



## Learning From Leaders

### Perspectives From Teachers At The 2017 Tennessee Teacher Leader Summit

#### Introduction

For the past several years, Tennessee has been working to establish and expand opportunities for teachers to serve in leadership roles. School-level, district-level, and state-level teacher leadership opportunities have increased across the state, empowering educators to expand their influence without leaving the classroom. To coordinate and sustain these efforts, the [Tennessee Teacher Leadership Collaborative \(TTLIC\)](#) launched in 2016 as an overarching network for teacher leadership and collaboration. This network, headed by the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) and the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), consists of teacher leaders, district leaders, advocacy partners, higher education representatives, and leaders from the philanthropic community. In July 2017, the TTLIC hosted the inaugural Teacher Leader Summit to bring together teacher leaders from across Tennessee for a day of networking, celebrating, and collaborating. Attendees included teachers who have served in one of the state's several statewide teacher fellowships, participated in statewide teacher leader networks, or served in school- and district-level teacher leadership roles.

At the Teacher Leader Summit, participants had the opportunity to engage in collaborative problem-solving sessions to provide feedback on some of Tennessee's most pressing education policy topics: standards and assessment, teacher leadership, teacher effectiveness and growth, and communications and advocacy. This brief details the perspectives that teachers offered during these sessions and provides insight into potential solutions to continue enhancing Tennessee's education system and historic student achievement gains.

#### Standards And Assessment

Many of Tennessee's most important changes in education over the last several years have centered on standards and assessment. Teacher leaders play an important role in helping policymakers understand areas where they feel confident with these changes and areas where they could benefit from additional support. Teacher leaders presented several ideas for additional supports around standards and

assessments, including expanded training and access to resources. Participants also discussed the role that several key stakeholders across the state could play in providing the supports.

Teacher leaders highlighted several areas where they could use additional support around assessment, including more time, training, and accessible resources. They also highlighted the need for stability and consistency in the release of testing data.

### **Additional Supports And Questions Around Assessments**

**Time and Data.** Many participants expressed the need for a fresh start, as well as the desire to move past a year when test administration did not go as they would have hoped. They want time to let the assessment settle, consistency from year to year, and improved turnaround on assessment results each year so they can make better use of the data received. Additionally, they expressed a desire for more information on how the different pieces of data they receive (e.g., quick scores, raw scores, scale scores, growth scores, etc.) should be used and which pieces of data they should prioritize.

**Training and Accessible Resources.** In general, teachers would like more support through training and additional resources related to testing. Teacher leaders indicated they could benefit from training and resources on a range of topics, such as building more authentic assessments for their classrooms, prioritizing standards throughout the year, and incorporating TNReady language into their own tasks and assignments. Teacher leaders also said they want to access the currently available resources more easily, as many expressed difficulty accessing and navigating the resources available on EdTools and the TDOE website. Some specific areas where teacher leaders indicated they could benefit from increased training, resources, and information included:

- Resources allowing teachers to see standards side by side with question types
- Training on released items and how to use them to drive student growth
- More comprehensive blueprints that are available more quickly
- Practice tests with answer keys that provide rationale for correct answers
- Continued training on how to unpack the standards and instructional shifts
- Clarity on assessment purposes (e.g., formative vs. summative)
- Information about the connection between higher education standards and K-12 assessments
- Explanation of how the state ensures validity of assessment items

**Alignment.** Although ELA and math teacher leaders were largely positive about the alignment they see between the standards and our new assessment, science and social studies teacher leaders expressed a strong desire for new assessments that will give them better information about their more rigorous standards. They want more data than just the raw score they have received for the last several years, and expressed the need for a test that will demonstrate the importance of science and social studies to others in their school, district, community, and state. Furthermore, participants in non-tested subjects expressed that they would like to see more growth measures aligned to their own content.

