

Teachers as **Servant Leaders**

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Jolene has taught kindergarten for 16 years. At a recent fund-raising banquet, there were hugs all around—with former students, with parents, and even with former school board members. Jolene has never aspired to be a school leader, and certainly not an administrator. Yet the warm interaction showed that her Christian school community appreciates her as an informal teacher-leader.

Today, kindergarten teachers can't help being leaders. Some of their students have no idea what it means to act responsibly in a group when they first arrive at school. Fashioning 20-odd children into an effective learning community takes some very special leadership skills—and extraordinary patience!

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But Jolene is also a leader beyond her classroom. She visits each kindergartner at home before the school year starts. She wants to know her children and their needs, and have them feel at ease when they first arrive at school. More than that, she wants to develop partnerships with parents. She asks them to sign up to visit her class on a regular basis. She keeps a small library of books on parenting for sign-out in her classroom. In the fall, she often has telephone contact with parents at night to discuss how to best nurture their children.

Monthly field trips provide experiential learning for her kindergartners but also enable her new parents to form a caring community that begins to understand and support the school's mission.

Jolene also provides a listening ear for other teachers. She has coffee after school regularly with the preschool teacher, and prayer with another. She has been her school's representative on the system's Board-Employee Relations Committee in order to do her part in fostering good relationships with the board. She regularly conducts workshops at regional teacher conferences. She welcomes kindergarten teachers from other Christian schools into her room for observation and follow-up discussions. She shares her course outlines and her unit plans to show how a sound Christian perspective permeates her program. Yet she would rather stay out of the limelight, preferring to lead through example.

Why Servant-Leader Teachers Are Important for Schools

Not all teachers are leaders outside their classrooms. New teachers have their hands full getting established. Other teachers are afraid of being too pushy. Still others feel they would be encroaching on their principal's turf. And some feel they have little to contribute.

However, teacher leadership is crucial for a healthy school culture. We need schools that nurture collegiality, that promote a Christian ethos, and that work toward effective Christ-centered learning. For this type of school to exist, a good proportion of its teachers need to provide informal leadership—leadership that supports the school's vision. Ultimately, the students benefit.

Almost every teacher has special gifts and insights that can benefit schools. All schools benefit from collaboration, for instance, when teachers are involved in joint planning for

extracurricular activities or for a peer counseling program. Research suggests that a collaborative culture with informal teacher leadership characterizes schools known for effective student learning and few discipline problems.

But Christian school teachers are not *just* leaders. God calls them to be *servant* leaders who follow the example of Jesus. Jesus exemplified the servant leadership that the apostle Paul describes: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3–4, NIV).

In their schools, servant-leader teachers help create a vibrant and loving sense of togetherness and common purpose.

Servant-leader teachers, in other words, willingly serve others in the school community. They invest in the lives of others around them. They work hard at developing trust. Max DePree (1990, 60–61) has said that such leadership builds *covenantal relationships*. That means that their actions display a commitment to the school’s vision, values, and policies. They serve without seeking external rewards. They provide a listening ear for both colleagues and parents. They show compassion toward and strengthen weaker members. They admit misjudgments but reflect grace and forgiveness to others. In this way they help empower their students, their colleagues—and their administrators. They implicitly covenant to work with and support all others to fulfill the school’s mission and vision.

In their schools, servant-leader teachers help create a vibrant and loving sense of togetherness and common purpose. They share ideas, plan, and make decisions together. They encourage others in new efforts. They show empathy for students, colleagues, and administrators. They also at times put the common good of the school ahead of personal gain. Thus, they help build a school community united in passionately advancing teaching and learning that are based on and that affirm a biblical worldview and lifestyle.

How Servant-Leader Teachers Contribute to Their Schools

When I read this description of biblically based teacher-servant leadership, I am the first to admit that I fall short! But by God’s grace, despite my shortcomings, I may count on God’s promise that He works in me “to will and to act according to his good purpose” when I “hold out the word of life” to those with whom I work (Philippians 2:13, 16, NIV).

The first year I taught in a Christian school, I had just two years of teaching experience. Yet I was given the responsibility of revamping our school’s mathematics program. I did not feel very confident, and I struggled with what would be the characteristics of a “Christian” math curriculum. Yet the fact that my principal trusted me with this responsibility set me on the path of becoming a teacher-leader. Looking back, I do think that the school benefited from the new program it eventually implemented. But, more than that, this responsibility enriched my own life. I soon enrolled in a master’s program in mathematics pedagogy and curriculum. Before long I led some summer mathematics workshops for Christian school teachers. This story demonstrates the beauty of biblical servant leadership. God wants us to serve without seeking reward; but when we do so, He enriches our lives as we use and develop our God-given gifts for the benefit of others.

