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AIR is one of the world's largest behavioral and social science research and evaluation organizations. AIR's mission is to conduct and apply the best behavioral and social science research and evaluation toward improving people's lives, with a special emphasis on the disadvantaged.

## Strategies for Implementing the Teacher Leadership and Compensation Program in Iowa School Districts

The Iowa Teacher Leadership and Compensation (TLC) system was designed to provide career pathways and compensation structures to attract, retain and reward effective teachers; to promote continuous improvement in Iowa's teaching workforce; and to increase student academic achievement. With TLC funds from the Iowa Department of Education, districts implemented new and revised teacher leadership roles and teacher professional development approaches intended to strengthen classroom instruction and student learning. As part of an independent evaluation, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted case studies of six purposely selected Iowa school districts to identify promising local strategies for implementing TLC. AIR interviewed district and school personnel about their perceptions and experiences implementing TLC and incorporating teacher leaders as a primary component of teacher professional development.

Respondents reported broadly favorable perspectives on TLC and perceived benefits for teacher professional development and instruction in the districts studied. AIR identified 14 general strategies perceived to be effective across two or more of these districts, nested within the following topics:

- establishing teacher leadership roles,
- prioritizing school needs and decision making,
- supporting the success of instructional coaches, and
- supporting professional learning communities.

Findings indicate that interconnected strategies for shared decision making, supports for teacher leaders, and school-based professional development facilitated successful TLC implementation in the districts. Supports and cross-cutting roles for instructional coaches were particularly emphasized, enabling coaches to work with individual teachers, participate in leadership teams, and facilitate school-based professional development. Respondents perceived that these strategies enabled an improved system of professional supports for teachers. The types of strategies identified in this study may be applicable or adaptable in other Iowa districts seeking guidance about TLC implementation or teacher leadership.

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## Introduction

The Iowa Teacher Leadership and Compensation (TLC) system was designed to provide career pathways and compensation structures to attract, retain and reward effective teachers; to promote continuous improvement in Iowa's teaching workforce; and to increase student academic achievement. The Iowa legislature appropriated funds for TLC in 2013–17. Funding was provided to applicant school districts through the Iowa Department of Education (the Department). Following guidelines from the Department, districts implemented new and revised teacher leadership roles and approaches to teacher professional development intended to ultimately strengthen classroom instruction and improve student achievement. The legislation required districts to select teacher leaders based on their effectiveness and their commitment to professional growth. TLC was launched in three cohorts beginning with the 2014–15 school year. As of 2017–18, all 333 districts in Iowa received TLC funds, including 39 Cohort 1 districts (2014–15); 76 Cohort 2 districts (2015–16); and 218 Cohort 3 districts (2016–17).

In 2015, the Department contracted with American Institutes for Research (AIR) to evaluate TLC. AIR previously has reported results about TLC implementation and outcomes derived from analysis of student achievement data; teacher, principal, and teacher leader surveys; and focus groups and interviews in select districts.

As a final component of the evaluation, AIR conducted case studies with a purposive sample of six Iowa school districts. The study was guided by the following general research question: *What strategies, decisions, and supports for TLC implementation and teacher leader roles were perceived to be effective within and across districts?* Based on interviews with district and school personnel, the study explored strategies related to planning and leading TLC, district and school supports for TLC implementation, and establishing and using teacher leaders to support instruction. The report presents strategies of the six districts as they implemented TLC and incorporated teacher leaders as a primary component of teacher professional development.<sup>1</sup> The report also highlights perceived changes and benefits related to TLC.

## Case Study Approach

The case studies were intended to identify strategies that district and school leaders and teachers reported were effective in planning and implementing TLC, the context for and reasoning behind the strategies, and the perceived outcomes or consequences of the strategies.

### Sample

AIR selected case study districts from an original pool of 12 districts that were (1) among the top 10% in average student achievement gains following initial implementation of TLC, determined by examining students' average standardized scaled achievement gains for reading and mathematics, and (2) among the

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<sup>1</sup> For this report, "professional development" is used as a general term to encompass training, professional development sessions, PLCs, or other mechanisms to support teacher professional learning or growth.

top 15% in terms of positive responses on survey items related to teacher retention and familiarity with the TLC program from AIR’s statewide teacher survey.<sup>2</sup>

