

Public School Teachers Who Lead



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During the last 10 minutes of a typical class, students are closing their books and chatting, antsy for the bell. The teacher hurriedly collects homework, erases the board and readies for the next class.

Ms. Dominguez' sixth grade class is different. Her students are not watching the clock, they are explaining in great detail how they solved problems with positive and negative integers in real world settings (e.g., weight loss and gain, saving money, mapping out a trip). They combine illustrations, numbers, logical explanations, and a number line made out of construction paper, and they even use analogies to explain.

Conversations include, "How did you know to move toward the left on the number line?" or "It makes sense the way you solved it, but another way to do it is to..."

One student presents in Spanish, while another translates into English. The learning and dialogue is fluid throughout the language switches. The focus is the validity of the explanation. Students clap for each presenter as Ms. Dominguez quietly observes, sometimes clarifying or probing more.

"What feedback do you have on the presentation?" Volunteers raise their hands, and the teacher chooses students carefully, strategically.

The bell rings. The students are still explaining. They agree to pick this up the following day. This is Ms. Dominguez' usual teaching rhythm. She is a public school teacher who leads.



Central to IDRA's vision of schools that work for all children is the leadership of teachers like Ms. Dominguez. In IDRA's work with teachers across the country, in urban, suburban and rural settings, across grade levels, and teaching experience, we have encountered many who do more than teach in the conventional sense. They are public school teachers who lead.

Beyond effective, quality teaching, IDRA is noticing more than instructional techniques and subject-matter competence, without discounting that these are essential (Dieckmann [2003a](#), [2003b](#), [2003c](#)). This article is not about what makes a good math teacher, nor to extol any individual acts of heroism. This article describes some core characteristics that reflect the underlying commitment of public school teachers to create and maintain vibrant learning environments for every student, every day, in every way, often under the bureaucratic pressures of high-stakes testing, rigid curricular fads, and simplistic administrative responses to accountability pressures.

The success of public schooling depends on increasing the number of teachers who share these leadership characteristics.



IDRA's work with teachers takes many forms supported by the premise of collaborating to create schools that work for all children. IDRA tailors workshops to support teachers in lesson planning; assessing; and sharing knowledge about best practices, second language learning,

and other experiences.

These workshops provide hands-on, in-class technical assistance through observation, coaching, co-teaching and modeling instructional strategies. Ongoing support includes follow-up sessions and online discussions. The work can be anything from a few sessions a year to intensive training across several years.

The leadership criteria arrived at in this article draw on multiple primary data sources: written and oral evaluations, informal conversations with experienced IDRA professional developers and teachers, teacher interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and conversations with parents and students. Additionally, this article draws on research literature on teacher leadership development and educational equity.



One critical aspect of IDRA's advocacy work is to support a shift in the public conversation about students and the public schools that serve them. One example has been to move the conversation about students who leave school before graduation from focusing on "the dropouts" to the "school's is holding power." IDRA shifts the conversation from a deficit perspective to a valuing of young people and holding the adult institutions accountable ([Robledo Montecel, 2002](#)).

IDRA proposes the term, public school teachers who lead, to distinguish our definition from a traditional master teacher or lead teacher terminology.

The purposeful distinction is important because the latter tends to imply some form of administrative or supervisory position such as department chair, teacher trainer, peer-teacher coach or curriculum developer. The rigidities and associations that the formal titles bring cause many teachers who lead to resist the term leadership. Most prefer to remain in the classroom with no other designation than teacher.

In this article, teachers who lead are defined as those who:

- Embrace the "public" in public school teaching,
- Value children for who they are - exactly as they are - right now,
- Relegate curricula, teaching strategies, assessments and accountability measures to the service of students, and
- Reach beyond the classroom to do what is right and what is needed.

Each core characteristic is illustrated below with a real-life example followed by an elaboration of the principle.



Midyear, Elena, a 10-year-old girl, enrolls in the fourth grade in a rural northern Arkansas school. Elena's family has moved from south Texas to work at the poultry processing plant nearby. She is not yet proficient in English.

On her first day of class, the teacher, Ms. Young, warmly introduces her to classmates in English and in Spanish and invites her to join a group working on a social studies project. She assigns Elena her own cubby and a name card on the class roster. This is the eighth new student Ms. Young has received from similar families.

Ms. Young is learning much about English language learners in her professional development and is already sensitive in lowering the “affective filter” and adjusting the linguistic demands of the lessons. She plans to assess Elena’s oral and reading proficiency in both languages.

When some of her colleagues complain about the influx of “those families” and how “behind” the children are, Ms. Young is quick to speak on the students’ behalf and to discuss strategies and share student success stories. She is concerned about all the newcomers, not just those in her class.

As a teacher who leads, Ms. Young does not reject any student. She understands every student has the right to the best education possible.

