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# THE SCHOOL Administrator

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## Features

### Changing of the Guard

**A new generation of teacher leaders will raise quality-of-life priorities**

*By Howard C. Carlson*

**The baby boomer generation, typically referred to as those individuals born between 1946 and 1964, has been teaching in our schools since the 1960s. These dedicated professionals, many of them serving their schools for more than 30 years, soon will retire. In the next 10 years, more than two million new teachers will be needed to staff our schools. This staggering number should be a wake-up call to all who serve our nation's educational system.**

Journals, publications and reports have been discussing this topic for some time, but the focus has been on the replacement of bodies in the classroom. Possibly more important, yet often overlooked, is the fact that our schools are on the verge of losing their teacher leadership infrastructure.

As the "boomers" leave our schools, who will run the site council, plan the science fair, sit on the curriculum committee, work on the school budget or help develop school policy? Answer: Generation X.

### Past 30 Years

Prior to looking at the mobilization of "Xers" into the ranks of teacher leadership, consider what has made our schools tick over the past 30 years. Influenced by the key events in their formative years, members of the baby boomer generation have become a generation known for their hard work and strong ideals. This generation experienced the deaths of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. and the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal — events that shaped their lives and molded them into a generation that stands up for what it believes.

As teacher leaders, the baby boomers have been dedicated. They have been willing to put in long hours, often using personal resources to keep the classroom running. Although commendable, this dedication has come at great personal expense. Many baby boomers have experienced divorce, at times because they have put their jobs first.

Baby boomers also have stood up strongly for their ideals. They have not been afraid to challenge the organization or the status quo when the need arose nor have they shied away from political activity. In combination, these traits have led baby boomer teacher leaders to take a powerful role in the educational community. They have willingly taken the lead in their schools and communities over the past 30 years.

It is under this generation that shared governance has evolved in school decision making and gained prominence. Many of our nation's schools today use some form of school-based management and baby boomer teacher leaders are key players in that process. What impact has this had on teacher leadership?

Primarily, it has meant that teacher leaders have been willing to put in the time necessary to complete the task, regardless of the personal or family sacrifice. As teacher leaders, baby boomers have been

willing to confront the organization to ask the hard questions and to use political means to effect change. Now that this generation will be leaving the classroom en masse and the "Xers" will take over as teacher leaders, what will this mean for our schools?

## The New Generation

Generation X, as coined by Douglas Coupland in his 1991 book by the same name, is most commonly considered to be individuals born between 1965 and 1980. As a group, Xers are technologically proficient, independent and willing to leave the system if the situation requires such a response. Unfairly characterized by the media as "slackers" who don't want to work for anything, this generation has been diligent in making a name for itself in our educational institutions.

Generation Xers bring a fresh approach to the teaching profession and are not inhibited by existing rules and regulations. Bright and well-educated, Xers are not afraid to leave an organization if they are unhappy. If the organization is rigid and unyielding, they may seek greener pastures. They possess strong individualism and are not afraid to go it alone. As a generation, they grew up in dual-income homes and have learned to take care of themselves.

Compared to their predecessors, the baby boomers who have been driven by materialistic pursuits, Generation X is focused on peace of mind and leisure time — in general, the quality of life. Not surprisingly, Generation X, many of whom have grown up in divorced homes, exhibits a strong commitment to the family unit. Xers are more apt to choose family over their job, and most are marrying at a later age than past generations.

As teacher leaders, Xers are independent and willing to challenge existing norms that have been put in place by their baby boomer predecessors. They will seek balance in their lives, and if the educational organizations for whom they work don't deliver, they will either fix the problem or leave. Their family values, desire for peace of mind and leisure time will change the educational culture as we now know it. Although they will lead with conviction, they will not put in the hours that led to family tensions and breakups in the previous generation.



Howard Carlson

Xer teacher leaders also will move their schools into complete dependence upon technology. Members of this generation have always lived with technology, and their lack of fear will bring about changes we would not have thought possible. Xers also value cultural diversity and will embrace programs and systems that focus on easing societal issues related to multiculturalism. As leaders they will fight for equal access and further support for the underprivileged. This effort will be waged in the classroom and community on state and national levels.

How will school districts need to change to accommodate this new type of teacher leader? It won't be easy, but leaders of educational institutions need to plan for the future now if they are going to weather this transition from the boomer era to that of Generation X.

## Family First

Now that we know we are going to transition over the coming years from a baby boomer teacher leadership corps to that of Generation X, how do we prepare? First, it will be imperative that school districts understand the differences between where we have been and where we are going as it relates to teacher leadership.

