Defining teacher leadership:
A framework

With support from district-level staff, a group of new teacher leaders fleshes out the specifics of their role.

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Teacher leadership is widely understood to be critical to the success of local school improvement efforts (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015; Schiavo et al., 2010). Instructional reforms, especially, depend on teacher leaders' capacity to implement any new approach and help colleagues understand how it fits with their values, skills, and expertise. In practice, however, when teachers are recruited into leadership roles, they

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often find the work to be fraught with ambiguities and tensions (Leander & Osborne, 2008; Smylie & Denny, 1990; Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

One reason for the difficulty is that it's not always clear what teacher leadership entails. In many schools and districts, for example, teacher leaders may be asked to perform quasi-administrative functions, such as communicating messages from the administration, convening meetings, and securing materials. Sometimes, they may be assigned tasks related to instruction, such as sharing lesson ideas and classroom resources. Other times, they may be asked to serve as an emergency substitute teacher or chair the school safety committee.

Generally speaking, the more ambitious the conception of teacher leadership, the more likely it is to spark conflict. This is especially true if their work involves coaching or offering professional development to other teachers. In a profession long marked by an egalitarian ethos, in which colleagues think of themselves as belonging to the same level in the organizational hierarchy, giving a special role to some teachers can easily lead to tensions among peers. Why was this person chosen as the teacher leader, they might ask, and what kind of formal authority do teacher leaders have? And so this leaves schools and districts with

a dilemma: How can they maximize the benefits of teacher leadership, tapping into veteran teachers' deep reservoirs of knowledge and expertise, while minimizing the potential for conflict with their colleagues and reducing confusion about their responsibilities?

To resolve some of these difficulties, a large urban school district created and implemented a teacher leadership model that aimed to support classroom teachers who agree to take on leadership roles in addition to their full-time teaching responsibilities. Launched by the district's science department, the effort began with the design of a conceptual framework — developed collaboratively by school-based teacher leaders and district staff, with assistance from our research team — meant to help teachers distinguish among various leadership roles and focus their time and effort on those that best match their skills and priorities.

