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## InForm 19

# Teacher Leadership: a tragedy in five parts?

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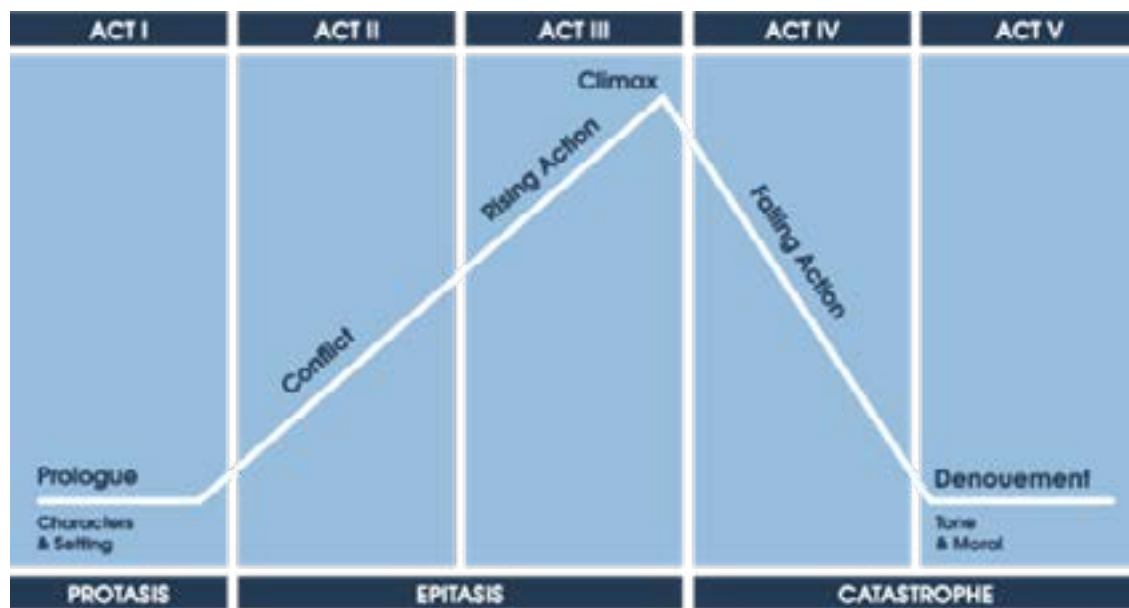
This edition of *InForm* is adapted from a talk given by Phil Poekert to attendees at the Leadership for Learning network's seminar at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge in March 2018.

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### **Teacher Leadership: A Tragedy in Five Parts?**

I am honored to tell you this tale of teacher leadership, and humbled that you'd care enough to read it. The narrative structure came as the result of the reflections of a Floridian weary of being at the epicenter of too many recent national and international news stories. A major hurricane passed some 30 miles from my home in Gainesville; the visit of a white supremacist to the University of Florida campus; and most tragically the mass shooting of 17 high school children in Parkland, Florida. I received news of the shooting by text message from my sister who was in lockdown because she teaches at a school just miles away from Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School. This trifecta of tragedy, coupled with other recent developments in the Lastinger Center's work on teacher leadership, led to the decision to tell this tale as a five-act tragedy.





My intent is not to depress. Rather, I am taking some personal privilege in using this talk as a chance to publicly reflect on a chapter in my career's journey, ultimately in search of catharsis and renewal. Beyond this, I believe that in using the narrative structure of the tragedy, I can tease out some of the major successes and pitfalls of the University of Florida Lastinger Center's work in the area of teacher leadership, and in so doing, point out challenges that the teacher leadership community must either overcome, or eventually succumb to. Before I begin, a couple of disclaimers.

First, this is an American story, and it is told in American English, both in the vernacular and academically. So, please forgive the use of terms such as 'instruction' to describe teaching, and other cringe-worthy terms that Americans may use freely with no intended malice. More specifically this is a Floridian story, and I am proud to tell it in the language and setting in which it occurred. Second, in full transparency and true to the form of historical tragedies, this story has been necessarily simplified to reduce the number of characters that I must introduce in order to tell this tale. And you, dear reader, must acknowledge that this story is told from the perspective of the narrator. Were you to ask others involved, they might have slightly different interpretations of the events that transpired. The same is true of every eyewitness account. And now, without further ado, the story begins.