## Key Stakeholders For Assessment Support And Information

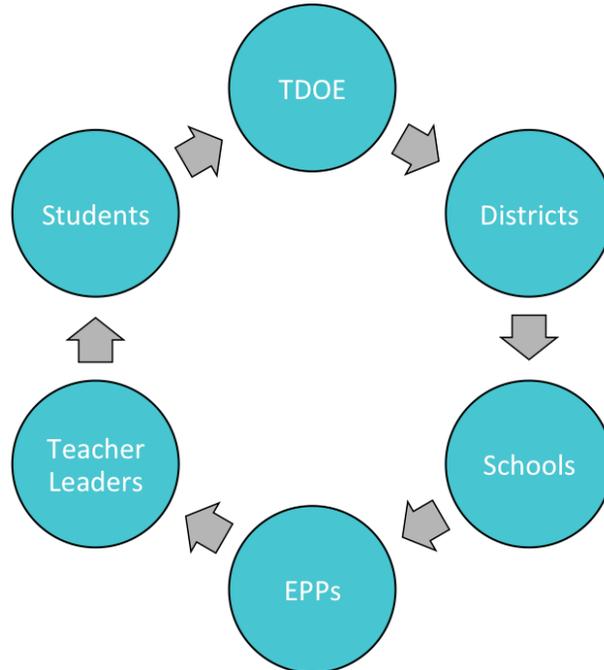


Figure 1: Key Stakeholders

**TDOE.** The TDOE can help improve the assessment process by continuing to work on returning results from assessments sooner as well as providing teachers with access to sample items, blueprints, and other resources to support assessments. It would also be helpful if teachers had more familiarity with the leaders who are in charge of assessment so they could reach out for more information when needed. Lastly, it would be useful if the TDOE would provide more thorough guidance on formative assessments and universal screeners to ensure they are truly aligned to our state standards.

Teacher leaders identified a number of different stakeholders who can play a part in enhancing the assessment process.

**Districts.** Districts can help by transparently sharing information about assessment with teachers. They can more regularly include teachers in the decision-making process around assessment or clarify how teachers can be involved to ensure their confidence and voice in the process. In particular, participants discussed a desire to be involved in areas such as choosing curricular materials, universal screeners, and formative assessment tools.

**Schools.** Schools can help improve the assessment process by providing job-embedded support over time focused on how to use the data for TNReady, particularly to support using data to prioritize collaboration at the school level. Schools can also help teachers evaluate the purpose of various assessments to determine if there are some assessments that may no longer be needed (e.g., weekly spelling tests).

**Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs).** EPPs can help by offering more opportunities for pre-service teachers to use data to inform instruction. Many teacher leaders shared that they never received explicit training on data use in the classroom and that it could be helpful for there to be an increased focus on how to use assessment data—from both formative and summative assessments—to drive instructional decision-making.

**Teacher Leaders.** Teacher leaders can help by sharing best practices in assessment with peers, either through modeling during a classroom visit or by sharing data at a Professional Learning Community (PLC). Several participants expressed a need for opportunities to observe their peers who are adept at using and discussing assessment data with their students. Teacher leaders who receive opportunities for training should also be empowered by principals to share with their colleagues what they learned to ensure greater understanding of the teacher role in assessment in Tennessee. With high-quality information, teachers can better serve as advocates and credible voices on assessments to colleagues and students.

**Students.** Students can help improve the assessment process by asking teachers to explain the purpose of assessments given in class and asking for more information about how teachers use assessment data to inform their instructional strategies. Additionally, there may even be a role for students to provide input on test questions so they feel they have a seat at the table. If they understood the purpose of assessment, more students may be more supportive of the assessment process.

## Teacher Leadership

Tennessee must continue its strategies and practices that support a thriving culture of teacher leadership. Though teachers benefit immensely from teacher leadership opportunities, barriers often prevent teachers from seeking out or expanding upon those opportunities. Teacher leaders identified a number of different resources and structures that can help teacher leadership continue to thrive.

To sustain a thriving teacher leadership culture, participants highlighted a need for administrator buy-in, collaboration, and networking. Teachers also proposed shifting the way we perceive teacher leaders’

### Sustaining A Thriving Teacher Leadership Culture

**Buy-In.** Teacher leaders shared that having buy-in from school leaders and district leaders is an important support to help teacher leaders thrive. Participants highlighted that sometimes, school and district leaders struggle to recognize the value that teacher leaders can provide or they are hesitant about moving to a shared leadership model, as described in the [Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards](#). With leadership buy-in, teacher leaders get the needed support to take risks in their new positions.

**Time, Collaboration, And Coaching.** Participants highlighted release time for teacher leaders as an important strategy for attracting and supporting teacher leaders and suggested that sharing creative, effective scheduling models from successful schools may provide

ideas. They also want to continue to develop their leadership potential through learning opportunities. Help with coaching their peers was incredibly important as well. As one teacher said, “even coaches need a coach every now and then.” Furthermore, participants suggested that facilitating opportunities for teacher-led professional learning would not only benefit teacher leaders but would benefit colleagues as well.

Teacher leaders also suggested creating structures at the school or district level for frequent peer observation opportunities, such as staggering planning within departments to ensure colleagues have time to observe one another. Peer observations enhance teachers’ professional growth and provide necessary time for collaboration around improving instructional practice. Additionally, peer observations enable teachers to see their colleagues excel in ways they otherwise may not see.

