

Laurie Wasserman, Capstone Project
*More and Greater Learning Time and
Reflections of a New Teacher Leader Initiative Member*

Leadership Profile and context:

Honestly, I wasn't sure if I would be a good participant when I first received the TLI e-mail from the MTA. I thought, "will I have enough time to commit to this, and will I do a good job? (Even if I am accepted.)" Initially I thought of not applying but realized I was motivated due to my love of collaboration, and the possibilities of meeting other educators from my state and the 5 other states. I also liked the fact that there would be local F2F meetings and small group virtual "hangouts" to support me. I wasn't sure what a Google hangout was but it sounded like I would be hanging out with other teachers, which sounded like fun.

My experiences as a **leader** so far have been to:

- Work with new teachers in my district and building. I often reach out to the new teacher or colleague who is struggling.
- Meet with other teacher leaders through my virtual work in Teacher Leader Network
- Share my experiences as a co-teacher through a blog, *2 Teachers in the Room*, and
- Write articles for other teachers through *Teacher Magazine*, *Education World* and *Education Week*. I think when we are willing to share our experiences as educators we can't help but be seen as teacher leaders.
- To present and share ideas with other teachers; I've done this through my local's summer conference, the National Writing Project annual conference as well as their Urban Sites conference, Boston Writing Conference, The Boston globe's Media Matters conference, and the New England League of Middle Schools as a teacher-on-loan and at their annual conference.

Context: I am currently a 6th grade learning disabilities co-teacher in Medford, Massachusetts. I am a National Board Certified teacher in Exceptional Needs. I am also a new teacher mentor in my district.

Description of pathway and competencies:

The pathway I chose was *Instructional Leadership*.

The reason I chose this pathway was because I just love to work with other teachers, including those new to the profession, educators in other districts/states, colleagues in my own school, and on my team as we share instructional ideas. One of the wonderful benefits of sharing and collaborating is learning from others. Although I am

a veteran of 34 years, I learn so much from my colleagues and teammates. Many of the new teachers I mentor are of a different generation and have the skills to use and integrate technology into their classroom practice. I look to them for strategies to help my students.

In addition, my 4 teammates help me in classroom instruction, as well as their strengths in The Common Core Standards and curriculum. One colleague in particular is a former architect who came from private industry to teach middle school math. She not only has the content knowledge of the Common Core math, and is willing to share this knowledge with me, but also has an incredible reflective practice. She often will step back and ask, "What can we do to reach this struggling learner?" We have the most wonderful and meaningful professional conversations. She is patient and supportive in teaching me as a fellow adult learner the challenging math concepts that are required of our students. I will often learn from her the steps needed to solve mathematical algorithms before I can comfortably teach our students.

In addition, I work with a new-to-teaching teammate who ironically I taught when he was a 6th grader. I see in him an amazing educator and I will often share with him resources, ideas, teaching strategies, and opportunities in professional development. He takes my advice and runs with it! I encouraged him to apply for the Boston Writing Project, and he shared his application with me. I felt it wasn't strong enough: he wasn't demonstrating his talents as a gifted teacher and I wanted it to be the best it could be. He took my thoughts, and redid his application, and got accepted! He was only 1 out of hundreds, with only 10 slots available. This is the epitome of instructional leadership: being able to push a colleague in a gentle but forthright way.

I used my knowledge and training I received on the Common Core in ELA as part of my work through the Massachusetts Writing Project (a group of educators who belong to the 3 smaller writing project groups in our state: Buzzard's Bay, Western Massachusetts and Boston) to present at Framingham State to administrators and superintendent throughout The Commonwealth. I then brought this knowledge and training to my district as we shifted from the Mass. Curriculum Frameworks to the Common Core. I worked in collaboration with the general education ELA and reading teachers and our district's ELA department head, to develop lessons and units that addressed the various standards. I then asked my special ed. Department head if I could use one of our monthly meetings to share with my special education colleagues what I had learned at both the state and district level. She supported and encouraged me.

I had a very intense but exciting opportunity to co-present with two fellow Boston Writing Project members on the Common Core in Reading and Writing for a week-long summer professional opportunity with elementary teachers in Townsend, MA. Teaching teachers through the writing process was one I will treasure forever. As I look back on the many wonderful professional opportunities I have had, I realize they all have one common theme: sharing what I've learned with others.

