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# Teacher Leadership and the Maine Schools for Excellence Initiative

## Case Study

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# Introduction

In 2012, the Maine Department of Education received funding from the U.S. Department of Education (ED), through the Teacher Incentive Fund Round 4 (TIF4) grant program to support implementation of its Maine Schools for Excellence (MSFE) initiative. This work was concentrated in 21 high-need schools, spread over four school districts in rural Maine.

The work of MSFE built on the Teacher Evaluation and Professional Growth (TEPG) program designed and implemented in six high-need Maine school districts in collaboration with the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards as part of its TIF3 grant awarded in 2010. Based on its overarching mission of “Enhancing Educator Effectiveness and Student Learning,” MSFE sought to (1) expand and refine the implementation of the TEPG program, (2) integrate individual and group evaluation results into a performance-based compensation system, (3) engage stakeholders throughout the design and implementation of the project, and (4) support the use of longitudinal data to inform key human capital decisions.

To attain these project goals, MSFE modeled a number of teacher leadership roles on the work of the TIF3 districts, to create opportunities for teachers to engage meaningfully in collaborative school improvement by providing strategic support to their peers throughout the project. In this report, we define teacher leadership; discuss why it is important in efforts to improve educator effectiveness and, ultimately, student outcomes; illuminate the role of teacher leadership in the MSFE theory of action; describe how teacher leaders were engaged in Maine; and highlight best practices that the MSFE project illustrates.

# What is teacher leadership and why is it important?

Though definitions of teacher leadership are abundant and variable, teacher leadership is generally understood to be “[a] process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of the school community to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement.”<sup>1</sup> These teachers are frequently selected based on demonstrated effectiveness in the classroom and an expressed interest in leadership. They take on additional responsibility beyond their instructional responsibilities in the classroom, and typically receive additional compensation. While teacher leadership roles and responsibilities tend to vary considerably from district to district and school to school, the term “teacher leadership” has come to be used as an umbrella term that is applied across contexts.<sup>2</sup> This usage has led to the perception of teacher leadership as a uniform practice, when in actuality this leadership occurs through both non-titled, informal collaborative efforts of classroom practitioners as well as through the more formal use of teacher leadership roles that are tailored to meet the needs of the system of which they are a part. States and districts have defined a wide variety of teacher leader roles, ranging from temporary or ad hoc participation in decision-making or advisory bodies and/or helping colleagues, to providing advice, to moving out of the classroom into full-time leadership roles.

Common teacher leader roles include:

- Mentor for new or struggling teachers
- Instructional Coach
- Facilitator of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)
- Data Coach
- Peer Observer
- Subject Area Curriculum Leader
- Facilitator of School/District Professional Development

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<sup>1</sup> York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(3), 255–316.

<sup>2</sup> Wenner, J. A., & Campbell, T. (2016). The theoretical and empirical basis of teacher leadership: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, 0034654316653478*.

This role-based strategy allows clear definition of responsibilities and the competencies needed to carry them out.<sup>3</sup> However, teacher leadership may also be more informal and in some cases “self-initiated,” and may require less of a time commitment, allowing the teacher to maintain full-time instructional responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> For example, teachers may rotate serving on school leadership teams or district committees or may serve as experts or innovative “action-research”-oriented practitioners specialized in specific content or instructional practices who are willing to provide help to, and explore new ideas with, colleagues.

There is a growing interest in how teachers can take on additional responsibilities to improve teaching, learning, and student achievement, particularly in light of progress over the past 10 years in measuring educator effectiveness and intentionally directing the flow of effective educators as resources through human capital management systems. Teacher leadership is a way to:

- **Keep good teachers in the classroom.** Teachers who might otherwise leave teaching for administrative positions can remain in the classroom by providing a combination of job enrichment (i.e., more varied roles and responsibilities that extend beyond the teacher’s own classroom) and additional compensation.
- **Improve school functioning by “distributing” leadership.** School leaders, including principals and assistant principals, frequently do not have the time or depth of expertise to support all aspects of school improvement and instructional practice change. Having teacher leaders provide instructional coaching, mentor new or struggling teachers, or design and conduct school-based professional development can reduce the instructional leadership burden on administrators, increase the amount of support provided, and utilize the specific expertise of teachers.
- **Provide teachers with more control over and “voice” in their work.** Teachers can be given more control by having them participate in decision-making about what happens in their school, for example, as members of grade-level, subject, or school leadership teams, and as active participants in broader initiatives aimed at school improvement.
- **Change the culture of teachers’ work from the old norm of working in isolation to a new norm of collaboration and teamwork.** Teacher leaders can be a catalyst for this change by providing teacher-to-teacher interaction around practice, ranging from opening up their classrooms to observation by others to acting as a peer observer or instructional coach.

