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# Can teacher leaders go stale?

**M**y wife Elizabeth is a wonderful woman — but in many ways, we’re the pure definition of opposites attract. She loves to stay up late and I’m an “early-to-bed” kind of guy. She’s reserved and polite, while I’m loud and obnoxious! She loves a clean and tidy bedroom, while my clothes are strewn from one corner to another.

One of our greatest differences surrounds our attitudes towards expiration dates on food. Like many guys, I’ll literally eat anything and rarely do expiration dates even cross my mind. My wife, on the other hand, looks over expiration dates religiously — and simply refuses to eat anything “past-its-prime.” We’ve had countless afternoon meals interrupted by emergency trips to the grocery store for new bottles of ketchup!

On a recent trip to replace some dinner rolls that were a bit crunchy around the edges, I got a call from an assistant principal friend of mine who has been urging me to move into a new role beyond the classroom for years now. “I heard that there’s an opening in central office,” Parry said, “Are you planning to apply?”

“Never!” I responded, “You leave the classroom only when you can’t hack it anymore. Those kinds of jobs are where teachers go to die!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Parry pushed back. “There’s tons of great work being done beyond the classroom. A new position might just allow you to see education from a broader perspective if you ever bothered to look. In many ways, you’ve limited your influence and

your own professional growth by staying a teacher, Bill.”

Frustrated and starving, I hung up — but I haven’t stopped thinking about expiration dates!

You see, much of what I think makes me unique as a teacher leader is that I haven’t left the classroom yet. Selfishly — and somewhat arrogantly — I cringe when professionals who haven’t worked directly with students for decades describe themselves as teacher leaders. “When was the last time they actually taught?” I sarcastically wonder. “They’re clearly beyond their expiration dates!”



But even though I’m somewhat hung up on the idea that being a practicing teacher brings a measure of freshness to my work as a leader, I also recognize that there are far more opportunities to be a difference-maker beyond my classroom than there are in it. Influential decisions affecting thousands of kids are made by those filling the instructional leadership roles that I’ve consistently turned

away from.

So I guess what I’m left to wonder is when does distance from the classroom decrease a teacher’s credibility? Do your skills drift almost immediately? After one year? Five years? Ten years? Does your credibility with colleagues ever completely expire?

How can teachers extend their “shelf-life,” holding on to a legitimate understanding of what it means to be a classroom teacher after stepping into leadership roles beyond the classroom? What actions can accomplished educators take to remain master practitioners when they are no longer practicing? ♦

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