



# Reimagine

## STUDENT LEADERSHIP

By Doug Franklin

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## THE STUDENT LEADERSHIP DREAM

At some point, once we've gotten into a rhythm with our church and have built rapport, we start dreaming about student leadership. We dream about the small team of super-responsible and committed students who will be unified for the entire school year. This team is a delight to be around, is teachable, and they energize our own passion to help students grow. On a great day, they even help lighten our workload. And when we say our final good-byes to these students and send them off to college they, of course, will be the leaders on campus who reflect Christ at every turn.

### But Then Reality Strikes.



- Students are busier than ever. They are just as easy to commit as they are to back out--especially if it's difficult.
- Parents are more demanding than ever. When it comes to their student, they want the college resume boost that being on the student leadership team promises, but view any sort of challenge or hardship their student faces as a mistake--your mistake.
- Great adult volunteers are rare. Adults who can be transformational with students are hard to find, and when we do find them, they are already serving in multiple roles (inside and outside of your youth ministry). This basically means that student leadership is up to you.
- Last, but not least, in both our dreams and realities, student leadership is more costly and messy than doing anything yourself.

### Making Dreams a Reality.

Before I get painted as a dream-killer, let me offer some hope. Obviously, there are some sweeping statements here. Whether they are partially true or wholly true, the traditional student leadership team of the past is harder to do than ever. With sports schedules alone, asking for a year-long commitment is almost laughable. Fortunately, growing students into godly leaders happens in all sorts of ways: teams, mentoring relationships, projects, and small groups. It also happens in all sorts of places, from youth rooms to van rides to coffee shops.

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So what if we kept the outcomes of our dreams and applied them to the new reality of our situation?

## Dream Outcomes + New Reality

### Dream Outcomes:

Students who have been sharpened and molded into confident, ready, and rooted leaders who reflect Christ.



### New Reality:

Busy and overcommitted students who love the easy way out. Adult volunteers who lack time and experience to develop them as leaders.

What I mean is, what if student leadership wasn't another program we add on top of our youth ministries and busy schedules, but was something we integrated into what we're already doing. It's not a piece of the pie, it's an ingredient found throughout the whole pie. We're already doing worship, service, retreats, mission trips, etc. Maybe all those things would be better with student leaders involved. Don't get me wrong, I don't think we should hand over the keys of our youth ministries to student leaders and hope for the best. But I do think we should raise up student leaders in each area to be owners of their ministry, and ultimately owners of their faith.

## REDEFINING THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH WORKER

Incorporating student leadership into your whole ministry is really only a slight change. In the past, it would have been a programmatic change--something that required budgets, meetings, space, and agendas in order to launch a full-out Student Leadership Team. But if we incorporate student leadership into all the programs we're already doing, with the adult volunteers we already have, the biggest change takes place in you. Your role becomes less about the execution of programs (although they still get done) and more about the apprentices who are a part of the process.

Think about it this way. In any trade, there's a process of apprenticeship. Bricklayers don't start out as bricklayers on day one. A newbie doesn't show up on a worksite with a blueprint in hand and a contractor patting him on the back. Instead, they start a long-term training program. Some

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of it is straight up skill training, but most of it is an apprenticeship. And while a master bricklayer is ultimately responsible for making the blueprint a reality, their job description also includes training an apprentice. Sometimes it's cumbersome (we've all felt this when developing student leaders). But other times the master bricklayer can truly enjoy his vacation days knowing that a well-trained apprentice has their back. Plus, the apprentice gets to practice being the master by having to "own" the jobsite when his boss is away.

As a master youth worker, you're responsible for turning the blueprint of youth ministry at your church into a reality. But what if your role and the roles of your adult volunteers included training the apprentices along the way: building their skills, giving them ownership, discipling them, and helping them take risks? The perfect places for doing this training of apprentices are all around you: the sound board in the youth room, the worship band, the kitchen, the game time, and the mission trip. Just about every part of youth ministry can actually be used as a leadership laboratory, useful for training student apprentices in leadership.

## LEADERSHIP LABS

Think back to your experience in your school's science lab, where the whole point of the experience was to give you the tools and the time to try things out and to test your hypothesis. In the lab you were encouraged to take risks, and it was fine to make mistakes. There was also a teacher or other adult there ready to facilitate, ask you hard questions, keep the place from burning down, and draw out the lessons that were bigger than this one experiment. In youth ministry, we may not have science labs, but we have tons of leadership labs.