Let me give some examples of how schools—as well as you yourself—can benefit from exercising servant leadership. No doubt some of these you already do. And if so, I’m thankful that you’re enhancing your school’s effectiveness!

- Praying for the school: Prayer is the most unobtrusive and yet meaningful way to exercise servant leadership. Pray regularly for your students but also for your colleagues, support staff, administrators, parents, and school board members. Some prayer-partner teachers pray together weekly for needs in the school.
- Being involved the school’s everyday operation: Servant-leader teachers look for solutions to snags and problems in the school. For instance, when they see persistent traffic confusion in the school parking lot or recurring behavior problems in a hallway, they bring these problems to the attention of their principal or colleagues and think about how the problems can be solved.
- Volunteering for tasks: Servant-leader teachers volunteer to take on their share of responsibilities in the school. They may help organize celebrations or special programs, be part of a committee to consider updating school policies, or plan a professional day.

- Collaborating with other teachers: Servant-leader teachers dialogue and work with their colleagues, especially but not only with those at the same grade levels or teaching the same subjects. They share materials. They may do some joint planning. They solicit and offer suggestions. Experienced teachers may mentor new ones. Through this collaboration they can foster a supportive community where each one's contributions are acknowledged and appreciated.
- Serving on planning committees: Servant-leader teachers can have a long-term impact by serving on a curriculum committee that revises a program or a school handbook. They may also be involved in choosing subject resources or be part of a school task force to refocus the school's vision.
- Promoting the school: Some teachers have special gifts in developing school publications. They may help design the weekly parent newsletter or the school website. Others may work with the "parents who care" prayer group or parent advisory councils, or speak at new-parent information evenings.
- Being there for the school administration: Wise administrators value the input of servant-teacher leaders. I know principals who consult regularly with teachers in setting budget priorities. Many administrators also involve teachers in selecting new teachers.
- Leading by example: I started my list with prayer. I end with what I believe to be second in importance. Servant-leader teachers lead by example. What Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit guides their actions. As Eugene Peterson put it in *The Message*, this fruit includes affection for others, a willingness to stick with things, and a sense of compassion in the heart.

Hurdles to Teacher Servant Leadership

No one can do everything or even most things on this list. We would quickly burn out! Besides, each of us is an original image of God, with special gifts suitable for some tasks but not for others. But belonging to a Christ-centered group of educators is also God's gift to us. Each of us is just one part of the Body, but we complement each other and can share the leadership load.

There are, nevertheless, several hurdles, or obstacles, to teacher leadership. Time is the first one. If you're a conscientious teacher, you spend many hours planning and preparing, marking and evaluating, and meeting with students and

parents. I've heard teachers say, "There's always something being added on to our tasks. When will something be taken away?" Principals will therefore have to make a point of making time available to their staff for leadership activities. I know one principal who takes half of his school (160 students) into the gym each week for an hour of activities that he organizes. So his teachers have one hour every other week for joint planning. There are ways and means to create time!

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The other major obstacle is that teachers do not want to interfere with what they feel is the responsibility of the administration. Principals play a crucial role in combating this obstacle. They can shape a school culture that empowers teachers to use their insights and skills outside the classroom. They can encourage them to take on meaningful roles. They can also relinquish some real authority to teachers. Covenantal relationships imply that we are faithful to each other as we together implement our vision as best we can.

Being a Servant-Leader Teacher: A Biblical Mandate

If you want to see how Jesus modeled being a servant leader, read John 13, where Jesus washed His disciples' feet. But don't stop there. Read all the way to the end of the Gospel. See how Jesus comforted, taught, and prayed for His followers—and how He gave even Peter—who denied Him—a meaningful role in the kingdom of God. We can take heart because in those chapters Jesus also promises that the Spirit of truth will strengthen us for our leadership responsibilities. So you can follow Jesus by taking on leadership that makes happen what you believe in, both for your school and for your students.

Reference

DePree, Max. 1990. *Leadership is an art*. New York: Dell Publishing.

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Teachers as Servant Leaders has such generosity, such incrementally ascending understandings of the responsibilities of the true teacher, and such a refreshing approach to being a servant leader in the core of the nation, it is a must read for all who have ever been inspired by those who give themselves to educate, mentor, and in effect, love, others. - - Shann Ferch, editor of The International Journal of Servant Leadership; Gonzaga University. Three cheers for Joe D. Nichols! Teachers as Servant Leaders is a welcome addition to the powerful and growing body of literature on education and ser...