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Personal Leadership Challenge Assignment

PART 1: IDENTIFY, ANALYZE, & DECIDE ON COURSE OF ACTION

Introduction

Within the realm of education, many leadership challenges arise on a daily basis. Teachers and leaders are faced with challenges that not only affect the classroom and their students, but affect the relationships formed within their school. Teachers are responsible for the success of their students and it is through the routines, tools, and structures set forth that they are able to succeed in this journey. It is a given that "improved student learning depends upon teacher learning" and it is argued that "the ultimate payoff of teachers' learning opportunities depends upon teachers' opportunities and commitment to work together to improve instruction for the students of their school." (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) Within the following pages one will find my personal leadership challenge in regards to developing a learning community for a group of teachers that presently does not exist and has not had the opportunity to subsist.

Identifying and Analyzing My Shared Leadership Challenge

Background Knowledge of the School/Situation

In regards to the challenge that deems to be conquered, it is first important to gain a few aspects of background knowledge about the school, relationships, and community that exist in my situation. The current school that I am employed at is a school where professional learning communities thrive. It is understood that "teacher learning communities all feature a common image of a professional community where teachers work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning from the particular students in their classes." (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) With an administrator who values time and

resources spent within our professional groups, our communities are ever evolving and using data to support student learning. Professional learning communities exist at each grade level and many times resources/ideas are shared amongst groups in vertical alignments. The vision of our school is centered on these strong gatherings of staff members and time given is crucial in our school improvement plans and goals.

With this said, it should be noted that for the past two years I have been part of the fourth grade professional community team. Here, we were able to collaboratively look at student work, data, and many other aspects that helped further our thinking and reach our students at new levels. It is highly seen at my school and adopted that "when teachers examine students' work together, it helps them consider how practice has been successful or fallen short of expectations." (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) However, due to our current economic standings, major cuts have been allocated to our district. It is within this time period that my position was greatly affected. I have been cut to a half-time Begindergarten position (an early five's program). In my building I am the only classroom teaching this area. Where other grades have upward of four teachers per grade level, I am solo in the realm of pre-kindergarten.

Now introduced, one can easily see that the opportunity to be part of a professional learning community at my grade-level is non-existent within my school. It has not been set up this way, but moreover, this is the way the situation has been laid out in relation to the times. From my standpoint, I feel as though it is hard for me to involve myself in the workings of the school and staff because of the inopportunity provided. Staff meetings are informative and helpful, but often times they refer to every other grade except the one I am involved with. This is a constant struggle for not only me, but my principal as well, due to the lack of teaching standards that I am supposed to use as a guideline for my instruction (there are no specific state guidelines for the grade level I teach). Although it could (and sometimes does) get very discouraging, there is a positive outcome that may be available to me in regards to forming a professional learning community to gain insights and provide for reflection.

Analysis of Situation

As previously discussed, the opportunity for a Begindergarten learning community does not exist at my school. With that said, the opportunity for a district Begindergarten learning community surprisingly does. Although I am alone in my school with this level of students, our district does have two additional Begindergarten programs at two other elementary schools. Being new to the program this year has allowed for many questions and concerns to develop. It can also be noted that the two other teachers are new to this position as well (none of them have taught this grade level before). I have been in contact with these two individuals, but with

the chaos of a new year and a new level, I have neither tried nor thought to meet in a professional learning community setting.

With an analysis of this situation I am dealt, it is obvious that a meeting needs to be scheduled. This meeting not only needs to address the thoughts and reflections we have had thus far for the year, but a meeting to develop a strong professional community with the three of us at the core. With all of the road-blocks administered for our specific situation we need to collectively decide to develop our very own pre-kindergarten teacher learning community that "entails, first, the creation of joint-work, or a project that engenders collaboration among a group of teachers who share a mission to improve instruction for their students." (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006)

Deciding on the Course of Action

First Professional Learning Community Meeting

As I have currently evaluated and analyzed my situation, a course of action is clear and was briefly touched upon in the previous section. Through this analysis, an apparent ideal has come about in regards to my situation and leadership; I have seemingly taken an "informal teacher-leader role" in which I have "naturally surfaced as a leader among colleagues." (Donaldson, 2006) I feel proud that I am able to bring together a group of such talented and flexible educators to share our ideas and make for a better learning experience for our students.

