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# A vision of educational leadership

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## Abstract

I believe that an educational leader must walk into any position with something of a dual personality. He or she must be able to examine and interpret the minutiae of research data and best practice, to handle the day-to-day crises of students, staff, and a community, and to work with such details as schedules and commitment of resources. On the other hand, the educational leader must also be able to continually keep sight of the larger context within which all these details exist. And finally, the inspired and inspiring educational leader never ceases efforts to bring the external and internal together both personally and organizationally.

In sum, my vision of educational leadership involves personally cultivating depth of understanding, seeking breadth of experience, and acting with quiet humility in the service of education specifically and humanity generally.

A Vision of Educational Leadership

A Research Paper

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By

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I believe that education has the potential to unite us and to enrich our lives. Education has been responsible for incredible advances in our understanding of the world around us and of the "us" the world surrounds. From a macrocosmic perspective, humans throughout history have found themselves joined together in efforts to understand and to share that understanding with others. Ideally, those efforts have transcended cursory divisions of race, gender or politics. There seems to be an intrinsic human need for intellectual advancement. Of course we need food, shelter, and social connections, but the need to learn is one of the earliest and most universal motivations, as can be witnessed by observing an infant for any length of time. The developing child has an insatiable desire to learn and responds to whatever the world of experience can offer along those lines.

As adults, one of the most exciting things in life is to share what we understand with each other and therefore somehow more fully comprehend the greater truths that lie just beyond our mortal grasp. Educators in particular know the thrill of learning and of imparting learning to others, but many of us have also encountered students who have, for some reason, shut themselves off from learning and are in danger of growing into adults who will be closed down to any new challenge to their established knowledge/belief system and profess, either through word or action, to know or have seen it all. What builds this impregnable wall of defensiveness in so many of our students, a wall they may carry with them into adulthood and as often as not pass on to their children? How do some people lose or never develop an appreciation of education? I believe that to a large extent education is both the answer to the question and the problem.

At the risk of overstatement, I believe education amounts to a sacred trust. Of course such a "statement of faith" is made out of idealism about what we as educators are about and is easier to make after a reasonably good day in the "mind mines." But even after the bad days, when idealism falters, I have to believe that there is the hope of "ignition" in every student entrusted to our care, the chance that something, sometime will hit a nerve, light a spark, make a connection. And connection is the ultimate goal of education, I think. We humans crave connection. We have a psychic need for connection to the world and those around us, those who came before us, and those who will shape the world of the future. As educators we can offer connection to the empirical world of math and science, to the history of human events, to the beauty of human artistic expression, and to that which is essentially ourselves by being passionate and vulnerable in the performance of our duties. And, ultimately, we can offer our students connection to that which is good and capable within themselves. I believe that education is about cultivating the precious spirit that resides within each of us. So what gets in the way of that?

When I started this program and wrote the first draft for this introduction, I speculated that perhaps the educational community's attempt to quantify and assess was at least part of the problem. I imagined that those students categorized as not measuring up to the standards we set were somehow injured by our attempts to judge and label. I was speaking from the heart. The last few years of study and reflection have helped me, however, to have a clearer picture of what our mission in education should be. Heart is a good place to start. I believe it needs to be present in all our actions. I have come to understand, however, that as leaders we do a disservice to all with whom we work if we don't

also expect the very best from everyone and do everything in our power to make it possible for them to accomplish it. And I don't mean that we demand the best. I do indeed mean that we optimistically believe that everyone is capable of goodness and excellence. If they falter, we coach and encourage. If they refuse or prove themselves not up to the standards, we help them to find a place where they might be more successful. We not only love, we lead.

Educational leadership provides a remarkable opportunity to find the balance between the need to nurture and encourage and the need to hold all in education accountable for each student's success. When I started the program, I believed the recent reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act known ubiquitously as "No Child Left Behind"(NCLB) was another instance of politicians meddling in something they hadn't lived and didn't understand. I now view it as a swing of the pendulum. I believe that the educational community had indeed strayed a bit too far from the path of accountability in many instances. In order to allow every student to experience success, we had started to define success almost individually. And yet there is a standard of excellence just beyond the reach of each of us, and if students never see where that bar of achievement is, how will they be able to feel like full participants? One needn't be able, for example, to write music like Bach or Debussy in order to appreciate the ordered genius or sensitive beauty of the music. If we don't continue to lift our eyes to the highest accomplishments, our sights are lowered and the cultural standard also slides.

So where does a principal concentrate his or her efforts in order to help keep the eyes of everyone, staff and students alike, lifted to the possibility of what they might accomplish? Ideals are wonderful but must fuel action. As I

contemplate a move into educational leadership, I believe there are four areas of critical importance that will help me to accomplish the daunting but necessary task of leading students and staff. I believe at least my initial areas of focus should be to hire the best teachers and provide support to them, to promote parental involvement in the school, to keep everyone's efforts and discussion centered around the issue of student achievement – after all that's why we're there – and, finally, returning to the issue of heart, to exhibit courage.