*I [..] point out challenges that the teacher leadership community must either overcome, or eventually succumb to.*

**Dramatis Personae:**

- Allen & Delores Lastinger, Founders of the UF Lastinger Center
- Don Pemberton, Director of the UF Lastinger Center
- The Teachers of Florida, all of them
- Staff of the Lastinger Center, an association of incredible educators with a healthy obsession for innovative solutions to address persistent challenges and help kids and teachers
- Faculty of the UF College of Education, a collection of profoundly talented and committed educators
- The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, one of the world's wealthiest and most generous foundations
- The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the world's wealthiest foundation with a significant interest in K-12 education in the US
- The US Department of Education, a federal agency that initiated a number of programs to catalyze educational innovation
- The Florida Department of Education, a state agency charged with maintaining the compliance of schools and districts to state and federal laws
- Phil Poekert, yours truly, the narrator.

**Setting:**

Florida, an assemblage of smallish towns across a peninsula, populated by 20 million souls



### **Act 1: Prologue – The Origin Story**

Allen and Delores Lastinger founded the UF Lastinger Center for Learning in order to challenge the university they love to improve the quality of teaching and learning in Florida schools and beyond. Both Allen and Delores are proud alumni of the university, who went on to become prominent citizens in the state, based in the St. Augustine community. Allen is a 'triple Gator,' as they say, having completed primary school at the university's K-12 lab school PK Yonge, followed by bachelor's and MBA degrees from the College of Business. Delores completed her studies in the College of Education and went on to become a primary school teacher. Allen achieved success in business and led Barnett Bank, a major statewide bank during my own childhood, and Barnett was eventually bought out by Nationsbank and subsequently by Bank of America, following in the style of banks that seem to swallow one another. Allen did well in this transaction and decided to give back to his alma mater. He jokes that he decided to do something useful with his money, so he gave it to the College of Education, rather than the College of Business as all his friends were doing. This gift – coupled with a public funding match that Allen, the savvy businessman, was able to procure – created the endowment that started the Lastinger Center.

In 2002, Don Pemberton was recruited to lead the newly formed Lastinger Center, after successfully launching both the Pinellas Education Foundation in the Tampa Bay area and the statewide organization, 'Take Stock in Children', which became a vehicle for public and corporate contributions to purchase tuition scholarships for students who were the first in their families to go to college. Since its inception more than 25,000 students have successfully completed Take Stock's high school mentorship program and gone on to enter the state college or university of their choosing where they received a full ride as their reward.



Don began the Lastinger Center in a small office with one staff member. As fate would have it, the initial office of the Lastinger Center – situated in 'Old Norman Hall,' the original site of the PK Yonge Lab School – was in the same location as Allen Lastinger's third grade classroom.

*...collaboration took the form of teacher inquiry projects, which were completed throughout the school year as teachers came together for monthly collaboration sessions and concluded in an annual showcase.*

Ever the social entrepreneur, Don began his tenure at the Lastinger Center by conducting a statewide listening tour. During this tour, he reached out to teachers across the state and asked them what help they needed in order to better support the children they served. In so doing, he struck upon a goldmine of information.

## **Act 2. Conflict – Teacher Leaders vs. 'the System'**

In response to this call, the teacher leadership movement at the University of Florida started as a graduate program known as Teacher Leadership for School Improvement program, or TLSI. The program was designed to prepare teachers as Master Teachers, Teacher Researchers, and Teacher Leaders. Don Pemberton and faculty in the School of Teaching and Learning designed a graduate program for practicing educators that filled the gap identified by teachers across the state who expressed the desire for additional support and the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues within their schools to effect school reform. Their collaboration took the form of teacher inquiry projects, which were completed throughout the school year as teachers came together for monthly collaboration sessions and concluded in an annual showcase in each community where the program took root. The program found early and consistent support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which was interested in sponsoring the development and implementation of efforts that sought to transform early learning from child care through elementary schooling.



It was about this time that I entered stage left, as an unpaid graduate assistant fresh off teaching stints in the South Bronx in New York City as well as Oakland and Los Angeles

in California and back home in West Palm Beach, Florida. Proverbially, I had seen it all in my four years in the classroom, and I was determined to do something about it. Like the teachers who had given their voice during the listening tour and who were now signing up to participate in the TLSI program in response to the offer of free graduate degree programs, I was fired up. Through the connections of the Gator Nation across the state, we had about 200 teachers sign up for the program over the course of the first 3 years. During that time, I completed my coursework at the university's main campus in Gainesville and then continued the crusade by moving south to Miami to assist the Center's efforts there and complete my dissertation studying the project's impact on teacher practice.

