**Teacher Leadership Initiative Capstone Project**

**2013 – 2014**

**Michael McCarthy- Massachusetts**

**Contextual Information**

**Challenge: Plan, Implementation, Effectiveness, Reflection**

My leadership experience prior to TLI was largely confined to my own classroom and to the mentoring of younger teachers in my department, Social Studies. I focused on improving my practice through reflection, dialogue with colleagues, and through my own self directed research (after finishing my Master’s in Education). For example, I participated in a group study with colleagues to obtain my National Board certification, which I received three years ago. I felt it important to be a ‘successful’ teacher recognized by a respected organization such as National Board not only as a validation of my practice, but also to add any weight to anything I may have to say regarding policy at the district, state, or national level.

Having a voice in the national dialogue about teaching was the main reason why I applied to be a part of TLI. I have been enormously frustrated by various policies [district, state, and/or national] that demonize teachers in the name of ‘reform’, which are often misguided, or at worst harmful to public education in general and to students overall. As I wrote in my application, “it has become clear to me that we [teachers] must go beyond our own class walls in order to preserve all that is good within them.” Not having any advocacy experience, I applied to TLI in order to improve my leadership skills to participate in advocating for teachers.

This has particular resonance in my own district. I work at Andover High School in Andover, MA. Over the course of the past few years, teachers and the teachers union has faced strong opposition form the local school committee including a terrible contract battle, spite from the local newspaper, even negative remarks the administration (at the high school at least). To simplify, we [teachers] have endured such opposition that an extremely negative, unhealthy environment has resulted. Instead of simply accepting this, I applied to TLI to be an agent of change, to act instead of complain. As the saying goes, “don’t curse the darkness, turn on a light.” To do this, my plan has been to learn leadership skills from TLI through the required work and then to apply them first to my own department and then later to my school, district, and hopefully beyond that.

As I progressed in the TLI webinars and assigned work, I became very interested in ‘school redesign’. For a substantial amount of time, this was initially focused around teacher led schools.

I became fascinated with teacher led schools, having never even heard of such a novel concept. I emailed various teacher led schools (ex. one in Portland, Maine and one in Boston, MA), asking specific questions about how these schools work on a day- to- day basis. However, all the teacher led schools I have come across are found in urban areas that typically serve low- income students and are for either elementary school students or middle school students. There was not a ‘high performing’, suburban, relatively affluent community model to learn about. Coming from an emerging leader position, I did not think it currently feasible to start my own teacher led school [though TLI has enabled me to truly think about this possibility for a time in the future].

In addition, my interpretation of teacher led schools for my situation is one where teachers actively shape the school to make it a better place, with or without administrative support, within the standard public school hierarchy And so, my focus technically bridged teacher led schools with ‘more and better learning time’.

To do this, I joined the Curriculum Steering Committee. This committee sets the direction of what each department, 6-12, will focus on that academic year and beyond. The committee also meets as a whole with the Assistant Superintendent and various department leaders to share ideas and help guide the Assistant Superintendent in some decisions she has to make. Last year, my department had a brand new Program Advisor (~Department head), who needed guidance in learning the culture of the district, the inns and outs of school forms and procedures, as well as help with the pulse of both the school and our department. I helped her with all of these. More importantly, the Program Advisor looked to me to decide what to focus on that year for our department. I decided, alongside the Program Advisor, to focus on skills development documents in social studies, grades 6-10. That is, to come up with a document to ensure not only these skills central to success in social studies for students were taught, but also in a systematic manner that build upon the following year, i.e. were scaffolded. We recruited four other teachers who were also reform minded -two high school teachers and two middle school teachers, to assist with this.

During this year, I led meetings, facilitated collaborative relationships amongst these individuals by coming up with a consensus on what skills are important, how to scaffold them, and when to introduce new skills so that we can assist students in a clearer manner. After reflecting on my leadership strengths and what it means to be a leader through the TLI webinars and assigned work, I was able to successfully advocate my position, truly listen to others and incorporate their views, compromise when necessary, and come to a consensus that all participants felt proud of. The TLI work on leadership helped me to do this. I took a position, worked for it, and came to a democratic decision of what we view as crucial for students in social studies.

Following the successful completion of the document, I then helped lead two meetings where we presented our document to all of the 6-12 social studies teachers in the whole district. This had the potential to be fraught with contention, as we have many contentious, vocal members of our department who seem to embrace discord and whom are extremely resistant to change of any kind. With that in mind, we divided up the teachers by grade and each committee member would facilitate discussion at their table on what we value as teachers and to advocate for the implementation of our skills document so that it will actually be used in curriculum planning and not be simply another document to put on the shelf; I volunteered to facilitate the table with all of the more contentious teachers.

