Assessing Individual Roles in Collaborative Relationships

In recent blog posts, KSTF's Executive Director (**Nicole Gillespie**) and Director of Programs (**Jeff Rozelle**) both address the idea of teacher leadership/leading teachers and the role KSTF plays in the development of KSTF Teaching Fellows as primary agents of educational improvement. Both Nicole and Jeff write about leadership as both reflexive and distributed, and how KSTF seeks to support that kind of teacher leadership capacity in our programs. Specifically, we recognize that early-career teachers can engage in a version of teacher leadership in which leaders act first to change themselves, and then bring in colleagues in ways that encourage them to do the same. In Phase 2, which comprises years 3 and 4 of the Fellowship, we provide opportunities for Fellows to critically examine leadership activities that aim to increase students' opportunities to learn.

Teaching has traditionally been an isolating experience. A high school math or science teacher may have few opportunities during their day to talk to anyone other than the myriad of students flowing in and out of their classrooms all day long. In fact, some high school teachers see as many as 150 to 200 students per day. It's not hard to imagine that they have little time or energy left to interact with colleagues. We see collaboration with colleagues as a tremendous resource to investigate, and ultimately improve, teaching practices that impact students' opportunities to learn. These practices might be at the individual teacher level, among teams of teachers who teach the same course, at the departmental level, or even school-wide. But in any case, when teachers can't interact with colleagues, students suffer.

This idea of collaborating with colleagues for the purpose of understanding, changing, and improving students' opportunities to learn is one of the major goals of Phase 2 of the KSTF Teaching Fellows program.

In Phase 2, Fellows develop their skills and dispositions for collaborating by engaging with colleagues in their local contexts in examining learning opportunities for students and developing ways to make learning more equitable for all. We build on the collaborative relationships Fellows have developed amongst themselves during the first years in the Fellowship. We initially focus on the norms and practices of collaboration with Fellows' KSTF colleagues before beginning to consider how they might collaborate with their school colleagues. Within the Fellowship, beginning in the first year, we develop specific norms for

working with others. As Fellows take on both formal and informal leadership roles in their schools, it is also important for them to consider the norms that are enacted, or not, in that setting and the impact this may have on the ways in which interactions occur. Taking an explicit focus on their roles in professional communities is important as Fellows begin to think about those communities in their schools of which they are members.

We recognize that colleagues can provide unique perspectives into happenings in classrooms and can work with Fellows in exploring and pursuing efforts aimed to support students' opportunities to learn. Recognizing the strengths colleagues bring to the collaborative relationship, and the role the Fellow plays in that relationship, is something we explicitly surface. We also recognize that is easy to attribute the challenges a group might face to others in the group rather than recognizing one's own role, or perspective, in contributing to that particular issue.

One activity we do support asks Fellows to self-assess both the collaborations they currently have with colleagues, and their own role in these collaborative relationships. In this assessment, Fellows consider the collaboration that occurs among one group of colleagues with whom they work at their schools. The assessment requires that Fellows rate themselves on a sliding scale on such things as: to what degree group members act to increase students' opportunities to learn; the degree to which group members work together; and the degree to which group members trust each others' opinions and feedback (there are a total of 10 prompts on which they self-assess). Fellows then reflect on their assessment and identify the areas where they would like their group to grow in the upcoming year, why that is an area they targeted for improvement, and how they believe focusing on it will increase students' opportunities to learn. Additionally, Fellows are asked to assess their role in the current state of affairs that they've uncovered through this assessment. For example, a Fellow may indicate that their group does not have any shared expectations for students. The Fellow then responds to the following prompts to consider ways in which they can draw on, or build upon, the strengths of the other members of the group in getting the group to talk about expectations and differences in opinions:

> What's your role in this state of affairs? How did you contribute to the state of affairs being what it was?
> What actions can you take to improve the state of affairs in this area?

What are assets other members of the group bring that can assist with improving the state of affairs?

We see assessing the ways in which individuals, including oneself, contribute to groups' successes and challenges as an important first step in developing stronger collaborative relationships. In reviewing Fellows reflections, we notice that they assume some ownership for their role in their group's performance in particular areas. We see variability in terms of how collaborative these Fellows see their colleagues, but note that some feel that they now recognize their role in their group's dynamics and can work to change that. Fellows revisit their self-assessment after they have had some time to make progress on improving the area they targeted. This kind of change can be difficult, but uncovering assumptions Fellows hold about themselves and their colleagues serves as a useful first step in addressing areas in which they want to grow, not only as teachers, but also as leading teachers who act as primary agents of educational improvement.