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<sup>3</sup> Murphy, J. (Ed.). (2005). *Connecting teacher leadership and school improvement*. Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, CA.

<sup>4</sup> Heneman, H., Milanowski, A., & Finster, M. (2016). Guide to creating teacher leader positions. Retrieved from <http://www.tifcommunity.org>

# Why did Maine invest in teacher leadership?

MSFE was a bold, comprehensive school improvement initiative representing one of the most complex and dynamic change efforts ever attempted in Maine schools. As such, MSFE placed a priority on the collaborative nature of the work, which meant engaging educators at all levels of the system in all aspects of its design and implementation. Recognizing how critical teacher involvement was to such an effort, the MSFE project identified multiple objectives for teacher leadership, including (1) supporting the implementation of the TEPG, (2) creating shared ownership and understanding of the components and expectations of the TEPG program, and (3) facilitating professional growth and the improvement of instruction.

**“With MSFE, we have constant followup, constant support. They come and meet with us. We see them on a regular basis. And that’s huge to have the face-to-face contact to ask questions and feel like your questions are being answered in a timely manner and that your voice is being heard.”**

**Mark Kenney, Principal**

MSFE leaders recognized that to effectively engage teachers in the processes associated with evaluation and professional growth, they would need to provide accessible sources of direct support to address questions and mitigate frustrations as teachers learned the new system. At the same time, they were aware that most of the participating districts had limited administrative resources to administer and support a more rigorous evaluation, performance-based compensation, and large-scale implementation of the vision for improving instruction. Therefore, they chose to create teacher leadership roles that served to take advantage of the expertise and “frontline” cultural capital of classroom teachers. The goal was to develop their colleagues’ knowledge of the TEPG program and support their

participation in implementing the program without overburdening school and district administrators who, in these relatively small districts, already wore many hats. Once teachers were knowledgeable about TEPG and were supported in the system that was scaffolded to meet their needs, they were able to provide meaningful feedback on how to improve its design, implementation, and potential impact.

MSFE leaders were also committed to refining the TEPG program, which was originally developed in collaboration with educators in districts that participated in the TIF3 project, as they expanded implementation to additional school districts. In a rural state such as Maine that was under local control, MSFE leaders recognized that neither the “cookie cutter” approach to evaluation and professional growth, nor similar initiatives developed in larger states and urban settings, would result in the necessary level of engagement. A tailored approach was needed, one by the people participating in the systems in each district and familiar with its context and needs. So, they created teacher leadership opportunities that engaged teachers across the four new MSFE districts in refining the design and implementation of the TEPG program. These opportunities were not limited to the period of design and initial implementation; rather, spread out across several years to match the needs of educators as their understanding and the system itself evolved. For example, in Year 1 of the grant, MSFE involved teachers as members of the district steering committee charged with considering options and making decisions related to system development. In Year 2, teachers were called upon as leaders to collaborate as part of a team of teachers, administrators, and superintendents from across the grant districts to develop a Student Learning Objectives (SLO) framework and adapt it for their own local district context and were also invited to help refine the SLO framework in Year 3. By engaging a broad base of educators over a period, MSFE leaders were able to create shared ownership and compelling interest in contributing to the success of the evaluation and professional growth program.

