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# Ask Not What FHS Can Do For You, But What You Can Do For FHS

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**ASK NOT WHAT FHS CAN DO FOR YOU,  
BUT WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR FHS**

**jessica endlich winkler**

**Giordano:** *You're always working. Always.*

**James:** *There's just no way to do it all in the building.*

**Giordano:** *Even mentally, you're always working; all the time, you're thinking about it. But I think it's amplified in a small school, the amount of roles that we have to take. Administrative, clubs...*

**Bramwell:** *Yeah, because everybody wears a thousand hats. Everybody.*

With the small schools movement in full force and new schools opening nationwide, principals are relying on teacher leaders to supplement the limited number of administrators available on a small school budget. Teacher leaders may be veterans who have achieved aspects of classroom mastery, administrators-in-training who relish the opportunity to lead, or enthusiastic young teachers who work tirelessly for an improved school community. While it is clear that new small schools desperately need strong teacher leadership to function effectively, is there enough being done to support these teachers—many of whom have not yet fully honed their teaching skills? Could it be that the opportunity for teacher leadership is burdening young teaching careers more than advancing them? What other supervisory arrangements and instructional support need to be provided to help teacher leaders succeed?

In late June, with the past year of teaching fresh in our minds, I interview 19 of my co-workers, representing over three quarters of the teaching staff at Fenwick High School (FHS) in New York City, to try to find some answers. \*

Seventy-nine percent of my interviewees have been teaching for less than five years, which is indicative of the school's overwhelmingly young staff. Four of the teachers are currently studying to become school administrators, while others are considering doing the same.

FHS is finishing its fourth year of existence and celebrating its first graduating class. The school educates 430 students and is modeled after another highly

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\* School and teacher names have been changed to protect privacy

successful public school in New York City. One principal and one assistant principal fill the formal leadership roles and do an excellent job of ensuring a safe building, maintaining academic standards, and creating a relatively disciplined and respectful school tone. Unfortunately, this work leaves less time for offering instructional feedback, fully supporting initiatives, or advising teacher leaders. There is a pervasive sense that as long as teachers are following and upholding school policies, the administration will be fairly lax in its oversight of individuals.

Throughout the interviews, teachers mention 30 distinct activities that they consider “leadership” roles. Formal positions such as dean, senior advisor, and coordinator of student activities are listed, as well as nontitled duties like choosing novels for the English department, editing all of the college admission letters, and keeping inventory of art supplies. The departmental study group leaders are appointed by the school’s administration, while other roles—advising a student club or presenting a small professional development unit at faculty meetings, for example—are filled by volunteers. In addition, teachers believe that unacknowledged tasks such as clearing the hallway during lunch and offering advice to struggling coworkers are evidence of leadership. These sentiments—that vital school leadership encompasses much more than formalized roles—align with nationwide initiatives to improve schools by engaging teachers in a variety of leadership activities (Paulu & Winters, 1998; Searby & Shaddix, 2008; Teacher Leaders, 2005).

With their wide variety of experiences within the school building, 19 teachers (plus one interviewer) build a cohesive picture of teacher leadership at Fenwick High School. We wonder whether whether leaders should arise organically or be appointed. We analyze the role of the “repeat leader” who assumes a multitude of positions, and we question whether favoritism is shown to those teachers. We look at the special challenges of mentoring. A critical question arises from these conversations: Are school administrators relying too heavily on teacher leaders without providing training, support, and recognition for their invaluable service?

### **Organic or Assigned Leadership?**

In our discussions, we debate whether leadership should develop naturally or be assigned. Though there is merit to each approach, it becomes clear that neither route is without problems. In early autumn the tenth-grade teachers decided that they should meet as a grade-level team to discuss the students they have in

common. Second-year humanities teacher Patterson describes the meetings as “egalitarian,” as they were not mandated by the administration and had no recognized coordinator; however, she also notes that after the holiday vacation in December, the group failed to reconvene for the remainder of the year. Teachers offer an explanation for why their grassroots movement failed:

**Harrison** (fourth-year special educator): I had way too many meetings; that’s why. So something had to go. I had yearbook, prom, graduation, AP art history. I had all this deadline-driven stuff, so tenth graders had to go.

