

# Core Leadership

Teacher Leaders and Common Core  
Implementation in Tennessee





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# Introduction

In the summer of 2012, eighth grade math teacher Emily Misconish of Memphis attended several days of professional development workshops. Thousands of teachers across the United States did the same. But unlike their training sessions, Misconish’s were prepared and delivered largely by teachers.<sup>1</sup>

The workshops, which focused on the Common Core State Standards, were part of a Tennessee Department of Education initiative in teacher leadership. The department recruited and trained 200 highly-effective teachers to guide its implementation of the new, more rigorous academic framework, and Misconish was among the 13,000 educators who learned from these “Core Coaches” in the summer of 2012. The coaches also served as resources for their schools, districts, and regions during the school year. Misconish, for instance, remained in regular contact with her Core Coach, who provided her with resources and suggestions that helped her improve as a teacher. When Tennessee dramatically expanded its Core Coach program for 2013-14—selecting 700 coaches to train more than 30,000 teachers—Misconish’s principal encouraged her to apply. She did and was thankful to earn a spot. “It was definitely the most meaningful and instructionally-focused leadership role I could have accepted,” she said.

When describing the Core Coach initiative, Tennessee education officials and practitioners such as Misconish paint a picture of cyclical reform. By empowering a select group of coaches to lead the Common Core implementation, the state sought to build a pool of instructional leaders who could support other teachers while becoming better teachers themselves, as well as more influential leaders. Along the way, the thinking went, they would help more and more teachers improve as well, resulting in improved instructional quality across the state. The state’s experience highlights the opportunities and challenges of leveraging teacher leadership to drive state-level change.

| TENNESSEE’S COMMON CORE COACH ROLE |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| <b>FUNCTION</b>                    | Improve instruction statewide by building a cadre of teacher leaders who can model and train others in exemplary practices for the Common Core and provide ongoing local support  |
| <b>FORM</b>                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Attend summer trainings led by the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh and Sopris Learning</li><li>• Diligently apply the Common Core in their own classrooms and attend convenings to reflect on their own practice and prepare to train others</li><li>• Lead summer training sessions on the Common Core</li><li>• Serve as regional resources with a menu of support mechanisms, including work such as assessment design, resource development, and the redelivery of regional Common Core trainings</li><li>• Receive \$5,000 annual stipend</li></ul> |

To assist system administrators as they pursue their own teacher leadership initiatives, this profile from Leading Educators and the Aspen Institute details the steps Tennessee took to design and implement its Common Core Coach initiative. Specifically, it examines the initiative’s opportunities and challenges within the context of our blueprint for teacher leadership. That blueprint provides a guide for implementing teacher leadership that advances student achievement, and it highlights key phases for system administrators to navigate as they leverage teacher leadership to address their highest priorities.

To build teacher leadership that works, system administrators need to clarify the purpose of teacher leadership—what we call **designing for impact**. Concurrently, we advise leaders to **know their context** in order to address potential challenges and opportunities. To ensure deliberate, strategic leadership development, systems must then **define the measures** before implementation begins and monitor progress throughout implementation. Finally, systems need to **build strategically** by designing clear teacher leader roles and responsibilities. This includes effective selection and training processes for teacher leaders as well as strategies for supporting principals and principal managers throughout the changes of roles and responsibilities.

Central to the blueprint is the idea that effective teacher leadership marries **form with function** in order to create transformative change in schools. By function, we mean that the teacher leadership initiatives are not isolated programs but are integral in advancing other pressing priorities. By form, we mean that the teacher leader roles themselves are clearly defined with sufficient time, support, and resources to be effective.

Tennessee’s Common Core Coach Initiative provides an opportunity to highlight the blueprint in action. After discussing the state’s efforts to identify a function for teacher leadership that advanced its top priorities, we consider how Tennessee aligned its resources to support the pilot, its approach to defining measures and methods for monitoring performance, and its process for strategically building and implementing its teacher leader roles.

## Design for Impact

Tennessee officials deliberately designed the Core Coach role with an instructional focus. As they reflected on their key education priorities in 2011-12, they identified the implementation of the Common Core as an opportunity to meet their college and career readiness goals. With the state’s 4th graders ranking in the bottom fifth nationally in reading and math and 85 percent of its high school seniors unprepared for college, officials viewed the new, more rigorous framework as a tool for improving instructional rigor and quality and boosting Tennessee’s competitiveness.<sup>2</sup>

“The emphasis behind the Core Coaches was thinking about our instruction as a state, having a critical moment as we move to the Common Core State Standards, and wanting teacher leadership to be the voice we put forward in that transition,” said Tiffany McDole, the Executive Director of Training and Support for the Tennessee Department of Education’s Division of Curriculum and Instruction.

