



THE PATH TO LEADERSHIP

Options abound for today's educators, whether they want to remain in the classroom or move into other roles

By **Jennifer L. Nelson**

*i*n the not-so-distant past, when a literacy educator was ready to advance in his or her career, there was really only one option: a position in administration. But those days are coming to an end.

Now, teachers across the globe are pursuing leadership opportunities and fulfilling positions ranging from mentors and coaches to research colleagues and chairs of school-based leadership teams, all of which allow them to both further their careers and make a difference in the classroom.

Most important, they are getting the proper recognition for doing so. They are being viewed as the leaders that they are.



Jennifer L. Nelson (Jennifer@jennifernelson.com) is a freelance magazine writer specializing in parenting and education.

“It’s assumed that many teachers ultimately leave the classroom because of the low salary...but if you look at some of latest research, one of the biggest factors is that they don’t have enough job satisfaction, and they don’t feel included in the decision making or confident with their level of efficacy in the classroom,” explains Melissa Scheve, who directs the Hollyhock Fellowship Program at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. “One of the biggest crises in the American educational system is skyrocketing teacher attrition, and to address that issue, we have to find a solution where they feel validated and empowered.”

Many of today’s educators feel most at home in the classroom and would be hard pressed to abandon their students, so their solution is to find ways to make a difference without leaving that behind.



development sessions for her peers.

“Having teacher leaders to bridge the gap between educators and administration is beneficial for all involved; I get to share what I’m excited about, and my colleagues feel more comfortable approaching me than they might a member of the administration,” Tobar adds. “Teacher leaders are there to speak up and give honest feedback to the administration to let them know when something isn’t going to work.”

In addition to being a middle school literacy educator in New Jersey, Kristy Shurina also chose to seek out opportunities to serve as a teacher leader. She followed the path of higher education to further her passion for learning, and today has two master’s degrees and a doctorate. She serves as a consultant for the National Writing Project at Rutgers

our classrooms in order to make a difference,” says Shurina, who was named Bridgewater-Raritan Middle School Teacher of the Year in 2014 and the Somerset County Teacher of the Year earlier this year.

Shurina conducts graduate courses on teaching middle school literacy for the Rutgers University Graduate School of Education, and she works as an adjunct English instructor at a local community college. In addition to being a member of the International Literacy Association, she is a member of the National Council of Teachers of English and the Association for Middle Level Education.

“I’m happy that I get to remain in the classroom with my students but also fulfill leadership roles,” she says. “I get to see the research and the theory in action in the classroom while still

directly relating to my graduate students.”

Fortunately, programs are popping up across the globe that are designed to help teachers make the most of their skills and learn how to share them with others. In New York City, the Office of Leadership for the Department of Education aims to support new teachers through mentoring, develop teacher leaders through its Teacher Leadership Program, and cultivate aspiring leaders through the Leaders in Education Apprenticeship Program.

“Teachers now have the opportunity to participate in creating professional learning for themselves and others. They serve as researchers and facilitators, and they can cultivate the ability to lead in others,” says Kyra Narain-Lloyd, director of the Teacher Leadership Program. “The idea that teachers learn more from each other than from ‘experts’ has taken hold in the past few years...and they’ve been able to take more control over their own professional development.”

“Each and every teacher is a leader in their own community.

In many contexts and cultures around the world, teachers are still the most respected, trusted, and quoted individuals, and they play an important role in developing students’ mental growth.”

—Musammat Badrunnesha

Giving teachers a voice

“I never intended to go down the administrative path, but from the beginning of my career I knew I wanted to find ways to serve as a leader from my classroom,” asserts Cristina Tobar, a high school teacher in Chelsea, MA. Tobar completed the Hollyhock Fellowship Program and is now serving on grade-level leadership teams within her school and conducting professional

University, where she collaborates with colleagues across the state and provides professional development in writing instruction. She has also served on technology teams that focus on helping teachers integrate technology effectively into reading and writing instruction.