Upon completing my doctorate and becoming faculty at the University of Florida to support the TLSI program from a distance in Miami, which was one of the largest recruitment sites, I became a quick study in the entrepreneurialism of the Lastinger Center. I decided to forge ahead with my very first grant application. This was early in the Obama administration, and the proposal went in response to the US Department of Education's Investing in Innovation program - a subproject of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act that provided vital bridge funding to school systems across the country devastated by the housing crisis and the accompanying hit to their tax base. Of more than 1,400 applicants to the USDOE's call, only 49 were selected, just 3.5%. I woke up one morning to a series of early text messages to discover that our project was among them. As a complete novice among my fellow faculty, I never even realized the gravity of the situation until I attended a meeting at which faculty members were asked to share grant proposals they had recently submitted or received. When asked to share my recent work, I naively shared that we had recently been awarded \$5 million. The response in the room let me know what a big deal that was.

The grant award allowed us to grow the TLSI program's content to include a specialization in early childhood education, focusing on prekindergarten through third grade teachers. Further, it allowed us to build the research base for the program as a successful education reform intervention. Previous research conducted by UF faculty had pointed to the success of the program in improving school climate as reported by teachers, reducing student absenteeism, and improving student learning gains in reading and mathematics. The grant afforded us the opportunity to conduct a rigorous, third party evaluation of the program's impact on teacher practice and student learning through simultaneous evaluations with a randomized control trial at the school level and a quasi-experimental design at the teacher level. We hoped that a handful of committed educators working in concert with their colleagues might be able to replicate the success we had seen previously in transforming school cultures and student outcomes. Poring deeply into the work of the 50 teachers who participated in the 20 schools that received treatment, the evaluation found *no* significance at the school level. However,

...the teachers who participated in the program had significant improvements in their teaching practice ...

the quasi-experimental study did find that teachers who participated in the program had significant improvements in their teaching practice as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, a highly validated and widely used instrument developed at the University of Virginia. What's more is that the most significant finding came in the domain of Instructional Support, which is typically the lowest scoring and most difficult to change domain within the instrument.

All the while, I worked with colleagues to dig back into the experiences of teachers who were completing the TLSI program in Miami in order to understand the experiences that transformed them into teacher leaders. Our team interviewed those 50 teachers to understand the journeys that took them from “just a teacher,” as they so often said, to a “teacher leader.” Perhaps unsurprisingly given the programmatic focus of the graduate program they were in, the participating teachers described their preparation and learning around teaching, research, and leadership as critical to the transformation of their professional identity to that of a leader. Colleagues and I prepared a draft of a visual model depicting these experiences and the influences that either supported or inhibited their development as leaders. We brought that model back to the teachers to member check its validity and asked them if they could use it to tell

their personal and professional journeys to leadership. In short, they could. We brought the model to other teacher leaders and validated it in different national contexts outside the US in England, Scotland, Wales, and the Republic of Ireland. These teachers, far removed from the intentional design of the TLSI degree program also found the model to have significant explanatory power. The model 'Theory of teacher leadership development' (Poekert, Alexandrou, & Shannon, 2018) (pictured) was presented at international conferences and published in the academic journal *Research in Post Compulsory Education*.



### **Act 3: Teacher Leadership Proliferates**

At this point in the Lastinger Center's journey into teacher leadership, we had graduated more than 400 teachers from the TLSI program across the State of Florida, and they in turn had led at least 1,000 of their colleagues through inquiry-based professional development cycles on an annual basis. Yet that wasn't enough. The program still existed mostly at the outer orbit of partner school districts' strategic plans and the most central tactics they were using to achieve improvements in student learning.

In the one instance that the Lastinger Center's approach became central to a district Superintendent's approach, the program was summarily dropped as the elected officials on the school board sniped at the Superintendent and tossed the baby out with the bathwater as they removed her from office.

Still, the work continued and morphed into new forms. As TLSI faculty developed the core coursework for the program, they did a significant amount of research into instructional coaching. Resulting from this effort was not only a graduate course on the topic but also an initial outline for a preparation process that could be used for training coaches currently working in schools. The preparation program sought to address the wide variance in the kinds of roles that instructional coaches played in schools, from model teacher to testing coordinator to pseudo-administrator. It was dubbed the Certified Instructional Coaching Program, and it incorporated a competency-based approach to certification that required participants to submit video evidence of their coaching practice. This was assessed against a research-based rubric that defined successful coaching practice as the ability to focus a coaching cycle on a particular area of teaching practice, collect and represent classroom observation data, and conduct a productive coaching conversation with the teacher.

