As teacher leaders have expanded their impact in schools and districts around the country, the role that the state education agency could play in supporting and elevating their work has continued to evolve. Tennessee is one example of a state that made teacher leadership a priority, resulting in lessons learned, and systems and tools to support the growth and expansion of leadership efforts statewide.

As part of their Race to the Top implementation the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) built the Teacher Leader Network, a statewide network of districts that participated in programming to design individualized teacher leader structures. Throughout this effort TDOE brought teachers together regularly to contribute to the state’s evolving policy direction, created structures and incentives for differentiated pay in districts, and designed a series of trainings and tools, with embedded support structures, for districts to use as they designed their own teacher leader systems.

The state’s efforts put every district in Tennessee on the same page, using the same framework to guide their teacher leadership efforts. “That is why Tennessee saw the movement it did,” said former Commissioner Candice McQueen. “All 131 districts had access to training and to the policy. They had the will and the funding.”

Throughout their RTT implementation, TDOE urged schools and districts to design and implement teacher leader programs that were district-initiated and district-led. Leveraging the foundation laid by former Commissioner Kevin Huffman, former Commissioner McQueen and her cabinet created systems and supports that elevated the role of teacher leader at the state level.

TDOE identified their responsibility as to:
◊ Make teacher leadership visible as a high-impact lever for improving student outcomes;
◊ Align and integrate teacher leadership with accountability measures by embedding teacher leadership into teacher and administrator evaluation systems; and
◊ Identify and share examples of effective teacher leaders and district conditions that aid in the implementation, refinement, spread, and sustainability of teacher leader models.

IN ORDER TO PARTICIPATE IN THE TLN, DISTRICTS COMMITTED TO:
• Selecting a four-person vertical team to attend all seven TLN monthly meetings in Nashville.
• Commit to building a comprehensive teacher leader model in all schools in the district
• Aligning all teacher leader roles with the Teacher Leader Model Standards
• Sustaining their TLN model for multiple years through dedicated funding.
TDOE was pivotal in setting the table for districts to create pathways, offer training and bolster differentiated compensation packages to support teacher leaders statewide. The state set ambitious goals: to create innovative, relevant and sustainable teacher leader models that identify, develop and extend the reach of teacher leaders resulting in increased teacher effectiveness and improved student learning. To get there, the TDOE developed and adopted the Teacher Leader Model Standards, created and elevated the Teacher Advisory Council, disseminated annual opportunities and guidance for the Teacher Leader Network, hosted an annual Teacher Leader Summit and hired regional coaches, experienced leaders in their respective districts who served as technical assistance leads for districts across the state.

“We had a theory of action to work through our districts with our teachers,” said Commissioner McQueen. “Then [our] role was to create resources, drive accountability, and share incentives so that this was the number one priority at the school level.”

Participation in the Teacher Leader Network required alignment to a specific set of structures designed by TDOE to support the identification, support and use of teacher leaders statewide. The model was based on two key principles: (1) The work had to be district owned and led, and (2) Teacher voice had to remain at the center of the work. This effort was “loose on methods and tight on outcomes,” said former Assistant Commissioner Paul Fleming.

“...[Districts] felt ownership,” he said. “This was not a case of the state telling them what to do, it was a coherent system. Ultimately it was the best marriage; a road map accompanied by non-negotiables.”

Sylvia Flowers, former TDOE Executive Director of Educator Effectiveness and Talent, agreed. “Once we embarked on this work we began to leverage teacher voice and teacher advocacy,” she said. “That was the biggest shift.”

The occasion to build up and out the role of teacher leader based on district needs, data and context was welcomed by districts. More than 55 districts participated in 2017-2018, including many that lacked the capacity to undertake this work on...
their own but were able to do so with state support. Conditions were ripe for districts to own the design and trajectory of their teacher leader initiatives, and build programs that benefited from the expertise provided by TDOE.

The outcome of the state-facilitated efforts was a sense of empowerment, said Robin McClellan, a veteran principal of Sullivan County School District in rural Tennessee, and a founding member of her district’s Teacher Leader team. McClellan served as a principal liaison in the 2013 cohort of the TLN, and became a district wide coach in Sullivan County. She was ultimately tapped by the TDOE to be a regional coach, supporting other districts as they designed and implemented their own Teacher Leader models. TDOE played an innovative role, especially in 2013, she said.

“The thing I know better than anything else is that if you empower teachers to grow that will ripple. I knew that from the beginning,” she said. “[Teacher Leadership] was so new at the time, but the state pulled us together and gave us a tribe to work with.”

Rural districts were the most “hungry” for the state support, said Commissioner McQueen. Urban districts like Memphis, Nashville and Knoxville may have moved forward with Teacher Leader initiatives without support from TDOE, but for the majority of the state the proliferation of teacher leader roles would not have happened as quickly or at scale without the state support and TIF funding incentives.

What made this initiative work was the continued prioritization of this effort at the state level, Commissioner McQueen said. Leaders at the TDOE consistently maintained a clear vision and committed the resources necessary to enable the opportunities to be made available statewide. The visibility of the work, the distribution of resources, and the persistent commitment to elevating the voice of teacher leaders in their respective districts was unique, she said.

The Tennessee team who led the work during the state’s RTT implementation remain proud of their efforts, but say that states who move in this direction could improve on their model by increasing a focus on data and support for measurable outcomes. The state is currently dedicating its efforts toward cultivating pipelines into the principalship, and has directed supports away from teacher leaders as TDOE responds to shortages in school leaders statewide.

“We should have been more explicit about student achievement,” said Commissioner McQueen. “We could have been clear about [target outcomes] and we could have tied that to how the districts did their work.”

Flowers agreed, noting that states should focus on wider-reaching policies to have an even greater impact and learn more about what is most effective – advocacy, instruction or mentoring.

“If we had gone further with policy, showing how to measure the impact of the teacher in these positions, we could have learned more about effectiveness of the Teacher Leader work,” she said.

Former Commissioner McQueen remains committed to the work and says she is proud of the results their efforts had across the state. “We had immense impact on the teacher leaders, and the teachers we trained,” she said. “The work can be done if you have the goal, the vision and the training.”