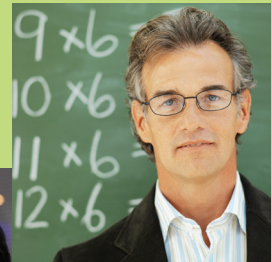


# Teacher Learning & Leadership Program

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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## THE TEACHER LEARNING AND LEADERSHIP PROGRAM: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If experienced teachers were supported to be leaders of learning – their own learning, the professional learning of other teachers, and their students’ learning – what would these teacher leaders do and what would be the challenges and benefits? These questions are central to the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP) in Ontario, Canada. Launched in 2007, the TLLP is a joint initiative

through partnership between the Ontario Teachers’ Federation (OTF) and the Ontario Ministry of Education with shared goals to: support experienced teachers to undertake self-directed advanced professional development; develop teachers’ leadership skills for sharing their professional learning and exemplary practices; and facilitate knowledge exchange for spread and sustainability of effective and innovative practices. Each year, experienced classroom teachers can apply individually or in a team to conduct a TLLP project.

### **Our overarching research questions were:**

1. What is the value of TLLP for teachers?
2. To what extent have the overall goals of TLLP been realized?
3. What lessons can be learned so far?

Our research involved: analysis of TLLP documents; observations and evaluations of provincial events for TLLP participants; interviews with TLLP provincial committee members (OTF and Ministry); review of descriptive data for all TLLP projects (N=302) conducted during the first four cohorts of the TLLP (2007 – 2011) plus in-depth analysis of a sample of 20% (N=60) of TLLP Teacher Participant Final Reports and interviews with a sample of TLLP teacher leaders.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### TLLP PROJECTS

Consistent with the TLLP's philosophy that there is 'no one size fits all' professional development approach or teacher professional learning and career trajectory, TLLP projects vary considerably in scale, focus and activities. The 'average' TLLP project has a budget of \$13,991 and a core team of two to four people, who use the project to share learning with a much wider audience to spread changes in practice. TLLP projects include a diversity of topics including teachers' professional learning, improvements in instructional and assessment practices, supporting students' learning, and practices to advance commitments to equity. While TLLP projects can focus on particular students' learning or achievement, the majority of projects are seeking to support learning and improvement for all students.

The most prevalent TLLP project topic priorities are:

1. differentiated instruction;
2. literacy;
3. technology; and
4. professional learning communities.

Other project topics included initiating new teaching practices in math, the arts, French language instruction, media literacy and/or attention to specific student groups, for example special needs, gender and/or student success in high school. The main goals of TLLP projects are to develop and improve teachers' understanding, knowledge, skills and instructional practices. Other project goals include: developing resources for professional learning and/or for student learning; using new technologies for learning; developing professional collaboration; and building community relationships. The activities undertaken through TLLP projects focus strongly on developing, sharing and spreading learning among and between professionals, students and the wider

community. TLLP projects provide a potentially fertile source of leading-edge innovation for the wider province (and beyond) to learn with and from.

### SUPPORTS FOR TLLP TEACHER

#### LEADERS

The OTF and Ministry recognized from the outset that if the goals of TLLP were to be achieved, TLLP participants would require support. Teachers generally focus on students' learning, whereas TLLP requires them also to think about their own professional learning, their leadership, developing the learning of other adults, sharing knowledge and managing a substantial project. TLLP teacher leaders attend a Leadership Skills for Classroom Teachers training in advance of beginning their project. The training is a high quality event with expert facilitation and a range of experienced, credible presenters and workshops. The major focus is preparing teachers to take on the professional learning, project management and leadership expectations of a TLLP project. Participants expressed very high levels of satisfaction with these events: for example, 98% of participants were satisfied or very satisfied in 2012. At the end of a TLLP project, TLLP teacher leaders attend the TLLP Sharing the Learning Summit to showcase completed projects and to strengthen further sharing, spread and sustainability of practices. In each year (2008 – 2012), over 95% of participants reported being satisfied or very satisfied. No participant has reported being not satisfied. When asked about "suggestions for future Summits", responses were to continue providing the Summit and included thanking the organizers for the "best professional development ever".

experienced teachers



### **TLLP GOALS**

The TLLP is designed to offer professional learning for instructional innovation through teacher initiated and led sharing of successful practices. This can be contrasted with the more routine professional development for instructional implementation through system initiated training for all teachers to implement specific changes in practice. Both are necessary for system level capacity building, but they differ considerably. Our research indicates the importance of the variety of approaches to professional learning generated through the TLLP.

