

Backbone Teachers: What Does It Mean to Be an Outstanding Teacher?

When we first launched our new website, I wrote a blog post introducing the idea of Backbone Teachers. We've borrowed this term from the Chinese, who use the Mandarin version to describe teachers who show the potential to be leaders in the profession, and are supported and developed as such from the beginning of their careers. This commitment to developing leaders, who serve a supporting and connecting function within the profession, is at the heart of [KSTF's Teaching Fellows Program](#). So "backbone" seemed like a fitting symbol to represent the kind of teachers our Fellows are.

For KSTF, there are four crucial and deeply intertwined characteristics that identify a Backbone Teacher: first and foremost, they are outstanding teachers; they have both the capacity and inclination to generate knowledge of and for teaching, they are part of a networked community and they are leaders in the profession. I'll write about each of these characteristics in future posts; this post focuses on what we mean by "outstanding teachers."

One of the hallmarks, and growing challenges, of the U.S. educational system is that there is very little consensus about what an outstanding teacher knows, understands, or does. We intend to have many posts on this blog (by a variety of authors) that will explore many aspects of outstanding teachers and teaching, but for now, I'll highlight just one: an outstanding teacher, by definition, has student learning as his or her highest professional priority. This means that, among other things, outstanding teachers have to be able to continually and effectively assess what their students are learning and know how to use that information to continually improve their instruction. Anyone who has tried to teach, and paid attention to the results, can tell you that this is a highly complex skill, that takes significant time, effort, and (ideally) support to develop. Much of the first four years of the KSTF Teaching Fellowship are devoted to supporting Fellows to deepen and hone their ability to do this kind of work.

The fact that it takes so much time to develop this kind of expertise implies that Backbone Teachers stick with the profession and continue to grow and learn throughout their careers. Approximately 90% of KSTF Fellows are still teaching after five years, and while that is a great retention statistic compared to the national average, retention is not our end game. Rather, we're working to understand what it takes for teachers to be able to sustain themselves in the

profession long enough to develop the kind of expertise that only comes with time and experience. In future posts, I'll discuss the other three characteristics of Backbone Teachers: why we think it's important that teachers generate knowledge of and for the profession, the role that a networked community plays, and what teacher leadership means. My colleague [Jodie Galosy](#) and I have found that each of these has implications for teacher retention and development, and recently published a [paper](#) in *The Clearinghouse: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, describing these findings and their implications for the teaching profession.