



# Magazine

**Unleashing Your  
Student Leaders** 08

**Leading Learning at  
the Middle Level** 20

**COLLABORATING  
WITH TECHNOLOGY** 44





# Identifying and Unleashing Your Student Leaders

The true classroom leaders may be those you least expect.

BY ALAN E. NELSON

Imagine your school business manager coming into your office, grinning from ear to ear, and announcing: "I can't believe it. It's been there all the time! Tens of thousands of dollars in our annual budget that we haven't been using."

It could happen to you! Every school administrator feels budget constraints, yet every year, most have a surplus of unused assets that could improve school climate and academic achievement. That most-underutilized school asset is the influence of student catalysts.

## Leaders with a Twist

More than a decade of research shows that students learn better when they're in a classroom climate that supports good teaching with few disruptions. What the research hasn't explored, and what every teacher intuitively knows, is that a few students in each classroom leverage more influence than the rest.

These are the students who set the climate of the classroom.

By identifying and developing the leadership of these gifted social influencers, educators can improve the

learning environment while decreasing classroom disruptions, bullying, and other negative social behaviors.

Leadership for young people usually is defined in terms of character, social responsibility, and good



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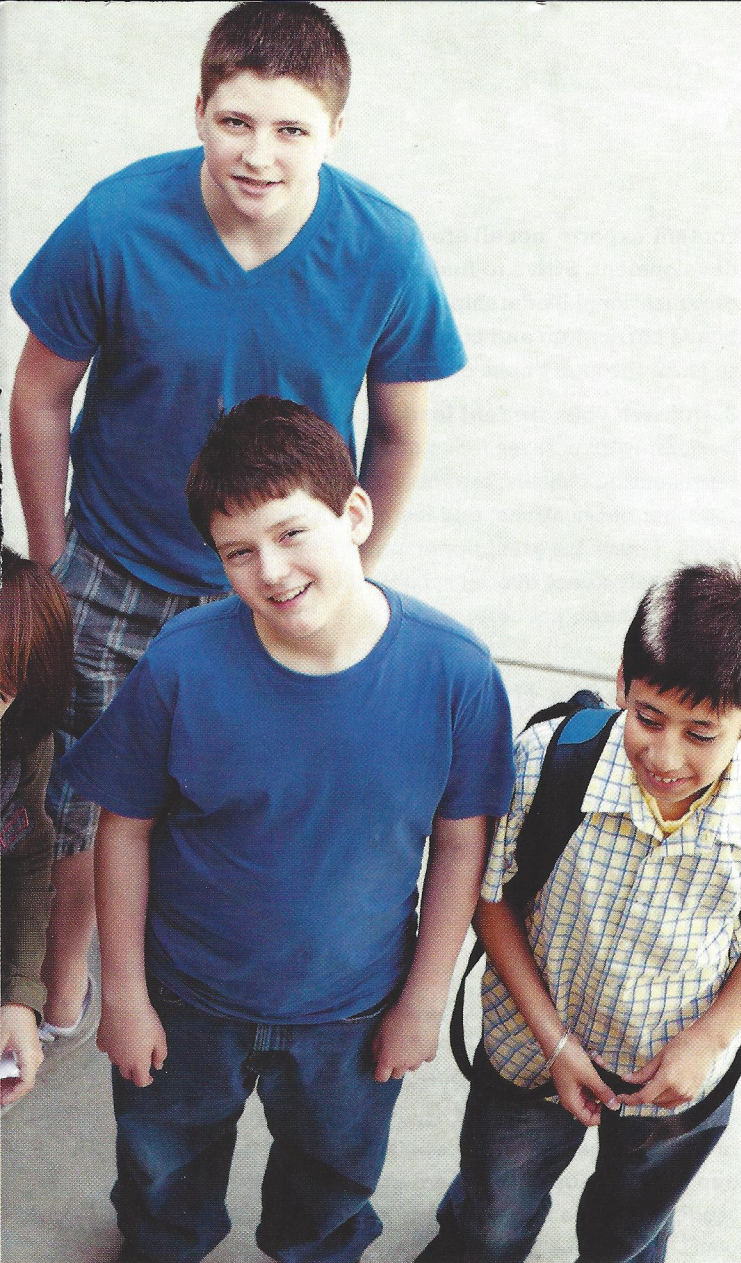
citizenship, and schools promote these leadership characteristics throughout the student body. However, history is not made by the masses, but by those who influence the masses. Improving the organizational skills and social-emotional maturity among the students who wield the influence in the classroom can lead to positive behavioral intervention and support prompted by peers, not just adults. This social engineering strategy creates natural allies for teachers and staff who spend less time policing disrupters.



