

SPRING 2026

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

You Don't Have to Leave to Lead



**Redefining the
Classroom CEO**

Chris Jochum



The Worthy Educator
theworthyeducator.com



You Don't Have to Leave to Lead: Redefining the Classroom CEO

Christopher J. Jochum, Ph.D.
Founder & CEO, CJ Leadership Solutions
Chair, Department of Teacher Education,
Fort Hays State University
Hays, Kansas



Overview

Whether you are a current classroom teacher, an administrator, retired educator, or someone who lives in a community with PreK-12 schools, I would like to ask you three questions:

1. Who are the leaders in the school district?
2. Who are the leaders in any organization, regardless of the profession or industry?
3. How do you define leadership?

I have been fortunate to have spent my entire professional career as an educator, beginning as a classroom teacher in the public schools and then transitioning into higher education, where I have been able to prepare future teachers along with serving as a department chair. Furthermore, throughout my career, I have been both a student, scholar, and practitioner of leadership, along with benefitting from wonderful mentors, many of whom have held administrative positions in PreK-12, higher education, and private industry. As a result, I published a book titled, *The Department Chair: A Practical Guide to Effective Leadership*, designed to prepare college professors for their first “titled” leadership position for which the higher education profession often provides little to no training or support (Jochum, 2021).

However, despite my own preparation, research, and leadership-based expertise, it wasn't until I was asked to design and teach a class to pre-service teachers on the topic of teacher leadership that I came to understand why Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) referred to teacher leaders as “Sleeping Giants” within our schools.

Although I had heard the term “Teacher Leadership,” I must admit that my years of attending teacher in-services on days where I would have rather been in my classroom working but, instead, spent the day learning about the new “flavor-of-the-month,” made me somewhat skeptical and suspicious. Furthermore, as a former English as a Second Language (ESL) and Spanish teacher who taught during the *No Child Left Behind* era, I became accustomed to professional development topics that, at best, were peripherally related to my content area. In fact, to help my fellow foreign language educators, I wrote my doctoral dissertation on how to effectively incorporate and align the *Marzano Strategies* (Marzano, et al., 2001) to support foreign language pedagogy and acquisition in the secondary classroom.

Nonetheless, since teachers know that the best way to learn something is to teach it, I decided to go all-in and not only learn as much as I could about teacher leadership but, more importantly, do so in a way that enabled me to create a high-quality, rigorous and relevant class for my students.

Now, having taught teacher leadership to current and future teachers as well as current and aspiring school administrators within multiple modalities—online, in-person, and as part of a destination workshop in Costa Rica—along with recently publishing *You Don't Have to Leave to Lead: A Practical Guide to Teacher Leadership* (Jochum, 2025), I concur with Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) who state the following:



Within every school there is a sleeping giant of teacher leadership, which can be a strong catalyst for making change. By using the energy of teacher leaders as agents of school change, the reform of public education will stand a better chance of building momentum. (p. 69)

How did you respond to the three questions I asked at the start of this article? In my experience as a teacher leadership instructor, author, trainer, and speaker, I have found that when I ask teachers who the leaders are in their buildings and/or districts, they respond overwhelmingly with formalized titles, such as the assistant principal, dean of students, principal, or superintendent. When I ask them to support their response based on their definition of leadership, I frequently hear answers indicating that a leader is the boss or the one “in charge” who must make difficult decisions, get everyone moving in the same direction, work with a number of stakeholders, and “keep all of the teachers in line!”

While these definitions and roles of a leader are, in part, accurate, they are also short-sighted. Furthermore, when I remind teachers that, in a word, leadership is influence and who influences students—on a minute-by-minute basis—more than teachers, they are still reluctant to admit they are a leader and, sadly, respond with “I’m not a leader. I’m just a teacher.” However, classroom teachers are not only the epitome of a leader, but they are also essentially the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of their classroom, displaying skills (i.e., superpowers) that Fortune 500 Companies spend millions of dollars trying to teach their own CEO’s.