AIR then conducted screening interviews with district administrators in 12 districts. The interviews asked respondents to describe the key features of TLC in the district and to report on the progress of TLC implementation. The interviews also explored the potential of the districts to contribute to the study by asking respondents about leadership turnover, district administrator knowledge of TLC, and district willingness to participate in the case study. Information from the interviews, district demographic and geographic information, and TLC cohort membership were considered together in deciding which districts to include in the case study (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Characteristics of Case Study Districts**

District	TLC Cohort	AEA Affiliation	Number of Students	Percentage of Non-White Students	Percentage of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
Audubon	2	Heartland	531	8%	40%
Cedar Falls	3	Central Rivers	5,480	16%	20%
Graettinger-Terril	3	Prairie Lakes	360	8%	47%
Lewis Central	2	Green Hills	2,969	15%	33%
North Polk	1	Heartland	1,799	5%	10%
Williamsburg	2	Grant Wood	1,247	11%	25%

Source: 2017–18 Iowa Public Schools Reports, published by the Iowa Department of Education.

Following the selection of the six case study districts, AIR conducted interviews in each district to gather data for the case studies. Respondents from each district included district administrators, school principals, instructional coaches, teacher leaders who were not instructional coaches, and teachers (see Table 2). To select respondents, AIR sent guidelines on the desired numbers and types of interview respondents to a district contact person. AIR requested that the respondents be well informed about TLC during the planning phase and early implementation of the initiative, and, in the case of teachers, had experience working with teacher leaders. The district contact person identified interview respondents and provided a contact list. AIR then recruited these respondents and scheduled phone interviews.

<sup>2</sup> This survey was administered as part of a prior component of the TLC evaluation. The teacher survey items used for case study selection included the following: *I look forward to returning to my school next year*; *TLC has impacted my desire to return to my school next year*; and *How familiar are you with the Teacher Leadership and Compensation (TLC) Program?* AIR calculated the percentage of teachers in each district that responded with an extreme category (i.e., *Strongly agree* or *Very familiar*).

**Table 2. Interview Respondents by District**

District	District Administrators	School Administrators	Instructional Coaches	Other Teacher Leaders	Teachers	Total
Audubon*	1	2	2	2	4	11
Cedar Falls	4	1	2	4	1	12
Graettinger-Terril*	1	2	2	4	3	12
Lewis Central	3	2	2	2	2	11
North Polk	2	2	2	3	2	11
Williamsburg*	1	4	2	2	3	12
Total	12	13	12	17	15	69

\* School and district administrative roles overlapped in these districts.

Among the respondents, AIR considered the district and school administrators and full-time instructional coaches to be primary respondents who could provide information on a range of topics related to TLC and teacher leadership in the district. Each of these respondents was interviewed for approximately one hour. Other respondents were interviewed for 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted by phone in February and March 2018. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The protocols focused on several topics, with some differences by respondent type. The main topics are presented as follows:

- the district approach to planning and leading TLC;
- district and school supports for TLC implementation;
- establishment of teacher leadership roles;
- use or leveraging of TLC and teacher leaders to support instructional improvement;
- teacher leaders' work with teachers to build instructional capacity; and
- TLC's influence on the professional environment, instruction, and student learning.

## Analysis

The analysis of the interviews focused on identifying and describing the strategies that were perceived as effective for implementing and supporting TLC teacher leadership in the district. Analysts coded interview transcripts using qualitative research software, with initial coding organized by topics and subtopics from the interview protocols. This resulted in coding reports that compiled responses on a similar set of topics across districts. Analysts then developed district summaries that synthesized information from multiple respondents within each district and clarified the TLC program features and implementation strategies. The district summaries served as internal intermediate analysis products and were revised as analysis continued, with transcripts revisited to check findings and to add explanatory and descriptive information to district summaries.

The district summaries provided the basis for identifying cross-case strategies to include in the report. The inclusion of the strategies was based on two criteria: (1) two or more respondents reported that the strategy was effective in their districts; and (2) the strategy was implemented and reported to be effective in at least two districts.

## Limitations

The methods have several important limitations. First, the districts were purposively selected and comprised a small and nonrandom sample that may not be representative of the state. Second, data were limited to perceptions and experiences reported by respondents in phone interviews. Third, a subset of respondents (district administrators, principals, and coaches) was more knowledgeable about the topics addressed, and thus the preponderance of relevant data came from this subset. Finally, the districts were selected based on indicators of progress during TLC implementation, but this does not provide direct evidence that TLC led to improvements.

