Beyond Teacher Leadership: The Role of Teachers as Learners, Innovators, and Designers for Whole Child Education

A POLICY BRIEF

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OVER THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS, the global pandemic exposed profound inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes. Other factors also impact our schools: Artificial Intelligence and machine learning, the global economy, growing student diversity, and social media networks create enormous challenges and opportunities. Students are facing an unprecedented struggle with maintaining mental health and emotional well-being. At the same time, schools must now teach a thinking curriculum for all students – preparing them for jobs that do not yet exist. Significant scientific advancements in our understanding of human development now point to reinventing teaching and learning to support the whole child – addressing their academic, cognitive, mental, physical, and social strengths and needs.

If schools are to serve the whole child and students are to lead their learning, then those who teach them must usher in new ways of doing so. In the future of education, Yong Zhao makes the case that teaching must become “the sum of the entire community of teachers” as they take on varied roles as life coaches, curators of opportunities and resources for learning, and project leaders as well as community organizers.¹

As the figurative walls between teaching and learning in schools and community fall, the need arises for many teachers to simultaneously teach and lead. Now is the time to rethink teaching and take advantage of the talents and aspirations of many teachers to bridge the digital divide, build deeper partnerships with families, allied professionals, and businesses, and use technology-driven innovations to accelerate student learning. Doing so requires school districts to consider new forms of school leadership beyond traditional career ladders designed for only a few teachers to “get ahead” in their profession.²

Through an exploration of two school districts committed to whole child education, this brief highlights the need for policies that enable teachers to create learning experiences that support students’ holistic well-being and prepares them for our rapidly changing world. The brief explores the conditions and practices deeply embedded or ready for enhancement across each district –
the established drivers and the promising accelerants – that support teachers as learners, innovators, and designers.

THE TWO DISTRICTS AND INNOVATION AND DESIGN BY TEACHERS

We have learned from two school districts – Surrey Schools (British Columbia) and Anaheim Union High School District (California) – how they cultivate teachers as learners, innovators, and designers to spur innovations in whole child education. Surrey is a much larger district (over 75,000 students) than AUHSD (about 27,000), but both serve diverse student populations in dynamic urban contexts. More than 190 languages other than English are represented in Surrey’s 130 schools serving grades K-12, and 4 out of 5 students have been designated socio-economically disadvantaged in AUHSD’s 19 junior and senior high schools.

We focused on the district as the unit of change, with an eye on high schools, which have been more impervious to change. We chose these two districts because of improvements in student outcome data beyond standardized test scores to include civic engagement, workforce readiness, intellectual, human, and social-emotional development measures.

The two case studies, which commenced in early 2022, documented how high school teachers from Surrey and AUHSD have explored avenues of “radical collaboration” by building digital spaces on Facebook or Microsoft Teams so they can lead their professional learning. In AUHSD, teachers are the driving force for the innovative use of a unique learning management system, eKadence, and student capstone portfolios that “marry academics with an emotional quotient.” Other teachers have created a hybrid, interdisciplinary summer school curriculum that “blew up the bell schedule” and produced “amazing results” for some of the district’s most high-need students. Still, other teachers led the development of the district’s approach to performance assessments tied to their district’s respective “North Stars” for deeper, student-led learning (and not multiple-choice, standardized tests).

Teachers in both districts created new academic courses that fuel interdisciplinary learning and student leadership; others spurred the development of virtual academies that spread learning opportunities to any student anytime, anywhere. Still, others in AUHSD, led by Sabina Giakoumis, expanded what was once a small school garden into a 2.5-acre farm where students learn about science, develop entrepreneurial skills, and address the food desert reality of Magnolia High’s immediate neighborhoods.

Click to watch a video on the MACC, developed by Sabina Giakomus, 5C Coach in AUHSD who led the creation of the farm as a classroom teacher.
Teachers are serving in externships with local business partners to experience the world of work that awaits their students. We documented even more of these examples, all reflecting a core tenet of the emerging whole child education movement: integrative practices connecting classrooms, the community, teachers, and allied and industry professionals.

The importance of a few formal classroom-based leaders, “Helping Teachers” in Surrey and the “5C Coaches” in Anaheim, cannot be underestimated in accelerating innovation and design. However, they do not serve as traditional instructional coaches; instead, they model the work of teachers as learners, innovators, and designers through the support of their peers. Both districts are in the process of finding ways to fully develop a system of leading teachers.

Our case study uncovered established drivers and promising accelerants for the teacher innovation needed for a system of whole child education.

**ESTABLISHED DRIVERS AND PROMISING ACCELERANTS**

We classified these elements into two categories: **Established drivers** refer to the work of teachers as innovators and designers already deeply embedded in practice. **Promising accelerants** refer to the work of teachers as innovators and designers that is beginning to unfold and could be enhanced if these practices were accelerated.

**ESTABLISHED DRIVERS:**

#1: Creating organizational culture centered on teachers as agents of change. This culture was built over time by administrators buffering teachers from external demands, like high-stakes testing, so they had the space to innovate. The districts bring in instructional (and PD) programs, but teachers are expected and supported to adapt to them as part of a larger strategy.
#2: Leveraging positional leadership so more teachers can innovate and design. In these districts, the role of positional teacher leaders is to fuel growth in informal and non-positional leadership from their teaching colleagues. Helping Teachers and 5C Coaches, who hold formal positions, are catalysts for developing a new leadership system with roles that do not resemble a supervisor, evaluator, or even a more traditional instructional coach.

#3: Developing the whole teacher for whole child education. Both districts nurture teacher well-being – investing time and money into mindfulness experiences and understanding teachers’ sense of belonging. Surrey intentionally collects data on the well-being of adults and children. Rob Gaudette, a 5C coach in AUHSD, has developed a teachers’ hierarchy of needs (based on Maslow) to support his colleagues and highlight the role of school climate in both student and staff experience.

