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## Increasing Teacher Leadership in CommPACT Schools

*A key component of the CommPACT Schools Initiative is the expansion of opportunities for teachers to exercise leadership in their schools.*

*Drawing on two years of surveys completed by all teachers in CommPACT schools, this brief examines the extent to which teachers have experienced increased involvement in decision-making and access to leadership roles in their schools. We find that growth in teacher leadership has been modest in absolute numbers but substantial in practical terms, given the difficulty of this change.*

### Background

The CommPACT Schools Initiative (CSI) represents a new approach to improving high-need urban schools in Connecticut. A CommPACT school is an existing public school reorganized by teachers and administrators to increase organizational responsiveness and to maximize shared decision-making and collaboration. The name "CommPACT" symbolizes a shared commitment by key school partners including community members, parents, administrators, children, and teachers to improve student learning and close persistent achievement gaps. Designation as a CommPACT school means that district leadership and union membership can provide school faculties increased flexibility on issues

of governance, budgeting and curriculum so that school communities can implement evidenced-based and context-specific decisions to increase student achievement.

CommPACT schools also receive technical service from faculty at the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. Eight schools adopted the model in the inaugural 2008-2009 academic year. The Center for Education Policy Analysis (CEPA) is funded by a National Education Association (NEA) Foundation gift to research the CSI. As part of their research agenda, CEPA researchers have examined school autonomy and distributed leadership in CommPACT schools for the first two years of the initiative.

## Why Study This Issue?

In the wake of No Child Left Behind, teachers' opportunities to take on formal leadership roles and participate in school decision-making have increased. Some studies indicate that appointing teachers to leadership roles increases teacher motivation and retention rates, and, importantly, student achievement. Particularly in urban districts, teacher leadership is gaining prominence. A key aspect of the CommPACT School Initiative's (CSI) theory of action involves teacher leadership. First, the initiative requires all schools to form leadership teams and appoint two teachers to this body. Second, the initiative devolves some degree of decision-making from the principal to the teachers.

## What Are We Studying?

From its inception, teacher leadership has formed a linchpin of the CommPACT initiative. A September, 2009 flier described the CommPACT reform: "Decision-making is shared, which leads to a shared vision, mission and ownership, and in turn, enhances the teaching and learning experience for all those involved. Teachers and building-level leaders are empowered to make decisions and are held accountable for those decisions." Similarly, the benchmarks laid out for CommPACT emphasized that leadership should be shared among administrators and teachers. Two of the eight "Governance" benchmarks are: "The school staff actively participates in the work of various governance bodies within the school" and "All staff members are actively involved in decision making and school governance and each stakeholder group is represented." Drawing on two years of survey data from teachers in the CommPACT schools, this brief examines the extent to which teacher leadership has taken hold thus far in the 8 schools.

## What Did We Find?

Overall, we found that teacher leadership and decision-making authority had developed to a modest degree between Year 1 and 2 in the 8 schools. Most of the growth in teacher leadership has been an increase from no involvement to a small or moderate role in school-based decisions. The small scale of these improvements is to be expected, given the cultural and structural changes required to foster authentic teacher leadership and involvement in decision-making.

At the end of the second year of CommPACT's existence, teachers in CommPACT schools reported that they were more involved in several important decisions. Fewer teachers reported that they played "no role at all" or "a small role" in selecting instructional materials, devising teaching techniques, and planning school improvement efforts. Fewer teachers reported having no role in making decisions about which curricula to implement.

Figures 1-7 depict these findings. If CommPACT functions to increase teacher involvement in decision-making, the red columns (Year 2) on the left (little or no role in the given decision) should be shorter than the blue columns (Year 1) while those on the right (a large or primary role) should be taller.