### **PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

A key goal of TLLP is to support experienced teachers to undertake self-directed advanced professional development for improving their practices and supporting students' learning. Teacher interviewees were universally enthusiastic about the TLLP professional learning experience. The teacher-led, self-directed nature of TLLP was considered to be unique and vital, particularly for experienced teachers looking for new ways of developing their professional learning. The opportunity for genuine teacher collaborative learning contributes to new ways of working together that can be empowering through increasing teacher voice and transparency of practice. Having to focus on teachers' professional learning as well as students' learning is a considerable broadening of experience and opportunity for TLLP teacher leaders. TLLP participants benefited also from the development of new resources to support teachers' and students' learning. The main professional learning benefits identified were: improvements in teachers' knowledge, understanding and instructional practices; growth in teachers' leadership skills, sense of energy and efficacy; and collaborative professional learning.

### **TEACHER LEADERSHIP**

The second goal of TLLP is to help classroom teachers develop leadership skills for sharing learning and spreading exemplary practices. The opportunity for teachers to be or become leaders is a major benefit

of TLLP. In the words of one TLLP teacher leader: “This is grass roots leadership at its finest... This has been some of the best and most rewarding work in my career.” Interviewees commented on developing as leaders and building leadership skills for leading a project, developing and sharing their expertise, presenting within their school and a wider community, and dealing with change processes and interpersonal dynamics.

### **SHARING LEARNING AND SPREADING EXEMPLARY PRACTICES**

The third priority goal of TLLP is to facilitate knowledge exchange by sharing professional learning and spreading innovative and effective practices. A key role of TLLP is to empower teachers to open up and share classroom practices in ways that can encourage and sustain exemplary practices. TLLP projects share their learning and spread practices within their own school(s) and with other schools; for example, by speaking at staff meetings, working collaboratively with teachers and teacher teams for professional learning, and supporting changes in classroom practices. TLLP practices can become school-wide. In the majority of TLLP projects, professional learning and practices spread to other schools within the board, for example across teachers in the same grade/panel or subject area or across families of schools or being taken up as a board-wide initiative. These practices sometimes extend to other school boards. The majority of methods of sharing focus on professional learning activities and communication strategies. The reach of innovative and effective practices was also supported by TLLP projects developing resources for student and/or professional learning, including creating instructional and assessment materials. There are inspiring approaches to sharing learning and practices with communities locally and at provincial, national and/or international levels, including presenting at conferences, making resources and materials available online or through professional

networks, as well as TLLP teacher leaders being asked to participate in provincial and international organizations. The main benefits of sharing learning and knowledge exchange are, first, development of new knowledge and understanding, and, second, changes in practice.

### **STUDENT LEARNING**

While the TLLP is primarily focused on teachers’ learning and leadership, improvements in teachers’ professional knowledge, skills and practice are anticipated to benefit student learning. The majority of projects identified benefits for students’ improved learning in specific areas related to the project foci, for example literacy, math or arts, and for broader learning and skills development, for example through use of technology and development of higher order thinking skills. Benefits for students’ engagement through participating in innovative practices were also identified in the majority of projects. TLLP projects are contributing to improvements in students’ development as learners and as leaders.

### **CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY TLLP PARTICIPANTS**

Nevertheless, as with all innovations, challenges were encountered. By far the largest challenge is time and time management for teachers leading and delivering TLLP projects. Ways to mitigate time challenges include reaching out to others for support and/or integrating TLLP activities with classroom or school processes, such as professional learning community activities. A second significant area of challenge - as well as of leadership growth - is managing the dynamics of the TLLP project team and of gaining commitment or overcoming resistance from a wider group of people affected by the TLLP. TLLP projects promote innovation and sharing of learning;





this can be perceived as a risk for people who are uncomfortable with changing their routines or becoming more public in sharing their practices. Part of the TLLP learning is teachers' leadership growth as they initiate and deliver innovative projects, build relationships, navigate systems and manage change.