My Project was two-fold: change our school's schedule to increase instruction time without changing the length of the school day, which in turn would impact more and greater learning time. Its intended goals were:

- To reach the struggling learners while utilizing our school's RTI model,
- While also providing enrichment activities for the students who were not struggling and needed to be challenged.

The 4 **competencies** I have selected for focus on my project are:

- (1) Reflective Practice
- (2) Personal Effectiveness
- (3) Interpersonal Effectiveness
- (4) Communication

The reasons were:

- (1) As a **reflective practitioner** I noticed that the kids who struggled had one common difficulty: not being able to express where they were confused and in turn losing their confidence to participate in class. Our 6th grade team decided to support our principal with his idea of doing a pilot RTI model for the first several months of school last year. Using data he shared with us from a math and ELA screener, my math and ELA teammates each took groups of 12, while I did the same, essentially targeting the 36 kids who scored the lowest on the screeners and demonstrated challenges in class as well. We made sure not all of the students in our groups were on IEPs. The remaining students were divided between our two other teammates, our history and science teachers. They did enrichment activities in their content areas. We met with our group 4-5 times a week for 46 minutes. We collaborated frequently on how well our groups were working, focus areas of instruction, etc. I suggested a binder and notebook to use as evidence that would travel with the groups as the 3 of us rotated the smaller groups.

I focused on the students' weakness in both math and written expression. I pre-taught and re-taught math concepts from our general education math class, as well as using journals to increase their writing skills. In the short time our students were with us, their confidence and participation increased, and

many made significant gains on our state's standardized testing. I am eager to do this again in the coming school year if possible. I am already doing weekly writing lessons in our co-taught ELA class and hope to pull small groups from math as well.

I often checked in with the kids to see how they felt about being in their small group and if it was helping them. The kids shared how much they enjoyed the help, and I observed, as did my math colleague, they were participating more and willing to ask questions for clarification. I also found more of our RTI kids were staying after school and using extra help time from us, which was great! I also loved being able to work with kids I might not regularly see such as the struggling/"shade of grey kids" in the non-co-teach sections.

In the beginning when I first joined TLI, I saw myself as performing, but now I think I see myself straddling **performing** and **transforming** in my overarching competencies.

I love to take other educators on my reflective ride but know sometimes policy can be a stumbling block for all of us. Some of my colleagues on other teams complained about the RTI model, finding it challenging to fit it in, while still teaching their curriculum. Although it isn't part of my actual Capstone Project, as I reflect on this past year through my work in TLI, I have become someone who stood on the sidelines of policy, not being involved at the local or state level. I decided during the past year, to reflect on these weaknesses, and do something pro-active. I attended my first state delegate meeting, ran for the E-Board at my local, and went to the *NEA Raise Your Hand* meeting in Denver. I could never have done any of these things if it weren't for my Capstone project; through my Cohort I developed wonderful professional relationships with fellow Massachusetts educators who, maybe without realizing it, mentored me to become more involved.

(2) Personal Effectiveness I think I use my passion for reaching my students while working within a very supportive, collaborative, collegial and professionally validating school. My two principals are accessible and listen actively with new ideas to help students. My team is always finding ways to differentiate and create new, innovative ways to help our 6th graders. I have not always worked in a community like this one. Our school was a toxic environment for many years with lots of dysfunction on teams. I learned through these very difficult situations to always do what's best for the kids even if it's not easy. One of the challenges for me is to be willing to take a risk

when it comes to students who “learn differently” and to think in ways that may seem “unique.” My teammates are my reality check; they let me know when my ideas are possible, and are honest with me when I am unrealistic.

As we worked on changing our school’s schedule, the focus of my project, I went to each of them individually asking for their wish list. What were important things to them? We all had one idea in common: change the length of time we taught. I then asked at our schedule meeting if I could go first sharing my dreams, and could we all dream big? I expressed the importance of longer periods (we currently teach for 46 minutes 7 times a day, with one “double block” per day. Was there a way to lengthen our class periods without changing the length of the day? I also wanted time to work with small groups of kids who I saw struggling: maybe at the end of each class to check in with them, reteach, practice concepts, and check for understanding/confusion before they left for the day.