It met with enormous success. First, I focused on what we value as teachers. Any time a teacher would make a more negative remark and start to bring the conversation down a different path, I would gently shift the focus back to what we value and to the skills document itself. I learned (during my TLI leadership work) that I am a ‘big thinker’ and am generally positive. Using these traits, I was able to focus on what we have in common as social studies teachers, how this is important for students and why these skills are important for students. These teachers, after two meetings, agreed to a shared vision and to using the skills document. In fact, the general consensus was that the skills document will not only help teachers ensure they have covered these skills in their own classrooms, but gives teachers a broader, ‘big picture’ idea of what we want students to learn and when.

Additionally, these meeting also gave 6-12 teachers an opportunity to meet and discuss, something that strangely has not happened in my nine years in Andover (at least between middle and high school teachers). I found that this simple face to face dialogue helped to dispel a feeling of isolation many teachers have, it shifts the focus from just one’s classroom to a shared department vision, along with centering our attention on students and not just one’s own classroom. Lastly, simply having a face to attach to a name has meaning and is the beginning of more collaboration.

The work I need to do to make the project more successful is adding what I see is a key component to the skills document. What I was unable to add to the skills document last year was the development of a social, emotional scaffolded section. I feel that we as social studies teachers are in the unique position to help students develop their socio-emotional life (our own title ‘social studies’ suggests we deal with social issues, after all). This is something that I also feel is crucial to recognize and support in an age where numerous studies have identified today’s students as anxious, isolated, and are having trouble with social relationships. Yet, many teachers felt this was beyond their responsibility as academic teachers and did not want to take on another responsibility in an age of new teacher evaluations, questions of licensure, a new schedule change for Andover next year, and a general overall feeling of having to do too much in too little time.

What I also was able to do, aside from what I have previously stated, was share this skills document at our ‘face to face’ state level TLI meeting. The feedback I received from fellow ‘TLI’ers along with our state TLI leaders was exceptionally positive. When I minimized my accomplishment, several other teacher-leader insisted on how significant this document is, vowing to go back to their district and share the document.

Building upon the success of this skills document, this year the rest of the Curriculum Steering Committee and myself will: a). remind teachers of the skills document to ensure it becomes a living, useful document b). begin a three-year curriculum evaluation that seeks to look at what we teach, why we teach it, what is missing, and what is best for students. Already there have been some difficult conversations, but so far I have successfully able to steer these conversation into a more productive, targeted direction such as (so far) writing down what we as teachers value and what we want every student graduating our school to know both in terms of skills, content, themes.

**Overarching Competencies**

1. ***Personal effectiveness***from emerging to developing/performing

At the beginning of my TLI experience, I had done a fair amount of reflection of myself as a teacher, especially identifying my passions through my National Board certification process and through various other professional developments (ex. mentoring, Facing History & Ourselves, Skillful Teacher). I knew I valued collaboration and dialogue for myself, critical thinking and developing empathy in students. I knew I wanted to be more of a teacher leader but only had actively explored this in a mentor role.

Through the TLI leadership modules, I became aware that my strengths- being a ‘big idea’ person who is generally positive and whom has a leadership style that is more democratic (valuing all opinions but taking the lead when necessary) were assets, especially so in my district. That is, in a relatively contentious environment, being someone who can see the big picture, whom others respect for not only their work ethic/skills in the classroom but because I am seen as willing to listen, compromise, and who sees the forest among the trees, would help in creating an environment that would be conducive to real change, such as the development of the skills document. Colleagues trusted me, knowing that I had no ulterior motive other than what is best for students and all the teachers in the 6-12 department. They saw that when a few teachers took a more aggressive tone with me and others simply on the basis of exploring change, that I responded calmly, positively, and with humility (though admittedly, writing that one is humble makes one question if one really is so). I was also willing to adapt, to change according to the overall desires of the department, that I am willing to go slower, be more thorough in order to get more true buy in and thus enact real change.

How this occurred was through reflection and specifically, reflecting on the activities presented through the TLI leadership modules. Though I was not always sure where TLI was taking me, I completed the assignments and more importantly, really reflected on my practice, more specifically the type of learner I am, the one I am becoming, and the type of learner I would like to become in the end. I not only completed the activities in the modules, but then applied what I learned in the steering committee I joined.

TLI has helped me think big and perhaps more importantly, to act upon these big ideas.

I continually reminded myself to play to my strengths, to identify the strengths of others, and to find a balance in all situations, keeping in mind what is best for students at the forefront.

Currently, as the committee engages in a three year curriculum review, this trust other teachers have in me has already helped me with this goal. I have encouraged both members and non-members of the committee to research better ways of teaching social studies, to reflect on our practice, and to share their voice.