**Connection And Information.** Teacher leaders need to stay connected in order for teacher leadership to thrive. These connections may include partners at the TDOE, national partners, or other teacher leaders across the state, especially with those in their content area. Furthermore, participants noted that having opportunities to network would be incredibly beneficial, perhaps through conferences or summits for teacher leaders throughout the year. Participants also suggested the need for a database or a website that may provide connection opportunities to other teacher leaders across the state.

### **Facilitating Increased Access To Teacher Leadership Opportunities**

In several cases, teachers find it difficult to step into teacher leadership positions. There can be many possible reasons for this hesitation; however, teacher leaders offered several possible solutions to facilitate increased informal teacher leadership opportunities.

**Clearly Define Teacher Leadership.** Many teachers may be hesitant to take on additional responsibilities or change roles when those roles are not clearly defined, and this definition may involve shifting the way school and district leaders perceive teacher leadership:

- **From Quasi-Administrators To Need-Based Positions.** Teacher leaders do not need to be perceived as only quasi-administrators. Instead, teachers should fill positions based on school and district needs, as well as teachers’ unique strengths. This shift might lead to a culture of teacher leaders who are empowered to support overall school improvement using their own strengths and abilities.
- **From Focus On Roles To Focus On Student Outcomes.** Perceptions of teacher leadership need to shift from being more centered on roles to being centered on student outcomes in order to truly promote student growth.

- From Emphasis On Current Teachers To Emphasis On Future Teachers.** Increased focus should be placed on the new teacher pipeline rather than only on current teachers. Educator preparation programs should talk to teacher candidates about the vast array of teacher leadership opportunities so they enter the classroom prepared to take advantage of teacher leader opportunities.

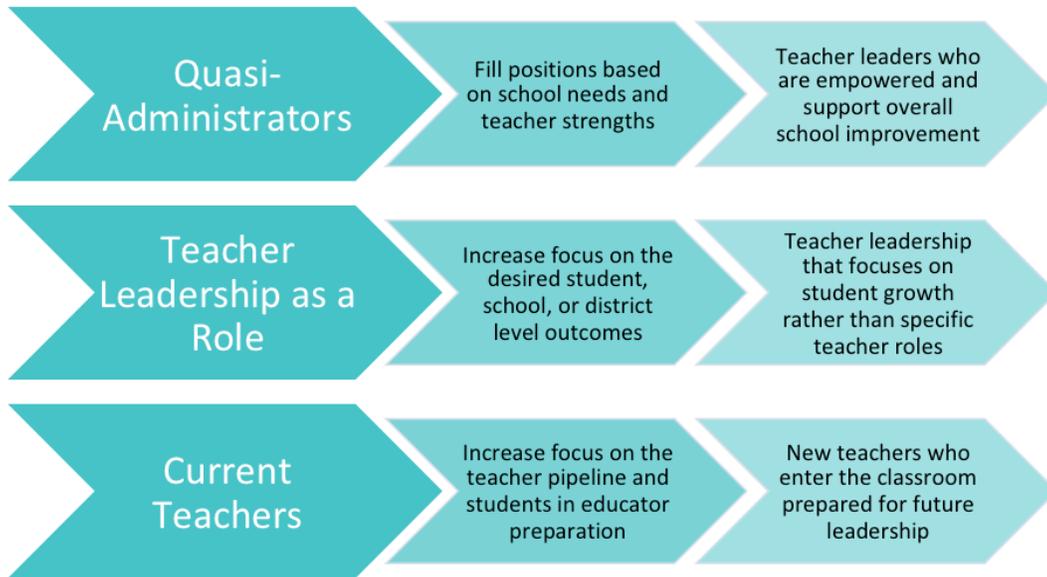


Figure 2: Teacher Leadership Shifts

## Teacher Effectiveness and Growth

Participants had an opportunity to provide feedback on the Tennessee teacher evaluation system, and present their perspectives on the ways teacher leaders could continue to provide support toward improving and refining the teacher evaluation process.

### Continued Enhancement Of The Evaluation System

**More Extensive Training For Administrators And Evaluators.** Teacher leaders generally agreed that administrators and other evaluators could benefit from more training to ensure that they were fully prepared to provide thorough evaluation feedback. In particular, they emphasized the need for administrators to understand the differences across teachers’ best practices based on content expertise, such as the differences in high-level questioning between a Chemistry teacher and a first-grade teacher. Teacher leaders also highlighted that administrators could benefit from additional training to ensure stronger inter-rater reliability across different evaluators, suggesting that online recertification may not be a best practice to ensure the best observation quality. Further, training could be improved by enhancing data literacy around the evaluation data that evaluators currently collect.