A recent article titled, *What Does a Chief Executive Officer Do? A Definitive Guide* (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023), lists communication, collaboration, and public speaking among the top skills required for today’s Chief Executive Officers. Additionally, in a study conducted by the *Harvard Business Review* that analyzed nearly 7,000 job descriptions to determine the most desirable skills in C.E.O.s, or those who occupy the “C-Suite,” the authors found that companies want leaders who are good communicators, can build relationships with others, and can solve problems (Sadun et al., 2022).

If you are a current or former classroom teacher, or simply familiar with the great work teachers do every day, but still reluctant to acknowledge that all teachers are natural leaders, answer the following questions:

- Do effective teachers consistently *communicate* with others?
- Do effective teachers consistently *collaborate* with others?
- Do effective teachers consistently *build relationships* with others?
- Do effective teachers consistently *solve problems*?
- Do effective teachers consistently *speak in public*?

Classroom teachers, on a daily basis, must consistently perform tasks required of (and often lacking in) the top C.E.O.s or titled leaders in the world. In my experience training teachers, it is precisely at this point where they realize two important notions: leadership is not about one’s title, and as classroom teachers, they are the definition of a great leader, serving as their own “Classroom C.E.O.”



Benefits of Teacher Leadership

While providing teachers with this profound perspective and permission is undeniably important, please know that developing and supporting teacher leaders is also supported by the literature. Extensive research over the past 40 years has consistently reinforced the significant benefits of developing teacher leaders, which include the following:

Positive Impact on Student Learning, Success, and School Improvement

Teacher leaders play a crucial role in enhancing educational outcomes and driving school-wide progress (Bixler & Ceballos, 2023; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2006; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Teachers

Schools with strong teacher leadership are better equipped to attract and retain talented educators, especially in traditionally hard-to-staff or underperforming schools (Behrstock & Clifford, 2009; Coggins & McGovern, 2014; Donaldson, 2007; Johnson & Donaldson, 2004; Morettini, et al., 2018; National Center for Great Public Schools; Podlosky, et al., 2016).

Increased Job Satisfaction, Confidence, and Professional Purpose for Teachers

Empowered teacher leaders experience greater fulfillment and commitment to their profession (Beachum & Dentith, 2004; Chesson, 2011; Friedman, 2011; Hunzicker, 2012; Vernon-Dotson & Floyd, 2011).

Improved Collaboration, Self-Efficacy, and Pedagogical Content Knowledge Among Teachers

Teacher leaders foster a collaborative environment that enhances teaching practices and teacher confidence (Curtis, 2013; Hofstein, et al., 2004; Muijs & Harris, 2003, 2006; Sing, et al., 2012; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Development of a Culture and Climate of Professionalism and Empowerment Among Teachers

Teacher leadership cultivates a professional community where teachers feel valued and empowered (Beauchum & Dentith, 2004; Chesson, 2011; Edge & Mylopoulos, 2008; Hofstein, et al., 2004; Vernon-Dotson, 2011).

Support for Administration by Building Capacity Among Faculty and Aspiring Administrators

Teacher leaders not only support current school leaders but also help in nurturing the next generation of educational administrators (Brooks, et al., 2004; Crowther, et al., 2009; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008).



Defining Teacher Leadership

This literature base has also defined the role of a teacher leader. In their article, *Solving the Teacher Shortage: How to Attract and Retain Excellent Educators*, Anne Podolsky (2016) and her colleagues state the following:

Teachers in leadership roles work in collaboration with principals and other school administrators by facilitating improvements in instruction and promoting practices among their peers that can lead to improved student learning outcomes. By doing so, they support school leaders in encouraging innovation and creating cultures of success in school. (p. 11)

Additionally, in their seminal article, York-Barr and Duke (2004) define teacher leadership as “the process by which teachers, individually or collectively influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement” (pp. 287-288).

Influenced by York-Barr and Duke’s work, subsequent research over the past 20 years has offered additional definitions of teacher leadership:

“Those persons, occupying various roles in the school, who provide direction and exert influence in order to achieve the school’s goals” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 2).