Over two years, we observed and collected data on participants' design and use of this Science Teacher Leader Profile, and we found that their work enabled them to develop not only a shared understanding of what teacher leadership entails but also a shared perspective on the kinds of teacher leadership that will be most helpful in their district. During that same time, the teacher leaders
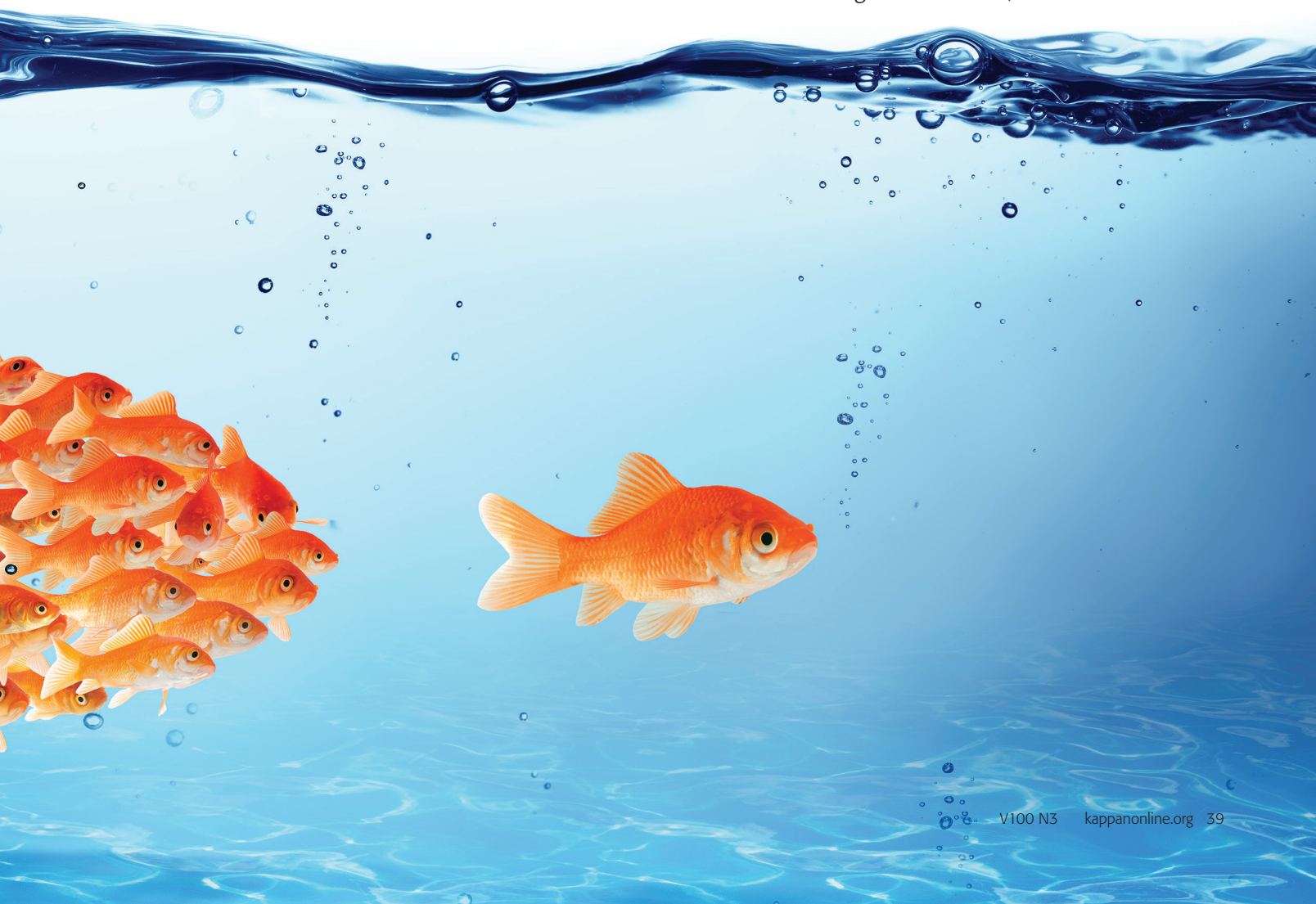
assumed a greater and greater degree of ownership over and engagement in their efforts to improve curriculum and instruction. Further, while the profile was created to support the work of science teacher leaders in particular, we assume that other kinds of teachers can use it just as effectively (if supported in similar ways by district staff) to identify specific leadership roles and decide which ones to pursue.

Creation of a teacher leadership framework

In this district, like many others, teacher leaders' written job descriptions have long emphasized administrative functions, while saying little about other facets of the work. However, anticipating the new instructional demands of the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), the district's science department decided that every school should designate one full-time classroom teacher as a science teacher leader (STL), who would take an active role in promoting the successful implementation of the new standards.

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At first, it wasn't clear precisely what kinds of support the STLs should provide, or what priorities they should pursue, so the district's science department staff enlisted our university-based team of researchers to assist the STLs in defining the scope of their work. Ours was meant to be a purely supportive role. The STLs are professionals, reasoned the district staff, and they are the ones who best know their own professional needs. Thus, we were assigned to record their ideas — as presented to us in individual interviews, focus groups, and written reflections — and organize them into a conceptual framework that describes the specific kinds of work that fall under the broader and fairly ambiguous label of "teacher leadership."

The resulting Science Teacher Leader Profile (see Figure 1) divides the work of teacher leadership into four categories (Collaborating, Advocating, Modeling, and Providing Resources), each of which is further divided into a pair of strands, one describing the work that individual teacher leaders do on their own to deepen their skills and the other describing the work they do in concert with others.

Again, these categories represent our effort to record

FIGURE 1.
Science Teacher Leader Profile

COLLABORATING
with others to improve science instruction

Self
- Participate in science professional development
- Value the power of collaboration and the conditions that support it
- Develop productive meeting formats and processes
- Understand how to mentor, support, and coach a variety of teachers
- Contribute to the science teacher leader community

With others
- Initiate and facilitate peer collaboration
- Facilitate science-focused professional learning sessions
- Mentor and coach teachers to improve their practice

PROVIDING RESOURCES
for effective science instruction

Self
- Keep abreast of science-related news and resources
- Access resources such as district-provided materials
- Create and adapt instructional resources such as lessons and units
- Identify resources such as field trips, speakers, grants, free or donated materials, and access to technology

With others
- Share readings, lessons, and ideas
- Support regular access to district-provided materials and supplies
- Share ideas for science events, field trips, speakers, free or donated materials, etc.