I think I see myself in the **transforming category** of the overarching competencies. Two of the characteristics are lofty and risk-taking; that’s me.

(3) Interpersonal Effectiveness It’s not easy being a new teacher whether new to a school or to education, and this is where helping “the new kids on the block” is so vital. Although my project was about increasing our school’s instructional time, working with new teachers as a mentor helps me immensely, a wonderful benefit. When we meet, as we both share how we structure our classes, instructional time, and in meeting our students’ needs, it’s all about best use of class time. As middle school teachers, we work with students with so many diverse needs, and are often challenged to meet these needs. I am so excited this year to be working with many new colleagues, and have created a mini PLC group comprised of all of the new special education teachers in my building. We share so many ideas, lessons, teaching strategies and my goals are to help one another with how to best use our precious time. I see myself as in the **transforming** category: fostering and supporting other teachers that I mentor, while also being student focused. I am excited that the majority of the teachers I am mentoring are working with my former students so I can share what I learned as their former teacher while hearing about their progress.

I think my project isn’t just about our school’s schedule and increasing instruction time; it’s also about using our class time to focus on our own goals. I am being evaluated this year as part of the new teacher evaluation and need to tighten my own practice. I tend to want to do too much which starts out lofty but can be overwhelming and cumbersome! I am actually hoping to use my

co-planning time with my teammates and new colleagues to learn to focus, and pick/streamline what is most effective for my students' learning.

- (4) **Communication:** I think I communicate almost too much if that's possible! I have a parent/family liaison notebook to record phone calls, F2F chats, meetings, and e-mails I have with the adult family members of my students. I have e-mail folders jammed with all the communication I have with my mentees, my Lesley students that I supervise, and then there are the frequent chats with my colleagues, teammates and principals. But, honestly, how can you do this job well without all of these supports? I would say I am in the **transforming** category here.

Including your rationale for choosing to address this challenge and its connections to the Teacher Leadership Initiative Competencies and the pathways of leadership selected;

- *What prompted you to select this particular leadership pathway for your project?* I love collaborating with others and the excitement for me was the incredible sharing of other teachers in my Cohort who live in Colorado (Dawn) and Iowa (Kathryn)! I've never met them but they both teach middle school and willingly shared what worked in their schools when they changed their schedules. They both privately e-mailed me tremendous resources, including samples of their schools' schedules.
I knew from past experience as a member of MiddleWeb, a List Serv for middle school teachers, and an early member of CTQ when we had a group called Teacher Leader Network that the virtual collaboration would be so validating, helpful and insightful, as well as incredible resourceful which TLI has been for me. I actually love the Google Hangouts and F2F meeting the best because I really enjoy "meeting face to face" even if it's via The Internet since we live so far from one another.
- *How does focusing on the selected competencies enable you to address your identified challenge?* I don't know if focusing on specific competencies really enabled me to identify my challenge. It actually made it harder for me. I prefer more open-ended questions such as, "how have you grown and changed in the past year? What have been

the strengths and challenges for you as a member of Teacher Leader Initiative? It actually made more work for me, and not in a helpful way but in a stressful way!

- *How does your project address the Capstone expectations?* I think the Capstone expectations wanted us to demonstrate how our collaboration through the various webinars, readings on line of articles, viewing videos, posting and sharing of ideas through The CTQ Platform, sharing of documents and ideas, helped me realize the importance once again of collaboration, virtually, electronically and F2F through our state meetings and hangouts. Some of the assignments, though, were cumbersome and awkward like the diagrams. I sometimes wondered if I wasn't being a good participant because the assignments came so fast and furiously, and it was hard to keep up! Some of the videos and articles helped me immensely as I looked at other schools in my own state and how they used their additional time. I found some of the guest speakers helpful as they gave us ideas of how their school reached out to meet the varying needs of their students during the webinars. I also enjoyed the break out groups, although I would have liked more time to chat together. I think I will use these skills and resources to share with my scheduling group at school.
- Plan and implementation – steps taken to implement your project, including those that may not be completed by the conclusion of TLI:
 - This is still in the planning stages at our school. I think the resources I gathered through my cohort will be extremely beneficial. I also think use of data and documentation from my colleagues and principal will give my project a focus.
 - I have been working on a schedule that will fit the needs of our students and establish a better co-teaching opportunity for my students, my teammates, and myself next year. One of my concerns is that our current co-taught schedule has math and ELA occurring simultaneously. The majority of my students have significant learning disabilities in both subjects, and so my teammates, paraprofessional and I are constantly juggling the best use of our day-to-day interventions. One day recently, we swapped our science double block

