Teachers, Take the Lead!

Fun, rewarding ways to grow your leadership skills beyond the classroom—and supercharge your professional development.

Join a Professional Learning Community

If your school already has a PLC in place, you should definitely take part. You’ll meet regularly with your colleagues to share lesson-plan ideas and classroom strategies, with the goal of enriching everyone’s teaching skills—which in turn helps students grow and thrive. “Professional learning communities are where teachers lead each other,” says Gerald Gabbard, Ph.D., associate professor of education at Concordia University-Portland. “It’s not about me being the leader by myself, it’s about working with others to build the staff’s capacity and improve instruction.” If your school doesn’t already have a PLC, why not take the initiative to start one? (For ideas on how, visit a site like ASCD.org.)

Develop Curriculum

Have you created some genius lesson plans for your class? Don’t keep them to yourself—share them with other teachers at your school or post them in an online teacher’s forum such as Curriki.org. When educator Susan Kunze
was a teacher in Bishop, California, she thought that her elementary students would learn math more effectively with a game-based curriculum, so she brainstormed original lessons and activities at her kitchen table. “I was focused on being the best math teacher I could be,” she says. But before long, Kunze was sharing these materials with her colleagues, and in the years since, she’s written activity books, spoken at conferences, and in 2008 was awarded the Presidential Award for Mathematics and Science Teaching. Not really the creative type? You can still influence your school’s curriculum by joining your district’s textbook review community (most districts have one).

Become a Data Guru

If you’re a techie with a knack for spreadsheets, ask your principal whether you can help evaluate your school’s data. Test scores and other assessment data are a potential gold mine that can shape how you and your colleagues teach. But while most schools are swimming in data, many administrators aren’t necessarily putting those facts and figures to work in ways that benefit students. When Kristoffer Kohl taught elementary school in Las Vegas, his school was “data rich and information poor,” he recalls—until he became the school’s self-appointed data strategist. Kohl, who now works at the Center for Teaching Quality in Carrboro, North Carolina, used data from fluency assessments in kindergarten and first grade to identify high-achieving readers. “Those students were pulled from the classroom for a couple of hours a week to join the accelerated program, and that gave their teachers more time to focus on students who needed additional support,” he says.

Mentor a New Teacher

You’ll probably never forget your first year in the classroom: No amount of training could have prepared you for the uncertainty that comes from being the sole adult in charge of a roomful of students. “Yet we expect the same performance from first-year teachers that we do from teachers in their 20th year,” says Alisa Bates, Ph.D., assistant dean of education at Concordia University-Portland. When you raise your hand to be a mentor—or...
We asked Alisa Bates, Ph.D., assistant dean of education at Concordia University-Portland, what teachers gain when they step into leadership roles.

What does the phrase “teacher leaders” mean?
Traditionally, once teachers enter the classroom, there have been few opportunities for them to diversify what they do and to grow and develop in new ways over the course of their career. Not every teacher wants to become a principal or administrator, but many would like to contribute what they’ve learned to other teachers or to the field.

How is this shaping the teaching profession?
If you’ve been a teacher for many years, the policies in your school will change, but what’s ultimately expected of you as a teacher doesn’t change. Teaching is hard work, and it’s important for us to come up with more formal opportunities to acknowledge and reward educators so they stay engaged in their careers for the long term.

In your free time, do you get out in nature, knit gorgeous sweaters, or run a killer recycling program in your neighborhood? Starting a club or program at school lets you share your passion with students, expose them to new skills, and stand out as a leader on your staff. Stephen Ritz, a science teacher at PS 55 in Bronx, New York, tapped into his passion for plants when he started a classroom garden with his students. His school’s low-income neighborhood has the highest childhood obesity and diabetes rates in the country, so his “plant-based curriculum”—where kids study science, health, and nutrition, and even business and entrepreneurship—not only was a hit with students, it also served an important need in the community.

Informally take a rookie teacher under your wing—you get to share your hard-won expertise and offer crucial emotional support. Even better, your impact keeps growing, since your guidance helps not only the individual teacher, but his or her students for years to come.

Q&A

TEACHER LEADERS

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Take it Online

Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are great tools for growing your professional development by culling ideas from educators across the country—and bringing those innovations back to your school. Madeline Mendon, a second-grade teacher at Westridge Elementary in Lake Oswego, Oregon, started her social media network when she met a like-minded educator at a conference. "I began following her on Twitter, and it just opened up a whole other world," she says. Now she follows about 1,500 educators from all over the country—and many of them follow her back. Mendon was inspired to implement a flexible seating plan in her class after seeing several posts about it on Twitter, and she says that change alone has had a huge positive impact on her students’ learning.

Keep Learning

The best teachers keep their skills fresh by taking classes, going to education conferences, and finding other ways to nurture their professional development. Newer, less-conventional gatherings, sometimes referred to as "unconferences," offer engaging formats where you can learn in a collaborative and supportive atmosphere. These meetups typically last a few hours or run for several days over the summer. Are your tech skills a bit stale? Take a course at your local community center. Online webinars are another accessible option, allowing you to learn from home and get professional development credits while you’re at it. For something more formal, attend a regional or national conference, where you'll get to hear fascinating speakers, expand your knowledge base, and build up your professional network. Or think about (finally!) earning an advanced degree in education, whether through an online or in-person program.

The best part of flexing your leadership muscles: It builds your confidence and lets you contribute to your school community in new and rewarding ways. So go ahead, tap into your teacher superpowers and take the lead! For more inspiration, visit Concordia's blog at Room241.com.