Most people can recall at least one teacher who changed their life. For Lovelyn Marquez-Prueher, that teacher was Mr. Zable, her 7th grade math teacher at Ynez Elementary in Alhambra, California. She had only been in the United States for four years after emigrating from the Philippines, and was still struggling with English. But Mr. Zable pushed her to participate in the annual “Chalk Talk,” a competition where students were judged on how they taught a math concept to a panel of adults. He worked with her on creating her lesson, helping her overcome her insecurities in the process. Her doubts were unwarranted—she won first place.

“Mr. Zable was one of those teachers who always went above and beyond for students,” she said. “He had a huge impact on me.”

After the competition, Marquez-Prueher had renewed self-confidence and a keen understanding of how teachers can make a difference for their students. She has since followed Mr. Zable’s example throughout her career as a teacher, from her classroom to her school, and most recently district-wide.

After earning her bachelor’s degree and teaching credential at Mount St Mary’s College, she started teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) in grades 6-8 at LeConte Middle School in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The school certainly had a need in that area—it was in an extremely diverse neighborhood, and at one point there were five different languages spoken in her classroom. After a few years in that role, she hungered for leadership opportunities, building on her Leadership and Women’s Studies minor in college. But she didn’t quite know what to do next. “I saw myself as having a leadership role,” she said. “But after a few years of seeing principals and assistant principals up close, I knew I didn’t want that.”

Marquez-Prueher quickly found other ways to lead. She sought out and took on new opportunities within her school, which included becoming the English Language Arts department head; she also worked with outside organizations, including the LA Writing Project, and even helped develop Beyond the Bell, an intervention curriculum for English language learners. Her work and impact drew the admiration and respect of her fellow teachers and administrators, and in 2015 she was named California Teacher of the Year.

But still she wanted to do more. Her perspective as a former English language learner and direct work with underserved student populations showed her that there were problems that needed to be fixed throughout the system.

This is what led Marquez-Prueher to Educators for Excellence (E4E). E4E is a nonprofit that works through local chapters to ensure that teachers have a leading voice in the policies that impact their students and the profession. In the organization’s six regions, Teacher Policy Teams identify the most important issues, create

LOVELYN’S PATHWAY TO TEACHER LEADERSHIP

- Started as middle school teacher
- Served as department chair, content lead and other school-based roles
- Named 2014 California Teacher of the Year
- Helped to lead advocacy campaign in Los Angeles to support stronger Common Core instruction
policy recommendations to address them, and ultimately run advocacy campaigns to create real change for their students. Educators for Excellence provides necessary structures such as grassroots organizing, logistical support, and political counsel, as well as training on relationship- and network-building, policy making and public speaking. But teachers remain at the center of the work. The goal is to empower teachers as agents of change in their schools and communities.

This was a new kind of leadership for Marquez-Prueher, and she could immediately see its value. "Teachers are often left out of important conversations, asking ‘how did this policy happen?’” she said. “We are in classrooms every day; we are in the middle of it all. Our voices need to be heard.”

She jumped at the opportunity to join an E4E Teacher Policy Team in Los Angeles. The issue her team identified was uneven implementation of the Common Core State Standards. The new standards required significant changes in how teachers deliver instruction, but the transition wasn’t going well everywhere—in large part because far too few teachers were receiving the necessary professional development and support.

The solution the Teacher Policy Team identified was twofold. First, they wanted schools to receive the funding necessary to hire instructional coaches to support teachers with the Common Core transition. Second, they wanted to ensure equitable distribution of professional learning opportunities and support for Common Core implementation among teachers.

They focused their efforts on Local District South, one of six local districts in LAUSD and where the team taught. Marquez-Prueher quickly found that advocating in front of adults was different than speaking to a classroom filled with students, but her E4E training in policy-making, communications and advocacy helped. “I was very new to advocacy,” she said. “When you’re meeting with elected officials, there’s a lack of confidence, even though you’re the person who elected them to that position. I forced myself to realize that I was someone worth listening to.”

This confidence clearly had an impact: Their policy recommendations were adopted and put into action.

But the biggest benefit for Marquez-Prueher wasn’t just the policy victory. “I’m most proud of the collaboration I got to experience with other teachers,” she said. “I’ve had so much learning. It’s not just telling elected officials what’s wrong. It’s about being part of the solution and following through.”

Marquez-Prueher wasn’t new to teacher leadership before joining E4E. But her participation in the program further affirmed her belief in its value. “To me, teacher leadership is an opportunity to advocate for what students really need while moving up in the profession—but without sacrificing why you became a teacher in the first place.”

She sees the potential of not just her own leadership, but in empowering other teacher to be leaders. “It’s a matter of waking up that inner voice,” she said. “They have the potential to be agents of change outside of the classroom as well as in it.”

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