The course of action will be straightforward at first, a small gathering will be scheduled in which we can all meet and just freely talk about the year thus far. Although it is suggested that all meetings "gather colleagues together with a purpose," this meeting cannot delve into a true purpose without first meeting everyone and having informal introductions. (P. McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & E. McDonald, 2007)

The exact purpose of this meeting is to justly form a relationship with others in the same situation. Although this meeting is a very informal first meeting, there will be three specific protocols used to develop a surface relationship and purpose for this group. The first protocol that will be used by the facilitator (I will facilitate for the first meeting) will be that of an "All-Purpose Go-Around". This protocol will be used to introduce the group to each other and gain a piece of knowledge about each person. With this protocol the facilitator will instruct the group to "Introduce themselves and tell use one thing they like about teaching pre-kindergarten." (P. McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & E. McDonald, 2007)

Then next protocol that will be addressed for the first meeting (and will immediately follow the first protocol) will be that of "Norm-Setting". Here, the group will compile a list of norms that they will hold high in regards to each meeting. For the "Norm-Setting" protocol the group will be following a specific structure assisted by the facilitator, "brainstorming, discussion, synthesis, and consensus." (P. McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & E. McDonald, 2007) Once the norms have been established, they will be in place for each meeting and used as a guide to constantly remind each other of the expectations we have for one another.

The last protocol that will be utilized during our first meeting is a protocol that I have come up with to meet the needs of our group. Our group will engage in a brainstorming session that will allow us to determine the focus of our future meetings. Although this meeting is solely used as a "meet and greet" we will also need to determine why we are here and what we want to accomplish. The brainstorming will be written on a non-formal piece of paper in which all teachers at the meeting will be able to voice their concerns and add it to the list of ideas that need focus. If there is time, the list will be looked at as a whole and we will come up with a few focal points of interest for the next meeting and how we will go about the organization of the content. This brainstorming sheet will be copied for each individual and then will be added to as the teachers see fit.

Due to the part-time schedule of our positions, we have the afternoons to "voluntarily" meet. This first meeting will be the most crucial part in our year as new pre-kindergarten teachers. It will be proposed that ideas, artifacts, and successes be brought to this meeting. A very informal structure will be used in our first meeting to ease into our year as teammates and this structure will be based off of informal conversations and offerings. As the year progresses, the meeting will develop structures, resources, and tools that will be used for each meeting.

The Use of Principals and Facilitators

Due to the nature of the situation, in which all the principals from the participating schools are extremely supportive; it will be asked if the support be given to our newly formed group. With support and guidance from the principals in place, it would be our goal to have a principal at every meeting we hold. After having experienced this learning thus far, "Because of their [principals] positional authority and control over school resources, principals are in a strategic position to promote or inhibit the development of a teacher learning community in their school." (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) Having the knowledge and power of a principal within our meetings will only help with our development as pre-kindergarten teachers.

In regards to a group facilitator, for the first few meetings, each group member will take a turn being the facilitator. As briefly mentioned before, I will be taking on the informal role as

the facilitator for the first meeting. With the teachers in our group taking on the role of the facilitator, we must "understand the three tasks-involving participation, equity, and trust-they are at the heart of the work." (P. McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & E. McDonald, 2007) It would be my goal (as well as my groups) to hopefully gain another fourth party to be our future facilitator. I know that each school is currently short on resources, but literacy consultants, title one consultants, and curriculum coordinators could all be placed in the facilitator's role during the course of the year.

The Use of Feedback

It can be strongly said that feedback is something that every professional community will need to accomplish and use, whether that be administration, teacher, or student feedback. The same will hold true with our pre-kindergarten professional learning community. There will be many avenues of feedback for our group including both formal and informal methods.

The informal method of feedback will consist of discussions between each other (pre-kindergarten teachers) as well as administrators, facilitators, and teachers. This opportunity for informal feedback can be used as an exceptionally significant method of feedback. This form of feedback relies on more casual interactions in which "leaders here participate in more frequent and less formal 'checking-in' activities. Their efforts are formative" and "the key to these informal follow-through conversations is the leader's emphasis on evidence. Leaders chat with colleagues or assemble a team for a brief, informal assessment before new practice has been in trial very long." (Donaldson, 2006) The informal method of feedback will be used on a daily basis as well as a regular meeting basis.