### **A Missed Opportunity**

Chances are good that you already have potential Leadership Labs happening in your youth ministry and you've got students serving in different ways both inside and outside of it. Maybe some of your students are helping out with the church Vacation Bible School (VBS) in the summer or perhaps they are serving on the worship team. They are getting out there, and are stepping into something that has great potential for leadership development.

However, for many students this will be a wasted opportunity. True, they will put in their time and will provide a much-needed service for the VBS workers or the congregation. They will learn responsibility and what it means to be a member of a functioning organization. They may even learn how to listen better to others, how to follow directions, or how to be a better musician. But without a certain level of intentionality, they will not learn leadership.

I want to show you a way to bring that laboratory learning environment into the lives of your students--with experiences they are already having.

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Take the example of VBS. We could ask our students to help out and give them a chance to exercise their servant muscles by collecting the craft supplies and shuffling small children between stations, or we could put a level of intentionality into the equation and let them flex their leadership muscles. Instead of helping with the VBS craft time, what if a small team of students was actually in charge of crafts, even for one day? Armed with the themes and a budget, they could report back to you and propose their ideas. They could even do a practice run before taking the lead in craft time. Though they are packed into a small experience, the leadership lessons of strategic planning, communication, risk-taking, and navigating obstacles are priceless. In Leadership Labs, students have a safe place to grow and learn to be a leader with you looking over their shoulder, encouraging and challenging them.

## **What is a Leadership Lab?**

A leadership lab is you (or any adult who is focused on developing students as leaders) and a few students. Through this relationship, the adult is taking the time to mentor, disciple, and to develop students as leaders by taking advantage of the life experience or project in front of them. As your time with these students goes on, you will give away more and more of the leadership responsibilities.

I have found that one of the best ways to tell a student that they have leadership ability is to invite them into a Leadership Lab. Try and stay clear of an application process. Instead, point out the leadership potential you see in them and invite them to develop that ability with you over the next few weeks or months.

As you are inviting students into a Leadership Lab, develop a covenant that lays out parameters and gets the students' parents involved from the beginning. If you are inviting two students into the leadership lab of running the soundboard for Wednesday night youth group, a covenant may include things like committing to arriving 30 minutes early and staying 20 minutes late for the next eight Wednesday nights. A Lab that involves students helping to plan and run the fall retreat might include ten meetings for the five weeks leading up to the retreat (one training and one planning meeting per week), as well as going on the retreat. This way everyone knows what will be happening during the Leadership Lab, and everyone involved can know that growth is taking place.

## **Debriefing is Priceless**

An integral part of Leadership Labs is the time spent in debrief and evaluation. Debriefing allows students to celebrate wins, process failures, and tie the leadership lessons learned to other parts of their life.

At LeaderTreks, we use a simple, three step process for debriefing leadership experiences:

# DEBRIEFING

## 1. Uncover the truth

Do this by asking simple questions. What happened? What was the problem you were facing? What went well or not so well? Why was this hard? In this step, students will do most of the talking while you will do most of the listening.

## 2. Identify the leadership principles that were used (or were missed)

In this step, you will do most of the talking. Based on the various truths that students uncovered, you get to pull out one or two leadership principles that they used or didn't use, and incorporate some teaching. (LeaderTreks has a go-to list of 10 leadership principles that are easy for students to hang onto. Check it out in our free ebook, *Student Leaders are Church Leaders*).

## 3. Apply it!

In this step, students will again do most of the talking as you help them create tangible actions steps they could use to improve for next time or in another area of their lives. But beware, students love to give vague applications like "I'm going to focus more," and while that's a good sentiment, it probably won't lead to growth. Your role is to help students take the steps to develop as a leader by asking them to make applications that are specific and include a what, when, and where: What are you going to do to focus more? When are you going to do that? Where are you going to do that? And if possible, is there someone who can keep you accountable to this?

Whatever you do, never skip the chance to debrief and evaluate with students. For most people, evaluation and honest conversation about how well something went can equal negative reactions. When we are vulnerable and honest with one another, there is potential for hurt or disappointment, and it might seem that it would just be easier to avoid these kinds of conversations. However, this is exactly the place to take a relationship that already has some foundation and ask the difficult and risky questions that will result in the immense payoff in growth for both you and the student. In the end, we want leaders who can make decisions, solve problems, and influence culture. We want disciples who can make more disciples.