**Add Flexibility To Observation Scheduling And Structures.** Teacher leaders recognized that one barrier administrators face in their ability to provide adequate feedback to teachers through evaluations lies in their already busy schedules. Ensuring administrators accommodate time for feedback would be an important improvement to the evaluation system. Participants also thought that administrators would be able to provide stronger feedback in observations if they spent more time doing informal observations and offering feedback prior to a formal observation.

**Exemplars And Deeper Training For Teachers.** In order to obtain the most benefit from the teacher evaluation system and formal observations, teachers must be able to take the feedback they receive and translate that into improved instructional practice. Teacher leaders generally felt that there were not enough opportunities for them to see high-quality instructional practice in action so they may use their feedback and scores from observations to improve. Exemplar videos housed in an easily accessible database may alleviate this barrier to improving instructional practice. Further, participants suggested that this database would be most useful if it not only provided an exemplar with a score, but also with feedback from an evaluator indicating the reasons for that score.

### **Key Stakeholders For Evaluation Support**

Participants highlighted a few different stakeholders who can provide the supports and resources they mentioned related to refining the evaluation process:

**TDOE.** The TDOE should continue empowering districts and school-level administrators to apply flexibility in their observation and feedback processes. One of the biggest hurdles to receiving effective feedback is the time it takes for administrators to engage in that process. Through promoting a variety of structures and schedules for completing evaluations, the TDOE could help free up administrators to adapt their evaluation procedures to promote a better feedback loop.

**District Leadership.** District leaders could take advantage of flexibility provided in the [Teacher and Administrator Evaluation Policy](#) to free up their building administrators to do more informal observations. Adding this flexibility may also require district leadership to rethink administrators' responsibilities and create the supports necessary for administrators to take time to share substantive feedback with teachers.

**Teachers.** Teacher leaders see themselves playing an important role in the improvement and refinement of the evaluation process. Overall, teacher leaders generally agreed that their ability to receive training in the scoring process could be an important opportunity for their own development and their ability to use their evaluation feedback well. However, teacher leaders also believed they could play a role in observations through completing peer observations and having those opportunities to provide informal feedback to colleagues. Teacher leaders also see an opportunity for collaboration across districts in letting lead teachers from one district complete informal observations for teachers in another district.

## Communications And Advocacy

Participants were asked to provide their input on several areas related to communication and advocacy. In particular, teachers reflected on areas where they could access information they needed easily and areas where there were gaps in access. Because Teacher Leader Summit attendees are highly engaged, other teachers may also experience the gaps in communication that they identified at the state and district level.

### **Information Accessibility**

Easily Accessible	Not Easily Accessible
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">State Standards</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Blueprints</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">TNReady testing dates and logistics</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Licensure</a></li> <li>• Highlights (especially through <a href="#">Twitter</a>)</li> <li>• Data, <a href="#">TVAAS</a>, <a href="#">report card</a></li> <li>• NIET (<a href="#">EEPASS</a>) website</li> <li>• Curriculum scope and sequence at the district level</li> <li>• Project Based Learning plans</li> <li>• <a href="#">Score Reports</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">TDOE Website</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Standards trainings</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Standards Analysis Reports</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">TNReady assessment materials</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Newsletters</a> don't reach every teacher</li> <li>• <a href="#">Directory of important contacts</a></li> <li>• TELL Survey (<a href="#">Tennessee Educator Survey</a>)</li> <li>• <a href="#">TN Compass</a></li> <li>• Counseling services for students</li> <li>• <a href="#">Kindergarten portfolio</a></li> <li>• State initiatives or <a href="#">state-level calendar</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Networking opportunities</a></li> <li>• Content-specific information in professional learning communities</li> </ul>

### **Vehicle and Timeline for Information Sharing**

Participants also identified the best ways and times for them to access information. In general, teacher leaders would like to have the details about state initiatives, policy changes, or district-level communications as early as possible. They also identified ways they could play a role in facilitating effective communication. For instance, they could serve as school- or district-level liaisons to share information. Leveraging teacher leaders as vehicles for sharing important information could be an effective strategy for ensuring clarity in communication from the state and local districts to teachers.