The next method of feedback that will be used within the group will consist of a more formal avenue of communication between group members, facilitators, and administrators. The feedback derives directly from the ASSIST website in which a tool will be administered each time our group meets. The tool being used is the "Assessing our learning—beginning teacher study group" rubric. (ASSIST, n.d.) This tool is simply a rubric that the group can collaboratively fill out based on the goals of the group, evidence to support the goals, areas for growth, and the next steps that our group needs to take. (ASSIST, n.d.) Below, one can find the rubric (and explanation) that will be used at each professional learning community:

➢ **Tool: Assessing Our Learning, Beginning Teacher Study Group**

- **Purpose of this tool:** This tool will help you and your colleagues to assess what you, as a group, have learned throughout the year. On-going assessment on your learning can foster critical reflection, and help you develop and enhance educative mentoring practices.
- **How to Use this Tool:** Use this tool as a group assessment. You can use it throughout your work to help you sustain focused, productive work, to celebrate your successes and to maintain commitment to your work and to each other.

Our learning goals	Evidence that we've met them	Areas for continue growth	Next steps

The group will be responsible for filling out this rubric together and using the previous rubrics to guide our future meetings and responsibilities. It will be our goal to eventually use more ASSIST tools to look at our student's work and assess strengths, weaknesses, and areas to improve on our teaching.

Conclusion to Shared Leadership Part 1

With all aspects of our current situation identified, analyzed, and a plan of action is in place, a definite pre-kindergarten professional learning community is underway. With one small step to shared leadership, it is my goal to have a small group of dispersed teachers form a true bond that will ultimately lead to teacher and student success. It is truly imperative that as a group of educators (teachers, facilitators, and administrators) we work together to form a "space with the help of the teachers where people can talk about their work. And therefore other people can be influenced by their work." (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) Where no professional community has existed before, a determined group of individuals will assemble and develop strong bonds to help further student success as such a pivotal age.

PART 2: INITIATE & TRACK PROGRESS

Initial Information of Implementation

With the plan set and ready for implementation, a date and time was secured for the pre-kindergarten Professional Learning Community. Below is the list of major dates that occurred within the initiation and implementation phase:

- ***First contact to schedule initial meeting:*** Monday, November 16th 2009 (via email messages)
- ***Agreement on meeting time and date confirmed:*** Tuesday, November 17th 2009 (via email messages)
- ***Phone conference with professor Meloche to address project:*** Sunday, November 22nd 2009
- ***First meeting time and date:*** Tuesday, December 1st 2009 (myself and both teachers present, held at my school for the first meeting)
- ***Next meeting scheduled:*** Tuesday, December 22nd 2009 (content not fully determined)

For the entire process of the phases of this project a notebook was kept in which notes, dates, and ideas were recorded. The findings in this notebook are further used to complete the next aspect of this project, the analysis of the implemented shared leadership challenge. Encompassed in the next section of this project, one will find the analysis of this project and the future it may hold within my teaching career and the ability of my teacher leadership opportunities.

PART 3: ANALYZE PROCESS

Detailed Account of Shared Leadership Process (Including Implementation of Protocols/Tools and Account of Initial Feedback)

With the date and time set for the meeting and all members in agreement to be present (myself and the two other pre-kindergarten teachers) the meeting was able to be held. The first meeting was held on Tuesday, November 16th 2009 from 4:00-5:00 p.m. We met at my current school, in my classroom. At this point, because of the short notice, the three principals were unable to attend the meeting. Taking on the facilitator role, it was my responsibility to "bring particular knowledge, skills, and tools for engendering and supporting the teachers' joint work."

(McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) Each of the members present were aware and in agreement that I take on the first facilitator role with the understanding that the role would be shared throughout the future meetings.