Figures 1-3 follow this pattern exactly; teachers in Year 2 reported greater involvement in decision-making regarding choosing instructional materials and techniques and school improvement planning. For example, in Year 1, 70.4% of teachers said they played a moderate to primary role in devising instructional techniques. In Year 2, 76.7% indicated this was the case. The proportion of teachers

reporting that they played a moderate to primary role in selecting instructional materials rose from 45.7% to 49.8% from Year 1 to Year 2. Lastly, the proportion of teachers reporting that they played a moderate to primary role in school improvement planning rose from 43.4% to 51.3% from Year 1 to Year 2. Figure 4 deviates a bit. Compared to Year 1, fewer teachers reported they played “no role at all” in choosing curriculum in Year 2 (40% vs. 49.8% in Year 1) and more said they played “a small role” (31% vs. 24%) or “a large role” (11.1% vs. 6.9%). Taken together, these figures represent increases in teachers’ involvement in decision-making as CommPACT planners envisioned. As depicted in these figures, most of the increase in teacher involvement is modest and composed of movement from not being involved to playing a “small” or “moderate role.”

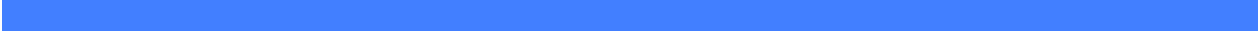
At the same time, data suggest that there is room for teacher leadership to grow in CommPACT schools. Figures 5-7 depict teachers’ views on whether teachers are involved in decision-making (Figure 5), whether the faculty in their school has an effective process for decision-making (Figure 6), and whether opportunities for advancement *within the teaching profession* exist at their school (Figure 7). Figure 5 indicates that in Years 1 and 2 the same proportion of teachers, 38.8%, disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement, “Teachers are involved in educational decision-making at my school.” Figure 6 may explain this finding. It shows that a considerable proportion of teachers (41.2% in Year 1 and 39.0% in Year 2) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “The faculty has an effective process for making group decisions.” Indeed, interviews with teachers and teacher leaders highlighted the challenges of developing new ways to

exercise authority and come to consensus as a group. Lastly, Figure 7 depicts teachers’ views about whether teacher leadership opportunities exist in their school. The largest sub-group neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement in both Years 1 and 2 and a higher percentage of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this proposition in Year 2 than in Year 1. At the same time, about one-quarter of teachers felt there were opportunities for advancement. It may be that this sub-group is composed of individuals who hold positions of authority in CommPACT. Perhaps in Year 1, more teachers were optimistic in the abstract that the initiative would create positions, but in Year 2, it may be that those positions are filled and fewer teachers feel they have access to these roles.

As a whole, these findings are to be expected, given the ambitious and counter-cultural nature of efforts to increase teachers’ authority and influence in schools. Given the barriers to teacher leadership and the difficulty of brokering new ways of sharing authority and new models of making decisions in schools, modest increases in teacher involvement over one year represent substantial growth in practical terms.

### **What Will the Future Hold?**

Our survey and interview data suggest that CommPACT schools should spend considerable time developing effective processes for making decisions that realize the goal of broadening stakeholder—including teacher—involvement. Without these processes in place, teacher leadership will not truly flourish. Moreover, we recommend that key stakeholders, including district leaders with direct authority over CommPACT schools, principals, and teachers themselves regularly and reflectively revisit what it means to increase teacher leadership and involvement in



decision-making. This change represents a significant departure from how things have been done in many urban schools, and requires district and school leaders to relinquish some of the authority they have traditionally possessed. As such, individuals may find it easier, less threatening, and, in some ways, more rewarding to fall back into (or never truly disrupt) old patterns of making decisions. This regular, reflective work by key role-players is likely vital to CommPACT's long-term success.