SCIENCE TEACHER LEADER PROFILE

Science teacher leaders are classroom teachers who also serve as instructional leaders by modeling effective science instruction, collaborating with others to improve science instruction, providing resources for effective science instruction, and advocating in service of effective science instruction.
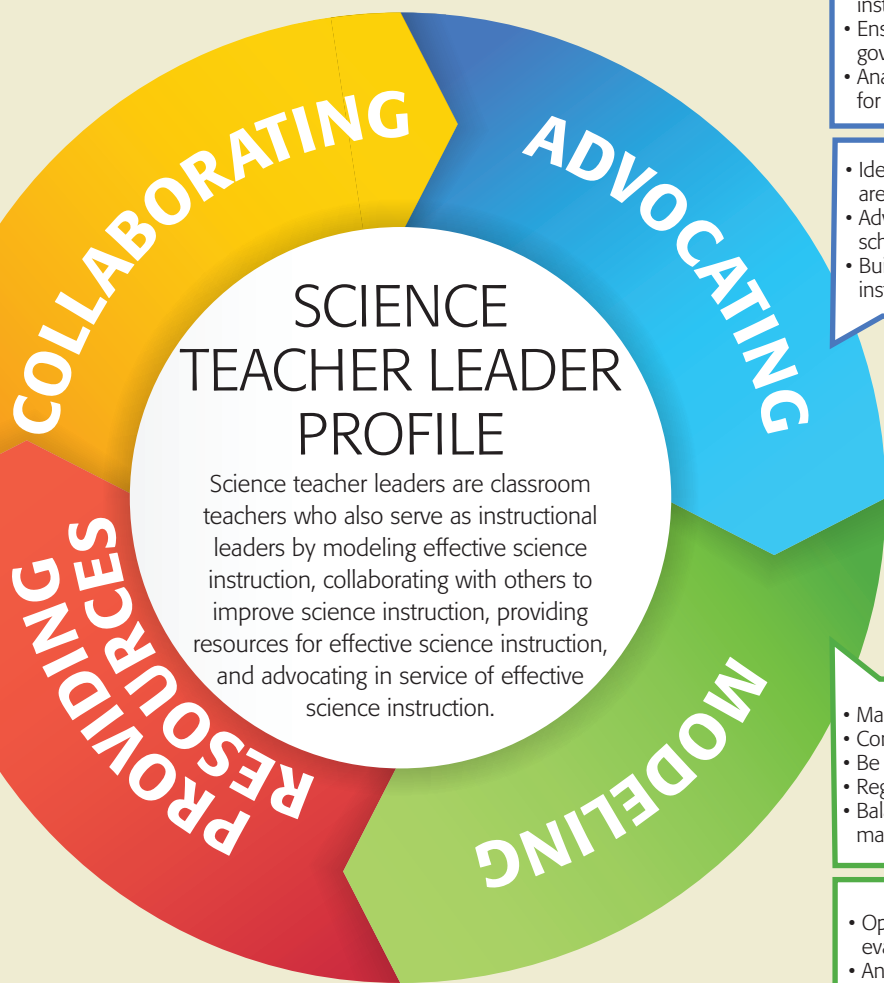
ADVOCATING
in service of effective science instruction

Self
- Keep abreast of science-related policies, expectations, and decisions
- Regularly communicate and remind administrators and teachers about science expectations and opportunities
- Identify opportunities to integrate science into the core instructional plan
- Ensure representation for science instruction in school governance
- Analyze the political climate and context of the school site for the purposes of supporting science instruction

With others
- Identify and develop common pedagogies across subject areas such as academic discussions
- Advocate for the prioritization of science instruction in school-wide decision making
- Build alliances that advocate for improved science instruction

MODELING
effective science instruction

Self
- Make effective science instruction visible
- Commit to deep understanding of NGSS instruction
- Be open to improving teaching practices
- Regularly reflect on teaching practice
- Balance and integrate nonscience commitments to maximize science instruction