As the meeting started, it was a relief to finally meet one another and introduce ourselves. It was a great feeling being able to put names to faces and truly meeting the individuals that were experiencing the same facets I was. With the introductions well underway, I shared with the group the agenda for our meeting. I actually had a copy of my Part 1 description, analysis, and tools/protocols to share with each group member. We discussed what the meeting would look like as well as all of the tasks I would like us to engage in. The group was very pleased with the ideas I had outlined for the group and seemed eager to get started with the meeting to establish a true professional learning community amongst ourselves.

One should note that the structure (surprisingly) followed the arrangement that was laid out in Part 1 of this shared leadership project. Having and agenda helped to keep us on track and in compliance with the configuration I had prepared for the group. With that said the breakdown of the meeting is presented below, with specifics for each phase of the meeting and the tools employed during the meeting.

"All-Purpose Go-Around": (P. McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & E. McDonald, 2007)

This was the first protocol that was used for the meeting. It was a perfect match to start off a meeting in which none of us had ever met in person before. Here, I asked each teacher to share a little bit about themselves (give a brief introduction) as well as state one thing they have found that they enjoy about teaching pre-kindergarten.

The findings were very similar. Although we had all come from different teaching backgrounds (including levels, specialties, etc.), for each of us, it was our first year teaching this grade level. It was also prevalent that we all enjoyed the innocence of the children at that age as well as the ability for them to learn concepts and ideas in such a quick manner. It was also very common that we were all perfectionists that wanted the best for our children and wanted to perform in such ways that would be conducive to all students' learning. I truly lucked out when it came to the personalities within this group; we all have very similar opinions when it comes to hard work and commitment.

"Norm-Setting": (P. McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & E. McDonald, 2007)

The next protocol that we embarked on was one that was held with the utmost of importance. I posted a large piece of construction paper in the middle of our table that we were sitting at. With this piece of paper we started what the protocol refers to as "brainstorming" with ideas for our norms. In our brainstorming session each of us threw out ideas for our group meetings. This list became rather detailed and consisted of these pieces:

- Respectful of others' ideas
- Open to new ideas
- Be on time for all meetings
- Be prepared and ready to share
- Bring all materials needed (similar to the previous one)
- Willing to push others' thinking as well as your own
- Switch meeting spots to accommodate for all
- Share the role of the facilitator amongst the three individual
- Have the facilitator be the recorder/responsible for all things discussed
- Bring new ideas to share
- Willing to make the commitment for future meetings
- Stick to some sort of agenda
- Get others involved if possible

Once we had finished our brainstorming stage, we then took our norms into the "discussion" and "synthesis" stage where we talked about the norms we had created and decided which ones were the most important and which ones we truly needed for our group to function as a cohesive unit.

After much positive discussion, as a group we had decided to whittle our list down to five key norms that we would live by each meeting. After having our discussion and synthesis, we were all in agreement in the five that needed to remain (a few were combined because of similarity or relatedness). This is where we had come to our "consensus" stage within the protocol. The five norms we thought were imperative to our group were:

1. Be respectful of each others' ideas
2. Be open to new ideas and be willing to push others' thinking as well as your own
3. Be prepared with all materials you need and be ready to share your thoughts and experiences within and out of the classroom
4. Share facilitator role as well as meeting spots
5. Be on time and use an agenda to stay on track

With our "Norm-Setting" protocol finished, we looked once more at the list and felt very confident in the norms we had set for our group. Although we had made our norms more specific and concise, we still agreed that keeping the longer list of norms would be a good aspect to safe for the group (norms could always change or be modified depending on the needs of the group). Being the facilitator, I took on the responsibility of typing them up and providing a copy for the next meeting.

Brainstorming Focus: (derived and initiated by Melissa Gucker-new tool designed for this specific project)

This tool was designed to meet the needs of our first group meeting. Here, just as noted in Part 1, our group sat down together and compiled a large list of what we wanted to focus on. The list was large, but had a few superior aspects in common. The most frequent issues that we wanted to address within our group consisted of issues/concerns regarding students and the curriculum. It seemed that we were all having difficulty with specific student situations and also situation involving what to teach (seeing that we have no hard curriculum or standards to follow). It was through this brainstorming activity that we decided our most important areas of focus would need to center on the students and the content.