with an extra math class because the co-taught section was struggling and we needed extra time. So, there were 3 of us in the co-taught math class (our para professional, Lisa, the general ed. Math teacher, Aileen and myself). It was phenomenal! Lisa worked 2:1 with our students on the Spectrum; Aileen delivered the instruction and worked with small groups of students who needed to be challenged, and who struggled, while I worked with the students who needed re-teaching, and more practice. I felt like that day we reached all students. It was a unique situation but made me realize the importance not just of better time and learning, but using rethinking ourselves as educators who can help all learners. I am hoping in the coming year to use the tools I have learned from TLI to make every minute count.

- *Evidence of success/effectiveness* –
 - *What evidence indicates that your project was successful? We are still working on extending class time through our monthly schedule meetings. We were only able to meet twice last year, so we as a school will continue this year, and hopefully implement our extended classroom instruction for 2015-2016. Although we are still in the planning stages, I have several resources from my participation in the cohorts, webinars, and hangouts, which I can share, with our school. My principal loves data and research and I feel there are several schools in the Boston area we can visit or reach out to as well.*
 - *What evidence indicates your success in addressing your selected competencies? This can't be answered for a year because we haven't changed our schedule yet. But, I think the evidence is there for our students' success as we as a team changed their instruction time through our RTI model. I am also realizing in the past 2 months I am rethinking my use of my academic support class time. All of my students on IEPs have this class and in the past I tried to do everything: work on organizational skills, prepare the kids for upcoming tests, quizzes and projects, and remediate written expression skills and math challenges. Now I focus on one or two areas and dive deeper along with guiding my students in how to express their priorities for our valuable time together. I see myself as being in the **performing** category but having my goal as*

transforming. I meet constantly with my math partner Aileen, and we question, reflect and discuss, “What can we be doing better? How can we reach all learners? What is the best use of our time?” So...my Capstone isn't just about changing our schedule, it's about using the schedule we currently have in place and making our instruction and learning time meaningful. This experience reminds me so much of my National Board experience; but with a colleague twist. What I realize is that we are doing **partner** reflective “*practitioning.*” How cool for our students and us!

What work do you still need to do to make it completely successful? I think if there was a way to have a reunion of my original Cohort members and check in with them and see how far they've come. I am also looking forward to my Google Hangout and F2F meetings to see if I'm on track.

Reflections leadership growth: Wowee, so much has changed since I first submitted my TLI application!! When I first submitted my application I didn't know how integral the MTA and NEA were as professional development organizations. I also didn't fully appreciate all that they do for us as members. This summer through an e-mail Gary Gilardi, my state coach, shared, I was able to meet with the NEA folks in DC as we developed a curriculum guide for practicum teachers. I would never have thought to be a part of this if it weren't for my experiences of being a TLI participant. To be in a room with teacher leaders from across the country, many college level instructors, as well as leaders from NEA at the national level, were both humbling and awe inspiring. I felt my thoughts on helping student teachers, and their field placement supervisors, helped me reflect on what we need to do for those entering this “calling of teaching”, as well as how to give the supervisors activities and strategies to guide them as well. Ann Coffman, our facilitator, understood and validated my passion for teaching and collaboration. She let me share my ideas, thoughts, and strategies for helping practicum teachers. I left DC not only exhilarated, but learning about NEA and all the amazing things they do. I am taking that experience and sharing it with my little PLC I've established: 5 new special education teachers in my school who I also mentor. We use our biweekly time to do mini Professional development. I took a risk with this; I have never done this before in my 34 years of teaching. Yet, with the TLI experience I had the inner professional confidence and strength to share it with my principal, Paul, and run with it. Paul gave his support and approval, and encouraged me as an educator. Then our assistant director of special education, Sandy,(who is filling in for our assistant director who is on medical leave), a former special education teacher, educational team leader and

assistant principal came to our meetings and shared what I was doing with director of special education. I was definitely an **Emerging Leader** when I first started TLI, but now I see myself as a **Transforming Leader**.

