RACHEL ESTARIZ
LEADING THROUGH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Rachel Estariz was a junior in college when she decided to rethink where her life was headed. Coming from a low-income background, she felt pressure to seek a high-paying career. “I was pushed away from education,” she said. “I tried computer science and other fields in college. But I realized I didn’t like any of it.” She enjoyed her time in student government and the leadership opportunities it provided. But she didn’t know which career path was right for her.

She had heard about Teach for America, a program that gives college graduates the opportunity to be teachers while earning their official certification, from a friend a couple of years earlier, and decided to find out more. She successfully applied to the program after graduation, and found herself teaching first grade in Tulsa, Oklahoma. But it wasn’t until she joined Leading Educators that she got the training she needed to help guide and shape professional learning for her peers.

Growing up in Virginia Beach, Virginia, Estariz had always valued her experience in school. But after stepping in to the classroom in Tulsa, she realized how lucky she had been as a student. “I had so many great, experienced teachers in Virginia Beach,” she said, but teachers in Tulsa had room to grow. “The district is so under-resourced. Part of the reason I felt connected to the city and wanted to stay was to have a long-lasting impact.”

After honing her craft for several years in first grade, she felt the urge to use her leadership skills to expand her impact beyond the students in her classroom. Tulsa’s partnership with Leading Educators presented a perfect opportunity. Leading Educators partners with school districts to create the conditions and culture necessary to achieve a coherent instructional approach systemwide. This means that teachers have the successful and relevant professional learning opportunities they need to put strong content into practice and offer all students excellent and equitable teaching experiences every day. Leading Educators prioritizes four conditions necessary for success:

- Adequate time for collaboration among teachers
- Diverse and distributed instructional leadership
- Standards-aligned curriculum and assessments
- Focused priorities

Leading Educators’ model is proven to work. Over two years of working with Leading Educators to implement the Learning together to Advance our Practice (LEAP) program, Washington, DC Public Schools saw accelerated student growth in both ELA and math on the PARCC assessment. Participating teachers increase their skills as well: 92% of Leading Educators teacher leaders increased their score on a pedagogical knowledge assessment.

Teacher leadership is a critical piece of Leading Educators’ approach. In Leading Educators districts, a select group of teachers are trained and prepared to lead curriculum-aligned professional learning in their schools. Before the school year, these teacher leaders begin their own

RACHEL ESTARIZ’S PATHWAY TO TEACHER LEADERSHIP
- Didn’t plan to become an educator when she entered college
- Joined Teach for America, teaching first grade in Tulsa, Oklahoma
- Through Leading Educators, became an instructional leader, facilitating professional learning in her school
professional learning program focused on effective instructional leadership and are coached on how to best support their colleagues. Leading Educators design sequenced materials tied to priority content topics so the teacher leaders can focus on how to facilitate the learning effectively.

Tulsa pulled in Leading Educators following a curriculum shift that required significant adjustments in instructional practice. In May 2018, the district asked Leading Educators to support the district in developing content-aligned professional learning, and to help train teachers like Estariz lead her peers in efforts to collaborate and improve their practice.

In most schools, professional learning is delivered by either external facilitators or district staff—people who are not based at the school. And according to Estariz, adopting the Leading Educators model has had a dramatic impact. “Professional development is generally not good if it’s not local,” she said. “When teachers who understand the context are leading, it makes a huge difference.”

That doesn’t mean Estariz’s work has been easy. Teachers were initially not accustomed to having required professional learning—while there were opportunities, many teachers chose not to attend without consequences. The weekly, 90-minute required sessions represented a significant change for her colleagues.

But getting the teachers in the room and engaged was only the first challenge. To be successful, she also needed a culture shift to build an environment where teachers viewed professional learning as an opportunity to hone their craft and focus on what they can control as educators. They needed to develop a “culture of improvement,” she said.

When Estariz started her role, many teachers needed to improve their instruction. She was delivering professional development on phonics, and she observed inconsistencies in how teachers were teaching the same material. “I was worried at first,” she said. “Many teachers had to change their practice. They were trying to focus on too many things at once.” But her credibility as a respected teacher in the school helped to quickly turn the culture of the sessions around. The teachers began to see themselves as a team, and the professional learning as an opportunity to work together to improve.

Estariz’s foray into teacher leadership has also made her a stronger classroom teacher. “It’s really tightened up what I do in the classroom,” she said. “It’s made me hold myself accountable in a new way. Additionally, learning how to teach to adults has made me internalize the content more effectively.”

To Estariz, this experience has shown the power of teacher leadership. “Teacher leadership is about empowering educators who know the context to make a difference in their school, and that can’t be replaced,” she said.

And while she benefited from a formal opportunity to be a teacher leader, she encourages all teachers to push for change within their schools. “Aspiring teacher leaders should seek out opportunities to work with teachers to make the change you want in your building,” she said. “If you see an issue, bring it up, and people will be on board.”

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