**“Maine has taken the path less traveled in the creation of these systems. We’ve developed every aspect of the human capital management system from scratch. We’ve done that with a high degree of involvement from teachers, from leaders, from board members, rolling up their sleeves, working collaboratively to design a system that is culturally compatible, that drives district priorities and drives improvement and instruction for students.”**

**Scott Harrison,  
Maine Schools for Excellence  
Director**

Most importantly, MSFE leaders kept professional growth and improving instruction at the center of implementing the TEPG program. They worked with participating districts to create teacher leadership roles that facilitated peer-to-peer observation and feedback, formed PLCs and resource teams to identify and address professional practice and student learning needs, and improved instruction through formal, individual coaching. Teacher leaders in these roles were given the structure and professional autonomy to work with their peers to identify topics and resources, as well as the training and support needed to directly facilitate professional learning. This added capacity helped to create a culture of professional growth in the schools that participated in the MSFE initiative. It also contributed to program sustainability by building a district-specific “bank” of resources and local professional expertise aligned to the practices in the TEPG standards and other program components.



**“Teacher evaluation is a complicated issue, and it’s really important for teachers to understand and to have buy-in to that process. And so through the TIF grant we have been able to really involve the teachers in helping them to see the benefits of enhancing teaching and learning. We are using teachers to teach teachers, and that has been very, very effective. Teachers are investing in themselves, they’re investing in each other.”**

**Dave Murphy, Superintendent  
School Administrative  
District #44**

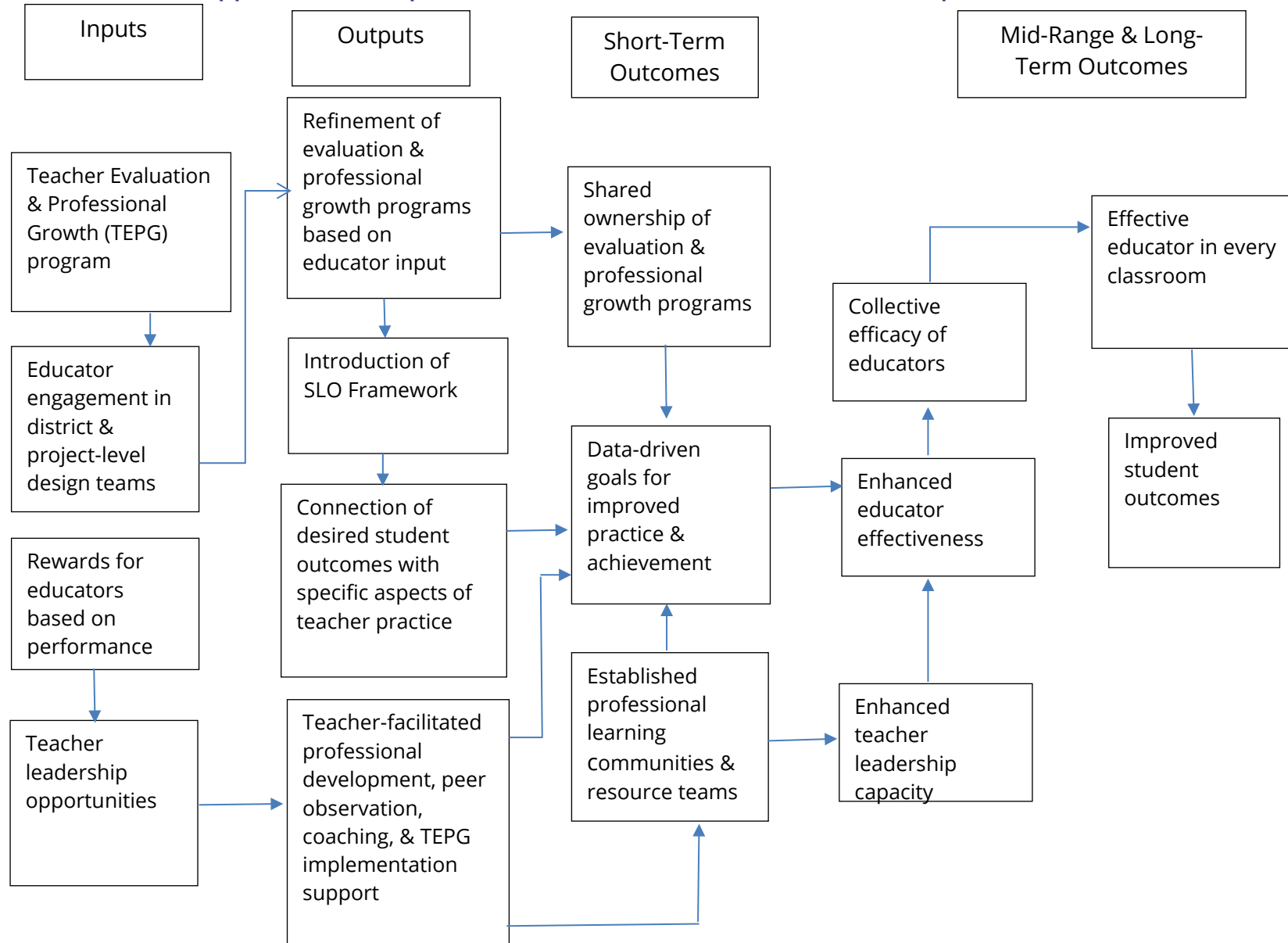
These roles evolved over time as the culture of peer-supported professional growth developed. It began with TEPG facilitators using MSFE-developed resources and training to lead professional development with small groups of teachers around the TEPG expectations and classroom practices identified as high leverage at the program level, including differentiation, assessment, and higher order thinking skills. By beginning the work in small groups focused on areas of practice and growth that were universally applicable and not tied directly to the effectiveness of individual teachers’ practice, the TEPG facilitators were able to directly facilitate and model peer-to-peer professional learning and collective efficacy in a nonthreatening way.

