

New Leadership for TESOL: Meet Christopher Powers

Beginning in May 2017, Christopher Powers became the new executive director of TESOL International Association. Christopher brings 20 years of diverse experience in international education to the association. In his role as director of the Education Abroad Programs Division at the Institute of International Education, he oversaw a complex portfolio of international education programs that supported language education from kindergarten through graduate school and activities that spanned 37 different countries.

Christopher answered a few questions to help us get to know him:

What's the last book you read or movie you saw?

I'm currently reading *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World*, by Eric Weiner. I love the subtitle! It's great travel writing and takes a look at how happiness is defined in different cultures, which makes it very interesting.

What is a favorite hobby of yours?

I'm a big baseball fan. I grew up a big Baltimore Orioles fan, but like the Washington Nationals, too. I'm a long distance runner and a trail runner. So far I've run nine marathons and one 50k.

What's one thing that you would like TESOL members to know about you?

I have a great family with my wife and two teenagers at home along with our 3-year-old golden retriever, Maggie (she's a trail runner too!). My mother is a retired public school teacher and my brother is a teacher too, so you could say education is in my blood; I think that being a public servant is one of the noblest things anyone can do.

What interested you in TESOL when applying for the executive director position?

I've been working in international education for more than 20 years, and I have always known and respected TESOL. I started my career working at an association and working with international students coming to the United States. For those students to be successful, they needed English language skills, so I recognize that English language education, and especially access to English language education, is a critical part of international education. For the last 15 years, I've been working on language programs, so TESOL's work really brings all of my experiences together: my work with international students, associations, and language programs. I also see myself as a collaborative leader, with an ability and interest in working with members, staff, the board, and other organizational leaders to achieve common goals. And finally, given the times that we find ourselves in right now, the work that TESOL and its members does is more important than ever.

What are your priorities for TESOL as executive director?

Advocacy is an important objective of mine. Giving a voice to our members and helping our members raise their voices collectively in their communities and around the world is a big priority for me. Also, I'd like to build on the incredible work that has already been done around standards and professional learning, as well as building our publications and convention. It's very important to me that TESOL continues to bring those opportunities and resources to more members around the world.

Being involved with international education throughout your career, what have been some of your most memorable experiences so far?

A. When I look back, what I remember most is being able to see the real impact of my work. I think education by itself, just education, is such a transformational experience. I think our members see that every single day. I've worked more as an administrator, so I'm a little envious of our educators who get to see that transformation daily. One memory that really stands out to me is a U.S. student, and engineering major, who talked to me after he came home and thanked me for encouraging him to go abroad and study languages. He said that his friends, parents, and even some professors told him that it wasn't a good idea, and that he would get nothing out of it. What's so remarkable to me is that I don't remember our initial conversation, but I would have told him what I would tell anyone. That you can never lose what you have already gained in your home classroom, and that you can only grow as a person, a student, and a professional by expanding your experiences and going abroad. Even though this was a brief interaction, it was a day-to-day occurrence, so I loved being able to see this result but also to know that I had many, many more conversations like this with other students, which hopefully had similar results.

How do you see professional associations, such as TESOL, serving their members in the future?

Any professional association is best served by bringing its members together to do things collectively better than they could be done alone. Our objectives and initiatives are more powerful when done together, and we, all of us in TESOL, can have a greater impact when we act together. Of course, TESOL has wonderful networking, professional learning, and other services that I hope are meeting our members' needs. But I think TESOL's greatest strength is our membership. And everything else we do flows from here. Whether it's the work members do when they become leaders within the association, attending and presenting at convention, becoming advocates, or strengthening their professional development. When we come together, there is so much we can do.

What challenges do you think face TESOL educators both in the United States and internationally?

I think we're in a very interesting political environment both in the United States and internationally. We've seen waves of both nationalism and internationalism come together and sometimes face off against one another. We've seen elections go different ways, and that tension impacts educators internationally, where they have to deal with challenging legislative, political, and immigration issues that impact their and their students' daily lives. What is also challenging is that we have to be constructive in the way we work with our colleagues and fellow citizens

who may have different opinions. It is more important now than ever to educate and share our values and the value of the work that we do in international education and English language education with those who may not agree with us. It's a big challenge, but I think we are up to it.

What are you looking forward to the most, or excited to learn more about, as executive director of TESOL?

I'm really excited to meet as many members and leaders as I can and find out what TESOL means to them and what they think TESOL will mean to them in the future. I want to talk to our members and find out how they can get the most out of their TESOL membership as English language professionals. I'm especially excited to see everyone at our convention next year in Chicago!