Teachers like Ms. Young do not have a preference for “good” kids, compliant, English-speaking, middle-class or those who fit some idealized norm. Teachers who lead work to make schools openly and optimistically responsive to the characteristics of the students and their families - especially as our population diversifies.

They understand that when schools fail students, all society is affected. They see diversity as healthy (and more reflective of the outside world) rather than a burden, and they actively seek to expand and improve their own competencies.

Dr. María “Cuca” Robledo Montecel, IDRA executive director, states: “The United States is still uniquely committed to one system that prepares us all for living in a great democracy. We should preserve this commitment” (Robledo Montecel, 2003).

Teachers who lead see the close connection between the success of public schools and the economic and social well-being of their communities. They preserve the commitment of a democracy and see teaching as a valuable service to their diverse community and to future generations (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996).



A second-year teacher in San Jose, California, begins his eighth-grade science class every day by addressing his students saying, “Young scientists, today we will...” This simple and consistent greeting reflects the relationship he is cultivating with his students.

He does not say “future scientists.” By identifying them as young scientists now, he is acknowledging that each student has the capacity and right to think scientifically, to investigate the physical world through systematic and joint inquiry.

Such bold statements and actions from the teacher encourage students from all levels of preparation and success in school science to begin to see themselves as scientists, and their class behavior follows suit.

The phrase “valuing children” is more than a catch phrase or sentimentality. It constitutes the very lens through which the teacher who leads sees students, their parents and the community.

This deeply-ingrained principle guides the daily actions of teaching. Because of this valuing perspective, the teacher sees a student’s talent, ability to think, personality, language, experience, and culture as contributions to the individual and group learning.

Teachers who lead do not let institutional labels box-in the students. Such teachers resist the proclivities of schools to classify, stratify and stigmatize - creating the tracks of low-performers, the gifted, the slow, the at-risk and the unmotivated (Darder, 1994). These teachers resist misguided applications of school accountability and high-stakes testing that equate students with their test scores.

Instead, teachers who lead create rich learning experiences requiring multiple competencies, and they overtly identify these competencies within students. They challenge the prevailing idea that only the identified “smart” students have status, and they promote equitable status among students (Cohen and Lotan, 1997). In these classes, nobody feels stupid, and everyone contributes to the learning tasks.



Mr. Hicks teaches algebra in a large high school in north Texas. His principal and his department chair have insisted on daily practice tests as class warm-ups for all math classes, except those exempt from state testing, such as pre-calculus.

Every few months his students take district “benchmark” tests as practice for the state-mandated spring test. Benchmark results are posted, and teachers compare the student passing and failing rates. A large poster in the hall trumpets “85 percent or better mastery in math” - the principal’s target passing rate for the school. All lessons to be taught must be geared toward that goal.

Mr. Hicks wants his students to surpass this goal, but he also wants much more for them. He is concerned about short-term and long-term goals for them: passing the course and the state test, graduating from high school and going to college. He knows that in order for his students to succeed in college, they will need math agility.

This agility becomes his focus, whether through group projects, career investigations, interesting math games, well-prepared lectures, or even through the daily practice tests, that students regard as perfunctory but necessary.

Mr. Hicks understands that, despite institutional pressure, no single test score can ever capture the complexity, talent and potential of his students. He wants to support the principal and the school to look good in the newspaper. More importantly, he wants his students to have a successful academic future.

Though such teachers who lead are not shielded from the current testing mania, they confront the challenges of high-stakes testing and narrow accountability with creative and student-supportive teaching (Dieckmann and Montemayor, 2004). Such teachers see their accountability being ultimately to the families and community the school serves.

Teachers who lead accept the risk of criticism from peers and administrators for taking different directions when they are required to do something that works in any student’s best interests. They hold no dogmatic allegiance to any teaching method or program.

As good as any methods and programs are purported to be, teachers who lead regard these as tools to help students learn and succeed. These teachers eagerly adapt any tool that proves beneficial to student thinking, learning and academic success.



In a south Texas town on the U.S.-Mexico border, Ms. Alvarez is tutoring Ismael and Verónica on covalent bonds in high school chemistry. It is December, and most of this material was covered in October.

But Ismael and Verónica were not in school then because they were in Michigan and Illinois as migrant farm workers. While there, they got some schooling, but mostly they were harvesting cherries and lettuce with their families to contribute to their income.

Ismael is in Ms. Alvarez's class, but Verónica comes to Ms. Alvarez's tutoring sessions because of his reputation for patience. Ms. Alvarez knows that these students' schedules are difficult because they leave weeks before school ends and return weeks after school has begun. Their high school transcripts are patchwork quilts of some partial and some local course credits, and there are many gaps in requirements for graduation - much less college entrance.

Ms. Alvarez knows that these students are capable of completing a recommended high school curriculum. And she engineers their enrollment in online local university courses that count toward high school credit. The online courses concurrent with the regular courses realign the students with the recommended graduation plan for college.