The authors recommend caution in interpreting or extrapolating findings. The findings are intended to help readers understand strategies identified in several districts that may be useful for consideration elsewhere.

## Cross-Case Findings

The cross-case findings synthesize the primary themes identified across districts. The report presents findings in five main sections:

- Establishing Teacher Leadership Roles,
- Prioritizing School Needs and Decision Making,
- Supporting the Success of Instructional Coaches,
- Supporting Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and
- Perceived Benefits of TLC.

### Establishing Teacher Leadership Roles

Administrators in each of the six districts described a judicious process for establishing TLC. District and school leaders held numerous meetings with stakeholders to design TLC in their district and decide on teacher leadership roles. The meetings spanned a year or more. Respondents emphasized ongoing communication as well as inclusive and distributed decision making about TLC. The following general strategies emerged in multiple districts:

- Select a teacher leadership model with full-time instructional coaches.
- Align TLC with an instructional framework.
- Engage with stakeholders about the local vision for TLC.
- Select teacher leaders in a transparent and inclusive process.
- Learn from other districts' experiences with teacher leadership.

### ***Select a teacher leadership model with full-time instructional coaches***

Each of the six districts chose to establish full-time instructional coaches in schools. As a district administrator said, “We thought the instructional coaching piece would be a huge benefit to us—getting people to look at how they’re teaching, working on becoming better in the classroom, hearing from people who are there to help them become better instructors.”

Four of the six districts selected a teacher leadership model the Department had identified. The model included several core teacher leader positions assigned to each school: a full-time instructional coach, one or more mentor teachers (who supported new teachers), and one or more model teachers (who demonstrated instructional strategies in their classrooms). The districts adapted the model to meet local needs and priorities. For example, one district added full-time school technology integration specialists who helped teachers learn and apply new technology. Rather than creating mentor teacher positions, another district provided each school with two or more instructional coaches, whose responsibilities included working with new teachers.

In the other two districts, the full-time coaches were an essential component of a school improvement model from the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), which the districts chose as the basis for TLC.

### ***Align TLC with an instructional framework***

The two districts using the NIET model for school improvement aligned TLC and teacher leadership activities to NIET’s TAP (The System for Teacher and Student Advancement), a rubric-based instructional framework. The framework consists of 19 indicators of good instruction, each rated on a scale of 1 through 5. District administrators and planning team members were drawn to the framework because it had been used in other districts. “It was a known product,” an administrator said, “something that other people had used and had been successful with.” In addition, NIET offered comprehensive support to districts as they implemented TAP, including defined roles and responsibilities of coaches, schedules and structures for teacher professional development, and training programs for coaches and administrators.

According to district administrators, the rubric-based framework supported instructional goals at the district and school levels, providing a guide for improving instruction across the district. Respondents said the framework focused on good teaching, “no matter what the content is” and gave coaches “a focus and something to coach towards.” Administrators in each district also referred to the framework’s potential for bringing numerous, sometimes disconnected, district initiatives and priorities together under one umbrella. One of the administrators said, “We used TLC to refocus and had some graphics out there showing how everything that we’re working on fits in [with the TAP framework] and is supported by the TLC project.”

### ***Engage with stakeholders about the local vision for TLC***

The districts in the sample were thoughtful in communicating with stakeholders about TLC. Respondents in all districts reported communicating with teachers as the TLC plan took shape, letting them know the key features of the plan as it neared finalization. Communication emphasized that TLC was “going to be a positive thing for our district,” as a district administrator said, and a “great opportunity for collaboration and leadership and helping our school move forward and do great things,” according to an instructional coach.

In several districts, respondents reported meeting with the local school board, the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and other stakeholders. For example, the superintendent in one of the districts talked to several stakeholder groups—the PTA, the school board, and community groups—describing to them the opportunities TLC presented and informing them about the emerging district plan. Another superintendent

wrote an article for the local newspaper explaining how the teacher leadership program would work and the benefits TLC would bring to the district schools.

All of the districts included teachers on their TLC planning teams, with the number of teachers on those teams equal to or greater than the number of administrators. The inclusion of teachers demonstrated that TLC was not an initiative forced upon schools by administrators. “It wasn’t a top down–driven process,” a superintendent said. The inclusive approach provided a “global look at your district and what it needs” (according to a district administrator) and brought multiple perspectives to inform decisions. Furthermore, teachers on the planning team could, according to a district administrator, “go back and have conversations and talk about what we are thinking and why” with other teachers to get their feedback.

