

**Abstract:** As the CalTeach program is in the midst of its 11th year of supporting student teacher candidates we are learning that many of our alumni are beginning to transition into leadership roles at their school sites and within their districts. I had the pleasure of sitting down with Carolyn Powell, who was a part of CalTeach Cohort 2014, to chat about her journey from UCI math major and CalTeach Student, to secondary math teacher, to a part of the Garden Grove Unified Math TOSA Team.

---

**Transitions: Teacher to Leader**  
**A Conversation with UCI CalTeach Alumni Carolyn Powell**

By Kris Houston

As the CalTeach program is in the midst of its 11th year of supporting student teacher candidates we are learning that many of our alumni are beginning to transition into leadership roles at their school sites and within their districts. Many alumni are now department chairs or co-chairs on their campuses, leading programs, taking on the responsibility of ASB on their campuses and becoming teachers on special assignment (TOSAs) for their districts. I had the pleasure of sitting down with Carolyn Powell who was a part of CalTeach Cohort 2014 to chat about her journey from UCI math major and CalTeach Student, to secondary math teacher to a part of the Garden Grove Unified Math TOSA Team.



We started our conversation at the beginning, with the question “Why did you decide to become a teacher?” Carolyn stated that her mom always encouraged to consider teaching as a career, *But it wasn't until I was in the PS 5\* class that I personally made the decision. I pretty clearly remember the moment when I was working with elementary school students and thought to myself 'This is what I want to do'. I really enjoyed my experiences in working with different age groups of students and, even though it was a lot of work balancing that with the academic side of things, I relished it and was fascinated by the way in which children's minds develop and how to teach them most effectively.*

\*PS 5 - Physical Sciences 5 Introduction to Elementary Math and Science Teaching

We then transitioned our conversation around her teaching experience in Garden Grove and the opportunities and affordances it provided her with moving forward in her role as a teacher leader.

Tell me a little bit about how you ended up as a math teacher at Garden Grove High School (GGHS).  
*I was very fortunate to get placed [as a student teacher] in the Garden Grove Unified School District. I had attended the district as a student, so I was very interested in student teaching there. Fortunately I was able to get a placement at Garden Grove High School and worked with an amazing mentor who supported and encouraged me. At the end of my student teaching, I was able to get a position at that very same school and have continued to grow and learn since!*

When did you first become interested in taking on some leadership responsibilities at GGHS?  
*In my first few years at Garden Grove, I also became co-department chair for the Math Department. It provided me with a more holistic view of math at the high school level and allowed me to collaborate with other leaders on campus and learn how to best support the math department and learn about topics like state testing, management of funds, schedule structures, and more.*

Carolyn then chatted a bit more about other early leadership opportunities, such as working closely with the AVID Program (Advancement Via Individual Determination) and on the AVID Site Team, which provides opportunities for first generation college-goers such as field trips to visit university campuses across California and being a teacher representative on GGHS's School Site Council.

I then asked Carolyn to describe her transition from classroom teacher to a TOSA and to share what her school day looks like now.

*Since getting my Master's Degree in 2019, I had pondered becoming a TOSA, but never felt quite ready for it yet. I really wanted to spend some more time in the classroom and develop more as an educator and have enough experience in the classroom before I made that change in my career. Fortunately, at the end of the 2020-21 school year, a TOSA position opened up and my teaching colleagues were so incredibly supportive of me and encouraged me to apply. They believed in me, even though I wasn't sure I was ready!*

*My school day is so different from when I was in the classroom. It was an adjustment to move from a highly structured day to working in an environment where I manage my own time working on various different projects. My focus, as always, is on student success, but now through the lens of supporting teachers and serving them. I help with creating Professional Development for teachers, support preparation for summer programs, go out to school sites and assist teachers and administrators, do demo lessons, provide email support for teachers, and more! I get to collaborate with other TOSAs from different departments, as well, depending on the projects I am working on. This has really helped me learn a lot about other subject areas. The most rewarding part of this job is similar to when I was working with students, I love being able to help and support teachers and am so excited when they have that 'aha' moment!*

In looking towards the future Carolyn is open to many different opportunities, including the possibility of moving into a more administrative role as she has obtained her Master's Degree and Credential in Administration.

*Being a TOSA gives me a small glimpse into the world of administration, so I am using this time to get more insight into that realm and help me make my decision if that is the path I want to take. If that does happen, I don't know when I would make that transition, but only time will tell!*

My final question for Carolyn was what advice would you give a current CalTeach graduate that would potentially seek more leadership opportunities at their school site or district.

*One of the most important things to remember, regardless of being in a leadership position, is when working with others, you are working in service to others. I don't believe this is necessarily specific to education, but it is a crucial life lesson I have learned over the years. My purpose in the classroom was to work to the best of my ability to serve my students and now as a TOSA, it is to serve the teachers of my district as best I can. This attitude is necessary because you can't truly help people unless you really believe your purpose is to help them. Positive relationships are so critical to the success of our students and the teachers, too! Some days the work is easy, and many days the work is hard, but we can do hard things :)*