As teachers became more comfortable and familiar with collaborative, improvement-focused peer-to-peer learning, TEPG facilitators conducted peer observations, providing individualized feedback to their peers using the comprehensive MSFE TEPG Rubric Companion Guide to guide observations, enrich conversations, and promote reflections on teacher practice. After the TEPG facilitator role was well established, districts introduced a number

of other coaching roles to provide direct support to teachers around specific areas of practice, such as data use, mathematics instruction, and National Board Certification. After teachers in the MSFE had developed sufficient expertise in peer-to-peer learning, they formed TEPG resource teams. These teams of teachers were responsible for designing, planning, and implementing collaborative professional learning experiences. The resource teams focused on topics identified as relevant across the MSFE districts, including new teacher induction, classroom video and peer feedback, subject area curriculum, and TEPG sustainability planning, as well as specific topics and practices selected by teachers as relevant to their individual and collective context and professional growth needs.

Through this evolution, peer-facilitated professional learning began with a relatively small group of teachers who had developed expertise in facilitation and around topics that were generally applicable and moved into increasingly individualized and specific coaching, feedback, and professional growth experiences guided by an expanding group of skilled teacher leaders. All the while, the participating teachers were building their own expertise in and comfort with the TEPG process of continuous improvement and peer-to-peer learning, until they had accumulated enough expertise to facilitate their own professional growth in small groups. For more information on the role of teacher leadership in the MSFE theory of action, see Figure 1 below.

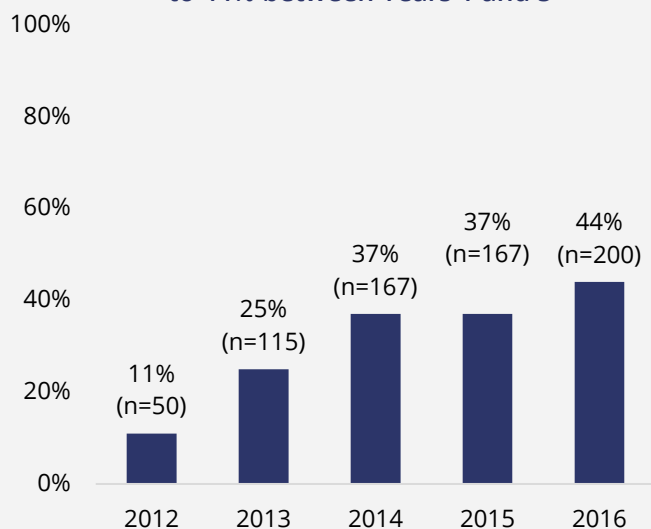
**Figure 1: Maine Schools for Excellence teacher leadership theory of action: As great teachers and leaders are better supported, developed, and retained, student outcomes will improve**