### ***Select teacher leaders in a transparent and inclusive process***

The districts used several approaches to inform teachers about teacher leader roles and to encourage them to apply for teacher leader positions. District administrators reported making in-person presentations at faculty meetings and professional development sessions; creating and distributing brochures that listed teacher leader positions, roles, and responsibilities; and developing websites that described the application process and included application materials.

Each district had a multistep application process for a teacher leader position. Generally, interested teachers first submitted written answers to a set of questions that were then rated by a selection committee. Applicants whose responses met a set standard subsequently were interviewed—or, in districts that adopted the TAP framework, applicants demonstrated a lesson that was based on principles of adult learning. In nearly all districts, teachers were on the selection committee and had a voice equal to that of administrators. The role of principals in the selection process varied across districts.

Respondents in one district described the full application process, noting differences in how instructional coaches and other teacher leaders were selected. First, teachers interested in any teacher leader position completed an online application with questions that required “a lot of thought and reflection on why you want to become a leader,” according to an instructional coach. Candidates who were scored at or above a set level were eligible to apply for any teacher leader position. School principals then selected teacher leaders who were not instructional coaches (i.e., members of the building leadership team, and model teachers). Applicants for coach positions were interviewed by a district committee that consisted of more teachers than administrators. The committee selected instructional coaches based on the interview. If the committee was unable to reach a decision, the instructional coach candidates participated in site-based “fit interviews” with a school team that included teachers at the school where the coach would be based. The school team then selected the instructional coach for their school.

**The district took the step of making sure a lot of different voices were at the table—different levels of teaching and different buildings, as well as administrators and the Director of Teaching. We were all there at the table as part of that committee to learn together, to explore different models and talk through what we think is best for the district.**

(School Administrator)



### ***Learn from other districts' experiences with teacher leadership***

All of the districts engaged in activities to learn more about their selected teacher leadership framework from other districts who had used a similar approach. For example, as one district came closer to a decision to use the TAP framework, planning team members visited a neighboring district that had implemented TAP some years earlier. A planning team member said, “Any district that is considering implementing it [TAP] should get out and ask lots and lots of questions.” District administrators in the five Cohort 2 and Cohort 3 districts said they delayed participating in TLC so they could learn from the experiences of the Cohort 1 districts. Members of the planning teams in several districts visited Cohort 1 districts and schools and engaged in discussions and observations that informed their final plans.

**Take the opportunity to go and visit. In our case, we did Google Hangouts with the team from North Polk. Find out what they are doing and then decide how you can make that work back in your own district and with the folks that you have.**

(District Administrator)

## **Prioritizing School Needs and Decision Making**

A major shift resulting from TLC was decentralizing professional development. Prior to TLC, in the majority of case study districts, the decisions about teacher professional development were made at the district level, or in some cases, by school administrators. Four of the six districts in this study had previously offered professional development only at the district level. Through TLC, school leadership teams became the primary decision makers and schools the primary sites for teacher professional development.

Two cross-case strategies emerged from the interviews:

- Use school leadership teams to make decisions about teacher professional development.
- Adapt teacher leader roles to meet school needs.

### ***Use school leadership teams to make decisions about teacher professional development***

The school leadership teams in the six districts had a strong influence on establishing professional development goals and focusing on school-based needs. The districts established or revised district leadership teams to include teacher leaders, usually coaches, who served on both district and school leadership teams. The overlapping membership provided direct connections between schools and the central administration and facilitated the alignment of school-based professional development with district priorities.

With support from instructional coaches, school teams used student data (e.g., formative assessments, need for academic interventions, student work), input from coaches on teachers' instructional challenges, and, in two districts, teacher requests to inform decisions. For example, a district administrator in a TAP district said each school has a dedicated team, including teachers “who are committed to the learning of their staff.” The school teams participate in a summer retreat during which they reflect “on the data they have collected throughout the year and the building goals and their priorities using the strategy of backwards planning.” According to the administrator, this “allows TLC to roll out a little bit differently in each of the buildings because the needs of each building are different.”

A principal described the use of data by school teams as one of TLC’s “biggest benefits” because “the professional development is now coming from our data and the needs of our teachers.”

