

Evaluation Brief on the Learning Environment Specialist

Background

A key piece of the Pittsburgh Public Schools' (PPS') Empowering Effective Teachers plan is its Career Ladder Opportunities, which encourage teachers with a demonstrated record of effectiveness to work with students who need them most. Beginning in the 2011–12 school year, the district implemented the Learning Environment Specialist (LES) role. LES teachers were selected based on their demonstrated abilities in classroom management and have received specialized training in student behavior management. LESs serve in high-need schools and assist their school's Student Services staff in (1) providing professional development sessions on current best practices in classroom organization, behavior management, and other related strategies; (2) modeling best practices for teachers; and (3) working closely with the principal to design and implement school-based strategies for improving their school's learning environment. Teachers in the LES role earn an annual differential payment of \$9,300.

All of the district's Career Ladder opportunities are funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) program. As required by this grant, PPS is working with an external evaluator, Westat, based in Rockville, MD, to evaluate the implementation and impact of its TIF-funded activities. Westat's evaluation work on the LES thus far has included site visits in 2011–12 to four of the seven schools featuring an LES that year, followed by a second round of site visits in October 2013 to all four of the schools currently featuring an LES: King K–8 and Brashear, Perry, and Westinghouse high schools. (The number of LES schools was reduced following the 2011–12 school year, due to the closing and merging of several buildings and several LESs not continuing in the role.) Both sets of visits focused on various issues around implementation. This brief takes a look at some of the major evaluation findings on the LES that have emerged, including preliminary findings from the October 2013 site visits.

Findings on Implementation

The LES role was characterized by the majority of educators as a significant source of support for teachers. A wide range of activities and supports were described by the LESs, the teachers who worked closely with an LES, and principals. The activities and supports specific to the LES role described during the 2011–12 site visits and again during the fall 2013 visits included the following:

- Observing and providing feedback to teachers;
- Assisting teachers in improvement efforts related to RISE domains;
- Providing guidance to teachers on classroom management and addressing student behaviors;
- Providing and facilitating professional development sessions;
- Serving as a resource and “safe” place for students to discuss concerns;
- Developing or supporting the implementation of positive behavior incentive systems (PBIS); and
- Assisting in school mergers, where needed, by setting up efforts to ensure a smooth process for integrating students into new school placements.

Activities and supports specific to the LES role that were described for the first time during the fall 2013 site visits included the following:

- Collecting and reviewing referral data;
- Serving as a “filter” to determine which referrals should be forwarded to the administration;
- Establishing policies and procedures to improve consistency across teachers in responses to student behaviors;
- Developing a staff handbook of policies, procedures, and forms;
- Linking individual students with needed social services providers;
- Serving as “check-in” for individual students; and
- Ensuring consistent follow-up in communications with parents and students on student behaviors.

In addition, LES teachers also took on or were assigned a range of other responsibilities in the schools, such as serving as lunch period monitor, test coordinator, substitute teacher coordinator, and as a substitute teacher. Focus group participants indicated that these activities took away time that the LES would otherwise be able to use for supporting teachers and addressing behavior and climate concerns.

Teachers who reported that they had worked closely with an LES referred to the value of a person filling the LES role as someone “in-between” the administration and teachers, i.e., who understood the perspectives of both groups. This in-between, “non-evaluative” space was considered important to the role in several ways, as follows:

- Teachers could feel more comfortable in seeking assistance from the LES as someone who could provide guidance, understood the administrative perspective without being a member of the administration, and also understood a teacher’s perspective and needs.
- Students had a resource that was separate from their teachers and not part of the formal administrative structure or formal disciplinary system.
- Students could raise concerns or seek guidance in a non-threatening space and the LES input could address issues before they led to problematic behaviors.
- The LES served as a “filter” in reviewing and acting on referrals in some schools and was able to identify and address underlying issues to help prevent lower level infractions from leading to more problematic behaviors.

When asked about their perceptions of the impact of the LES on their building, participants cited a variety of changes that they attributed to the implementation of the LES role:

- Decreased suspensions;
- Increased attendance;
- Increased teacher retention;
- Clearer halls with more students in class;
- More time for instruction in class; and
- Improvements in test scores.

In addition, participants at one school referred to a change in the school climate overall from negative to positive as new policies and procedures began to be implemented. As one teacher commented, “As far as relationships with staff and students, I think she had a direct impact on... the staff trusting each other more. Once we developed the trust in her, then she started to help [us] to trust each other, and I think she has affected the culture with the kids also. So she has definitely improved the culture in the building.”

Several challenges to the implementation of the LES role were cited across the four schools:

- **Lack of clarity regarding the role of the LES.** Across all schools, participants noted that there was a lack of clarity and focus around the LES role. Several focus group participants also noted that the LES took on a range of tasks that did not appear to be central to the LES role, even though there was also not enough time to build in other activities that should be part of the role. The mix of administrative tasks with other LES tasks led some teachers to interpret the LES as an administrative role rather than as a resource for teachers, and this perception affected the teachers’ receptiveness to

the role and led to some hesitance in obtaining guidance from the LES. Some of the LESs referred to the role of the principal in shaping and supporting the specific nature of the LES role within a school and described difficulties encountered in shaping the LES role when there are changes in their school's administration from year to year. Some participants commented that the LES was in some respects functioning as an additional general staffing resource for the school.

- **Too wide a range of responsibilities assigned to/taken on by the LES.** Several participants commented that the LES teacher was engaged in too wide a range of responsibilities and was “pulled in many directions.” Some teachers commented that because the LES was pulled in many different directions, there was not sufficient time for the LES to work with teachers who needed and wanted help. They further noted that the LES activities appeared to include tasks that should not be part of the LES role, while at the same time there was not enough time for the LES to provide the support being requested by teachers or for greater focus on the school environment. LES teachers noted that they were not able to be in the classrooms as much as they would like.
- **Challenges in building trust among school staff.** The importance of building a relationship of trust between the LES and the school staff was mentioned by participants across all schools. Building trust requires time and continued effort, and LES teachers reported working to build trust as an important initial step for productive relationships with teachers. Thus, changes in assignments and school mergers complicated the process of building trust and shaping the LES role. Some participants indicated that trust remained a challenge for the LES in the school, and they found it difficult to identify examples of best practices. Some of these comments also were related discussions regarding the lack of clarity among staff about the LES role and perceptions that the LES was an administrative role.

Conclusions

The comments of the site visits participants indicated that the level of success of the LES role was not consistent across the four schools visited. Some stakeholders perceived the program to be very successful in that it provided a significant support for teachers and was an important factor in improving the school environment. However, others expressed limited support for the role and did not report any impacts of the LES role on teachers or the school environment. Educators in general, independent of their view of the LES role in their school, referred to the need for greater clarity in the definition of LES goals and activities. The perspectives expressed are perhaps best captured by the comments of one principal, who stated that the LES role “could be something really powerful” provided there is a better vision and plan, along with greater clarity and guidance about the role.