### **THE BENEFITS AND VALUE OF TLLP**

There are many substantial benefits of TLLP – for teachers' learning; for teacher leadership; for changing knowledge, understanding and practice; for student learning; for knowledge exchange,

sharing learning and spreading practices beyond individual classrooms and schools. The fact that the TLLP is teacher-led professional learning and collaboration is valuable and powerful. With relatively small budgets, projects have innovated, implemented and spread effective practices. For teachers, the importance of being professionally valued, respected and empowered is a very strong value of TLLP. TLLP embodies the benefits and value of respectful relationships and collaboration, including the very important ongoing strong partnership between OTF and the Ministry in sharing commitment and support to the TLLP. Our conclusion is that the TLLP is a professionally, educationally and financially valuable initiative that should continue.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE**

We introduced this report by asking if experienced teachers were supported to be leaders of learning, what would these teacher leaders do and with what benefits? The evidence is clear: these teacher leaders will do amazing things; they will initiate, innovate, implement and share a wide range of projects which can develop collaborative professional learning, improve practice and support student learning; they will experience success in tangible outcomes – such as changes in professional practice for instruction and assessment – and also importantly in the sometimes immeasurable benefits of being empowered, enabled and valued; they will navigate personal, interpersonal and practical challenges as their leadership is tested and grows; they will learn how to collaborate and share to spread knowledge

and sustain improvements in practices; and they will demonstrate the professional, educational and financial value of self-directed, teacher-led innovative and effective practices. We are struck by how the values of respectful relationships, partnership and collaboration underpin all aspects of the TLLP and how the work at all levels (teachers, projects, OTF and Ministry) demonstrates learning and leadership.

We turn to the three priority goals for TLLP to offer some conclusions and further considerations.

***To support experienced teachers who undertake self-directed advanced professional development***

TLLP has advanced this goal considerably and effectively. Our research supports the continued development of self-directed professional learning for experienced teachers, particularly with an emphasis on teams of teachers collaborating. We offer three considerations for future development. First, we encourage further guidance and support to TLLP participants for approaches to monitoring and reporting evidence of TLLP project activities, outputs and outcomes. Second, to support identification and spread of practices, a meta-analysis of effective practices across all TLLP projects and case studies of particularly effective and/or innovative practices could be conducted. Third, it is important to continue to ensure that administrators and system leaders are aware of the nature, purpose, value and benefit of the TLLP.

***To help classroom teachers develop leadership skills for sharing learning and exemplary practices***

This goal has been advanced considerably. We encourage the TLLP to continue to enable and empower teacher leadership and learning. We offer three practical considerations. First, we suggest that the TLLP Final Report template be revised to include a section specifically for evidence about teacher leadership. Second, we propose that the TLLP training include an increased focus on how teachers can develop their leadership practices.

Third, further research specifically on teacher leadership for and by TLLP participants could be conducted.

***To facilitate knowledge exchange for shared professional learning and spread of effective and innovative practices***

The goal of knowledge exchange has also been advanced. All TLLP projects consider teachers to be a main audience and involve sharing within their school, across the TLLP community and can spread practices to other schools, boards, communities and/or at provincial, national and even international levels. We offer three potential considerations for future development. First, OTF and the Ministry continue to develop the online presence, profile and sharing of knowledge from and about the TLLP. Second, we suggest providing TLLP leaders with examples of effective strategies for knowledge exchange to spread practices. Third, OTF and the Ministry could assist further sharing of learning by making all TLLP participants aware of key provincial opportunities, such as invites to speak or participate at relevant conferences, meetings and events.

Our overall conclusion is to continue this outstanding way of leveraging and developing professional learning for experienced teachers.

**PROJECT TEAM**

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