## Know Your Context

When state officials recently rolled out a new teacher evaluation system, teachers, unions, and policy analysts criticized them for acting too quickly and without sufficient practitioner input.<sup>3</sup> With Common Core implementation, leaders committed to engaging district- and school-level stakeholders. The department convened an advisory board of district administrators, the Common Core Leadership Council, which urged that teacher leadership be a key lever for creating change. This approach was particularly appealing since it permitted local teachers, rather than state officials, to drive the Common Core shifts.

“District leaders felt that if they were going to be successful in leveraging the Common Core standards for the benefit of all students,” McDole said, “that they would need voices in their communities and voices in their schools that had a lot of knowledge and some early access to Tennessee’s implementation at the teacher level, so that this would be a teacher-led effort and not something that came from the district.”

Officials also believed that teachers would learn best from colleagues who could both relate to their challenges and serve as resources throughout the implementation process, according to Linda Kennard, a Leadership Council member and the Director of Curriculum and Instruction for Shelby County Schools in metropolitan Memphis. “We have learned from others’ efforts that peer-facilitated sessions can have much more power than sessions led by an external consultant or even someone from the district level. When teachers say they’ve used (the Common Core) and they can vouch for it, then it assumes a level of credibility that someone who’s not in the trenches, facing the same kinds of challenges, does not have.”

The Common Core Leadership Council permitted Tennessee’s Department of Education to leverage existing resources to support teacher leadership. First, Leadership Council members helped to establish a broad base of support for the Core Coach initiative by promoting it in their districts and assisting in the recruitment of coaches. Second, the council’s input that districts wanted local voices to be included in the Common Core implementation enabled the department to build upon existing interest in teacher leadership. While those efforts may be easily replicable in other states, its funding mechanism will likely be harder to follow. The state covered the costs of the Core Coach program, which included \$5,000 stipends for Core Coaches and fees paid to the content experts who trained them, with money from its \$500 million federal Race to the Top grant.



## **Define the Measures:** Monitoring Outcomes

The data the Tennessee Department of Education gathered on the Core Coaches supported Misconish's assertion about the effectiveness of the teacher-led trainings. Training attendees received daily emails asking them to rate their sessions through online surveys. The Department of Education and Common Core Leadership Council then used that data to evaluate the trainings' quality, content, operations, and facilitation, and found in the first summer that participants were very satisfied with the training and the Core Coaches. Additionally, Linda Kennard said, the trainings appeared to yield positive returns once the school year began. "Invariably, when we did go to schools to make our rounds, teachers who had been to the training were using these instructional tasks as a major teaching tool," she said. These encouraging results led the Leadership Council to recommend expanding the program for 2013.

While there has been positive participant feedback and strong anecdotal evidence, the initial evaluation model was not designed to quantify the program's impact on student achievement or teacher effectiveness. Additionally, Core Coaches received differing levels of support and responsibility from their districts and schools, further complicating the evaluation. In order to assess the impact on student achievement and teacher effectiveness for a statewide teacher leadership initiative, it will be important for policymakers to clearly define metrics at the start of the program and consider how those metrics might influence guidelines at the district and school level. Tennessee's more flexible approach allowed for greater investment and differentiation at the school and district level, but it also created challenges for determining how much it has helped students.

## **Build Strategically:** Implementation

Tennessee staggered its implementation of the Common Core, beginning with English and math for kindergarten through second grade in 2011-12.<sup>4</sup> As officials prepared to implement the math standards in grades three through eight the following year, they worked with the Common Core Leadership Council in the winter of 2013 to recruit and screen teachers interested in serving as Core Coaches. To apply, teachers submitted letters of intent explaining why they wanted to be coaches, what they thought the state could do to support student growth, and their experience working with adults. The state also required applicants to provide summaries of their students' growth that included quantitative and qualitative evidence, along with a discussion of how they used that information to guide their teaching.<sup>5</sup>

The state's initial screening evaluated applicants based upon their evidence of teaching effectiveness, content knowledge, and fit with the role. Teachers who cleared this stage then participated in regionally administered interviews. Prior to the interview, teachers submitted an example of a content-specific practice exercise for students, along with a sample PowerPoint presentation they would use to guide a grade-level professional learning community session. The

interviewers evaluated candidates' fit for the role while also considering their ability to communicate effectively. In 2013-14, when Tennessee extended its Common Core implementation to English/language arts, literacy, and the high school grades, it selected its 700 Core Coaches from an applicant pool of more than 1,200. About 85 percent of the previous year's coaches reapplied, and the state permitted about 80 percent of those repeat applicants to continue in the role.