Ms. Alvarez further facilitates similar solutions for other students by using the Internet to find five local libraries in both Michigan and Illinois with free Internet access near the camps where these families stay. She even prints out and gives them driving directions to these libraries.

Teachers who lead do not compartmentalize their work or deny responsibility by calling it someone else's job. They ignore artificial barriers and help students who are not on their class roster. Rather than lament the injustices of "the system," they seek solutions and do what needs to be done - reviewing student records, conferring with counselors and the principal, and seeking support with other teachers.

They engage parents and see them as valued partners in the education of children. They understand why many parents find the schools alienating. Such teachers build community linkages with businesses and universities. Rather than wait for tailor-made programs, they solve problems and get the job done. Their commitment affects students and families beyond the four walls of the classroom. These teachers recharge their batteries with student successes.

Though not perfect or always right, these pedagogical leaders are consistent in their commitment to student success. They are constant students themselves, learning from their experiences and from any source that presents practical and optimistic solutions.

They are not characterized by a particular personality type or a particular style of communication. They might be outspoken or quiet; intrusive or diplomatic. Some are seasoned, and others novices to teaching. Though their actions may differ according to the context and the nature of the issue, their commitment is constant, and their belief in students and families is undiminished.



The accounts described above are based on real people and real events. Some were noticed by peers and others by IDRA staff. Our purpose is not to pay homage to any individual but to illustrate what we hope will be made more noticeable and, eventually, more the norm.

These vignettes simply show the concrete actions that arise from the specific commitments of public school teachers who lead. Though separated by time and distance, the underlying characteristics are shared by them, and many more.

For those who want public school classrooms to work for all children, cultivating many more teachers who lead is a key strategy. Whether to spark a conversation that will inspire new definitions of teaching or to assist in a school improvement plan of action, IDRA offers a structure of open-ended questions around each of the above described characteristics. Using this article as grounding for dialogue, these questions may be used in meetings within and across schools and with educators, parents and students ([see box below](#)).

Strong forces are attacking public education. The public's confidence in its neighborhood public schools is vulnerable to those seeking to dismantle public education and promote the privatization of schools. We must support excellent public schools on many fronts, from providing fair funding for the common good, to attracting the best and the brightest to teach in our public classrooms. Teachers who lead demonstrate through their effect on student success that strengthening public schools is a worthy goal for the public, and it is doable.



IDRA invites you to share your conversations about teachers who lead in an IDRA-sponsored online discussion board. This informal forum will initiate a national conversation about the important work of public school teachers who lead. We invite teachers, administrators, parents, students and community members to participate as an activity concurrent with back-to-school events to give the new school year a positive jump-start.

The forum will be available online from July 1 through September 30, 2004. We look forward to hearing from you.



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	Administrators	Teachers	Parents	Students
Embrace the "public" in public school teaching	How do you support the openness of enrollment and the diversity of the students? How do you support teachers to be this kind of leader?	How do you welcome and integrate all newcomers in your classroom? How do you defend the "public" aspect of schooling?	Share a story of how a teacher has made a difference in the life of your family. How is supporting your goals for the academic success of our children?	Share a story of how a teacher has helped you succeed in school. What helps you feel welcome and supported in learning?
Value children for who they are - exactly as they are - right now	Identify examples of valuing or mapping the assets of students who were labeled "at-risk" "LEP" "low SES" or "behavior problems"	Think of a time when you helped a student succeed academically and who, by other standards, was destined to fail.	Think of a time when a child who had some negative label was helped to succeed in school.	Think of a time when you were helped to learn something or succeed in school and that you had not thought you could succeed or other teachers had told you that you couldn't learn.
Relegate curricula, teaching strategies, assessments, and accountability measures to the service of students	When have you observed a teacher who might not follow your dicta perfectly but still had great success in helping the students succeed academically? How have you supported	Tell about a time when you marched to a different drummer, resisted some rigid process that was imposed from above, and helped students learn something	What experiences have you had that support individualizing teaching and adapting instruction to the way students prefer	What experiences have you had with teachers who have been flexible with their teaching and adapted something to your way of

	bold thinking from teachers who want more critical thinking work beyond the requirements of mandated tests?	important or proved to themselves that they could be critical thinkers.	to learn and your children's interests and personalities?	learning or your interests and you still did some hard thinking and learned important things?
Reach beyond the classroom to do what's right and what is needed	How have you supported teachers who see the big picture and are consistently trying to help students beyond the curricular requirements and the confines of their classrooms?	What are some examples of connecting to extracurricular resources or of helping students in areas beyond your subject? How do student needs drive what you do? How do you relate to the broader student body beyond those who you directly teach?	When have you observed a teacher who acts as a counselor, referral resource, problem-solver, connector to college resources or any help beyond the subject he or she teaches?	When has a teacher helped you and other students beyond the teaching in class during the regular class period? In what creative or interesting ways has the teacher connected with students who are not in your class?
Source: Intercultural Development Research Association				

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