**Bramwell**: I think with teacher leadership, I think often times it’s easier to take that stuff and say, “You know what, I think I’ll drop that.” You want to let a deadline drop for another teacher as opposed to a Washington or a Ronald [principal and assistant principal] who are saying, “Hey, you guys need to meet.” You’ll be less likely to put that to the side.

**Patterson**: I feel like I would have kept meeting if I had been hounded down to meet, but my own initiative to get everyone to meet was just lost in other stuff.

**Harrison**: And when it’s a group, I thought, “Well, maybe they’ll continue without me. But if I don’t do the yearbook, then nobody’s going to do it.” When you’re just responsible for one thing, then you’re accountable for it. But in that group, I felt like there’s...

**Hausler** (fourth-year math teacher): ...other people.

The school’s two administrators were pleased that the tenth-grade teachers decided to meet, and they even encouraged other grade levels to do the same. Regrettably, their words were not backed by actions, as they offered no additional time, resources, feedback, or compensation to the tenth-grade teachers for their efforts. Administrators may have inadvertently sent the message that the meetings were expendable by not encouraging or expecting ongoing commitment.

While the leaderless tenth-grade collaboration was short-lived, there is also no guarantee that assigned leaders would have done any better in supporting a cohesive group, as shown in the following discussion about the departmental study

group leaders assigned by the principal. Fifth-year teacher Hanson led meetings of the English department, using a rotating facilitation model of which fourth-year teacher James says, “People were very responsible...when it was their turn to lead, and it’s something that functioned really well. We also had it really be about our interests and what was useful for us.” Though overwhelmingly positive, they admit that even a highly functional team begins to lag:

**Bramwell:** In the beginning we were very, very consistent, but then in April, May, no.

**Patterson:** I think we met when we needed to meet. I think in the beginning it felt more necessary to have a weekly meeting. And then biweekly sort of suited us more at the end.

**Bramwell:** Then, by the end, it was just kind of, you know, a little more happenstance toward the end of the year as opposed to very structured in the beginning.

Departmental meetings were also difficult for the social studies department. Waldorf, a teacher with less than one year of experience, says that the five teachers had no common planning period, so they were forced to meet before the school day, creating departmental friction. School administrators demanded weekly meetings, but did not prioritize the meetings enough to schedule common planning time. Waldorf says that the principal mediated the department’s verbal conflict but did not solve the scheduling problem. Describing one burden of being study group leader, Waldorf comments:

They’re under way more pressure than the rest of us. Because anything that goes wrong in the department, they get blamed for it. Again, with the meeting thing, our [study group leader] got blamed for it, and she had the least to do with it. She had to take the brunt of the blame for what went down with that whole fiasco.

Teachers from various departments complain that the administration’s expectations for the role of study group leader are unclear. Moretti, a second-year teacher and science study group leader, describes his understanding of the position:

I don’t think I do any more than anybody else. I really don’t. I am always willing to stay, assist, do whatever I can, but I don’t know that I necessarily

go out of my way...I keep reminding them to do things we need to do. But as far as having meetings, I was very bad at holding department meetings.

Essentially, teachers describe a scenario in which study group leaders are fully in charge of leading their departments while receiving almost no guidance from school administrators. Meetings between the two parties are sporadic, leaders receive no professional development to facilitate their endeavors, and there is no compensation for assuming the role. These policies are counter to those recommended by most research on promoting teacher leadership (Searby & Shaddix, 2008; Wynne, 2001; and Teacher Leaders, 2005); in addition, some teachers struggle without greater supervision.

Calapatia and Moretti discuss why the science department sometimes needs someone with more authority than a study group leader:

**Calapatia:** When we have meetings or need to come to a decision about things, I feel like sometimes we need a mediator.

**Moretti:** Yeah, we either don't take a stand, or we do take a stand, and when we do, nobody budges.

**Calapatia:** Brunson is opinionated but with a lot of reason, and you can understand why, but sometimes people...push for a direction, and we're open to hearing about it, but it's like, "What are your reasons?" And he keeps pushing, and it gets frustrating. I guess in that sense, I'm open to ideas, but I feel like we need someone to step in.