The student aspect seemed to be the strongest area that we all felt was crucial and seeing that "looking at an individual students' work in a teacher group can be a particularly powerful vehicle for developing a teacher learning community," we decided that this would be our first starting point for the group. (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) We agreed that for future meetings, we would need to start collecting student work that we thought was secure as well as work that we thought was still developing or needed work. This method of discussion was a great "entry point" for our group seeing that "the focus is on a particular student's learning, rather than directly on teacher" which "provides a safe entry to collaborative practice." (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006)

As mentioned, the next focus area that we wanted to direct our group focal point was to that of the content our children were engaged in. We have little curriculum guidance in what is expected of us and we have been directed to use the Kindergarten curriculum as a basis of what our children should start to know. This has been a difficult task for the three of us to tackle on our own. Together, we feel that "beginning the community development process through a subject discipline engages teachers in learning content more deeply, as well as understanding how to better support student learning in the subject." (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) Although we have little curriculum to build off of, we feel that sharing what has worked for one another as well as what we see might be important, we can focus in on a curriculum

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that we feel will be appropriate for our students. This will be a very vague and broad subject at first, but we are hoping to deal with this massive issue piece-by-piece and do this with the help of each others' collected resources.

Feedback from Meeting: (derived from informal discussion and the ASSIST website)

The last feature of our first meeting consisted of the feedback portion. Unknowingly, the group started to discuss feedback in an informal form after we had finished the last protocol. It was amazing to hear the great feedback that the other two members voiced. They (along with me) agreed that the meeting was very worthwhile and was a "relief" to hear that we were all experiencing the same things within our schools and classrooms. The tools and protocols were received well and truly set out a plan that will hopefully provide for a successful pre-kindergarten professional learning community. The informal discussion in the form of feedback was one of the most powerful parts of the entire meeting seeing that I was the facilitator and the project designer.

Along with the informal avenue of feedback, we also used the ASSIST tool "Assessing Our Learning, Beginning Teacher Study Group". This form was easy to fill out and was a quick reflection of what the meeting was and what we can look forward to in the future. Below you will find the form that we filled out (typed out). It will give one an inside look at what we concluded with from our meeting.

Our learning goals (for this meeting)	Evidence that we've met them	Areas for continue growth	Next steps
* To introduce ourselves to each other * To establish norms for the group * To brainstorm what our group purpose is including what we are meeting for and about * To start a form of feedback that will aide in helping our group grow and develop	* A set of five norms (to be typed and posted) * A list of ideas that were brainstormed for future meetings and what we are striving to meet as goals *This feedback form	* Specified areas of growth (student and subject base) * Continue to get comfortable with each other in regards to our community	* Collect student samples to bring to the next meeting * Bring resources that we have compiled thus far in regards to curriculum ideas and examples

<u>Reflection of Effectiveness of the Professional Learning Community Implementation</u>

With the initial aspects of my Personal Leadership Challenge in place, one can now determine the effectiveness of the project implementation. When reflecting on the value of the project, one should look at the first meeting solely and the future implementations that were created from this process. The first meeting was a true success. I could not have asked for a better outcome. Each individual that was invited was present and willing to start as well as continue this professional community. It seemed that as a group whole, we all agreed upon the importance of the advancement of this team and the outcomes that could be developed within our boundaries. Our first meeting followed a structure that allowed for a conducive gathering in which many goals were established through the use of "artifacts, or programs, policies, and procedures" that were put in place in regards to a shared leadership structure. (Halverson, 2005)

Not only did our first assembly start off on strong grounds, a sturdy bond had already been formed with people who usually would not have met. It was particularly surprising to meet a group of individuals who were so determined to form bonds with complete strangers. Although each of us are located at different buildings in which our schedules are hectic it seemed to be a clear understanding that "nothing convinces busy educators that they should work together better than seeing that it makes each person more successful." (Donaldson, 2006) It was a shared feeling that after each of us left the meeting, we felt rejuvenated and not alone in our new adventures and processes in this grade level.

