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# Beyond Classroom Walls

Developing Innovative Work Roles for Teachers

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# Introduction and summary

The teaching profession has long been structured around full-time classroom responsibilities that are defined by the location, timing, and schedule of the school day and a ubiquitous one-teacher-per-classroom model. In most districts, the only option for highly successful teachers to advance in the profession or serve more students is to leave the classroom to serve as an assistant principal, principal, or district administrator.

Exceptions to this traditional approach exist in many schools and districts across the country. According to a 2009 national survey, more than half of teachers (56 percent) and nearly half of principals (49 percent) report that at least some teachers in their school combine part-time classroom teaching with other roles or responsibilities in their school or district.<sup>1</sup>

But evidence does not suggest these nontraditional roles are particularly innovative, focused on enhancing teacher quality, or designed to extend the reach of the best teachers to more students.<sup>2</sup> A significant number include roles for teachers to serve as instructional or curriculum specialists, data coaches, or mentors—roles that typically remove teachers from the classroom to work with adults rather than students.<sup>3</sup> As author Frederick Hess points out, “even in the most innovative and dynamic charter schools, teaching bundles together the roles of content deliverer, curriculum designer, diagnostician, disciplinarian, discussion leader, empathizer, clerk, secretary, and attendant—and asks teachers to fulfill these roles for a variety of students in a variety of content areas.”<sup>4</sup> When our research team went looking for innovative staffing models—those that engage highly effective teachers in new roles with students or other adults, beyond traditional classroom boundaries and schedules (see “Methods” box)—we found few experiments that fit our study criteria.

Yet nearly four in 10 teachers report that they are interested in combining their classroom work with other roles or responsibilities in their school or district, including 46 percent of teachers with five or fewer years of experience.<sup>5</sup> Across the country, interest is increasing in alternative approaches to school staffing that provide more flexible work roles and advancement opportunities for highly effec-

tive teachers—both as a means to recognize and retain teachers in hard-to-staff schools, and to allow the best teachers to have a positive impact on larger numbers of students.<sup>6</sup>

With this growing interest, the field needs to learn what it can from early adopters of role-shifting reforms. Here we profile two organizations—a small charter management organization based in California and a large school district in Virginia—that have recently pursued staffing innovations designed with these goals in mind. While they have taken very different approaches, both study sites offer examples of the types of roles that other districts, schools, and charter organizations can pursue to open up and professionalize teachers’ work, while revealing several critical limitations related to design and implementation that the next generation of innovators should heed. We do not hold up these examples as models for other education leaders to replicate. However, from them we gain a better understanding of the design and policy conditions that enable or constrain staffing innovations; and offer preliminary lessons learned for other districts, schools, and charter organizations about how to yield the greatest impact for students.

## Methods

To learn more about alternative school staffing models, we set out to study states, districts, traditional public schools, or charter schools that have recently implemented staffing innovations designed to improve career opportunities, provide more flexible work roles, or extend the reach of the most highly effective teachers. We gathered information about staffing innovations currently taking place around the country by scouring news articles and reports from major news media and Internet search engines, soliciting recommendations from colleagues, and tracking additional leads that arose from their recommendations.

From an initial list of sites, we chose two that best fit our study criteria, including:

- Developing new roles for teachers that enable them to reach more students and/or expand their impact beyond the classroom
- Using a quality screen to identify highly effective teachers to participate in the program
- Focusing on at-risk students and/or hard-to-staff schools
- Achieving promising results with students and teachers

Only one of the sites we discovered met all of these criteria (Rocketship Education). Fairfax County’s Teacher Leadership Program provided the next-best fit: While participating schools did not use a standard quality screen to identify eligible teachers, the program met the other criteria. Other potential sites, including both district and charter schools, typically did not involve work roles designed to extend teachers’ reach to directly or indirectly impact more students, or had not been in existence long enough to demonstrate positive or promising results.

For both the selected sites, we then conducted interviews with three to four members of the organization’s staff, including teachers who have been affected by the changes, and conducted a detailed review of internal and publically available documents and data about results.

Experiences in our two case study sites suggest that district, school, and charter school leaders may pursue very different approaches to reach the same goal of making teachers' roles more flexible, dynamic, and rewarding—and to find success in very different contexts and circumstances. In their pursuit of these new types of roles, however, education leaders are likely to face several similar challenges with regard to design, systems, and policy no matter the particular innovations they adopt. With regard to the design of innovative work roles, education leaders can build on the experiences in our case study sites by:

- **Extending teachers' reach beyond traditional classroom boundaries**, through redesigns of both *organizational* structures and *job* responsibilities that enable great teachers to directly or indirectly reach larger number of students beyond their classroom walls
- **Considering teachers' individual strengths and weaknesses**, as well as their overall effectiveness in improving student learning, when conceiving and designing new work roles
- **Designing roles with both students' and teachers' interests in mind**, including a clear path between new roles for teachers and the student learning gains they want to achieve
- **Ensuring long-term financial sustainability** for what is too often an add-on program by keeping costs in mind from the start
- **Challenging traditional expectations** by embarking on a campaign with teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders to clarify the changes to teachers' daily roles and demonstrate the benefits of innovation in this realm for both teachers and students

Experience in our case study sites also suggests that education leaders should be mindful of the impact of internal systems and local and state policy when designing and implementing new types of work roles. These types of considerations include:

- **Collective bargaining provisions.** In many states and districts, implementing different work roles for teachers will require significant changes to collective bargaining agreements and current teacher contracts—particularly regarding teachers' work roles, schedules, and compensation. Pending those changes, education leaders will need to seek buy-in from participating teachers and proceed around existing agreements with care.

- **Class size mandates/certification requirements.** Ideally, state requirements regarding maximum class size and teacher certification should be loosened to permit staffing innovations that have positive impacts on student outcomes. While they are in place, however, experiences in our case study sites suggest that education leaders may be able to carefully work around them.
- **Payroll/HR administration.** Roles that depart from the traditional one-teacher, one-classroom model are likely to require changes to the salary schedule and payroll processes. Ideally, these types of systems would shift more authority to the school level to enable systems to adapt more easily to school-driven innovations. But while human resources and payroll systems remain centrally controlled and fairly one-size-fits-all, innovators will likely need to work closely with central office staff to ensure necessary accommodations.
- **Technological limitations.** Although there have been great strides in technology and learning software in recent years, there are still significant limitations that may impact the extent of what education leaders can do in the short term. Innovators should use technology where it provides a solution, and tap other resources—such as tutors and community-based organizations—to meet their needs as technology continues to develop.

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