“I do think that school administrators are starting to listen to teachers and allow us to influence policy...so we no longer need to abandon

“One of the biggest crises in the American educational system is skyrocketing teacher attrition, and to address that issue, we have to find a solution where they feel validated and empowered.”

—Melissa Scheve,
pictured center



Though many educators are finding new ways to share their knowledge with fellow teachers while remaining in the classroom, others are making the choice to follow a path outside of the classroom walls. According to Theresa Deeney, associate professor at the University of Maryland, many literacy educators are moving on to become coaches or specialists. She also works with students who ultimately are hoping to land positions as reading and literacy consultants.

Deeney began her own career as a special education teacher before moving on to work as an education liaison at a local Department of Youth Services. She then became the principal of a school for children with emotional and behavioral issues while earning her master’s degree in educational administration at the University of Massachusetts.

“Some people think that climbing to the role of principal means that you’re the boss and you can finally enact change... but it’s not really like that anymore,” she says. “Teachers are learning that being a leader means working collaboratively with your fellow educators and administrators to make education accessible and well-

structured for every child who walks through your doors.”

Deeney later earned her doctorate in reading, language, and learning disabilities at Harvard University while directing an alternative public school for students who were unsuccessful in a traditional school setting. “When you’re in the classroom, you’re in charge of 15 to 30 students...and you can do

a good job of knowing exactly how to meet their needs. But when you take the path to leadership, it’s about trying to meet the needs of a larger group of students, and doing your best for the entire community,” she says. “Teachers can have a voice...and they can make a difference.”



“Teachers should take advantage of leadership opportunities because the knowledge and skills they’ve developed through daily direct interaction with students are what schools need to drive student achievement.”

—Rhea Lastica-Espedido

Fostering growth

Fortunately, there is now a growing plentitude of programs, from the national to the district level (like the Department of Education programs in New York City), to help teachers fulfill their aspirations.

Musammat Badrunnesha began her career in 2000 as an English and social sciences teacher in a secondary school in the Moulvibazar district of the Sylhet region in Bangladesh. She received training from both national and international organizations and, five years later, joined BRAC International as a part-time master trainer, which enabled her to organize a forum for local English teachers.

She is now the CEO of the Empowerment and Human Development Society (EHDS) in Sylhet, which works toward ensuring girls’ rights in Bangladeshi communities and empowering women in

education, and she's the founding principal of EHDS's school, Captain Academy.

"To me, providing quality education to children is the best investment in developing countries," Badrunnesha says.

After being selected for the Teaching Excellence and Achievement Program of the International Research and Exchanges Board in Washington, DC, she was supported by the U.S. Department of State to attend further training programs to get where she is today.

"Each and every teacher is a leader in their own community," Badrunnesha says. "In many contexts and cultures around the world, teachers are still the most respected, trusted, and quoted individuals, and they play an important role in developing students' mental growth."

Recognizing that, many districts are beginning to provide opportunities to bolster their educators' career aspirations and nurture their desire to lead by rolling out organized leadership programs.

While national programs strive to advance the cause of teacher leadership—such as Teach to Lead, a joint partnership of the U.S. Department of Education and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards—many schools are also creating new leadership designations for school-based teaching positions.

In Baltimore City Public Schools, lead teachers are tasked with taking the next step in inspiring and mentoring both their peers and their students. Part of a landmark contract with the Baltimore Teachers Union, the Lead Pathway program provides teachers with an opportunity to be a school's lead in a particular investment area and collaborate with school leadership while maintaining a teaching/service load of 25%.

Rhea Lastica-Espedido, a teacher at Liberty Elementary School, is one of the program's first 15 lead teachers. A National Board certified teacher and member of the Emerging Leaders program, she previously had been

involved in leadership opportunities such as initiating a schoolwide writing program and modeling an effective reading intervention system before she applied to become a lead teacher.

Lastica-Espedido underwent a rigorous selection process in order to determine her readiness for the position.

"Teachers who know that they're highly capable of leading, and who have a relentless passion for the cause of education, should not think twice about being in the forefront...it's only when



"I do think that school administrators are starting to listen to teachers and allow us to influence policy...so we no longer need to abandon our classrooms in order to make a difference."

