonder if you had vertical team meetings would you be able to bridge the gap in consistency?"

After Brancato closes the session, and educators file out of the art room, Brancato notes how energized she is at the power of these sessions. "It pushes people to envision possibilities," she says. "It helps them realize that obstacles are not insurmountable."

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A Note on Methodology

In order to provide a detailed description of work currently taking place in Community School District 14, and distill the findings and vignettes in this report, a qualitative case study methodology was used. Data were collected between January and May 2017 and purposive sampling was used to get a variety of perspectives. In all, fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with District 14 leadership, staff from the Office of Teacher Recruitment and Quality, and District 14 school administrators and teacher leaders in each of the three teacher leadership roles. Participant observations were also conducted at two District 14 Community of Practice events and two district-wide intervisitations.