Best Ways To Share Information	Best Timeline To Share Information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Email and newsletters (SCORE &amp; TDOE)</li> <li>• Social media (Twitter, Facebook)</li> <li>• Teacher leaders sharing with colleagues at faculty meetings or at the district level</li> <li>• Websites or website alerts (TTLC website)</li> <li>• Video or webinar</li> <li>• Google classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early—not after something happens</li> <li>• Outside the school day</li> <li>• Before the end of the school year</li> <li>• Once a month, or some specified timeline so it comes at the same time               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Regular timing</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Want to know before general public               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Also add upcoming information</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## **What can teacher leaders do to improve or facilitate effective communication?**

Teacher leaders also highlighted several areas where they can help facilitate effective communication:

- Serve as district-level liaisons to share information at the school level
- Connect with other teacher leaders to facilitate training and information sharing
- Facilitate creating a “who’s who” of contacts at the TDOE for certain questions
- Assist in creating more effective use of faculty or PLC meeting time
- Model best practices when sharing information, keeping a positive tone
- Start feedback communities once a month at school for colleagues to ask questions

## **Resources For Learning**

Teacher leaders raised several important points at the Teacher Leader Summit. While many of these areas require continued conversation and dedication to the work, a few resources may provide more immediate solutions for teachers across the state. Below are some resources for teachers based on a few of the concerns highlighted by teacher leaders for each of the four collaborative problem-solving areas that may alleviate some of those concerns.

### ***Standards And Assessment***

**Classroom Assessment Builder.** This resource provides teachers with a platform to design assessments with TNReady practice items so their classroom assessments may align with TNReady. This resource is now available for a preview.

**Item Writing Workshops.** These workshops are designed for educators to learn more about writing TNReady-style questions for classroom assessments. The TDOE plans to offer these writing workshops in the spring, and the most updated information about dates and locations can be found in Commissioner McQueen’s updates.

**EdTools Practice Questions And Practice Tests.** PDF versions of practice questions can be found on the [EdTools website](#). Practice testing also began on October 16, 2017 in Nextera. The TDOE will need specific information from teachers in order for teachers to receive access to these platforms.

**Scoring Timeline.** The TDOE has been working on creating an expedited scoring process so teachers can access data more easily. Online testing will help facilitate this quicker timeline, and in the future, TDOE hopes to release detailed score reports to teachers by late summer.

Additional resources around standards and assessments that are provided on the TNReady.gov website also include:

- Blueprints
- Writing rubrics and anchor papers
- FAQs
- Parent guides and resources
- Sample standards analysis and score reports

## ***Teacher Leadership***

**Teacher Leader Guidebook.** Many teacher leaders highlighted the desire to see more information shared about different types of successful teacher leader models at the district level. The TDOE’s [Teacher Leader Guidebook](#) provides information about various types of teacher leader models across multiple Tennessee districts, and it also highlights best practices from districts that are part of the TDOE’s Teacher Leader Network.

## ***Teacher Effectiveness And Growth***

**Educator Effectiveness Preparation And Support System (EEPASS).** One common thread identified by teacher leaders in enhancing the evaluation process was access to portals with exemplars alongside scores and explanations where teachers could improve their practice. [EEPASS](#)—formerly the NEIT Best Practices Portal—provides these types of instructional resources for teachers. This upgraded portal provides tools and a video library with resources aligned to the TEAM Rubric and the Tennessee Academic Standards. District evaluation administrators can provide teachers with their access credentials for this resource.

**TEAM Rubric Training.** Another area teacher leaders mentioned was the desire to sign up for evaluation training so they could understand the process more deeply for their own learning. [TEAM Training resources](#) and [schedules for training opportunities](#) are available on the TEAM website.

## ***Communication And Advocacy***

**Accessible Resources.** Teacher leaders highlighted several areas where they felt they could not access resources very easily. Where possible, we have included links to areas related to these resources in the Communication and Advocacy section of this brief to help facilitate this accessibility. In some cases, information teachers would like to see is more readily available or more appropriately distributed at the district level.

## **Conclusion**

At the Teacher Leader Summit, teacher leaders provided valuable insight and possible solutions to several pressing areas of Tennessee K-12 education policy. These conversations can be used to inform future work as Tennessee continues advancing its progress in student achievement and educator effectiveness. However, providing these opportunities for feedback and discussion with colleagues adds value for teachers as well as to our state. When teachers have opportunities to feel heard, they reaffirm their commitment to the work of developing impactful professional practices for themselves and their peers to improve outcomes for all students. Teachers at the Teacher Leader Summit stand ready to accelerate student growth—not merely sustain it. As a state, we must remain committed to elevating teachers as professionals so they maintain their passion for the profession and continue the excellent work they do with students every day.