## Supporting High Performance Teachers

"A principal's single most precious commodity is an opening in the teaching staff" (Whitaker, 2003, p. 43). The principal should constantly be seeking to improve the quality of the school by striving to hire talented and committed people to teach. In many small districts, however, the opportunities to hire are few and far between and candidates often scarce for certain positions. It isn't always easy to avoid desperation when attempting to fill a position, but Whitaker (p. 44) recommends ranking talent ahead of education or experience in order to populate a school with good teachers. The qualities he deems most important to successful teaching – and more importantly, successful teacher leadership - are a "love of students, bright mind, positive attitude, congenial personality, great work ethic, leadership skills [and] charisma" (p. 45). By contrast, a recent Harvard University study, cited by Viadero (2003), found that hiring of new teachers was based more heavily on their paper credentials than on

"extended interaction with the school community or on any demonstration of the teachers' abilities (p. 7)." This practice not only short-changes the district but also the new teacher, who doesn't get a full picture of the district and the position they will be expected to fill, thus affecting initial fit between the candidate and the district, and thus new teacher success and retention (McCarthy & Guiney, 2004). The Harvard study (Viadero, 2003) also demonstrated that new teachers were often expected to immediately assume the same load of non-teaching duties as their more experienced colleagues. There may be times when it may even be better to offer the job to a long-term substitute rather than to hire a below-average candidate or one whose personality or professional goals don't fit the district's needs. But while hiring is critical, a principal's more common responsibility will be to support teachers in their efforts to do the best job possible in the classroom.

Cheryl Bernstein (1997) began her first teaching job eager to put into practice what she had learned in her teacher education classes and during her student teaching experience. She was also anxious for the support and guidance of a caring and knowledgeable administrator. After spending her first two days preparing a first-grade classroom, she was called to the principal's office and told that she was being reassigned to teach third grade, a move that she later discovered had nothing to do with her perceived abilities or the needs of students. Instead, her reassignment was the product of an ongoing battle being waged between the administration and the district office. Apparently leaving her in the first grade position would have qualified the district for additional funds to which

specific guidelines were attached, a situation the principal and her assistant were anxious to avoid.

This initial experience turned out to be only the tip of the unsupportive administrative iceberg. It soon became clear that both the principal and her closely-allied assistant principal indulged in a system of favoritism toward some teachers and a demeaning lack of trust and support toward most. They showed a clear lack of interest in the opinions of the teaching staff, upbraided teachers in the presence of students, rewrote and sterilized curricula, ripped apart lesson plans without a word of encouragement, and micromanaged allocation of classroom time. They created such an atmosphere of demoralization and frustration that eventually nearly every teacher banded together to ask for transfers to other schools in the district. The following fall, students returned to an almost entirely new staff.

Although Ms. Bernstein's (1997) experience may be an extreme one, research and anecdotal evidence suggest that it is played out in school districts across the country (Blair, 2003). Admittedly, from the perspective of an administrator, there are many hurdles to overcome, multiple goals and demands to meet, endless disciplinary problems and paperwork deadlines to deal with, and the human element of empowering teachers to do their best often gets lost in the shuffle. My contention is that supporting teachers should be the first priority attended to by a building principal rather than the last. The literature provides a

significant amount of corroborating evidence to justify making teacher support a priority.

Personal and professional support may be especially important in the field of teaching due to the fact that it is a profession that provides little opportunity for extrinsic rewards and advancement. In the absence of such recognition, studies have shown that lack of emotional and professional support can negatively affect teachers' personal health and their desire and ability to do their job well (Littrell & Billingsley, 1994). Further studies have shown that lack of principal support is a leading contributor toward teacher stress and burn-out (Blase & Blase, 1998) and significantly affects teacher retention (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Conducted under the auspices of Harvard University's Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, the latter study followed a group of 50 new teachers in Massachusetts and found that in three years time nearly 50% of them had left teaching or changed schools. Roughly 1/3 of those who sought teaching assignments in other districts had come to teaching after careers in other fields. They expressed in their interviews an understanding that "workplaces differ and that the work environment is crucial in fostering satisfaction and success" (p. 21) and each subsequently found districts that better met their needs for basic support, reasonable assignments, growth opportunities, and accessible, respectful leadership.

And if teacher health, competence and job satisfaction aren't adequate justification to promote better teacher support, a recent report by the National

Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003) cited teacher turnover as the major cause for concern in the quality of the nation's schools. The report's authors suggest that the national 50% teacher turnover rate is the primary reason behind issues of ineffective and inconsistent instruction in our nation's schools and that the only way to counteract the trend is to ensure teachers a secure and supportive work environment.