The program was piloted by faculty from the School of Teaching and Learning and Lastinger staff members among a cohort of 30 teachers in the Jacksonville area. By the following year we had signed on Seminole County and Palm Beach County to train teacher leaders and coaches as well as every school principal in the Jacksonville area.



*The participating teachers described their preparation and learning around teaching, research, and leadership as critical to the transformation of their professional identity to that of a leader.*

In this initial year we certified over 200 instructional leaders across those three districts. Over the course of the subsequent three years we brought on additional cohorts in Alachua County, Miami-Dade County, Orange County, Clay County, and Indian River County, training and certifying over 1,500 instructional leaders across the state. The Florida Department of Education began to take notice and embarked on a process to develop an official certification for coaching in Florida policy, the very first such certification in the United States.

In the midst of all of this, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation appeared on the Lastinger Center's radar. Because of Don Pemberton's multi-faceted connections with educational and political leaders across Florida, the Foundation came to see the Center as an important partner in its efforts to improve educational systems statewide. Soon the Foundation had bestowed two different grants on the Lastinger Center: one to work with the Department of Education to convene a group of stakeholders across Florida to analyze professional development practices across the state and move toward a set of policy recommendations to improve its implementation and impact, and a second grant to recruit, select, and support a statewide network of teacher leaders. While I was involved in the former grant as a stakeholder in advancing recommendations, I spearheaded the second grant conceptualizing and actualizing the Florida Teacher Leader Fellowship with a team of Lastinger Center staff. Through a rigorous selection process we culled a group of 40 teacher leaders from 22 different counties across Florida, and embarked on an 18-month professional development program that was designed to ensure that teachers had the kinds of experiences the theoretical model of teacher leadership development had identified as important. That is, we tasked them with completing a leadership project, which they documented through the teacher research process, aimed at accomplishing one of three goals in their respective contexts:

1. Improving the quality of standards-aligned classroom instruction,
2. Improving the quality of teacher professional development, or
3. Improving the alignment of the teacher evaluation system with classroom instruction or professional development.

# FLORIDA Teacher Leader FELLOWS



During the program, the Teacher Leader Fellows engaged in a series of statewide and regional meetings to work through the inquiry process and complete their leadership projects. Additionally, they received virtual support from a partner organization that kept them connected in between the face-to-face sessions and sought to enhance their social media and communication skills toward the end of increasing their influence as leaders. The Teacher Leader Fellows also had the opportunity to travel to Boston to meet with instructional leaders and understand the implementation and impact of teacher leadership efforts there. Beyond all these connections, the Teacher Leader Fellows also had the opportunity to engage regularly with our program officers from the Gates Foundation as well as our trusty external evaluators from the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge.

All of this work achieved a glorious climax when the Teacher Leader Fellows joined over 300 other colleagues, literally from around the world, when the Lastinger Center joined the Professional Development in Education journal to host the International Teacher Leadership Conference in March 2017 in Miami, Florida.

The event was nothing short of triumphant. Teacher leaders of all sorts and from all over crashed into each other to engage in deeply reflective, practice-centered conversations around their ongoing teacher research. Partner organizations came together to share their work in developing and promoting teacher leadership.

The Gates Foundation convened a panel of teacher leader researchers and policy experts to explore how to best document the impact of teacher leadership in ways that would be meaningful to decision-makers. Keynotes were given by experts on enacting teacher leadership through the inquiry process and utilizing teacher leadership to move closer to achieving educational equity for all children. And to top it all off, Professor John MacBeath gave a rousing lecture in front of a pineapple-shaped stage on the open-air patio of a famous Miami jazz club in between the opening and closing sets of an 8-piece salsa band. (I'm really not making this up.) It was – by so many, if not all accounts – one of the best, most memorable conferences that the attendees had ever been to. And yet, it still all seemed so fleeting and fragile.



#### **Act 4: “The System” Strikes Back**

I’ve been working in various capacities in education for 20 years. And throughout that time, I have heard a regular refrain at various points of heartbreak: “There are larger forces at play.” This statement, which is necessarily true because there are always larger forces than any one of us alone, is used as a pat on the back to well-intentioned, ambitious educational reformers who are disappointed by the outcomes of their efforts to change things for the better. Too often we see an entrenched bureaucracy revert to equilibrium and perpetuate the injustices that underserve too many children, particularly children of color and children from low-income families, and rob our countries of the social and economic development that could be had if only, if only all children (and their teachers) had access to high quality learning experiences every day.