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## Leadership Lab Example

A good example of this comes from a youth worker whom I talked with the other day. He had taken his middle school students on a retreat where they all stayed on houseboats on the river. But instead of having adult volunteers provide the meals, he recruited High School student leaders to be the galley cooks. He gave them each a budget and goals, then let them loose to create a menu (approved by him of course!) and provide the meals for their retreat. This became a perfect opportunity for leadership development as the students gave it their all, even though at times their kitchens looked like an earthquake had hit. Through taking advantage of teachable moments, these students learned how to plan ahead, operate under pressure, delegate, and provide a much-needed service for the rest of their group. He took what could have been an added time commitment for an adult volunteer, and turned the opportunity into a Leadership Lab.

## STUDENT LEADERSHIP TEAMS & LEADERSHIP LABS

I believe that Leadership Labs are a great way to do student leadership because they take advantage of what's already going on in your youth ministry and church as a whole. They use the adult volunteer leaders you already have and tweak their role to include apprentices. Based on your students and how busy they are, you'll have to decide what Leadership Labs are the best for your youth ministry circumstances.

There are 3 main structures that youth ministries use for taking advantage of Leadership Labs: Long-Term Teams, Short-Term Teams, and Leadership-Focused Mentoring.

### Long-Term Teams

The structure that's most prevalent in today's youth ministry is the Long-Term Team. This is typically what people think of when they think of student leadership development in youth ministry. In this model, there is a team of students (often 10-15) who lead various projects or parts of the youth ministry for an entire school year. Long-Term Teams are often an additional program inside of the youth ministry--an additional piece of the pie along with retreats, small groups, discipleship, and so on. Often times, Long-Term Teams end up becoming their own program because the youth ministry needs something that will keep students growing in leadership for the entire year. The natural ebb and flow of projects and seasons throughout the youth ministry year don't usually allow a team to lead something long enough for effective leadership growth to happen.

#### *Examples:*

(Long-Term Teams need long-term Leadership Labs, committing to a ministry year.)



#### Ministry Leadership Team

Students will partner together to oversee various parts of the ministry: welcoming, worship, message-planning, events, evangelism, assimilation, website, weekly e-newsletters, etc.

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- Responsibilities: Oversight and direction of the ministry
- Ideal Team Size: 6-10 students
- Time Commitment: School year



## Global Leadership Teams

Identify a project that students want to educate, grow awareness, and raise funds for, like AIDS, water systems, orphanages, international schools, and numerous other charities. The team will find ways to raise awareness in the youth ministry as well as the church and even school.

- Responsibilities: Identify an international mission and educate and motivate others to get involved
- Ideal Team Size: 8-12 students
- Time Commitment: School year



## Small Group Leadership Team

Student leaders are in charge of leading small groups in the youth ministry. I have seen this done well, but not very often. If you do this type of team, make sure you incorporate training that results in your students knowing how to teach and facilitate a small group discussion. You might want to start by having them lead middle school students, or acting as an apprentice to an adult small group leader.

- Responsibilities: Lead a small group
- Ideal Team Size: 2 students per small group
- Time Commitment: School year

## Short-Term Teams

Short-Term Teams are the best way to take advantage of the Leadership Labs and the resources in your ministry. These consist of students (anywhere from 2-7) who are committed for a shorter time frame (2-3 months) and focused on leading a specific project or part of the ministry. Many youth ministries will have multiple teams in a year. And many of the adult volunteer leaders you have already recruited will simply add apprenticeship into their job descriptions.

### *Examples:*

(Short-Term Teams need short-term Leadership Labs, committing to 2-3 months at a time.)



## Event Leadership Team

This team will bring vision to a youth ministry event, such as a retreat, an outreach project, or other summer activities.

- Responsibilities: Planning a specific event for the ministry
- Ideal Team Size: 2-3 students
- Time Commitment: 2-3 months

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## Mission Trip Leadership Team

Student Leaders will help plan and execute important elements of a youth group mission trip. This could be big-picture elements (like helping decide where to go or what students will be a part of the team) or smaller, practical things (like researching transportation and accommodation options).

- Responsibilities: Plan, run, and participate in a mission trip
- Ideal Team Size: 2-4 students
- Time Commitment: 3-6 months



## Worship Band Leadership Team

With this team, students will help plan a certain number of worship times. They might plan the order of songs, or choose the band members for each session, giving them opportunities to exercise their leadership skills

- Responsibilities: Planning worship structure (prayer, music, etc.) leading worship, bringing in new leaders
- Ideal Team Size: 2-4 students
- Time Commitment: Seasonal

## Leadership-Focused Mentoring

Mentoring student leaders happens when adults inside and outside of the youth ministry use life's natural Leadership Labs in order to mentor individual students in leadership. The great part of Leadership-Focused Mentoring is that it allows for more church-wide involvement and utilizes mentors who aren't necessarily volunteering in the youth ministry. Sunday School teachers can become great leadership mentors by simply bringing on a student apprentice and using each Sunday as a leadership lab. Other great leadership mentors? The maintenance staff, people who lead caring/meals ministries, and even Operation Christmas Child volunteers.