### ***Adapt teacher leader roles to meet school needs***

Three districts changed or adapted the roles of model teachers, designated in their original TLC plans, because the model teachers were underused in the schools. Model teachers were expected to open their classrooms to teachers and demonstrate a specific instructional method at a scheduled time. In elementary schools, teachers had little nonteaching time during the school day when model teachers demonstrated lessons. Even though teachers were offered class coverage, several district and school respondents said teachers preferred not to disrupt their classes for a 10- or 20- minute demonstration. Model teachers were more active in high schools because high school block schedules provided teachers with time between classes to observe model teacher classrooms.

The districts replaced some or all model teachers with other teacher leadership roles. A principal in one of the districts explained, “We started out with model teachers and we no longer have that position...so, we started a PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention System) initiative and we have hired some coordinators for that out of the teacher leadership grant.” The second district replaced the elementary schools’ model teachers with coordinators for specific initiatives while maintaining model teachers in the high schools. The third district solved the problem on a school-by-school basis. For example, one school replaced its model teacher with a learning team leader who leads grade-level teams and certain PLCs, whereas another school maintained the model teacher and encouraged greater teacher interest through scheduling options and demonstrations based on teacher interest.

**Our program champions are really significant. I don’t know how the work would get done if we didn’t have people who are passionate about our initiatives in those roles.**

(District Administrator)

## **Supporting the Success of Instructional Coaches**

Instructional coaches were a major resource provided by TLC. Prior to TLC, the districts had limited experience with coaches. One of the larger districts had placed coaches in some schools and another of the larger districts had full-time instructional specialists who supported school administrators and did not focus on coaching.

When planning their TLC programs, each of the districts was deliberate in establishing coaches and selecting a coaching approach. In the TAP districts, coaching focused on the TAP framework. Each of the other four districts chose a coaching approach (e.g., cognitive coaching, student-centered coaching) from among approaches the district teams learned about from the area education agencies (AEAs).

Respondents across districts reported the following strategies to establish and support instructional coaches:

- Help coaches build trust with teachers.
- Provide coaches with formal professional development and informal learning opportunities.
- Provide principals with professional development for working with coaches.
- Use coaching cycles.

### **Help coaches build trust with teachers**

Respondents in all six districts emphasized the importance of establishing trust between coaches and teachers. Efforts began at the beginning of the school year. TLC was launched with presentations by administrators and coaches to teachers in faculty meetings or large professional development sessions. Coaches and administrators addressed teacher anxiety about the coach serving as an evaluator or a type of administrator. Coaches emphasized their role as a support to teachers, and principals assured teachers that “certain things do not go back and forth” between the coach and the principal; coaches do not “run to the administrator saying, ‘Oh, guess what I saw in so-and-so’s class today.’”

Early on, the coaches looked for a variety of opportunities to connect with and support teachers. A coach said the support might be “as small as finding an article or as big as a coaching cycle.” In one district, coaches helped provide resources for teachers’ projects. In another district, a coach developed a menu of the different ways she could help teachers. “It looked like a lunch menu,” a respondent said, with types of support listed as appetizers, main courses, and so forth. Teachers took advantage of this, according to the principal.

Several coaches said they gradually familiarized teachers with their presence in the classroom. For example, a coach in a TAP district said that when she first started her required walk-throughs, she did not take notes or provide teachers with feedback unless asked. A coach in a non-TAP district said she conducted informal walk-throughs, observing one classroom after another for 10 minutes each. In another district, the coaches sought out and observed teachers who were recognized as strong in particular instructional areas, asking the teachers, “Can I come in to watch you and take back some ideas [to other teachers]?”

Respondents in two districts reported that learning labs were helpful in building teacher trust. Learning labs are group learning sessions in which coaches first describe an instructional practice; teachers then observe the practice demonstrated by a teacher or teacher leader, and coaches facilitate a debriefing session to discuss the practice and its application. A district administrator said the learning labs were an “effective tool that has helped publicize what coaches do and demystify it for teachers who might be hesitant to engage with a coach.”

In the TAP districts, coaches delayed the required coaching cycles and initially focused on the rubric that would be central to their classroom observations and coaching. A school administrator said, “We spent a lot of time trying to teach the rubric...so that we really were building up an understanding of what we were trying to accomplish and what everyone’s role was in accomplishing that. I think that went really, really well.”