Good principals offer a basic undercurrent of support and thereby create a caring community within a school. Supportive principals exercise and model care for others in spite of balancing multiple duties, in spite of pressure from parents or community members to put their child or their interests first, and they are also able to encourage students and teachers to achieve their best every day (Rooney, 2003). Supportive principals know, as Barth (2001) states, that "the relationship among adults in the school house has more impact on the accomplishment of youngsters than any other factor" (p. 105). But what specific steps can a principal take to demonstrate such support in an authentic and meaningful way?

Littrell and Billingsley (1994) describe four specific "dimensions" of support for teachers. Emotional support was deemed by teachers in their study to be the most important and is demonstrated by principals who are "honest and straightforward, allow teachers input into decisions about school matters, show concern for their students and program, and promote a sense of importance" (p. 7). Second most crucial was appraisal support, defined by teachers as providing meaningful feedback and demonstrating trust in their judgment. Instrumental

support, ranked third, involved direct help to teachers such as collaboration, allocation of resources, and help with discipline and parent confrontations. Finally, informational support was deemed by teachers in the Littrell and Billingsley study to be last in importance. I found the low ranking of informational support interesting. Working as I do in a district which struggles somewhat with the issue of effective dissemination of information, I would say that although informational support may be a low-level type of support, it still needs to come first and, in an ideal world, could be assumed to be a *sine qua non* of every school district. In fact, in thinking about how to best support teachers, I would like to work backward from last to first in the above study and review how I might put into action my desire to be a supportive administrator.

*Informational Support*

I would want to ensure from the beginning of my tenure that there was an effective means of transmitting information to teachers and that my trust in them came through in every communication, from meetings to e-mail. The way in which information is communicated is often critical. I believe that teachers should always be treated as responsible professionals. If certain teachers give an administrator reason for concern, they should be dealt with individually and privately, and such corrective actions should never be allowed to spill over to the communication with the staff as a whole. Having been one of the innocent victims of an administrative "shotgun" (Blase & Blase, 1998, p. 136) approach to

discipline, I can vouch for the negative atmosphere it creates without achieving

the goal of addressing and correcting the problem. Informational support, then,

needs to be in place from the first day of contact with staff. In our electronic age,

information is particularly easy to disseminate but requires an eye toward

regularity and completeness as well as appropriateness of tone. I would suggest

that, in an effort to communicate information, an effective principal remembers

also to express gratitude to the teachers for the job they are doing.

*Instrumental Support*

I believe that it is the principal's job to shield staff and students from non-

productive outside pressure and to pass on praise to them when it is offered. I

know from my own experience that support in the area of student discipline can

help a teacher be more committed to continuing to try to solve a discipline issue.

I would be willing to deal with students in order to prevent them from disrupting a

lesson but would also work with the teacher to develop a better mutual

understanding of what might best help the student be able to remain in the

classroom and benefit from instruction. Similarly, I would consider it my job to

support the teacher in conflicts with parents. When confronted by a parent, I

believe that I must work from the initial assumption that the teacher behaved in a

professional and responsible manner and that the parent is acting out of a

legitimate concern for his or her child. If the former proves to be less than true, it

is my responsibility to deal with it as discreetly as possible with the goal of

helping the teacher to reflect on how he or she might have handled a given situation differently.

Another *sine qua non* of school districts should be that all teachers have the materials and training they need to do their job well. Unfortunately, declining enrollments, dwindling funds, and sheer practicality dictate that choices have to be made about the best allocation of resources and training dollars. Rather than make such decisions on behalf of the teachers, I would work to promote the kind of collaborative environment in which teachers and I worked together to establish resource and staff development priorities. It would be my job to identify the passionate interests of teachers in the building and to encourage them to offer their leadership in those areas, whether it meant chairing a budget committee, leading a study group, or offering an in-service on an innovative teaching strategy.

*Appraisal Support*

I was surprised how overwhelmingly studies (Blase & Blase, 1998) have shown that teachers desire observation and evaluation, but then again, I remember my student teaching experience and how grateful I was to one of my cooperating teachers for his insightful and constructive criticism. Just as the challenge in teaching is to kindle into flame the spark for excellence within each student, similarly it is the challenge of a good principal to expect and encourage teachers to continue to improve their skills and artistry.