**Teachers' Self-reported Involvement in:**

Figure 1: Devising Teaching Techniques (n=513)

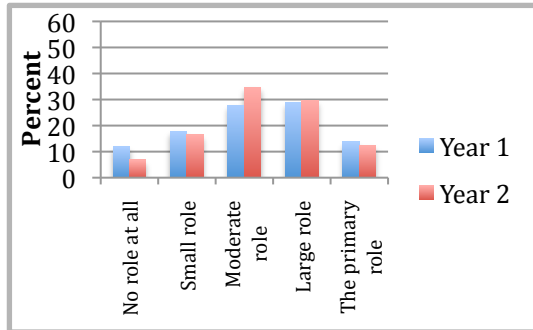


Figure 2: Selecting Instructional Materials (n=515)

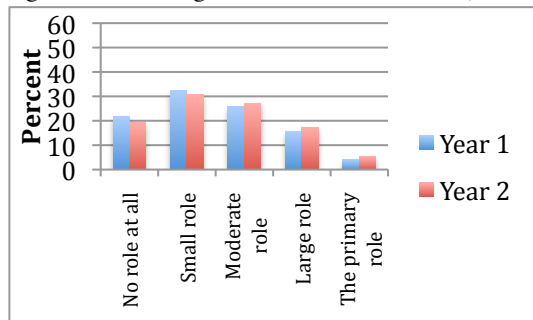


Figure 3: School Improvement Planning (n=508)

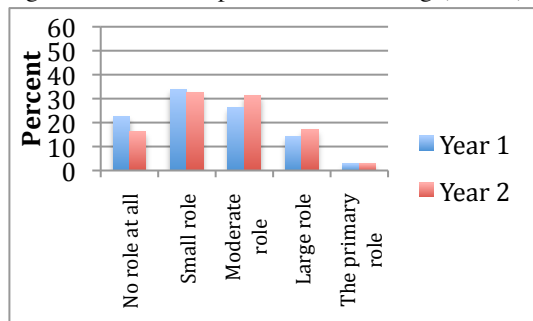
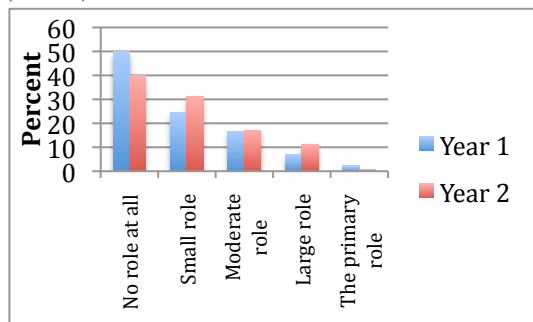


Figure 4: Deciding Which Curricula to Implement (n=512)



**Teachers' response to these prompts:**

Figure 5: Teachers are Involved in Educational Decision-Making in my School (n=518)

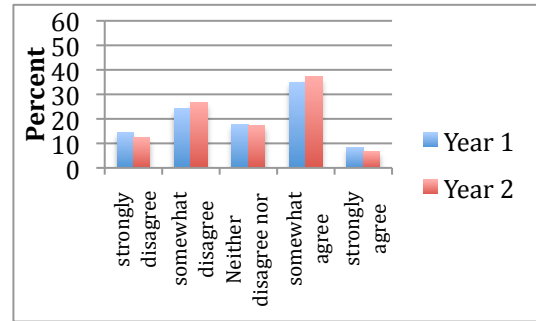


Figure 6: Faculty has an Effective Process for Making Group Decisions in my School (n=520)

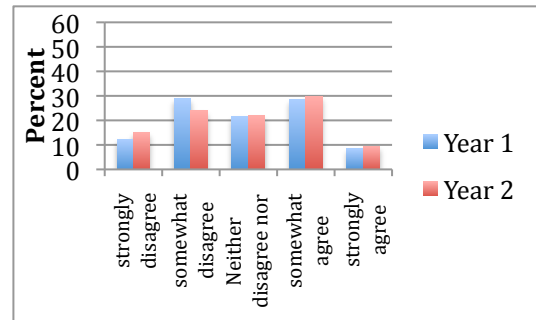


Figure 7: Opportunities for Advancement exist at my school (n=516)