With others
- Open your door to being observed and collaboratively evaluating the lesson
- Analyze and discuss teaching practices utilizing the indicators of high-quality science instruction

and synthesize what the STLs said they were actually doing in their schools to help support the implementation of the new science standards. First, the STLs described activities that involve collaborating with teachers, such as when they work with them to plan opportunities for professional learning. Second, they talked about providing resources for effective science instruction, from contacts with museum staff to lesson plans and teaching materials. Third, they described modeling the kinds of inquiry-oriented teaching practices favored by the new science standards, often by opening up their own teaching to observation and critique. Finally, they described spending a portion of their time advocating for the successful implementation of the new standards, such as by making presentations to school governance groups to explain what the standards are meant to accomplish, or by urging school and district leaders to support greater investments in science instruction.

Using the profile to inform professional development

Once the STLs gave informal approval to the profile, agreeing that it was a valid representation of their discussions about their work, the district science department decided to use it as the basis for its professional development offerings (which included a lesson study protocol, a weeklong summer institute, and monthly STL meetings). For example, since a significant portion of the STLs' work involves *collaborating,* the district staff decided to provide workshops on effectively facilitating professional learning community meetings. Additionally, when the time came for STLs to reflect on their professional growth and set goals for the subsequent year, the district staff suggested that they use the profile as a shared rubric for discussion.

Our research team conducted end-of-year surveys (featuring open-ended discussion prompts) of the STLs in 2016 and 2017, examining the results closely to see how the use of the profile had influenced their professional growth and development. According to these surveys, the participants (40 in all) saw the profile as an extremely helpful tool. For example, one elementary science specialist inferred that challenges at her school were due to the absence of such a framework:

> It feels as if my school administrators have no framework for supporting science instruction, because there has been no prioritization of science professional learning communities, and they have not offered pedagogical support. In fact, our school is so deeply concentrated on literacy instruction that grade-level teachers are expected to not teach science.

When we compared the end-of-year survey results for the 25 STLs who were involved over both years, we found am-

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ple evidence that the profile had given participants common language with which to reflect on and discuss their efforts to promote high-quality science instruction. All 25 respondents indicated that they understood the profile's four domains, accepted them as valid, had become fluent in using the terminology to describe their own activities, and thought that the profile had made a valuable contribution to their professional development.

The surveys revealed that the STLs saw *collaborating* and *modeling* as critically important ways to help teachers adapt to the changing landscape of science education, and they understood providing resources to be a fundamental expectation for all teacher leaders. Interestingly, though, they highlighted the fourth domain — *advocating* — as their most important role, one that they also saw as new, unfamiliar, and challenging.

Advocacy emerges as a central area of support

After two years of using the profile, STLs were twice as likely to say that they needed to develop their advocacy skills as any of the three others. Further, advocacy was the only skill that they were more likely to describe as an area in need of improvement than as one that they already performed successfully.

According to staff from the district science department, this wasn't entirely surprising. Science instruction held a precarious status in many of the local schools (especially the elementary schools), and the STLs likely recognized that they would have to secure more resources and instructional time to meet the high expectations defined by the

new science standards. As one elementary-level STL put it:

> I feel most of my development has been through gaining confidence in my own ability to advocate for science and to be a resource. I feel like I have a pretty good understanding of the science concepts but the juggle of how to use the resources in the limited time we are given to collaborate and how to successfully bring more focus at the administrative level is still a struggle. I think the science department meeting with principals this year is a good start and more of that could be helpful.

Similarly, a middle school teacher leader remarked:

> I need more support in data-driven instruction, evaluating instruction for NGSS implementation, and advocating for high-leverage corrective action for instructional planning. I need documentable hours to advocate for paid time to do this strategic and critical work in support of stronger student outcomes for all students.

When asked to cite examples of successful advocacy, some of the elementary STLs told of having pushed for and won formal approval for science instruction to be allotted a greater number of minutes in the master schedule. Others told of persuading administrators to establish regular teacher collaboration time to plan for and implement the new standard. Further, a number of STLs said they felt accomplished simply for having taken on the identity of an advocate. For example, one elementary teacher wrote:

> I think that this year I have developed a greater confidence in, and comfort with, advocating for science at my school. Our discussions … have felt empowering, an affirmation that teachers can have a position as advocates at their school, and the great benefits that can be associated with that… I do feel less intimidated by the idea and have greater clarity on what such leadership will entail.