**We didn’t say to our coaches, ‘You need to do eight coaching cycles your first year.’ We just said go out and build relationships...we gave them our word that we are not going to put a bunch of mandates and demands on them the first year.**

(Principal)

### ***Provide coaches with formal professional development and informal learning opportunities***

In all districts, the training for the TLC instructional coaches began the summer before coaches assumed their positions in the school. The initial training was provided by outside providers and focused either on the district’s primary coaching model or, in the TAP districts, on the instructional framework. The majority of districts provided coaches with additional training that year on other skills that were important for their new roles. For example, in a TAP district, coaches initially were trained on the indicators and rating on the TAP rubric, then they attended training on cognitive coaching. In another district, the training on the coaching model was supplemented by leadership training that was offered to all the teacher leaders. A third district supplemented coach training with training provided by the New Teacher Center on protocols, scripted conversations, reporting mechanisms, and other procedures.

**I feel like the training really prepared me to hit the ground running the first weeks of school—getting into classrooms, building relationships with teachers and students. It was great to know what to do because I didn’t know what to do when I was first hired.**

(Instructional Coach)

After coaches assumed their positions, they participated in regular networking and learning activities. In the larger districts, a district administrator or coordinator created these opportunities. For example, one district administrator brought all teacher leaders together six times a year for learning activities such as assessing approaches to classroom observations. In another district, the monthly meetings of coaches included coaches videotaping one another and discussing the videos. The AEAs also provided instructional coaches with opportunities to connect with peers in other districts through their training and networking opportunities.

The networking opportunities were particularly valued by the coaches in all districts. As one coach stated, “Networking [with peers] gives us the opportunity to share things that we’ve found worked in our schools and to discuss things that aren’t working and learn how to deal with those situations.” Another coach said the monthly coach meetings “have made the biggest impact on the success of coaching...learning from one another in that capacity has been very powerful.”

### ***Provide principals with professional development for working with coaches***

Principals in the six districts participated in training with their instructional coaches. The training programs varied across districts, and examples shared by respondents included NIET training for TAP coaches, Diane Sweeney’s student-centered coaching, and Jim Knight’s coaching approach. The training required principal participation and was beneficial in that principals learned how to work with coaches, and principals and coaches established a shared understanding of the coach role.

Principals in two districts referred to valuable training from their AEAs. In one district, principals participated in a 12-month course from the New York City Leadership Academy that the Department offered. A mentor from the academy worked with the district’s two principals and, according to a principal, “helped us learn how our position as principal changes when working with teacher leaders.” In the other district, principals participated in AEA seminars that centered on teacher leadership and the AEA Leadership for Continuous Improvement series.

### ***Use coaching cycles***

After the coaches had been in their positions for one or two years, the Cohort 1 and 2 districts gradually incorporated coaching cycles<sup>3</sup> as a core strategy for instructional coaches. The district or school administrators set goals for coaches to work with teachers in coaching cycles. For example, coaches in one of the districts were expected to dedicate 60% of their time to coaching cycles. In another district, a principal asked the instructional coach to include a minimum number of coaching cycles in her Iowa Career Development Plan (ICDP). Goals for coaching cycles already were set for coaches in TAP districts because the framework requires all teachers to participate in several coaching cycles a year. (The required coaching cycles, however, were not initiated for two years, after teachers fully understood the TAP indicators.)

Coaches in three districts used teachers' ICDPs to link coaching cycles with the professional goals teachers included in their plans. A coach explained:

For years, everybody wrote their ICDP goal at the end of the year, and they turned them in, and nobody ever looked at them...we decided to use that with coaching. So, last spring, I met with every teacher that I work with one-on-one, and we wrote the ICDP together. We wrote SMART [Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely] goals...I had to teach them what a SMART goal was...A lot of times, their goal was teacher-centered, you know, something they would do. We turned it into a student-centered goal.

According to an administrator in a TAP district, the ICDP was “the most instrumental piece of TLC” because it links student data and TAP indicators that teachers “will work on with the net result being a positive impact on student achievement.”

### **Supporting PLCs**

In the case study districts, PLCs were a core TLC strategy for school-based professional development. Administrators in five of the six districts reported that prior to TLC, either the districts did not have PLCs or they had PLCs that were “new,” “not functioning as PLCs,” or “undeveloped.” District administrators in only one district reported that they previously had functioning PLCs.

Respondents highlighted the following three strategies for supporting PLCs:

- Schedule weekly PLC sessions.
- Provide dedicated training on PLCs.
- Check in on PLCs as teachers learn new processes.