Along with a complete structure and firm bonds formed, another positive aspect of this meeting was the fact that a future had been established. The meeting, first used for introductions and broader goal setting, allowed for future meetings to be planned and established. The next professional community gathering has been set for Tuesday, December 22nd 2009. For this meeting, I was planning on taking on the role of facilitator and then allowing future meetings to be shared with the other two team members; however, after our first meeting one of my group members was so interested, they wanted to take on the role of facilitator for the next meeting. It was through their eagerness that the next general meeting will be held at their building and planned and structured by this person. As a group, we agreed that our next congregation will have to do more with goal setting and looking at specific sets of student work to determine further meetings. Although this meeting sounds broad, I trust in the ability of my fellow group member to facilitate a structure that is favorable for the group. I believe that sharing this trust with others will only allow for our group to grow stronger and wiser. It seems that this could be a large step for our group in the whole process of shared leadership in which our group will reflect on and "promote collective responsibility for student

learning and norms of collegiality among teachers that are associated with higher levels of student achievement." (Halverson, 2005)

The last aspect of this project that truly made the process worthwhile and allowed for all group members to reflect upon our practices engaged within the meeting was that of our feedback. Although the most effect method of feedback for our professional learning community was that of our informal discussion, the formal "gathered" feedback provides for methods of reflection unlike informal methods. The ASSIST tool used for each meeting time will provide for an ongoing method of communication and reflection. The tool, although small, allows for a quick reflection of the meeting and what we have accomplished as well as future implications. The group responded well to the feedback and a binder of these sheets will be kept for the entire year (and if possible the year to come). By using this feedback our group is finding behaviors to "offer ways to examine results continuously, sharing data with everyone and fostering an environment that supports problem solving and ownership." (Donaldson, 2006)

What This Experience Has Revealed About Understandings of My Leadership and Shared Leadership

This experience has truly allowed me to exercise my shared leadership qualities and capabilities. Without the offer to develop such a shared leadership project, this professional learning community might not have developed. Although this was something that I had in mind since I knew of the other two classrooms in the district, this project has honestly permitted me to put this process into action. Not only has this project put aspects into action, it has also allowed for future developments to occur and hopefully be sustained.

Throughout my life I have always been the one to step up and lead. This project has allowed me to continue doing what I am natural at. I must say that at the beginning of this year I felt powerless in my situation. I felt alone within the realm of pre-kindergarten and felt as though no one was there to understand what I was going through with such a hefty change. This project has truly given me the understanding and entry to step back into the leadership role in which I can make things happen and now I feel like I will. It is comforting to know that this feat will not be conquered alone now. It is particularly nice knowing that I have a wonderful set of people to help me out through this process of transformations. What is even more powerful is that I know I too am helping these new found colleagues out in their ventures as well. It is through the understanding that "improving learning for children grows from adults' incremental and situation shifts in knowledge, beliefs, and behavior, classroom by classroom and day by day" that allows for the development of outstanding teacher groups. I justly believe

that this professional group and the ideals conceived within it will travel with each member throughout their career as teachers, leaders, and beyond.

Lastly, it can be stated that this project has established a great opportunity for shared leadership to thrive. Not only was I able to introduce the concept of shared leadership to a group of people, I believe that this ideal will endure and fasten with these group members and they too will use this method within their own practices. Shared leadership is something that can be used within a large school setting or even the smallest of professional learning communities. I feel successful in my endeavors over the course of the class and agree that I have reached the original goal I set out for myself at the beginning of this course (which can be seen below)

"How can I (as a newer teacher/leader) take on more leadership roles and responsibilities and gain respect from the veteran teachers at my school (especially now that I have stepped into this new position)?"

I now see that I have taken on such a feat and have graciously been receiving comments from other colleagues in my school. They feel that I have taken on such a challenge and have made the most out of what I can. These comments have truly made me see that I can be a leader in a place where there seems to be no fit. It also showed me that shared leadership was the correct path to travel to gain this respect. This course and project have brought many new thoughts to my attention and I have gained a large amount of insight to leadership but, when all is said and done, "our new generation of leaders must champion informal connections and authentic interaction among teachers and staff. As they trust others, draw out their talents, and connect them in pairs, small groups, and as a whole faculty, the entire professional community becomes more capable of meeting the school's challenges than each individual is alone." (Donaldson, 2006) I feel comfortable (after many learning experiences both in and out of the classroom) to take on such a position and provide that avenue for leadership to exist.

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