—Kristy Shurina

they make their thinking and actions visible that they can effect change in our schools and our nation as a whole," she asserts.

Lastica-Espedido continues to teach two special education classes, but she is now responsible for leading team meetings, coaching teachers in implementing emerging instructional practices, modeling lessons, conducting professional development, and

addressing technical and adaptive challenges. She also opens her classroom for observation.

"Teachers should take advantage of leadership opportunities because the knowledge and skills they've developed through daily direct interaction with students are what schools need to drive student achievement," she says. "Extending our influence from the four walls of the classroom to the entire school and community is powerful and fulfilling."

Though many teacher leaders are highly successful in the classroom, becoming a teacher leader often means developing new skills—such as the ability to connect with adults.

"Adults are often much more challenging to work with than children who, by nature, are more malleable and resilient," explains Nancy Nassr, associate director of the ChicagoQuest charter school. "Teachers want to be led by people who inspire them, and who they believe are effective educators in the classroom and can teach them something new."

Nassr has been a teacher for nearly a decade and has held a variety of leadership roles ranging from team leader to department chair.

Joshua Olson, who also took advantage of the Hollyhock Fellowship at Stanford University, agrees that becoming a more effective leader involved learning how to better connect with adults. A ninth-grade teacher at Mariner High School in Washington, Olson frequently hosts professional development sessions for his fellow educators.

"Teaching in front of students comes naturally to a lot of us, but leading professional development for your peers is quite a bit different," he says. "While you're empowering fellow teachers, you're also inspiring students...you're demonstrating the idea that anyone can be a leader if they choose to take the initiative."

Though any educator can be a leader, it's important, as with any other profession, to do it out of passion for the work.

"Unfortunately, there aren't many ways for educators to make

more money in this field, unless they pursue administration,” Nassr explains. “I would advise against pursuing leadership roles if that’s your primary motivation because leadership—particularly at the school or district level—is a tremendous amount of work, and very often thankless. You have to really want to lead and believe in your ability to effectuate change in order to sustain yourself as a leader.”

Seeing the true impact

Badrunnesha urges educators to understand the lasting impact of their work—no matter what their particular job may be.

“Teachers are the best solution for social issues because they can develop curriculum based upon the needs of the students and community, become a researcher in their own fields, and can serve as advocates on behalf of the schools



“I never intended to go down the administrative path, but from the beginning of my career I knew I wanted to find ways to serve as a leader from my classroom.”
—Cristina Tobar

and students within the larger community,” she says.

Her words serve as a reminder of how *all* teachers are already leaders in the first place. That is important to remember as the definition of literacy continues to rapidly change—and with it, the role of literacy educators.

But the good news is, even though teachers still face their share of challenges, they have more doors open to them than ever before to serve as leaders in their fields and to inspire their fellow educators.

“It’s an exciting time for teachers because there are so many more opportunities available to become leaders,” Tobar concludes. “In the past, if you didn’t go into administration, you didn’t have any room to grow... but now more and more teachers are finding new ways to share their expertise and connect with their peers without having to give up the thing they love the most.” ■

Lead the way in 21st-century literacy education.

Whether you are an experienced educator looking to expand your expertise or new to the profession and looking to build your knowledge and skills, Hamline offers literacy programs that will prepare you to inspire and instill in your students the literacy skills necessary to meet the challenges of learning, communicating, and problem solving in today’s world.

Master of Arts in Literacy Education

Master the theoretical as well as practical bases of effective 21st-century literacy teaching and learning.

Join our **fully-online** cohort beginning in **February**.

K-12 Reading Licensure*

Learn how to adapt your reading instruction to meet the needs of students at all reading levels.

Sign up for any of our **fully-online** courses or the entire program.

*Note: Our reading licensure program is based on standards set forth by the State of Minnesota. Please consult your state to see if such requirements are compatible.

Find out more
about our programs:

hamline.edu/LitToday

 **HAMLIN UNIVERSITY**
School of Education