### *Examples:*

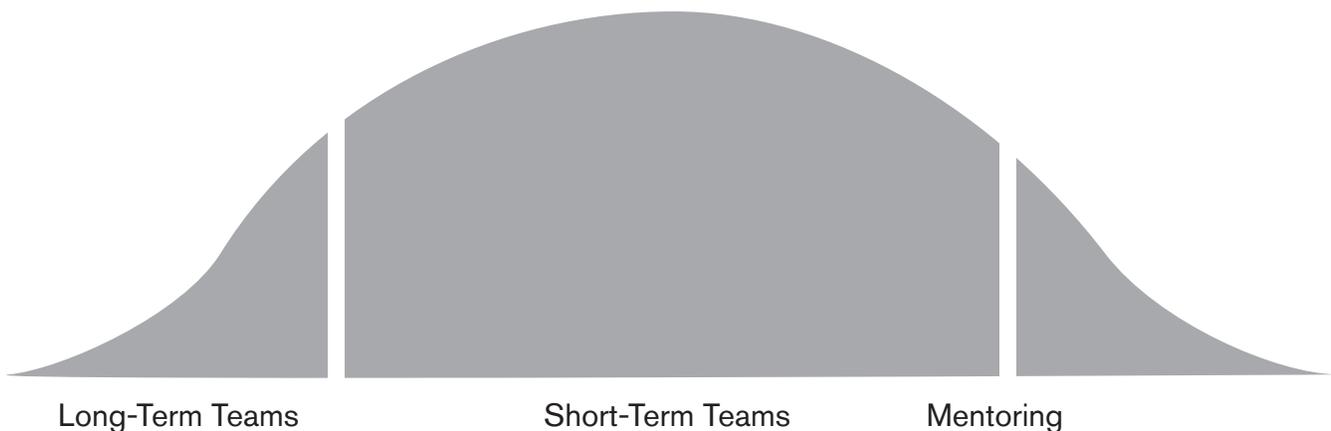
Leadership-Focused Mentoring needs individual adults apprenticing individual students in a long-term relationship. Many of these can happen in the youth ministry, in church as a whole, or even outside of the church.



- Helping run the tech/lighting on a Sunday morning or Wednesday evening
- Playing or helping plan services with the worship band
- Planning or leading games for children's or youth ministry
- Problem-solving projects such as working on a car
- Creative projects such as set design
- Ministry projects such as Samaritan's Purse
- Planning and running the church's Vacation Bible School

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT STRUCTURE

Finding the right student leadership structure for your ministry depends a lot on the culture of your church, the expectations, the adult volunteer involvement and maturity, as well as your goals and passions. Each of these structures, when done well, have proven to be incredibly effective with students. I see the suitability of three structures for youth ministry as falling on a bell curve.



**On the left are Long-Term Teams.** This traditional youth ministry structure will work well for some youth ministries, especially those with a highly-committed culture. But the cons can be daunting. “*Student leadership teams are unfair!*” Ever hear that at your church? This can be a typical response from parents and church leadership after you’ve put together the student leadership team because most people believe that only the good kids, the super-involved, or the favorites are chosen, while other students were left out.

### Pros

- Students have more time to learn from each other
- Lower adult volunteer participation
- Less adult volunteer recruitment
- More time for leadership development
- More opportunities to develop and guide

### Cons

- Small number of students involved
- High commitment for busy students
- Usually only responsible students are involved
- Only the “good kids” get in
- Parents often get offended if their child doesn’t get in
- May emphasize positional leadership
- May be perceived as “favorites”

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**On the right is Mentoring.** Mentors can personalize their equipping and teaching for a particular student, and the student gets the mentor's full attention. However, based on the reality that students are busier than ever, and the fact that many adult volunteers don't feel confident in the role of a leadership mentor, only a handful of youth ministries will be able to use this structure.

