



by Michelle Maniaci Folk and Lucy Santos Green, February 2019

This past year has brought us many examples of leadership: from teachers rallying for improvements to educational funding to students rallying for safer schools. In all of these instances, we have been inspired by the many who may not call themselves leaders, but lead us just the same, through their willingness to inform stakeholders and advocate for change. As school librarians we have the opportunity to lead in these ways. We inform and advocate for appropriate funding, strong library collections, intellectual freedom, and equitable access. We lead through example when we collaborate with teachers, when we present professional development, when we sit on school and district committees, and when we are active in state and national organizations. There is another way we can be impactful teacher-leaders: by supporting and encouraging youth leadership.

There is a long list of benefits accrued when we take advantage of youth leadership. Here are just a few:

- Youth identify community challenges up to three years before adults become aware of the same issues (Stoneman 2010)
- Youth, bigger risk-takers than adults, are more willing to tackle problems, and come up with more creative solutions (Libby, Rosen, and Sedonaen 2005)
- Youth are open to sharing their perspectives and interpretations of organizational challenges (Stoneman 2010)
- When youth design solutions, their talents and capacities are used to maximum effect and they become more invested in those solutions (Soleimanpour, Brindis, Geierstanger, Kandawalla, and Kurlaender 2008)

The benefits of youth leadership are unique because young people are unique. While traditional leadership among adults is defined "as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse 2004, p. 3), youth have a much more elastic and welcoming definition. In a study of 130 teens ranging in ages from 12 to 19, researchers found that young people view leadership as a *collective action*, "a group effort in which people come together for the benefit of all" (Mortensen, et al. 2014, p. 453). One teen interviewed in the study declared: "There's a lot of power in one person, but there's real strength in numbers"—a powerful statement, indeed! Youth believe anyone can be a leader at any time, in large and small ways. One of our favorite quotes from the young people interviewed during this research project came from a middle school student. She declared: "There are many ways in becoming a leader and they can be big or small steps. In some of our daily lives we don't even notice it, but we are being a leader in someone else's life" (Mortensen et al. 2014, p. 455). We encourage you to read through this study and explore other characteristics of leadership that our young people identify. Their powerful words will move you!

When supporting and encouraging youth leadership through the school library, remember to plan alongside the youth you want to mentor. Consider their perspectives and creative insight. Approaches that have been found to be successful include service learning and experiential learning (learning by doing) projects (Redmond and Dolan 2016). Regardless of what you do, there are a few key components. First, youth should be able to make decisions that have genuine impact and consequences. Second, youth leadership is best fostered when youth tackle real and authentic challenges faced by their community or by an organization where they have a personal connection. In other words, the challenges and decisions must be meaningful, and as real-world as possible (MacNeill 2006).

We end this month's column with a final quote from one of the young people interviewed by Mortensen's team: "Every good leader always leaves something behind. This process will keep going on the generations to come but each leader will add another skill. That's what a leader does is teach and also learns from others" (2014, p. 456). Consider your own impact as a leader when you foster youth leadership at your school library. It is important and it is long lasting.

Works Cited

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