Although elementary teacher leaders devoted particular attention to the advocacy domain, teacher leaders at all levels recognized the importance of that component of their work. For example, one high school teacher described how her work advocating for science teacher professional growth had the potential to benefit her department:

> If I am able to make a strong case for why my department needs to take advantage of different professional development opportunities and the value of meeting with my entire team on a regular basis, perhaps I will be able to receive the time that I am asking for, rather than consistently being told that I will not be getting the time (because of concerns with other departments not utilizing their department time wisely). I wonder how I can better advocate for the supports I feel my department would best benefit from.

The STLs' growing emphasis on the need to focus on advocacy is consistent with widely documented reports that science teaching has been marginalized in recent decades. Further, attention to advocacy seems particularly timely at present, given recent calls for renewed and sustained focus on science education in response to the Next Generation Science Standards (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015).

However, we expect that teacher leaders in other subject areas will have pressing reasons of their own to define advocacy as one of their primary roles. For example, in math and English language arts — which were prioritized under No Child Left Behind and the Common Core State Standards — teacher leaders may wish to advocate for curricular and instructional improvements, while teacher leaders in history, world languages, the arts, physical education, and other subjects might choose to advocate for more instructional time and professional development resources.

A way for teacher leaders to talk about their work

Overall, the profile served its initial purpose: to provide STLs a common language with which to discuss and define the work of teacher leadership, as well as to identify priorities to pursue and skills to develop. This shared language served them well also when time came to reflect on their accomplishments. For example, when asked to give successful examples of how they had collaborated with other teachers, they were able to name very specific activities, such as co-planning lessons and co-leading professional development. As one middle school teacher leader explained:

> My work as department head has allowed me to facilitate partner planning to deal with curriculum development and classroom strategies, to facilitate cycles of inquiry where we analyzed student work and developed PDs to get vertical alignment of classroom skills like claim, evidence, and reasoning. The real breakthrough is to facilitate collaboration around the "skills" we are teaching as well as the "content."

When asked about the ways in which they had modeled effective instruction, the STLs mostly described opening the classroom door for observation and learning. Several noted that they saw this as a major accomplishment, signaling a newfound willingness to expose and reflect on their work in the classroom. As one elementary STL put it, "I was able to make science instruction visible, commit to deeper understanding of NGSS, be open to learning new teaching practices, and regularly reflect on teaching practices."

Finally, while the STLs described "providing resources" as the activity they performed most often, they rarely described it as an area for growth, suggesting that they saw it as a common task that they fully understood already. (This may have been expected, given that this has traditionally been seen as a standard role for teacher leaders.)

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Building an infrastructure for teacher leadership

Over time, as the science teacher leaders incorporated the profile and its shared language into their professional learning, they began to express a deep sense of ownership over the work — co-ownership, to be more precise, along with the district science department. As one teacher wrote, "[Our] school is so deeply concentrated on literacy instruction, that grade level teachers are expected to not teach science. As such, the reflection on my teaching practice has occurred entirely with the support of the [District] Science Department."

In short, this was a truly collaborative effort, in which the district (assisted by a university partner) provided meaningful support to classroom teachers as they defined their roles and reflected on their work as teacher leaders. As such, the project embodied the recommendations made in a number of reports that have underscored the need for system-level infrastructure to improve instruction (e.g., Achieve, 2017a, 2017b; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015). On their own, teacher leaders might have organized themselves into a support network. However, we doubt they would have experienced professional development of this quality if not for the district's decision to prioritize science education, its willingness to provide a stipend for an STL at each school, and its hosting of monthly STL meetings and summer workshops.

The data that we collected suggest that over the two years of this project, the teacher leaders strengthened their identity as agents of instructional change in their schools, cocreated a conceptual tool that helped them define and reflect on their leadership roles, and came to trust and rely on district staff to sponsor meaningful professional development. We posit that in districts that prioritize teacher leadership in this way, and that build an infrastructure to cultivate it, teachers are more likely to feel ownership over their leadership roles, define those roles more clearly, and grow professionally in ways that ultimately lead to improved student learning.   K

"Hey, mom! That 'F' I got in history… my creative writing teacher read it and gave me an 'A.'"

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