# In what ways have teacher leaders been engaged?

The MSFE project created a variety of teacher leader roles, including those that would continue for the duration of the project, and in some cases beyond, as well as temporary roles districts strategically implemented during a particular phase of the initiative to serve as specific supports key to project success. The number and variety of teacher leadership roles grew throughout the project, increasing the percentage of educators who were engaged as school leaders from 11% in the first year of the project to 44% in the final year (see Figure 2). These teacher leader roles (see Figure 3) evolved organically as the project developed and implemented components of the human capital management initiatives in each participating district. This approach was a good fit both with the

**Figure 2:** Percentage of MSFE educators engaged as school leaders increased from 11% to 44% between Years 1 and 5



state's tradition of local control and with consideration to educators' unfamiliarity with concepts such as performance-based compensation and rigorous assessment of individual teacher effectiveness.

### ***District steering committee (DSC)***

**member** was among the first leadership roles identified. DSC members were teachers from each district who worked with other stakeholders to refine the evaluation rubrics, consider the learning and growth measures, and identify practitioner needs related to the implementation process. Districts operationalized these temporary roles only during a critical period in developing the evaluation rubrics. The roles served to

gather teachers' input and expertise for the rubric design. They also served to establish a skilled cadre of teachers in each district with a sound understanding of professional practices and performance levels within the rubrics and the evaluation design process. Through this role, the MFSE project involved teachers, fostered understanding, and gained more widespread acceptance for more rigorous performance evaluation and performance-based compensation.

The **peer observer** was a permanent teacher leader role implemented to strategically support the overarching goal of the project to enhance educator effectiveness and student learning. This role was required of all teachers and designed to promote formative feedback, self-reflection, and sharing of practices among colleagues. While teachers were initially anxious about this process,

many of them later reported that peer observation “provided them with some of the most enriching conversations about their work that they’d had in many years.” Still others, who had only been comfortable observing/being observed by teachers within their own grade or content area, expressed the desire to see colleagues in other grades and subject areas. The peer observer role not only facilitated professional development and collegial interaction but also helped familiarize teachers with the evaluation rubrics and underlying vision of instructional improvement.

**Figure 3: MSFE teacher leadership role development, 2012-2017**

|  | 2012-2013  | 2013-2014  | 2014-2015   | 2015-2016   | 2016-2017  |
|--|--|--|---|---|--|
| <b>District Steering Committee Members</b> | Joined Superintendents and administrators to develop SLO Framework | Focused on refinement of TEPG rubric, resulting in efficient and targeted PD standards   | Collaborated with administrators on using the TEPG Companion Guide and building quality assessments for use in SLOs | Continued to refine the TEPG system implementation                          |  |
| <b>TEPG Facilitators</b>                   |  | Supported all aspects of TEPG process  | Facilitated PD cohorts related to high leverage classroom practices   | Targeted specific priorities in TIF 4 districts                             | Expanded to planning and preparation of PD session   |
| <b>TEPG Resource Team Members</b>          |  |  | Ran a pilot in which teachers designed and implemented trainings for professional and school growth                 | Expanded to 110 sites across the 4 districts, each with its own facilitator |  |
| <b>TEPG Resource Team Facilitators</b>     |  |  |   | Provided Resource Team with structure for collaborative study               |  |
| <b>Instructional and Math Coaches</b>      |  |  | Helped improve subject-area instruction in their districts.   |   | Released from classroom to work as full-time coaches |
| <b>SLO Workgroup Members</b>               |  | Contributed to the refinement of MSFE SLO Framework                                      |   |   |  |
| <b>SLO Facilitators</b>                    |  |  | Helped educators assess student knowledge, set goals, and track progress  |   |  |
| <b>Data Coaches</b>                        |  |  | Supported educators analyzing student achievement data to inform instructional planning                             |   |  |
| <b>Teacher Advisory Group</b>              |  | Offered support on HCMS systems, including development, communication and implementation |   |   |  |

As districts rolled out the TEPG program, they added the teacher leader role of **TEPG facilitator**. MSFE trained TEPG facilitators in evidence-based observation and feedback processes alongside principals and other evaluators. The program also trained them on how best to work with adult learners and on how to lead change productively through a challenging initiative. TEPG facilitators then shared their knowledge and resources with colleagues in a PLC format at their own schools. They planned PLC topics to coincide with components on the TEPG program timeline, such as:

- Understanding professional practice standards
- Constructing quality assessments for SLOs
- Writing SLOs to measure student learning growth
- Setting professional goals
- Sharing aspects of their practice observations in pre-/post-observation conferences
- Providing feedback to peers through peer observation
- Using student perception surveys and self-reflection
- Engaging in ongoing improvement-focused conversations and year-end summative conferences with evaluators

As the evaluation system became established, those serving as TEPG facilitators assumed increased responsibility for planning and preparing professional development sessions at the school and district levels, with professional development ranging from the specific practices in the TEPG rubric to instructional unit design, curriculum development, and ways to improve school climate. To improve the skills and knowledge of educators, MSFE established more than 100 interest-driven resource teams across the four participating districts. **TEPG resource team facilitators** were designated for each of the resource teams. Their role was to provide a structure to the resource team, facilitating collaborative study, expertise exchange, and professional dialogue. Often these leaders were either self- or peer-selected as groups of educators formed around one or more common needs and ideas related to instructional practice and school improvement.

In some districts, the TEPG facilitator roles evolved into more permanent **instructional coaches** who were released full time to support the professional practice needs of their colleagues on an ongoing basis. At the same time, MSFE and the Maine Department of Education worked with one of the state universities to support the design of a mathematics coaching course. The first cohort included a number of participants selected from the MSFE TIF4 schools.

Teacher leader roles also evolved to support the TEPG program's expansion to include SLOs as a measure of educator effectiveness. **SLO framework workgroup members** included teacher leaders from the four districts participating in the MSFE initiative, along with superintendents and administrators from all 10 of the TIF3 and 4 districts. Workgroup members participated in this collaborative effort to develop a framework that would drive the SLO process not only in their

districts but also throughout the state as districts outside of TIF looked for guidance on meeting the student growth measure component of Maine's educator effectiveness law. As with each of MSFE's teacher leadership roles, once the use of SLOs was implemented, the MSFE districts created and implemented a role to support the process, known as an **SLO facilitator**. Teachers in this position supported teachers in developing quality assessments of student learning based on an analysis of student needs, establishing student growth targets, and monitoring progress and other aspects of achieving their individual and team SLOs.

Since data analysis is key to identifying, measuring, and monitoring student learning through SLOs, MSFE districts introduced a role in concert with SLO implementation designed to support teachers' use of student learning data. **Data coaches** supported staff in disaggregating and analyzing student learning data from assessments and other student work to inform instructional planning and identify needed supports for student learning at the classroom, school, and district level. Supporting the SLO process was a natural extension of their role, given the degree to which the SLO process parallels the instructional process of assessing students' knowledge before instruction to set a baseline and inform instructional planning, setting goals and objectives for student learning, and monitoring student learning during and after instruction to track their progress toward goals.

The MSFE project continues to work with the Maine Department of Education and educator preparation programs to identify and develop training for other, similar teacher leader roles, and its substantial contribution to moving the profile of teacher leadership forward has not gone unnoticed outside of Maine. In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education selected Maine as one of seven states to send a team to participate in its first ever Teach to Lead State Summit in Virginia. Teach to Lead is a joint initiative of the U.S. Department of Education, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the mission of which is "to advance student outcomes by expanding opportunities for teacher leadership...by providing resources, facilitating stakeholder consultation, and encouraging professional collaborations to develop and amplify the work of teacher leaders."

From this initial meeting, MSFE worked with the Maine Department of Education to establish a Teach to Lead Maine Committee that is being co-chaired by two former Maine State Teachers of the Year and includes teachers (including a number of National Board-certified teachers), policy leaders, university staff, members of state educator associations, and the business community. Building upon the successful work of the MSFE schools, Teach to Lead Maine has established a Mission, Goals, and Commitment Statement based on its vision that "Every Maine student will benefit from the purposeful involvement of teacher leaders who collaborate in guiding the continuous improvement of schools and the teaching profession." This committee expects to continue carrying forward and expand the positive impact that the MSFE teacher leadership work has had on schools, teaching, and student learning in Maine long after the MSFE project has completed its work in fall 2017.