“Teacher leaders model effective practices, exercise their influence in formal and informal contexts, and support collaborative team structures within their schools” (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011, p. 11).

“A teacher whose official schedule includes both teaching K-12 students and leading teachers in some capacity” (Margolis, 2012, p. 292).

“Teacher leaders lead within and beyond the classroom; identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders; influence others toward improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of their leadership” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2016, p. 124).

“Teachers who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom” (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 140).

“Individuals who use their gifts and talents to create a positive impact on student learning and school/community culture inside and/or outside of the classroom” (Matsumoto, et al., 2018, p. 202).



Teacher Leadership Standards and Frameworks

Although the research provides a sound rationale for why schools should develop and empower teacher leaders, according to Karen Action (2022), “teacher leaders, despite their significant contributions to schools, are often undervalued and underutilized” (p. 1). Nonetheless, there are standards and frameworks that recognize the impact of teacher leaders, thus providing guidance and goals for school and district-wide development.

Teacher Leader Model Standards

The Teacher Leader Model Standards (2011) recognize and define the critical leadership roles that teachers play in contributing to student and school success and can be used as a framework to guide curriculum development, professional development, and the creation of policies within educational institutions. Additionally, they are intended to encourage discussions about the competencies required for teacher leadership and how teacher leaders can complement formal administrative roles, ultimately supporting effective teaching and student success. The Teacher Leader Model Standards are comprised of the following seven domains:

Domain I: Fostering a Collaborative Culture to Support Educator Development and Student Learning

Domain II: Accessing and using research to improve practice and student learning

Domain III: Promoting professional learning for continuous improvement

Domain IV: Facilitating improvement in instruction and student learning

Domain V: Promoting the use of assessments and data for the school and district community

Domain VI: Improving outreach and collaboration with families and community

Domain VII: Advocating for student learning and the profession (p. 9).

Five Goals for Teacher Leadership

Coggins and McGovern (2014) offer a model of five measurable goals that can guide, support, and enhance the implementation and development of teacher leadership programs. These goals are a direct result of their work at Teach Plus, which is an organization “rooted in the belief that leadership opportunities for teachers have a measurable, positive effect on students, schools, and the teaching profession” (p. 16). These goals are as follows:

Goal 1: Improve student outcomes across a school (p. 16).

Goal 2: Improve access of high-need students to effective teachers (p. 17).

Goal 3: Extend careers of teachers looking for growth opportunities (p. 18).

Goal 4: Expand influence of effective teachers on peers (p. 19).

Goal 5: Ensure a role for teachers as leaders in policy decisions affecting their practice (p. 20).

Five Actions for Teacher Leadership

To support school and district level administrators seeking guidance on how to best develop, implement and support teacher leadership programs, Bixler and Ceballos (2023) provide the following Five Actions:

Action 1: Create a vision for teacher leadership and embed it in the school culture.

Action 2: Building trusting relationships with teachers.

Action 3: Provide leadership development and mentoring for teachers.

Action 4: Collaborate with teachers on decision-making.

Action 5: Provide resources to teacher leaders (p. 24-27).

InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards

Finally, it's important to note that the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) Model Core Teaching Standards, developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2013), includes Standard #10 which states that “the teacher seeks appropriate leadership roles and opportunities to take responsibility for student learning, to collaborate with learners, families, colleagues, other school professionals, and community members to ensure learner growth, and to advance the profession” (p. 45). To further operationalize how teachers can serve as leaders, Standard #10 provides the following sub-components or Progressions:

“The teacher collaborates with learners, families, colleagues, other school professionals, and community members to ensure learner growth” (p. 46).

“The teacher seeks appropriate leadership roles and opportunities to take responsibility for student learning and to advance the profession” (p. 46).

Developing and Supporting Teacher Leaders

Hopefully, it is now clear that developing and supporting teacher leaders in our schools is not some new concept or flavor-of-the-month; it is clearly supported by research, standards, and frameworks. Nonetheless, I understand if, while in theory, teachers and administrators agree with the value of teacher leadership, they may feel as though it is “one more thing on our plates.”