Where the baby boomer teacher leaders would put in hours that might have compromised their home life, the Generation X leader will be focused on family first. This means schools will need to become more flexible. It isn't that these new teacher leaders won't be willing to work to complete needed activities, but the work may be conducted outside the realm of what has been considered traditional settings. It is probable we will see a desire to use technology as a way to conduct the committee meeting of the future.

For example, the district curriculum committee, rather than meeting face to face at 7 on Tuesday evening, may gather online via a video conferencing system. It stands to reason that if Generation X and its identified need for flexibility affects our schools, this issue also will become an integral part of the broader workplace. If school districts don't rethink these practices, Generation X teacher leaders will either seek to change the rules or will opt for a career that is more family friendly.

## Quality of Life

Generation X's vital concern about quality of life, peace of mind and leisure time closely connects to family values, but it differs in some respects. This generation will not only concern itself with significant others but also with itself. This should not be seen as a selfish pursuit as much as a chance for self-reflection and renewal, both of which have been in short supply for the baby boomer teacher leader.

Providing this opportunity for rejuvenation will prevent burnout and undue stress. Baby boomer teacher leaders have come to accept burnout and stress as a part of the system. This will no longer be tolerated, nor should it be. In many states, Generation X teachers are asked to work seven to 10 years longer than their baby boomer predecessors, but that will not be possible without changes in the existing system.

How can quality of life, peace of mind and leisure time become a reality in public schools? It can come in many different packages but in all cases must serve the unique needs of those involved. More than a system of interventions, the fulfillment of these personal needs will most likely take the form of a school or districtwide wellness plan. These plans may include on-site daycare so parents can see their children during the day — a model that has become popular in the private sector. Or it could be a marriage between technology and time off, such as providing time away from the school site a couple of times a year when teachers complete their grades and upload them to the district's computer network.

Although the approach will vary greatly depending on the school site and its individual needs, this type of flexibility and wellness approach will become a standard request by tomorrow's teacher leader. The Xer leader will value the needs of fellow teachers and will push school districts to consider these flexible approaches. Growing up, these leaders have seen the devastation that occurs from not attending to one's needs, and if the best talent is to be attracted and retained, the system will need to change.



Colleen Khachatourians is a Generation X teacher at 92nd St. Elementary School in Los Angeles.

The Generation X teacher leader will consider his or her well-being as more important than compensation. To succeed in the effort to fill the leadership void, school districts will need to keep these simple facts in mind.

## Tech Revolution

Over the past 10 to 15 years, school districts have seen a real change in the types and amounts of technology available to the classroom. Programs such as E-rate funding have brought technology to the forefront, a trend that will continue. As Generation X teacher leaders take over the reins, the sky will be the limit.

Already we see where these technologically proficient teachers are calling for greater access to resources in this area. This pace will intensify, and a more formidable discussion will take place as the Generation X teacher leaders guide school committees.

The new teacher leaders will likely call for home-based networking connections for and among teachers and students. This would enhance student learning and provide a venue for online staff development in the teacher's home.

## Multicultural Impact

Generation X will reportedly include the highest percentage of naturalized U.S. citizens of any generation born in the 20th century. This will prompt these new teacher leaders to take a more active role in supporting a multicultural society and its education.

It is clear already that an increasing number of students are coming to our schools with multiple needs. Whether the issues are language barriers, cultural differences or socioeconomic challenges, our new teacher leaders will become advocates for students with these diverse needs. Possibly greater than ever before, this group of teacher leaders will see it as their duty to change how the system delivers instruction to a multicultural society. Their willingness to take a stand against any perceived injustice means they will push schools to adequately provide for these children.

Perhaps this will be the venue for Generation X teacher leaders to gain prominence on the national level. They will push aggressively for adequate resources and force the system to look unconventionally at how it can best serve diverse students. They will embrace change and find unique ways to ensure a first-rate education for all children.

## **Forward Thinkers**

As the guard changes in the teacher leadership ranks, it is clear that schools will usher in a new generation of leaders who will operate in stark contrast to their predecessors. They will take care of themselves and their families at the expense of materialistic pursuits. They will challenge conventions that have been in place for decades and will innovatively approach their leadership roles in education. Most will operate from a strong philosophical base and will seek to protect those they feel are underprivileged.

It would behoove forward-thinking school districts to begin planning for how they will transition to this new type of leader. Without such plans, schools may find the best and brightest of this new generation will pass them by for a better quality of life in other fields.

Howard Carlson is superintendent of the Delano Public Schools, 700 Elm Ave. East, Delano, MN 55328. E-mail: [hcarlson@delano.k12.mn.us](mailto:hcarlson@delano.k12.mn.us)

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