# What promising practices does this case illustrate?

This MSFE story illustrates the potential of teacher leadership roles to enhance educator effectiveness and, ultimately, improve student learning. Teacher leadership has no universally agreed-upon definition. Teacher leadership roles have been widely implemented in states and districts across the country as a strategy to support professional growth and improvements in instruction. However, Maine's implementation of teacher leadership roles as part of the MSFE initiative highlights three characteristics of best practice:

1. Aligning teacher leadership roles to the goals and needs of the schools, the district, and the state
2. Distributing a wide variety of teacher leadership roles throughout schools and districts, providing ample opportunities for engagement, ownership, and a high degree of support
3. Using teacher leadership to build educator capacity and promote collective efficacy

First, MSFE districts implemented teacher leadership roles that they strategically designed to meet the needs of the educators in participating districts. As educator needs evolved, so did the roles. The earliest roles were designed to build knowledge and support participation in the professional growth and evaluation program. These roles were critical not only to the success of initial implementation of the TEPG program but also to the subsequent refinement of the program based on educator feedback. MSFE districts created teacher leadership roles to inform and support modifications and expansions of the TEPG program, such as the expansion of student growth to include SLOs. Then, as familiarity and proficiency with the program increased, teacher leadership roles shifted to facilitate PLCs; MSFE districts formed TEPG resource groups to facilitate collaborative study and professional dialogue among educators to improve their knowledge and instructional practices. They designed some of the roles to be short term and

**“Some of the ways we’ve used teacher leaders is to really send that message that there’s coherence here; that the standards for teaching and the work you do with students and the measures we use for students in our classroom and in our educator effectiveness system really work together to help the whole system improve, to help us move our district forward and make a difference for its students; to really move the needle.”**

**Sue Williams,  
Professional Development  
Coordinator**

phased them out when that specific level of support was no longer needed, while others became permanent and remain in place because they align to the ongoing needs of educators in these districts and continue to build the capacity and the culture necessary to maintain school improvement. The strategic design and ongoing adaptation of teacher leadership roles in response to educator needs are key qualities linked to the success of teacher leadership in supporting professional growth, and enhanced educator effectiveness and student learning.

Second, by distributing a wide variety of teacher leadership roles throughout the districts and schools that participated in the MSFE initiative, Maine created a broad base of engagement that fostered shared ownership of the TEPG program. In the beginning of the program, having teacher leaders distributed across these schools and districts provided much-needed supports as educators participated in the TEPG program for the first time. These supports were critical in ensuring that educators could effectively engage in the process with minimal frustration and conflict. As the initiative continued, having a large number and variety of teacher leaders providing feedback helped to ensure that teachers' voices were informing the expansion and modification of the professional growth and evaluation system to best meet staff and student needs and the culture of the schools and districts as a whole. In the latter stages of the initiative, positioning teacher leaders as facilitators of professional development fostered peer-to-peer learning and collective efficacy, and created a sense of ownership and responsibility for their own and their peers' professional growth and improvement.

Finally, by using teacher leaders to build educator capacity throughout the project, MSFE was able to successfully increase the capacity of these four districts — as well as the six MSFE districts that came before them — to implement and support more rigorous evaluation, performance-based compensation, and large-scale implementation of its vision for improving instruction. Educators in participating districts had the benefit of increased capacity in designing effective SLOs, using student achievement data to inform instruction, incorporating feedback from peer observers into their practice, and engaging with peers around shared areas of interest related to student learning, instruction, and professional growth. As a result, this initiative became more than the implementation of an evaluation and performance pay program; it became a system of continuous improvement, the sustainability of which was not dependent on any one individual or even a small group of individuals. The educators who had the benefit of working with these teacher leaders now embody the skills, mindsets, and dispositions necessary to sustain the work of the MSFE initiative.

To learn more about the MSFE initiative and the TIF program, visit the TIF Community at [www.tifcommunity.org](http://www.tifcommunity.org). It provides more information about the TIF grantees, including Maine, and access to resources on teacher leadership, performance-based compensation, human capital management systems, and other topics.