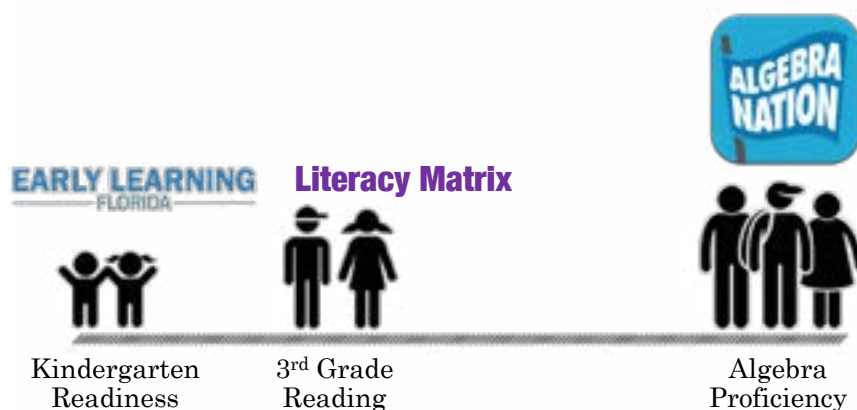
Larger forces truly were at play in the Lastinger Center’s teacher leadership work. The Gates Foundation underwent a significant change in leadership that led it to completely redefine its investment strategy in K-12 education in the US. With a new focus on networking school leadership teams rather than individuals and a concentration on secondary schools alone rather than across the K-12 spectrum, the Florida Teacher Leader Fellowship was left without a funding partner and with no other recourse to continue the program. This was in spite of the acknowledged success of the program and tremendous interest in participation among teacher leaders statewide.

What’s more is that school districts across the state began to re-assess any professional development programs that required teachers to miss significant amounts of instructional time for fear of negatively affecting the high stakes achievement tests. A new set of standards had come into play since this journey had begun. Perhaps you’ve heard of it: The Common Core, or the ‘Communist Core’ as it was dubbed at public listening sessions held by Florida Department of Education officials in response to the backlash of a politically volatile state critiquing the closest thing the US has ever had to a national set of standards or assessments. Knowing that more rigorous and coherent standards that required students to move closer to college and career readiness were necessary, state officials ended up adopting a revised version of the Common Core that came to be known as the Florida Standards, with the component Mathematics Florida Standards, or MAFS, and Language Arts Florida Standards, or LAFS (I’m not making this up either). Continuing our game of alphabet soup, students are assessed on their achievement of the Florida Standards by the aptly named Florida Standards Assessment (FSA). And due to policy enacted concurrently to much of the yarn I’ve been spinning, Florida teachers are also assessed according to their students’ ability to achieve success on the FSA. In fact, it fluctuated between one-third and one-half of teachers’ overall

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performance assessment during the period covered by this tale. As a result, not only were school and district leadership wary of sending teachers out of the classroom for any extended period of time, now teachers themselves were also wary of leaving their students in the hands of less experienced and less qualified substitute teachers for fear of the negative impact on student performance and thus their professional evaluations and livelihoods.

Simultaneous to all of this is the Lastinger Center's own departure from individual and school-level work toward larger scale efforts that transcended districts by offering resources directly to teachers and students across the entire state through the use of educational technology. The Center's Algebra Nation program was built quickly with a tech start-up in the Gainesville area and launched free of charge to help prepare students for the Algebra 1 test that students must pass successfully in order to receive a high school diploma in Florida. Within the first six months, the system had over 125,000 users. Within two years we were providing access to all 250,000 algebra students and their 6,000 teachers, and had successfully procured legislative support to offer all students free consumable workbooks that accompany the online tutoring videos as well as expand the system to include geometry and algebra 2. Research undertaken on the platform has demonstrated significant impacts on student performance that connect to usage of the platform across every student demographic: race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English Language Learners, and Students with Disabilities. And two years ago, the US Department of Education's research arm, the Institute of Education Sciences, decided to invest a hefty sum to experiment with the Algebra Nation platform with the goal of creating more personalized, more effective learning tools.