**PROMISING ACCELERANTS:**

#1: Identifying and utilizing innovative teachers without overly formalizing their leadership. Both districts have an array of initiatives that allow them to identify and use increasing numbers of teachers as innovators. For instance, Marc Garneau, a math Helping Teacher in Surrey, suggested that learning walks could be used more strategically to identify the strengths of teachers. This could be complemented by an intentional process that helps to identify areas where innovative teachers can contribute their unique skill sets. He told us that “leadership is about finding your strength.” Amy Kwon, a former AUHSD principal who now directs innovation for the district, told us that new tools and processes could be developed but must not stifle the power of informal, creative leadership. She shared, “The more casual the way you talk to teachers about their strengths and interests, the more their ‘thing’ comes out.”

#2: Spurring school-university-community partnerships that prepare teachers as change agents. Surrey and Anaheim have developed partnerships with a limited number of local colleges of education among their wide range of collaborating partners. And while many innovative teachers and administrators teach as adjuncts in local universities, the districts have yet to develop a more profound strategy for cultivating the next generation of whole child educators with skills in peer collaboration and development of performance assessments and community partnerships.

#3: Redesigning the job of teaching to transform professional learning environments. Both districts have been rethinking the use of people and personnel dollars so more teachers serve in both teaching and leading roles. AUHSD invests in teacher leads for technology, English language learners, and civic engagement. Surrey strategically uses highly qualified substitute teachers (and allocates 4 percent of its budget for these Teachers Teaching on Call) to create more collaborative planning time for teachers to innovate. Kyle McKillop, an ELA teacher in Surrey, and Raquel Solorzano-Duenas, a social studies teacher in AUHSD, have shown how they can “blow up school schedules” that create more interdisciplinary teaching for teachers and personalized learning for students. The Cambridge Virtual Academy (CVA) in AUHSD offers a model for how technology can build a whole child education approach as teachers have more time to learn from each other and students have time for internships and classes at different times of the day.

We do not see the districts cultivating more innovative teachers without building on these promising accelerants, and we see a role in state and local policy in enabling the prospects of them doing so.
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In reflecting on the evidence, which included a two-day learning exchange between the two districts in October 2022, we point to the following policy recommendations:

**It’s time to take a stand and reimagine what counts for student learning in state and national policies.** Whole Child education posits a new North Star of student-led learning and cross-sector partnerships needed for every child and adolescent to be prepared to thrive in work and life. Policy leaders can make a difference by first re-thinking what counts for learning – shifting away from the Carnegie unit (measuring learning in secondary schools by subject area courses taken) and standardized testing (measuring learning by multiple-choice items where every student needs to pick one correct answer). Both are bedrock currencies of the K-12 and higher education enterprises and both stifle innovation. Administrators should not have to go out of their way to buffer teachers from fear of failing as teachers seek to innovate. New policies must be in place to encourage more teachers to co-develop better assessments for learning, not just of learning.

**It’s time to reimagine teacher evaluation systems and collective bargaining agreements as catalysts for innovation.** The cases highlighted the need for reforming teacher evaluation and collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) to promote the development of leading teachers. Policy leaders can reframe teacher evaluation as a tool for identifying and utilizing teacher strengths, fostering collaboration among teachers in conducting research into the effects of their practice, and acknowledging the value of teaching teams. Similarly, CBAs can be transformed into a catalyst for innovation by rethinking human capital and the role of Human Resource and Curriculum departments as talent developers in school districts. A new CBA can recognize teachers with different teaching schedules and encourage new roles in partnership with allied professionals who may not hold a traditional teaching license, but work in support of a district’s most accomplished classroom practitioners. By doing so, policy leaders can spur a more collaborative and effective system of leading teachers that supports whole child education.

Transforming HR from an industrial human capital model to a professional one that leverages distributed expertise and differentiated compensation can help to create a system of leading teachers that supports whole child education. Policy leaders can anchor this model in the strategic use of people, including licensed K-12 teachers and administrators, community educators, social and health service professionals, industry experts, and technical college and university faculty. By differentiating compensation for time, role, and impact, policy leaders can recognize the value of each contributor to the education system and create incentives for collaboration and innovation.

**It’s time to implement innovative approaches that prioritize teacher leadership, collaboration, and deeper learning.** By investing more education personnel funds in teachers (and teaching time) rather than administrators and supervisors, school districts can create opportunities for more classroom experts to lead without leaving the classroom. Collaboration time, such as the 15 hours per week afforded to teachers in top-performing education jurisdictions, can be made available to teachers by shifting teaching schedules for deeper learning and professional growth. (Much of Singapore’s educational innovation of the last 20 years has been built on teach less, learn more.) Policy leaders can encourage districts to rethink traditional personnel categories and deploy resources in innovative ways that support effective teaching, learning, and caring for all students.
State and provincial policies can also incentivize learning exchanges among districts to foster collaboration and develop solutions collectively for finding more time for teachers to teach and lead.

Despite the challenges faced by public schooling, a system of leading teachers can provide a solid foundation for teaching, learning, and caring that benefits every child and adolescent.

The experiences and lessons learned from Surrey and AUHSD can guide and inspire other school jurisdictions worldwide to create a system of leading teachers that prioritizes whole child education. By taking action and implementing innovative approaches that cultivate teacher leadership, policy leaders can create a brighter future for all students.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**, contact barnettberry@sc.edu and m.saunders@ucla.edu about the joint USC and UCLA efforts in support of creating a system of leading teachers for whole child education. Read the full case study [here](#).

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**ENDNOTES**