### Tablet App EXTRA!

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## Falling Short

Many educators make significant yet honest mistakes when it comes to handling students who have high-octane social influence. Here are some common mistakes:

### 1. Failing to recognize the true leaders.

Approximately 10%–20% of your students wield a majority of the social influence in your school. According to Bill Damon, director of the Stanford Center of Adolescence and a professor in Stanford's School of Education, our culture's value of equality causes us to overlook the most creative and motivated in our schools—many of whom are unrecognized leaders. In our effort to treat everyone equally, we mistreat those with inordinate abilities, and consequently we overlook the power these influencers have to improve school climate.

**2. Putting a negative label on student catalysts.** In our work at KidLead, we've discovered that about 75% of teachers try to avoid student catalysts because they deem them troublemakers. We send these students to the principal's office for disrupting the class concentration, forcing them into their emotional caves with threats or forever fighting them, turning them against us—something we never want to do to a student with natural social gifts. Playing tug of war is a lose-lose scenario for everyone, because learning takes a back burner to discipline.

The world is populated with powerful leaders who tell childhood stories of demotion and intimidation in school. We want our future CEOs and entrepreneurs to testify that they are successful *because* of their school experience, not *despite* it.

**3. Not recognizing the difference between academics and leadership.** Schools primarily focus on two of the eight intelligences identified by Harvard Professor Howard Gardner: language and math-logic. While IQ tests identify those with elevated intelligence in these areas, many schools naively assume that these students also have fundamental leadership skills.

In our work with student leadership around the world, we've discovered that most schools do not allow students with sub-par GPAs to run for student government or serve in a leadership capacity. Although some great leaders were stellar students, academic acumen is quite different than social intelligence. Placing a model student in charge of others is a sure way to damage the self-image of that student and frustrate the daylights out of the true classroom leaders—the student catalysts.

**The danger here is believing that we're producing leaders, when in reality we're turning out good citizens at best.**

One of the best places for your lesser academicians who display social acumen is in a leadership development program. By including them in such programs, you serve them as well as the school as a whole.

**4. Confusing student government and service activities with leadership development.** Many times I have observed what a well-meaning, good-



hearted educator has told me is a “really good student leadership program,” only to discover it’s a service-oriented social group.

Team building and building a team are not the same thing. Being popular and being elected to student government does not guarantee one has the ability to lead effectively. The danger here is believing that we’re producing leaders, when in reality we’re turning out good citizens at best. We’re asking students to lead without training them how to lead, thus producing mediocre events, clubs, and projects that could truly shine with effective leadership.

## Tapping Latent Potential

As a student and a professor of organizational behavior, I’m forever observing what organizations do and don’t do to create organizational health. As has been said, every organization is perfectly structured to get the results it’s currently getting.

Here are three tactical ideas school leaders should consider if they want to tap the natural social influence among their most influential students.

**1. Identify students gifted in leading.** The typical classroom of 20–30 students includes two primary and two secondary influencers who have significantly more social horsepower than the rest. (Remember not to confuse leadership with conformity, IQ, academic achievement, or even popularity.)

Given a typical bell-shaped curve, you’ll have a small percentage of your student body with naturally strong abilities in this area. (Visit [www.kidlead.com](http://www.kidlead.com) for a Social Influence Survey that adults can take to identify students with leadership aptitude.)

Help teachers recognize that some of the students they’ve labeled as troublemakers are potential classroom allies if these students learn how to constructively channel their social influence.

**2. Develop your student catalysts.** Leadership development among children and young adolescents is significantly undeveloped in most societies. Leading is perceived as adult behavior. We telegraph this to our students by saying, “Someday, you’re going to be a leader.” Young adolescents lack experience, not capacity. Many young adolescents can lead well and lead now, given the right training.

By the age of 10, when cognitive development and socio-emotional maturity take a jump, students with high leadership aptitude can learn sophisticated social skills, very similar to executive training. Unfortunately, we teach what we know, and although middle grades educators are age-group and


content experts, not all are proficient in leadership development. Strive to find trainers who understand organizational leadership and implement project-based curriculum and coaching. Soft skills are difficult to learn through books or lectures.

**3. Unleash your student leaders.** Traditional student leadership structures focus on student leaders representing classes, organizing events, putting together publications, and leading extracurricular clubs. These are great opportunities for students, but they rarely affect overall school culture because they are peripheral, not core.

## To harness the energy of your influential students, create specific opportunities for them to receive training and then unleash them intentionally.

To harness the energy of your influential students, create specific opportunities for them to receive training and then unleash them intentionally. Don’t limit the number of student leader roles to pre-established slots, but rather create ad hoc opportunities based on the number of qualified students you’ve identified and trained in any given year. Gather this group quarterly to hear your vision, interact with community and business leaders, and gain additional training. These are not only future leaders, they’re potential leaders who’ll improve your school climate today.

## Enemies into Allies

Educators who tap into the social acumen of natural student leaders can direct this influence toward the good of everyone, turning potential enemies into allies and harnessing the constructive energy more effectively. This is the missing item in your annual budget that can significantly improve school climate without significantly increasing your budget. 

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