Administrators and teachers alike are expecting study group leaders to function as departmental assistant principals; however, these leaders still have full-time teaching schedules to manage. They have no real authority to mediate conflict between peers. Brunson describes the conflict:

It's difficult. We're our own bosses for most of the day. We're the masters of our domain most of the time. Sometimes it's hard to put that aside and follow someone else's leadership. I think, in this job, more than any other job I've worked in, when you're among peers, establishing leadership roles

can be a little bit tricky. Because we are sort of all equal, but then again, all day we don't have a boss telling us what to do. We're the ones in charge.

### **Repeat Leaders**

Because the administration relies so heavily on teacher leaders to keep the school functioning, certain teachers do play critical roles in large capacities or with small niche talents that are seemingly irreplaceable. Keita, a first-year English teacher, is a published writer and feels that the administration tapped into his passion by asking him to edit the seniors' college application essays. He enjoys the job, but recognizes the reality of being the school's "go-to" person for editing:

But I felt like, it was starting to get kind of overwhelming. Because then people would come and be like, "Look at this, look at this, look at that." I feel like with a lot of the leadership roles, since it's a small school, it's like this is the one person. Ms. Hausler is the programmer: I'm sure you wish you had like a team of programmers. Ms. Benson is the one student [activities] person. It's like that one person. Sometimes they get overwhelmed.

"I feel like that too," says Rizzo, the only visual arts teacher. Zambrano, who is the only physical education teacher and speaks with twenty years of experience, adds that sometimes "it's like the floodgates open up."

When asked whether those in formal leadership roles are shown favoritism, second-year English teacher Giordano suggests that it might be difficult to break into this group: "I tend to see that—that people who are pursuing administrative [degrees] tend to get more leadership roles. Not that it's unfair, but they tend to be the leaders of the school." Markowitz does not believe repeat leadership is limited to administrative interns but does pinpoint personality and competition as key factors:

I think that some teachers are more motivated to take on a lot of things, and be in charge of a lot of things, and for that reason, maybe other people aren't as driven to do that thing. They end up taking on a lot of things that other people would like to be involved in, and maybe the other people didn't have the opportunity.

Zambrano views the role of experience pragmatically: "If somebody's been

doing it well for the last three years, who am I to come and say, 'I want to do it now. Can you just step aside?' At the same time, others are noticeably less content with the status quo. Expressing dissatisfaction with a few of the teacher leaders in formal positions, first-year science teacher Chatham says that they were selected and rehired the next year in a "less than transparent process." After debate and attempts at clarification, it appears no one in the interview group is certain about how leaders are appointed; this confusion leads Chatham to change his description of the application and selection process to "opaque." Administrators rely on those who have proven competent in the past, which allows the principal and assistant principal to focus on other things; however, the perception of equity among teachers is an issue worth examining before greater tension arises. It may also behoove the administration to review the teaching staff in search of untapped leadership potential from those currently on the sidelines.

Many teachers say that repeat leaders are viewed as "capable," "committed," and "good at what they do" by the principal and assistant principal. While perhaps more teachers would like to feel the pride of being a recognized leader, everyone mentions that his or her own demanding workload can stand in the way of increased leadership. Finishing his first full year of teaching while juggling a few teacher leader roles, Marshall says, "I feel like I have enough on my plate anyway, that I didn't need the extra responsibility of anything else. So, I was happy with what I have." Michel lightheartedly adds, "I like to think of it, like, is it worth the perk of being one of these leaders? You know, if a perk is getting more work, you can just keep your perk."

### **The Special Problem of Mentoring**

The New York State Department of Education requires that each first-year teacher have an assigned mentor. Literacy coach Bramwell, who also serves as the mentoring coordinator, explains that he first tries to assign administrators-in-training to act as mentors. After those considerations, he then looks at content area and personality to match mentors and new teachers.

As a first-year science teacher, Calapatia is satisfied with the arrangement, saying, "I think I lucked out, because I think my mentor helped me out a lot, based on what he taught...It was kind of convenient because he can watch me because we share a classroom, and that component helped out a lot."

Thomas, a special education teacher, had a less favorable opinion of the formal assigning of mentors:

I mean, I had no problem with my mentor, but I think of it like in life:

Someone who you choose to be your mentor, someone who you look up to, someone who you've sat back, and you've observed them. You're like, "I like something in her. I want to be like her." I think maybe it should start a little bit later in the year. See who you mesh well with, and then you go from there.