However, if correctly implemented and supported, creating a school or districtwide culture and climate that helps teachers develop or uncover their inherent leadership abilities—which supports student achievement, improves teacher morale and retention, and develops school and districtwide leadership capacity—is no more of an add-on or doing “one more thing,” than proper nutrition and strength training is “one more thing” for athletes. In fact, most, if not every educator reading this—regardless of your grade level or content—probably works in a district that has a strength and conditioning program for your athletes. Admittedly, the act of conditioning takes time and, technically, is another thing on student athletes’ busy schedules (i.e., full plates), but it is worth the investment, reducing the risk of injury, thus enhancing their performance, and prolonging their careers.

Teaching is a hard job because *it's hard*. Most normal humans are neither equipped nor willing to do what our PreK-12 teachers do on a daily basis. Similar to athletes who lift weights and eat properly to develop and strengthen their body's core, as professionals, we too must strengthen our “core” or foundation (i.e., our “plates”) upon which everything rests.



Accordingly, based on my experience training teacher leaders at all levels, I advocate for taking a personalized approach to developing teacher leaders by focusing on the general tenets of effective leadership, which are applicable across all professions and industries. This practical approach is built upon my personal definition of leadership, which is “influence through character, courage, relationships, and service” (Jochum, 2025, p. 14). Within this framework, we work together to uncover, enhance, and develop teachers’ inherent leadership skills to support their influence, inside and outside of the respective classrooms. While beyond the scope of this article, the majority of my book, *You Don't Have to Leave to Lead*, provides educators with a development journey, focusing on concepts and tasks such as The Teacher Leader's Credo, developing a mission statement, understanding the importance of relationships and choosing to lead yourself and others on an daily basis, how to address conflict, and how to create a positive classroom culture and climate based upon core values.

Ultimately, the “sleeping giant” within our schools does not require a formal title or promotion out of the classroom; it simply needs to be acknowledged and awakened. Strengthening the collective leadership core in our schools is neither a flavor-of-the-month inservice nor an add-on to an already full plate. Rather, by enabling classroom teachers to uncover and enhance their natural leadership abilities as the CEO of their classroom, schools can support student achievement, improve teacher morale and retention, and build leadership capacity, proving that you “don’t have to leave to lead.”





References

- Acton, K. S. (2022). [Environmental teacher leadership: Overcoming barriers posed by school culture, school structure, and the principal](#). *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1–21.
- Beachum, F., & Dentith, A. M. (2004). [Teacher leaders creating cultures of school renewal and transformation](#). *The Educational Forum*, 68 (3), 276–286.
- Behrstock, E., & Clifford, M. (2009). [Leading Gen Y teachers: Emerging strategies for school leaders](#). National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality.
- Bixler, K., & Ceballos, M. (2023). [Promoting teacher leadership: Principal actions to promote and facilitate teacher leadership for enhanced student outcomes](#). *Leading & Managing*, 29 (1), 21–30.
- Brooks, J. S., Scribner, J. P., & Eferakorho, J. (2004). [Teacher leadership in the context of whole school reform](#). *Journal of School Leadership*, 14 (3), 242–265.
- Chesson, L. S. (2011). [The nature of teacher leadership in a Boston pilot school \[Doctoral dissertation\]](#). ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Coggins, C., & McGovern, K. (2014). [Five goals for teacher leadership](#). *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95 (7), 15–21.
- Council of Chief State School Officers. (2013). [Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium: InTASC model core teaching standards and learning progressions for teachers 1.0: A resource for ongoing teacher development](#).
- Crowther, F., Ferguson, M., & Hann, L. (2009). [Developing teacher leaders](#). Corwin Press.
- Donaldson, M. L. (2007). To lead or not to lead? A quandary for newly tenured teachers. In R. H. Ackerman & S. V. Mackenzie (Eds.), [Uncovering teacher leadership: Essays and voices from the field](#) (pp. 259–272). Corwin Press.
- Edge, K., & Mylopoulos, M. (2008). [Creating cross-school connections: LC networking in support of leadership and instructional development](#). *School Leadership & Management*, 28 (2), 147–158.
- Handford, V., & Leithwood, K. (2013). [Why teachers trust school leaders](#). *Journal of Educational Administration*, 51 (2), 194–212.
- Hofstein, A., Carmeli, M., & Shore, R. (2004). [The professional development of high school chemistry coordinators](#). *Journal of Science Teacher Education*, 15 (1), 3–24.
- Indeed Editorial Team. (2023, July 21). [What does a chief executive officer do? A definitive guide](#). Indeed Career Guide.
- Jochum, C. J. (2021). [The department chair: A practical guide to effective leadership. \[Kindle version\]](#). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Jochum, C. J. (2025). [You don't have to leave to lead: A practical guide to teacher leadership](#). RTA Publishing.
- Johnson, S. M., & Donaldson, M. L. (2004). Sustaining new teachers through professional growth. In S. M. Johnson (Ed.), [Finders and keepers: Helping new teachers survive and thrive in our schools](#) (pp. 225–248). Jossey-Bass.