Building on the success of this technology-based effort, the Lastinger Center returned to its work in early learning and launched the Early Learning Florida professional development system to serve the infant, toddler, and preschool teachers across Florida. High quality professional development courses help teachers to improve their marks according to the specific metric used to assess the quality of early learning programs in Florida and increasingly across the US, again the Classroom Assessment Scoring System. The system built on the success of the TLSI graduate program by offering learning materials online, and also with in-person implementation supports in the form of communities of practice or coaching offered by more than 300 local support personnel who that had been trained and certified by the Lastinger Center. To date, three years into the project, Early Learning Florida has served more than 30,000 teachers across the state. What's more is that like Algebra Nation, the intervention is showing significant impacts. The outcomes of a recent large-scale study pointed not only to significant impacts on teacher knowledge and teacher practice, but also to significant impacts in child outcomes, meaning that on average the children in the classrooms of participating teachers are achieving developmental milestones at more regular rates than children working with teachers outside the program. In sum, the final outcome is that kids will enter kindergarten more ready for school and more likely to be successful.

These two efforts, together with a third, emerging effort targeting foundational literacy skills that is taking a similarly hybrid approach of technology-based professional development coupled with in-person implementation supports, have signaled a sea change in the Lastinger Center's overall work. Moving forward the Center will focus on and be measured by specific child and student outcomes (kindergarten readiness, third grade reading proficiency, and algebra proficiency) in an effort to keep kids front and center in our work, target outcomes of interest to parents and policymakers, and employ technology and instructional leadership efforts in support of achieving these outcomes.

As a result of these changes, the personnel who supported our teacher leadership efforts by working with teachers, coaches, and instructional leaders have either evolved along with the Center, retired, or resigned. At this point, even if we wanted to run the Florida Teacher Leader Fellows program again, we wouldn't have the capacity. Our team has turned over to a large degree as the Center positions itself for its future work. And as a result, teacher leadership as an initiative unto itself seems to be drawing to a close at the Lastinger Center.

*Unless teacher leaders can redefine success to include additional or different sets of metrics other than those currently supported by parents and policymakers, it will continue to operate as an effort on the periphery of education reform writ large.*

## **Act 5: The Aftermath**

As I conclude this narrative, I want to bring us back to the title of this piece: 'Teacher Leadership: A Tragedy in Five Parts?' The question mark is clearly intentional and very important. I want to leave open the possibility for the resurgence of teacher leadership within a proper evolutionary context of the Lastinger Center's work. The question is sincere: is it over? will it be back?

As we await the answer to this question, some important realizations to note and share. Teacher leadership as the protagonist in this tragedy necessarily has a fatal flaw. This fatal flaw is twofold. First, teacher leadership requires a significant amount of external support financially and programmatically in order to flourish. Without the generous support of the Foundations that initiated both the TLSI degree program and the Florida Teacher Leader Fellowship or the US Department of Education's i3 grant to study the degree program, the programmatic support of the UF faculty and staff would not have been possible. Without UF's involvement in designing and delivering each of the initiatives, teacher leadership would not have been catalyzed nor developed to the extent it was. And where would we have been without this external support?

Second, without specific attention to an outcome of interest to the educational community, including parents and policymakers, teacher leadership will fail as an education reform effort. Parents and policy makers want to see specific results manifest for children and students as a result of the public investment of financial resources, effort, and time. Unless teacher leaders can redefine success to include additional or different sets of metrics other than those currently supported by parents and policymakers, it will continue to operate as an effort on the periphery of education reform writ large.

Therefore, which will it be? How will the teacher leadership community move ahead from here? Will teacher leaders take aim at education policy to recalibrate the definition of success and reimagine the purpose of schooling to go beyond passing student achievement tests? This is a long, arduous process that few educators are well equipped to tackle. Will teacher leaders double down on helping students to overcome gatekeeping metrics enshrined in existing policy that disproportionately and negatively affect students of color and/or low-income families? Without attention to helping students pass now, certain groups of students will continue to be disenfranchised by our society. Or will the current wave of teacher leadership ride off into the sunset as another admirable, well intentioned education reform effort that showed promise but ultimately missed the mark? To these questions and to highlight the implications of the story I shared here, I invite your responses [details overleaf]. Thank you.

References:

Philip Poekert, Alex Alexandrou & Darbianne Shannon (2016) How teachers become leaders: an internationally validated theoretical model of teacher leadership development, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 21:4, 307-329

Phil Poekert is the Director of the University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning. Managing a large portfolio of research and service projects, totaling over \$10 million annually, his research focuses on the development of teacher leadership and the impact of collaborative professional development on teaching quality.



More information is available at: [www.lastingercenter.com](http://www.lastingercenter.com) and [www.educ.cam.ac.uk/networks/lfl/about](http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/networks/lfl/about)

Contribute to the debate on Twitter by tagging [@LfLCambridge](https://twitter.com/LfLCambridge) and using the hashtag #TeacherLeadershipTragedy



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