#### ***Schedule weekly PLC sessions***

If they had not already done so, the districts established a regular time for PLCs to meet and scheduled weekly PLC meetings, typically during early release days. Having a regular meeting time was a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for effective PLCs to maintain momentum in carrying out the steps that define the PLC process. A district administrator said, “Having a dedicated time for PLCs has been really

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<sup>3</sup> Coaching cycles are a structured way for coaches to work with individual teachers. A coaching cycle begins with scheduling a preconference, during which the teacher's instructional goals are defined. The coach then observes the teacher at a scheduled time and either videotapes the teacher or takes observation notes. The coach and teacher then meet in a post-observation conference, discuss the coaches' observations, and reflect on what worked well and lingering challenges. They then decide on the teacher's next steps to achieve his or her goal and continue a cycle of observation and reflection until the goal is reached or changed.

important,” adding that in the past teams had to “figure out a time to meet,” with the result that meetings often “fizzled out.”

### ***Provide dedicated training on PLCs***

Three districts strengthened their PLCs by providing PLC members with training. A district administrator said this training was “essential for us to get people talking together in a professional manner and talking the same language and then working together.”

One district used TLC funds to send nearly all its teachers, school administrators and teacher leaders to conferences offered by Solution Tree, an Indiana-based professional development provider with a defined PLC process. The training helped “the PLCs step up and do their part,” an instructional coach said. The district has since conducted nearly all teacher professional learning through these PLCs. The financial expenditure was worthwhile, from the perspective of a district administrator: “We feel it’s one of the best things we have ever done.”

Another district sent 10 teachers to the PLC Institute in Minneapolis. That group of teachers then trained other teachers in their schools. The district plans to send more teachers to upcoming trainings offered by the PLC Institute. In the third district, a leadership team studied a PLC framework developed by Learning Forward and prepared a local framework and related resources for schools and teachers. A district administrator said, “We were very intentional about giving people some common understanding of PLCs and their purpose. We gave a framework on how PLCs should function...we talked about what good collaboration looks like.”

**We taught our teachers how to be successful in professional development and we think it has led to a collegial feeling among the staff where ‘it’s not my kids or your kids. They are our kids.’**

(District Administrator)

### ***Check in on PLCs as teachers learn new processes***

Principals in the case study districts checked in on PLCs to ensure that they were focused and following the correct format. In order to “hold teams accountable” and stay informed about instructional concerns, several principals said they sat in on meetings, either rotating among meetings or focusing participation on teams that were struggling. In one district, a principal required teams to report out periodically on “their teaching learning goal, what they learned from their collaboration time, and where they were going next,” including how goals and action plans were informed by data. The principals in another district asked school teams to complete checklists following their meetings, reporting whether the team members followed the PLC process, reviewed student data, and created goals and action plans. Administrators and the instructional coach reviewed the checklists. Over time, a principal reported, the teams incorporated the actions on the checklist on a regular basis.

## Perceived Benefits of TLC

Respondents reported several general perceived benefits of TLC,<sup>4</sup> attributed to the professional development support provided to teachers. The following themes emerged across districts:

- alignment of professional development to local priorities and teacher needs,
- application of professional development to classroom practice,
- teacher collaboration and shared learning,
- professional learning mindset among teachers, and
- improved instruction.

### *Alignment of professional development to local priorities and teacher needs*

In all districts, one or more administrators or instructional coaches reported that professional development was more aligned to the district and school priorities, as well as to teacher needs. A coach described a new emphasis on “doing one thing really well instead of addressing so many initiatives.” Similarly, a principal said, “The biggest change in our PD [professional development] is that everything we’re doing is focused on the TAP rubric...before PD was a little more haphazard.” Teachers surveyed by the administration in one district described professional development as more focused and less fragmented than in the past, according to a district administrator. Several respondents also perceived that professional development had become more focused on teacher needs. For example, a district administrator said, professional development is “now coming from our data on student work and the needs of our teachers. It is more personal for the teachers and they are able to take what we work on back to their classroom.” A coach in another district maintained that “teachers know what they need and we listen to them.”

### *Application of professional development to classroom practice*

In each district, respondents said the instructional coaches had improved the application of professional development to classroom practice. A principal said that in the past, following a professional development session, everyone “went back to our rooms and promptly forgot what we learned.” Now, the coaches go into the classrooms and ask teachers, “What did you do for formative assessment last week? Have you thought about trying this...I’ll come in and watch.” An administrator in another district referred to the implementation of instructional initiatives before and after TLC as a “night-and-day” difference. Previously, the administrator said, “fidelity in terms of what teachers were actually implementing in the classroom was so much less than what we expected.” The administrator attributed the difference to instructional coaches, saying that with TLC, the district has “good people in the coaching roles who provide the classroom teachers ongoing and consistent support, I think that’s huge...what we’ve tried to do in the past just pales in comparison to what [coaches] have been able to accomplish back within the buildings.”