- Katzenmeyer, M., & Moller, G. (2009). *Awakening the sleeping giant: Helping teachers develop as leaders* (3rd ed.). Corwin Press.
- Katzenmeyer, M., & Moller, G. (2016). Chapter 13: *Understanding teacher leadership*. In *Counterpoints* (Vol. 466, pp. 121–136).
- Leithwood, K. A., & Mascal, B. (2008). *Collective leadership effects on student achievement*. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44 (4), 529–561.
- Leithwood, K. A., & Riehl, C. (2003). *What we know about successful school leadership*. National College for School Leadership.
- Margolis, J. (2012). *Hybrid teacher leaders and the new professional development ecology*. *Professional Development in Education*, 38 (2), 291–315.
- Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Pollock, J. E. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. ASCD.
- Matsumoto, V., Yoshioka, J., & Fulton, L. (2018). Cultivating teacher candidates' passions into leadership for tomorrow: The gift that keeps on giving. In J. Hunzicker (Ed.), *Teacher leadership in professional development schools* (pp. 201–216). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Morettini, B., Luet, K. M., Vernon-Dotson, L., Nagic, N., & Krishnamurthy, S. (2018). Developing teacher leaders using a distributed leadership model: Five signature features of a school-university partnership. In J. Hunzicker (Ed.), *Teacher leadership in professional development schools* (pp. 217–233). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Muijs, D., & Harris, A. (2006). *Teacher led school improvement: Teacher leadership in the UK*. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22 (8), 961–972.
- National Center for Great Public Schools. (n.d.). *Teacher leaders*.
- Podolsky, A., Kini, T., Bishop, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). *Solving the teacher shortage: How to attract and retain excellent educators*. Learning Policy Institute.
- Sadun, R., Fuller, J. B., Hansen, S., & Neal, P. (2022, June 13). *The C-suite skills that matter most* [Webinar]. Harvard Business Review.
- Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium. (2011). *Teacher leader model standards*.
- Vernon-Dotson, L. J., & Floyd, L. O. (2011). *Building leadership capacity via school partnerships and teacher teams*. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 85 (1), 38–49.
- Wenner, J. A., & Campbell, T. (2017). *The theoretical and empirical basis of teacher leadership: A review of the literature*. *Review of Educational Research*, 87 (1), 134–171.
- York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). *What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship*. *Review of Educational Research*, 74 (3), 255–316.



Dr. Christopher J. Jochum is the founder and CEO of CJ Leadership Solutions, partnering with organizations to transform their culture and climate by developing leadership capacity within the entire organization. As a Professor and Chair of the Department of Teacher Education at Fort Hays State University, he leads its large teacher preparation program. Chris hosts The Department Chair Leadership Podcast and is the author of The Department Chair: A Practical Guide to Effective Leadership (2022) and You Don't Have to Leave to Lead: A Practical Guide to Teacher Leadership (2025).  

Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworthyeducator.com/journal.