2. ***Group Processes-*** from emerging to developing/performing

In my years of teaching, I have always actively participated in meetings when given the chance, be it department meetings, informal meetings with teachers of the same content, National Board certification review, or district level meetings. I have been known as someone who listens and who will speak about an issue with conviction but with even-mindedness.

My school district, high school and department are all very much divided for a variety of reasons. They are very strong opinions on each side and many, many landmines one could easily fall into without awareness. Understanding group dynamics, how to navigate a difficult situation is critical for success in life in general and especially in my workplace.

Again, through the TLI module, through reflection, and dialogue with reform minded colleagues, I have carefully planned each step in the steering committee’s work, knowing many of our ideas would be challenged solely on the basis on their newness. I learned through the modules the value of preparation, of writing out many letters/responses in anticipation of challenges, so that one can more thoroughly respond. Additionally, I attempted to think of others, their point of view, their motivation, to acknowledge that and work with it, producing a compromise that all can be satisfied with. Many colleagues have applauded me for this, including my Program Advisor and Principal. This verbal validation is in an indication to me that I am not only thinking of being leader, I am actually leading; I am performing. I know I have a lot more to do- I for instance want to extend my actions beyond my department and begin school wide change, district change, and perhaps beyond this. I want to transform.

**Instructional Leadership Competencies**

1. ***Facilitating Collaborative Relationships****-* from emerging to performing

I have always been seen as a team player, whether this was in sports or in the work environment. I have often taken on roles to help the whole rather than just myself. Recognizing that the culture of our school is in need of both compromise and positivity, I have sought to improve these through new initiatives, first in my department through the work of the Curriculum Steering Committee and later in the whole school during TLI, but especially afterwards as on ongoing process.

Through the Curriculum Steering Committee, I was able to improve the implementation of this initiative by recognizing different voices, validating them and reaching action in the form of the skills document. Also, by participating in TLI itself, I was able to bridge time and space by connecting with TLI participants across the country, united in our desire to become teacher-leaders, supporting each others’ ideas and projects. I have developed strong collegial relationships because of TLI, particularly but not exclusively from the TLI Massachusetts branch. We very much supported one another during this year with regard to not only our Capstone projects but also any other professional issues we were/are facing. Our conversations have been enriching, thought provoking, and have much potential in terms of idea generation for change.

I also attended the NEA’s ‘Raise Your Hand: Empowered Educators Day’ for TLI participants in Denver this past July. This was a significant step for me and I found the experience inspiring, affirming, and it has led me to truly contemplate myself as a change agent and how I can more effectively do this. I gained more confidence as a teacher-leader, and I particularly found my discussions with other TLI participants both locally as well as nationally enriching, especially on the different ways we could collaborate. I built relationships, which are vital for change and can be difficult for classroom teachers to do simply because of the nature of the day- to- day job.

2. ***Community Awareness, Engagement, and Advocacy****-* from emerging to developing

Having been, as stated, a teacher who worked mainly on his professional practice as a teacher, there was much room for growth with respect to community awareness. However, by taking part in the TLI module and in conversations with NEA leaders who attended our Massachusetts ‘face to face’ meeting, I became aware of the need for teachers to more actively shape our future. I also knew this myself, for this was a very large motivation for my joining TLI.

Aside from my skills document, I also worked on smaller projects that would help build more positivity in our school and shape the school in a more progressive manner in the form of teachers taking more ownership of our learning along with the improving physical space of the building for students. For instance, I reached out to two colleagues to begin work on revamping our professional development, trying to steer it to things teachers actually want and need, specifically collaboration. Next, I am working with another colleague on trying to get a grant for an outdoor classroom at Andover High. I also convinced our principal to provide a space in the main office for teachers to meet and discuss, with free coffee provided by the school as a draw for teachers to come. This last idea has been enormously popular, as teachers feel slightly more taken care of, a small measure but nonetheless one that has increased the positivity in the building.

Lastly, I have spoken in front of the school committee on behalf of both myself and other teachers in favor of maintaining our current school vacation and not changing it in isolation, as the only district in the state to do so. I was even quoted in the local newspaper (though the journalist only cited my personal reasons for maintaining our current calendar and not my pedagogical ones).

**Reflection on Leadership Growth**

TLI has very much a positive, reflective practice that has truly made me a better teacher-leader. I started out knowing that I needed to leave my classroom more in order to advocate for what was going on in the classroom, but I wasn’t sure how and had little experience to fall back on. TLI helped me identify my strengths so that I could use them to change. I gained more confidence as I brainstormed strategies, ideas, and practices with fellow participants, was inspired by their own ideas and projects, and came up with so many ideas, that their implementation was impossible to do in just one year. Rather, I now have many ideas that I would like to act upon. I also now know that I need to advocate more for change, both within my department, school, and district, but also beyond if we as teachers want more of a say in the national dialogue on education. And I believe I have more tools as a teacher leader to do just this.