I was able to participate this summer in presenting 3 workshops at my state association's annual summer conference. I used these opportunities to not only share the teaching strategies I use to motivate my students with written expression challenges, but to also demonstrate the exciting, innovative lessons and projects my general education teammates and I use in our co-taught classrooms. From these presentations I learned so much from the other teachers throughout our state. We discussed and shared ideas as we problem-solved difficult experiences we face in our classrooms. I encouraged my participants to take on the role of student learner as I share activities and games we play in our middle school classroom.

I was also deeply honored this summer to co-present with my state coach, Gary Gilardi, on our Teacher Leadership Initiative. To present at this level, to fellow leaders throughout our state, was exciting, exhilarating and a little bit scary. But I think as teacher leaders who focus on instruction, we need to push ourselves outside our comfort zone. This is something I learned about myself in the past year, which I will reflect more about below through the various competencies as they relate to my application.

- **Reflections on leadership growth** – description of the leadership skills needed to complete the project and your growth in the four competency themes you selected for focus;

Use your TLI application as the starting point to reflect on your personal leadership growth through the TLI. Consider where you were at the beginning of this experience, as reflected in your application responses, and where you are now.

As I look back on my application for TLI from a year ago, a lot has changed for me professionally and personally. At the beginning of this experience I wrote, "I would like to develop my skills so that I can share my passion more effectively by empowering teachers, and to not be intimidated. I have had my voice quieted numerous times and been threatened professionally by previous administrators. It is part of my professional responsibility to work on putting a stop to this, for there are many other teachers who have unfortunately been placed in this exact situation, and often leave teaching because of it." I began my journey with TLI, meeting folks from across the country and within my state. It was comfortable for me, and I was surrounded by like-minded colleagues who shared my passion for education. But as

we became closer in our Google Hangouts, sharing posts and reflections, and meeting F2F, I became encouraged to be more active within my state association. This was something I never considered a year ago. I attended my first state delegate meeting, an exciting, exhilarating, and intimidating experience. I was so very blessed to have my state coach, Gary Gilardi there, up on stage to reassure me I was among friends. Linda Hanson, a local president from Arlington, literally sat beside me and guided me in the process of how to vote and helped me navigate through the process. Nicole Prevost, a member of our state's executive board, met me, shared encouraging texts and support as I learned the importance of my votes for our next President, Vice-President, and local state rep, as well as voting on a variety of important association issues. As a result of this past year's experience and with the support and encouragement of my fellow state association teacher friends, I took a risk and ran for my local's Executive Board. I have already attended my first meeting and am learning so much!

I also learned at my F2F meeting about the NEA "Raise Your Hand" Day in Colorado. Linda Davin, whom I had never met before, shared this opportunity with us. I found this experience life changing, surrounded by teachers from across the country. The first day I met teachers who became friends; inviting me to spend the day and the entire evening walking, talking, laughing, and sharing our common passion for teaching. It is through TLI, and the amazing network of my local friends I had an experience I will cherish with incredible joy. I must share a personal thank-you to Peter Mili, from Cambridge, a teaching fellow that invited Gary and I to meet other teacher leaders from across the country. Just reflecting now 3 months later, I still see all of us in Denver together, dining, laughing, and sharing stories from our classroom. It's funny: here are educators who have never met one another, and we are connected. There is a special bond between teachers; and TLI gave me this opportunity to experience something I never thought would be possible for me after 34 years: reigniting the excitement and passion for my profession.

As I reflect on this year, I see myself as someone who has changed from **developing** to **performing**; an immense feeling of growth for me.

- *How has the TLI encouraged and supported your growth as a teacher leader and a professional? (see above)*
- Consider where you started in each competency theme at the beginning of your project; where are you at the end of the project? Did you move, for example, from Developing to Performing? Provide

examples of how you attained this growth. (I've incorporated this within each separate competency response/reflection)

Further Reflections (Comparing my application a year ago to where I am now):

1. How can we promote and enhance the role of teacher-leaders in schools, districts, and in the profession to support student learning? This is what I wrote a year ago:

We can promote and enhance the role of teacher-leaders in our schools, districts and in the profession to support student learning by providing multiple professional development opportunities for teachers to learn from teachers. So often during our Professional Development Days we are forced to listen for hours on procedures that do not affect our students' learning directly. Sadly, the best Professional Development I have attended, was outside my district. These workshops and conferences were exciting and relevant because I was learning from fellow educators who knew what would be beneficial ... We need to do this more frequently in our districts. Being a part of the MTA and presenting at the summer conference, spreading the word to our fellow members, and sharing what I've learned in my district, now that I'm part of the E-Board will help immensely. I am going to talk up the new teacher trainings offered by the MTA at my biweekly mentoring meetings. I think the biggest obstacle to good PD is the lack of quality and communication occurring in our own districts. I can't wait to hear from Dan Callahan, in my cohort to see if what he's learned I can share at my local.

2. Discuss your advocacy experience related to professional issues impacted by local, state, or federal policy. In what ways would you like to develop these skills, and how do you consider that to be part of your professional responsibility? A year ago I wrote:

...I would like to develop my skills so that I can share my passion more effectively by empowering teachers, and to not be intimidated. I have had my voice quieted numerous times and been threatened professionally by previous administrators. It is part of my professional responsibility to work on putting a stop to this, for there are so many other teachers who had unfortunately been placed in this exact situation, and often leave teaching because of it. I'm still learning about how to do this most effectively so I am definitely still in the **Emerging** category. I am hoping the longer I am on the E-Board, and have another state delegate meeting under my belt, I will progress into **Developing**.

3. What do you believe the role of the union or Association should be with regard to teaching and learning issues? How do you believe the union or Association should determine its priorities for advocacy and action? A year ago I wrote:

I feel very strongly and passionately that we should be focusing on how we can utilize our time both locally and on the state and federal levels to help our fellow colleagues by teaching them how to help their students, AND how to take better care of themselves. ... We need to rethink how we help each other so new teachers don't leave, and veterans like myself, are encouraged and respected, to help the newbies. I've only attended one E-Board meeting so far, but I already brought my thoughts about our mentoring program and its weaknesses under New Business. My goal is to share the importance of what the MTA offers to its members as well as the NEA. I didn't know, until I became a member of TLI, how pivotal and supportive these two groups are. I am still in the **Emerging** category but hope in the next year to evolve into the **Developing** category.

4. A year ago I wrote the following about my motivation to participate in the Teacher Leadership Initiative. ... *I am motivated to participate in the Teacher Leadership Initiative because I am excited about a partnership with The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, The Center for Teaching Quality, and The Massachusetts Teachers Association/National Education Association. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards changed my life professionally and personally, when I became a NBCT. I learned to be a reflective practitioner through this process, as well as mentoring fellow candidates, a form of leadership. My participation and membership of Teacher Leader Network/Center for Teaching Quality encouraged me to speak out on issues of importance for both students and teachers, and gave me tremendous support and validation. They gave me my teacher leader voice! ... I would like to take all of these experiences and share the many ideas I have of how to change things, beginning at the most basic level of how we mentor new teachers.*

I have had such a wonderful, professional and personal experience this past year. I have met so many wonderful people through this Initiative. I have traveled to Williams College, at our state's annual conference in Williamstown, MA, to Denver for the Raise Your Hand Day, to Washington, DC to collaborate at NEA headquarters, and to my own hometown of Boston to participate in my first experience as a state delegate. I think if I look back at my overall experience as a member of TLI, I went from **developing** to **emerging** to **transforming**.

Final thoughts (really!)

I've just come back from my final F2F of our TLI Cohort, year 1. My head is full but my heart is filled with joy. As I walked into the room I saw people who have become dear colleagues from the past year. I learned from Linda Davin about all that is happening with NEA. She had me enthralled as I listened intently. Linda speaks from her heart, as someone who is still a teacher. We sat together at lunch as she shared how she grew up in my hometown, taught and was a vice principal in a neighboring one. I will admit a year ago, I would read the magazine from NEA, glancing through the articles, but having no clue about educational policy at the national level. I think about how I want to take all that I have learned, and how I want others in my school and district to know how empowering and exciting it can be to get involved. All of this "policy stuff" affects our students. I want to have a reunion in a year and see where everyone is in his or her projects, and in their teacher lives. I want to stay connected because what we did this year was special, life changing, and amazing.

Thank-you, MTA, NEA, CTQ, and National Board for making this year one I will cherish always.