## Pros

- Open to more types of students (not just the "good kids" or students who are already invested in as leaders)
- Intense relational development
- Individualized leadership training
- Higher student buy-in because they are able to focus on one specific area of interest or passion.
- Often, no need to recruit mentors because they can already be found in ministry roles both in and out of the youth ministry.
- Growth is easier to identify

## Cons

- Missing opportunities to develop leadership with peers as a team.
- Missing group decision-making skills
- More adult volunteers required for a one-on-one experience.

**Short-Term Teams, the middle third, is my recommendation for most youth ministries.** Short-Term Teams allow more students to be involved at a higher-level of commitment. Since so many extracurriculars are seasonal, busy students and already-committed adult volunteers can get involved and stay involved.

## Pros

- Accommodates busy students
- Smaller size means more concentrated leadership development
- Project-focused, leading to clear results
- More teams means more students are able to participate
- Avoids perception of "favorites"
- Matches students with areas of interest/giftedness
- Easier to find adult volunteers for shorter commitments and areas of interest
- Focuses on influential leadership rather than positional leadership.

## Cons

- Less time to develop leaders
- Less time to build team unity
- Starting from square one multiple times (with every new team).
- Requires more adult leaders (if you do this more than one time a year).
- Requires more people management (more adult volunteers to recruit and manage, more parents to communicate with).

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## Leadership Labs + Short-Term Teams = Dynamic Student Leadership Development

Taking advantage of Short-Term Teams to develop students as leaders has many benefits. You will be able to reach more students, especially the ones who would never “qualify” for a traditional leadership team. You will also be able to invest in their leadership development more intentionally, without overwhelming or burning out your adult volunteers. It is an opportunity to leverage your and your adult volunteers’ passions and schedules in order to unleash leadership development. Short-Term Teams will also fit better into the lives of students who very often will have sports responsibilities, busy seasons at school, or other limitations that hinder them from serving at a deep capacity the entire ministry year.

In the end, our students long for people to come alongside them, encourage them, and disciple them. When we invest intentionally into the lives of students through Leadership Labs and do it in a way that is more manageable for the schedules of our students and adult volunteers, you will see leadership development multiply in your ministry.

## SO NOW WHAT?

Based on the culture of your church and youth ministry, you have a choice to make when it comes to how you will incorporate student leadership. I hope you’ve found some useful blueprints in this book and have a better grasp of the options before you in Long-Term Teams, Short-Term Teams, and Leadership-Focused Mentoring. Regardless of the method you choose, you and the other mature, godly leaders in their life are more valuable than any program. We know that students really are powerful tools in God’s Kingdom - but they need us to spur them on, teach them, build into them, challenge them, evaluate them, and love them. They need us to instill in them God-given leadership principles and provide opportunities to live them out. They need us to believe in them, even when they fail time and time again - for our faith in them helps them reach for greatness. They need us to sharpen them as iron sharpens iron, building them into the world-changers they can be. Students are powerful tools in God’s Kingdom and we are the sharpeners.

I’m so excited that you have committed to growing student leaders within your youth ministry and will be providing the church with strong leaders for the next generation. As always, if you have any questions about *Leadership Journey* or student leadership in your youth ministry, Call us! We want to help and we love helping. We exist to partner with you as you make disciples and grow leaders.

Give us a call at 877-502-0699.  
LeaderTreks.com

# REIMAGINE STUDENT LEADERSHIP

Doug Franklin is the president of LeaderTreks, an innovative leadership development organization focusing on students and youth workers. Doug and his wife, Angie, live in West Chicago, Illinois. They don't have any kids, but they have a dog that thinks he is their only child. Diesel is a 70-pound Weimaraner who never leaves their side.

Doug grew up in Illinois and graduated from Wheaton College with a degree in Christian Education. He started in youth ministry as an adult volunteer, leading a small group of junior high boys. The experience shaped the way Doug thinks about youth ministry and how students learn. After spending six years as a volunteer, Doug became the full-time high school youth pastor at a church in Wheaton, Illinois. He served as a youth pastor for 12 years in various churches.



As Doug thought about what was really working in youth ministry, he came to the conclusion that everything becomes more effective when students lead. So in 1994, Doug started LeaderTreks to partner with youth workers to help them develop their students as leaders. In 2003 LeaderTreks added leadership training for youth workers. It started with five youth workers coming to LeaderTreks for intense training and grew into LeaderTreks' Refuel Retreats.

Doug understands that being a youth worker requires us to lead students, adult volunteers, parents, and church leaders. He wants to help youth workers lead well and to see them become more effective for the purpose of helping students love God.

Check out Doug's blog at [leadertreks.com/blog](http://leadertreks.com/blog)