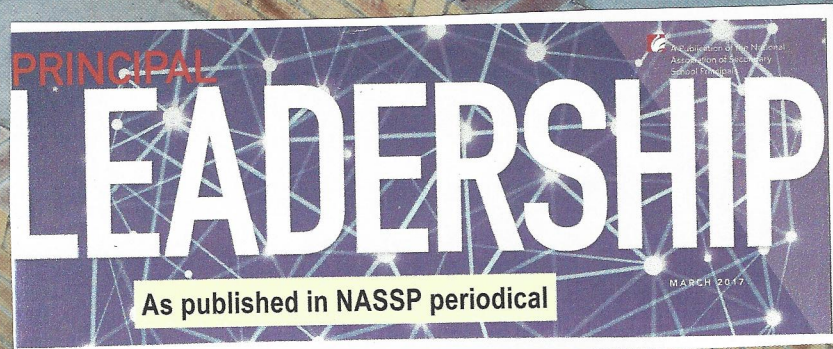


# MINING STUDENT LEADERSHIP GOLD







## Strike it rich using students with organizational skills

BY ALAN E. NELSON

If I could show you how you could expand your staff by 50 percent without adding any costs to your budget, you'd want to know about it right away, right? Well, I can.

The most overlooked, underdeveloped resource in schools is students gifted in organizational leadership. When a chef analyzes a restaurant, she'll focus on the menu, taste of the food, and how the kitchen operates. But ask an architect to assess the same eatery, and he'll notice the structural design, spatial layout, and interior aesthetics. Most administrators look at their schools as educators. But if you peer through the lens of a leadership development specialist, you'll notice a huge untapped resource indigenous to every educational community: students with exceptional talent in organizing peers.

Over the last decade, I've interacted with thousands of 10- to 18-year-olds in several countries, not focusing on academic acumen, but rather on organizational aptitude. If you define leadership as "the process of helping people accomplish



By tapping the social influence of your natural catalysts [students], principals can reduce behavior problems and elevate school climate, which has proven to increase academic achievement.

together what they would or could not as individuals," you cut through the mishmash of student programs labeled as "leadership clubs" that are actually about citizenship, self-esteem, character, and self-actualization. These are good, but they don't often teach what is taught in high-end executive training programs. By tapping the social influence of your natural catalysts, principals can reduce behavior problems and elevate school climate, which has proven to increase academic achievement.

### ED Recognition

In 1972, the U.S. Commissioner of Education submitted to Congress a report recognizing leadership as one of six domains in the gifted and talented spectrum. But because of hefty academic requirements and limited resources, schools rarely do more to develop this skill than offer student council or a leadership class. Often these are run by dedicated yet underequipped staff members who have neither led an organization nor studied leadership.

Normally a gifted and talented program focuses on the 3 to 5 percent of the students with an exceptional aptitude in a specific domain. A leadership equivalent means that in a school of 1,500 students, you'll have at least 75 with exceptional organizational leadership aptitudes. Even if you have a robust student government, you'll likely connect with only five to 15 of these students, because we've found that only about half of those involved in student body government are truly leaders. The other half gets elected based on popularity but possesses little ability to run events or supervise a team. Consider employing three tactics to extend your school leadership with practically no money and modest time and talent investment. The tactics are: identify, develop, and deploy.

### Identify

The easiest way to identify students who are gifted in organizational leadership is to look for four qualities. These qualities are not the only ones we seek in leaders, but they reflect what is unique to good leaders, distinguishing them from others.

- *Persuasive*: Look for students with an ability to get others to see things differently and buy into their ideas and vision. In organizational behavior, this is what we refer to as social potency. It could be as simple as the student who talks the coach out of making the team run another

lap or as irritating as the one who starts a paper war fight when a teacher leaves the room. Who do other students listen to, and who has the ability to sell and negotiate (not just whine)?

- *Propelled*: Look for students who are self-motivated and achievement-focused, and who inspire others as a result. Leaders possess an internal locus of control, a sense that outcomes are not determined by external factors, but on willpower and perseverance. Less than 30 percent of people, in general, have this quality. Who initiates new projects, clubs, or activities where others follow? Perseverance and drive are related aspects of this quality.
- *Planner*: Who are the students who can see the big picture as well as come up with ideas and assign tasks to others? Many are good at one of these things, either being an abstract thinker or an organizer, but the ability to do both reflects a uniqueness of leaders. It could be as simple as getting a group of friends to go to the mall over the weekend or as complex as running a schoolwide Go Green campaign.
- *Powerful*: A powerless leader is an oxymoron. Look for students who exude boldness, courage, and confidence to the point they impress others to notice and follow. Who can look you in the

## DETERMINING YOUR SCHOOL'S LEADER LIST

- Teach the four P's—*persuasive, propelled, planner, and powerful*—during a staff meeting and divide into groups of three or four, asking staff to compile their list of students with these qualities.
- Combine the lists to create a master list. This can be done in 20–30 minutes.
- Use a free assessment called the Social Influence Survey (SIS), modeled after executive instruments but age-designed for youth. The SIS is a 25-question, multiple-choice tool completed about the student by an adult who has seen the youth in social settings. Students with a composite score of 3.8–5.0 should be considered for intentional development.

eyes when they engage with you? Sometimes these students get mislabeled as troublemakers or disruptors, as they steal attention from authority figures such as teachers, but it's often an innate power grab that reflects their potential for good.

Any student may reflect one or two of these qualities, but it is the combination of all four that makes great leaders, so look for signs of them among your students. Help teachers understand that it is not necessarily the compliant academic student who is the leader. Sometimes your budding CEO has a 2.0 GPA and is a frequent flier to the principal's office.

### Develop

The typical student government program skips development, moving directly from elections to running various school events. The premise of education is to prepare students to succeed, so we should do the same for those in leadership. Naturally, there's a full range of activities that can help develop these students.

**Low:** A low-end activity on a development continuum may consist of encouraging staff to intentionally build

rapport with identified students for the purpose of aligning classroom allies.

**High:** The other end of the spectrum might involve a specific, ongoing training program that implements project-based activities with Socratic coaching (moving people along in a way they want to go), so that you focus on executive-type skills. Make sure the curriculum and people running this program reflect these qualities.


**Medium:** If you as an administrator feel comfortable in your own leadership skin, then delete some managerial task you do and replace it with a biweekly lunch meeting with your potential movers and shakers. Nothing inspires young leaders more than being treated by authority figures as influential. Sprinkle this with occasional guest visits from community leaders, a field trip, or a training activity every semester, and now you have a middle-of-the-road, low-budget strategy to develop and cast vision to your amplifiers.

What your development impetus looks like depends on your bandwidth, budget, and brains—namely the people in your educational community who understand organizational leadership themselves.

### Deploy

Leading is what leaders do to catalyze the social process we define as leadership. We don't learn leading skills from a book, just as you don't learn how to drive a car, throw a football, or write a poem merely from reading or listening to a lecture. Therefore, a part of your development should involve intentional deployment.

As you develop your student leaders, assign specific tasks, events, offices, or community service projects to them so they can practice leading teams. Debriefing after events takes the learning to the next level. After a couple years of this, you'll have a leadership pipeline any CEO would envy.

Bottom line: You can strike it rich as a social miner by knowing where to find and how to extract the leadership gold among your students. You'll see improved school climate and turn out some impressive future leaders. 

---

**Alan E. Nelson, EdD**, teaches at the Naval Postgraduate School and the University of Southern California, and serves as the Los Angeles Chair of the Institute for Management Studies. He's also the founder of LeadYoung Training Systems ([www.leadyoungtraining.com](http://www.leadyoungtraining.com)).