### *Teacher collaboration and shared learning*

Respondents in all districts perceived that TLC had improved the degree to which teachers collaborate with and learn from one another. District administrators and principals reported changes such as “a lot richer, deeper conversations happening as a result of TLC” and shifts in the “culture and climate for meaningful collaboration.” A principal observed that “teachers are talking to other teachers about professional

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<sup>4</sup> Though the primary focus of the interviews was on implementation strategies, AIR also explored general respondent perceptions about the benefits of TLC.

practice...talking more about 'here's what I saw in this classroom that really worked well with this group of kids'...That used to never take place. We don't practice in silos anymore."

According to the respondents, school-based professional development activities enabled more shared learning among teachers. School professional development sessions have provided "a structured way for professional conversations to happen," a principal said. As a result, an instructional coach in the same district observed, "Everybody knows what's happening in each other's classrooms and that's a good thing because that's the only way we can help each other." In another district, a coach noted the importance of classroom observations for shared learning: "I don't think anyone ever observed each other before. I know I never did. I never knew I could really. I just didn't think about it. And now, it's happening all the time." Similarly, a high school principal reported that learning labs have helped teachers share and learn together, describing this as a shift from the prior culture where teachers "did not share anything with anybody else and hoped what they are doing works."

**We are seeing teachers go to each other for help when they are struggling with a student. . . It's not always the principal they go to now.**

(Instructional Coach)

### ***Professional learning mindset among teachers***

Respondents in four districts perceived a deeper willingness among teachers to engage in professional learning. Respondents described a "growth mindset" and "willingness to try new things" among teachers, as well as a recognition that they, as teachers, "have the power to make a big difference." According to an instructional coach, teachers are "talking about what things are working and what things could be improved and how we are going to do it, instead of just complaining about student issues." A district administrator shared an example of teacher participation in a book study outside of contract hours. Two years ago, when the opportunity was offered, "you would have no takers," but this year, 15 of 22 teachers in one school chose to participate.

### ***Improved instruction***

In all districts, respondents perceived that instruction had improved because of TLC. Perceptions about the types of improvements varied and generally were high-level. In four districts, respondents observed that student engagement had improved because teachers were trying different instructional strategies or approaches, such as "varied activities and materials to help engage students in the learning process," "making lessons engaging and getting kids to understand why we are doing something," and using technology in ways that "deepen student engagement." In one district, an administrator reported, "We are keeping track of data both from the student perspective and teacher perspective and student academic engagement has gone up" following TLC implementation.

In some cases, respondents spoke about instructional change that aligned with the local foci of professional development. For example, an instructional coach in a district that has prioritized technology integration said teachers are using technology more effectively. A coach in a district that has emphasized the Iowa core standards observed that teachers more explicitly focus on the standards and that "students now know what the standards and objectives are and are aware of what they are supposed to be learning." In a TAP district, a coach reported improvements in TAP indicators that have been the focus of professional development, including teacher knowledge of students and teacher use of more varied activities and materials.



## Conclusions

The case studies focused on a purposive sample of six Iowa districts that were selected based on district-level indicators of relative success that were concurrent with TLC implementation. The findings highlight broadly favorable perspectives on TLC, corroborating that the initial years of TLC implementation were considered successful in these districts. Respondents described substantive benefits for teacher professional development and learning and attributed those benefits to TLC and teacher leaders.

Experiences in the six districts reveal several important features of professional development systems implemented through TLC. First, the case study districts emphasized the central role of instructional coaches. Respondents reported a set of strategies to train and support coaches for their roles as instructional leaders and primary providers of professional development for teachers. Second, the districts strengthened school-based approaches for teacher professional development, making decisions about needs and content at the school level and establishing school-based professional development sessions and PLCs. Third, district and school leaders were deliberate in engaging stakeholders and establishing distributed leadership for both the planning and implementation of TLC.

Overall, the findings indicate that successful TLC implementation in the districts was facilitated by the districts' interconnected strategies for shared decision making, supports for teacher leaders, and school-based professional development. The types of strategies identified in the districts studied may be applicable or adaptable in other Iowa districts seeking guidance about TLC implementation or teacher leadership.