

Backbone Teachers: The Importance of a Networked Community

This is my third post describing KSTF's thinking about Backbone Teachers. This is a term we've borrowed from China (the Mandarin term for Backbone Teacher is *gugan jiaoshi*), and it refers to a teacher who has been trained as a leader from the outset of his or her career. Recently, there has been fair amount of **discussion about teacher leadership** in the United States, but we don't have a national strategy for developing these leaders; rather, we seem to be hoping that enough talented, committed teachers will defy the attrition statistics, stick around long enough to gain teaching expertise and somehow develop leadership skills along the way. KSTF takes a different approach. Our five-year Teaching Fellows Program is designed to sustain and support exceptional early-career teachers and build leadership capacity from the onset of their careers. This is why we've adopted the term Backbone Teacher as a short-hand for **leading teachers** who are intentionally identified and supported early in their teaching careers. In my previous posts on Backbone Teachers, I've written about the importance of **leading teachers who are first and foremost outstanding teachers**, and the need for **leading teachers to generate and share professional knowledge**. This post expands on the idea that leading teachers are not lone heroes, but rather must be part of a deeply networked community of education professionals.

A network of professional educators can function in two ways to improve practice: First, by connecting individual members to each other, such a network allows knowledge, practices and shared norms to spread and develop and provide a mechanism for support and enculturation of new members. Thus, individual members are enriched by being part of the network. Second, networks can function as a collective entity to advocate for policies, students, schools and educators themselves, but also to collectively study and understand problems and design and implement solutions.

Through the **Teaching Fellows** and **Senior Fellows** Programs, KSTF develops and supports a nationwide network of outstanding STEM leading teachers. To date, the network primarily functions in the first way I described above. Fellows are connected to each other, other educators in the KSTF community and beyond, and are positioned to bring this knowledge and the practices they have learned into the many contexts in which they work. They become networked within ever

widening communities of practice, which can exist in schools, districts, and professional organizations, and occupy digital spaces.

While there are a number of other professional networks for teachers (e.g., [NSTA](#) and [NCTM](#)), the KSTF network is particularly robust because Fellows know many members of the network personally and feel a strong affinity for those they don't know because of common, powerful experiences. Participation in the Fellowship results in a wide range of shared purposes, practices, norms and values among the network members, including comfort with sharing artifacts of their teaching practice with colleagues (both within and beyond KSTF), skill and experience collecting and analyzing data related to student learning and other aspects of teaching, and enacting change through collaboration.

Although existing teacher networks often function as professional communities, they rarely function as a collective entity working to accomplish something. They may take a stand on a particular issue (e.g., [NCTM on the Common Core State Standards](#)), may lobby for policy change or on behalf of teachers (e.g., AFT's statement on teacher evaluation), but these are cases where networks try to influence other entities to bring about change. Smaller groups of teachers (e.g., school-based professional learning communities or district teams) often work to understand and solve problems on a local level, but it's rare that their results make it into the broader knowledge base of teaching and learning. Rather, the structure of education in the United States is such that teachers are almost always expected to enact solutions that have been designed and tested by someone else. However, some of the most pressing problems in U.S. education are ones that cannot be fully understood, much less solved, without teachers' specialized knowledge, skills and access to students and their learning, classrooms, schools and communities. Moreover, these are problems for which teachers can develop and test solutions themselves, and, if part of a robust national network, share what they've learned and thus bring about change on a national scale.

Because of the unique characteristics of the KSTF network, we believe that it is primed to function as a cohesive entity that works to understand and develop solutions for pressing and ubiquitous problems in education. A team of KSTF staff and Senior Fellows have begun working on plans to begin leveraging this

capacity of the KSTF network. We're in the very early stages of planning, but are excited about the possibilities and will be sharing our ideas here as they develop—so stay tuned!