To prepare the Core Coaches to lead the summer training sessions, Tennessee contracted with two outside content experts: the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh and Sopris Learning. Rather than passively receive these experts' instruction, the Core Coaches were active participants in a dynamic process of content development. After attending training in the spring, the Core Coaches provided feedback on the substance of the sessions and on their presenters. The consultants then revised the sessions before bringing them back to the Core Coaches. As McDole pointed out, this meant that by the time teachers received the training during the summer, "the content had been reviewed by us internally, tried out on the Core Coaches, modified by the Core Coaches, seen again by the Core Coaches, and then delivered." Since Tennessee's students have traditionally scored poorly when asked to cite evidence in writing—a major focus within the Common Core—trainers spent a lot of time preparing Core Coaches in evidence-based writing and instruction. The state's decision to select coaches for content and grade-level specific roles facilitated this process.

Viewing the Core Coaches as part of a statewide network of teacher leaders, Tennessee officials purposefully structured the role and the training the coaches received in order to promote collegiality, continuous learning, and instructional excellence. Following their initial training, for instance, the Core Coaches came back together for a fall and a spring reconvening, where they shared their experiences implementing the new standards. The coaches remained in their same 30-person groups for these meetings, and they communicated with the members of these content and grade-level cohorts in between sessions through their independent social networking sites. "We've found that this is a way to not only create a close-knit group," McDole said, "but also what we've seen in research and our own practice is that a high level of specificity to grade level and content through their role creates a more effective transfer and likelihood that their practice will change."

For Misconish, learning the Common Core from another middle school math teacher in the summer of 2012 brought the standards to life. Even though she went through the training before her coach—or anyone in Tennessee—had implemented the standards, her coach was nevertheless able to describe how she intended to implement the Common Core in her classroom. When Misconish and her former coach teamed up to lead training sessions in 2013, they placed their experiences during the first year of implementation in the forefront. "The best people to train would obviously be the people who are in the trenches doing it every single day, as opposed to someone who just comes in," she said. "We said, 'We've tried a lot of this stuff. This is how it went for us.'"

While participant responses have been very positive, the Core Coaches' work during the academic year produced different results, at least during the first year of implementation. The Department of Education outlined two expectations for coaches for 2012-13, in addition to attending the

reconvenings and diligently applying the Common Core in their own classrooms. They were to serve as regional resources and assist with the local scoring of some optional math assessment items. The Department, however, found that these expectations were overly broad.

As a result, it built additional time into the coaches' contracts for 2013-14 and added what McDole described as "a menu of support mechanisms" that would benefit both the state and the coaches. This included work such as assessment design, resource development, and the redelivery of Common Core trainings on a regional basis. "In looking at the Core Coaches' contract, it looks like a series of obligations," McDole said. "But we see their role as something much more substantial. It really is being a peer leader—a teacher leader—within their region (and) within their school."

This hoped-for dynamic appears to be taking hold in the recently unified Memphis-Shelby County school district. There, Core Coaches worked with district administrators to write a new curriculum aligned with the Common Core. The district also paid some coaches an additional stipend to repackage the summer training into seven modules, which Core Coaches then delivered to local teachers who did not attend during the summer. When district content specialists visit schools and observe teachers who are struggling to implement the Common Core, they refer them to a local Core Coach. Additionally, the district plans to ask Core Coaches for their input as it revises its teacher evaluation framework.

Kate Bond Middle School in Memphis has six Core Coaches on its staff. Principal Angela Brown said teachers need expert peers who understand their struggles and what is required to be successful at their school. Having Core Coaches in the building, Brown said, "means they can go and model for (other teachers). They can go and see what it looks like in their classroom. They can actually plan together. It just makes them accessible." That accessibility, Brown continued, is particularly important with a change as large as the Common Core. "Some of the thinking processes behind the Common Core shifts are difficult, and they sometimes can be uncomfortable," she said. "But when you have someone right here with you that you trust to talk with or see demonstrate, and then have time to come back and debrief and talk with you, the change becomes much easier."

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> On professional development trends in the United States and the limited influence teachers typically have over the content of their in-service training, see Linda Darling-Hammond, Ruth Chung Wei, Alethea Andree, Nikole Richardson, and Stelios Orphanos, "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the United States and Abroad," National Staff Development Council, (2009): 5-6.
- <sup>2</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, "The Common Core State Standards: Tennessee's Transition Plan," (1 March 2012): slide 2, [www.tncore.org/sites/www/uploads/files/common\\_core\\_plan.pptx](http://www.tncore.org/sites/www/uploads/files/common_core_plan.pptx).
- <sup>3</sup> On Tennessee's teacher evaluation system, see Liana Heitin, "Evaluation System Weighing Down Tennessee Teachers," Education Week, Vol. 31, Issue 8 (19 October 2011).
- <sup>4</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, "The Common Core State Standards: Tennessee's Transition Plan," (1 March 2012): [www.tncore.org/sites/www/uploads/files/common\\_core\\_plan.pptx](http://www.tncore.org/sites/www/uploads/files/common_core_plan.pptx).
- <sup>5</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, The Core Coach Application: [http://tncore.org/apply\\_to\\_be\\_a\\_core\\_coach.aspx](http://tncore.org/apply_to_be_a_core_coach.aspx).



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