Numerous teachers agree with Thomas, including fourth-year math teacher Michel, who resigned as mentor to fellow math teacher Kannangara in January:

**Michel:** The funny thing is, I was chosen [by Bramwell]. I didn't volunteer to be a mentor. Which is why I kind of agree with what Thomas is saying. I felt, because I was just kind of forced into it, well, not *forced*, *called* into it, when it was time for me to make a decision between other priorities that I had and mentoring, that's something that I can just cast away. So in January, that's why I just had to, uh...

**Bramwell:** Yeah, it's just less of a priority.

**Michel:** Yeah, exactly. I have to give up something. But I think it would be a little more personal if you knew that person chose you. You'd feel a little more committed. Like, OK, this person holds me up here, and then, you know...

**Bramwell:** You might commit more.

First-year mentoring has been a requirement for many years, but previously mentors from outside the school were assigned by the city. Most teachers disliked the process, including Brunson, who has taught science for six years:

Being an outsider, they weren't really helpful. The people I look up to and look to for leadership the most, and that I'm most willing to receive it from, are the people that I do work with. I see them in shared experiences that we have, and I'm way more likely to trust their actions, their guidance, than someone from outside the school.

Brunson's description includes many of Sullivan and Glanz's (2005) goals for peer coaching: "improve school culture, increase collegiality and professional dialogue, share in the implementation of new or common instructional skills" (p. 144).

Kannangara adds, “At least from my perspective, I feel like I can go up to any teacher and ask them for advice, and they’ll give it to me.” Teachers agree that this informal mentorship, which develops organically between teachers who work well together, is invaluable to the staff. It also supplements the limited amount of time that the two administrators have available for one-on-one conversations with teachers.

### **Remembering Appreciation**

Teachers at Fenwick High School monitor bulletin boards, start new student organizations, and serve on the school leadership team. They volunteer to teach the really tough group of students, the scorching hot Saturday academies in June, and the credit recovery programs after school. Educators write grants, prepare report cards, and develop new courses. They do these things in addition to their contractual duties, often with little or no extra pay. They lead the school without the power that comes with a formal title such as “assistant principal,” but are then left to deal with the consequences of angered coworkers, unclear expectations, and little feedback on their efforts. Keita describes an incentive:

Even if it’s just having students and teachers come to them with more work, I feel like it’s kind of a form of appreciation. Like, “You’re good at what you do. So, here, do more of this.” So, I feel like, you know, as much as it is a lot of work for students to come to me with essays, I always feel like that’s a compliment.

Hanson, a fifth-year teacher, dean, and extremely busy administrative intern, is a bit more critical, observing that some leaders can get more credit than others:

I feel personally my efforts have really been appreciated, but I feel like a lot of other people’s efforts really go unsung. And that’s something I would like to see more of. People who maybe don’t have a leadership title but who maybe do a lot of leadership things in our school. I think that they need to get more appreciation.

### **Teaming for Richer Teacher Leadership**

Teachers work extremely hard to meet their classroom obligations while fulfilling additional leadership roles. While most teachers feel overwhelmed by the

tasks they are asked to complete, their roles are often isolated, with one teacher leader being solely in charge of each responsibility. This leaves little opportunity for collaboration, shared decision making, and the exchange of expertise, which the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement considers vital to developing teacher leadership (Teacher Leaders, 2005). This compartmentalization also means that the principal and assistant principal are supervising isolated individuals, as opposed to a professional learning community or study group, effectively leaving them less opportunity for constructive, personalized feedback.

Perhaps a more group-oriented approach to teacher leadership would be appropriate, in which a small team shares the burden as well as the sense of accomplishment that comes with each role or task. A team-based model would also guarantee that at least one or two other people recognize the full extent of an individual's efforts and could show appreciation for this outstanding service; similarly, this approach also allows for critical feedback so that leadership skills can improve over time. At FHS, the principal and assistant principal are hardworking individuals with strong leadership skills, but their administrative workload makes it difficult for them to fully develop teacher leaders. Despite the time constraints, school administrators need to invest in providing professional development, more manageable schedules, and ongoing support mechanisms for teacher leaders. Principals must also communicate more frequently to receive feedback and genuinely hear the voices of the educators, particularly if they are going to rely so heavily on teacher leaders to advance the mission of their schools.