It is clear from the literature that evaluation absolutely must go beyond the cursory annual or semi-annual review conducted in most school districts. Marshall (1996), principal of Mather Elementary School in Boston, described his struggle to develop a system of rotating through every teacher's classroom on an average of once every three weeks. While he didn't quite achieve the level of frequency he had aimed for, he was able to make an amazing total of 462, 5-minute observations throughout the year, most followed by brief but pointed feedback discussions. What resulted was a better understanding of each teacher's style when formal evaluation time did arise and, more importantly, regular contact and opportunity for discussion with each teacher on his or her teaching successes and techniques. In his article, Marshall emphasized that each 5-minute observation must be followed-up with feedback to the teacher. After the first year of 5-minute visits followed by feedback and discussion, teachers seemed to indicate that they felt more appreciated and most indicated they would like even more than the eleven visits per classroom he was able to manage in his first year using the technique.

I think the most important element of Marshall's (1996) technique might be frequency of contact. By making frequent observations and feedback opportunities, Marshall honored the work that teachers were doing in the classroom by treating it as something worth his time to observe and discuss. Just as a teacher uses a combination of observation, praise and suggestion to get the best performance out of each student, an administrative approach that makes

teacher observation and conference a priority appeals to the inherent learner in almost all teachers. Who would not want to do their best job in such an atmosphere?

In their studies, Blase and Blase (1998) found that the quality of the follow-up conference was critical to its effect on teachers' motivation. Teachers don't want meaningless praise that essentially sends the message that they can't improve. There is an inherent dishonesty in such an approach, since no one is so good that he or she is incapable of improvement. To pretend otherwise is to remove the motivation to strive toward excellence. While issuing post-observation directives or blanket praise might initially seem more expedient, my goal would be to promote a reflective approach through inquiry. I had occasion to encourage professional reflection in my position as mentor to a new teacher in my department as we discussed how he might alter instruction or organization in order to optimize student response. My self-assessment in this aspect of mentoring is that I would like to better master the art of inquiry. I'm not sure I'm yet skilled at eliciting substantive reflection, but I believe in its value as a supportive technique.

*Emotional Support*

Interestingly, each description of the aspects of teacher support herein has been progressively longer. My sense is that these levels of support are progressive in their complexity as well as in their significance, sort of a taxonomy of support, as suggested previously. Emotional support is the most desired by

teachers (Littrell & Billingsley, 1994) while also being the most difficult to

quantify. At its most basic, emotional support involves simple human concern for

the emotional well-being of teachers: remembering to ask about a sick child, a

new house, an upcoming family event or the previous holiday. All school staff

can do a great deal for each other by remembering to ask such questions and then

attending to the answers. It is a way to look beyond the job to the person who

fills it. While this type of basic attention to emotional well-being is good, the

emotional support offered by a principal to his or her staff should more

specifically serve the goal of excellence of teaching and learning. What are the

elements of this kind of specific emotional support? I think the first kind of

emotional support a principal should offer is his or her honesty, exhibited in an

unwillingness to play political games, to play favorites, or to settle for second-rate

teaching. Barth (2001) quotes Deborah Meier, principal at Boston's Mission Hill

Elementary School, as saying:

> A school is a community. By virtue of the fact that teachers are citizens
>
> of that community, I expect each of them to take responsibility in some
>
> way for the well-being of the school. That's what members of a
>
> community do. (p. 110)

The best kind of emotional support I feel a principal can offer a teacher is a

combination of high expectations in the classroom and confidence in his or her

wider leadership abilities. "We are beginning to believe that all children can

learn. Similarly, when principals expect teachers to become committed and

responsible school leaders, they instill the equally lofty message that all teachers can lead" (Barth, 2001 p. 110-111). Encouraging teachers to assume leadership roles requires a principal to trust them with making and executing decisions and then standing behind them in the face of criticism. Principals support teachers emotionally by not indulging in finger pointing when something goes wrong but rather seeking to ascertain how the problem situation might be handled in the future. And principals can give emotional support by publicly recognizing the efforts of the teaching staff. Barth (2001) finds it

> ...ironic that teachers, principals, and parents see clearly the value of student recognition and have assembled an array of ways to offer recognition to students, from gold stars to scholarships, while developing no comparable offerings for the outstanding work of teachers.... Recognition costs little – nothing in dollars – but when that alarm rings day after day at 6:00 a.m., recognition is among the reasons a teacher keeps bounding out of bed with alacrity. (p. 114)

The hiring and support of good teachers relates to the national leadership standards (Wilmore, 2002) in several ways. Building and maintaining an effective teaching staff is crucial to the development and articulation of the vision of the school as a community (Standard 1), the encouragement of staff professional growth (Standard 2), the support of learning through resource allocation (Standard 3), and the demonstration of integrity and fairness toward teachers (Standard 5).

Promoting Student Achievement

What are we about in education if not student achievement? It seems ironic that sometimes the focus on the achievement level of the students can get lost in the shuffle. It seems we too often approach the job in a hit-or-miss fashion. We write curriculum and put it on the shelf. We devise standards and benchmarks from which to teach and then attribute low standardized test results to students' low effort, inability to learn, and/or lack of family support for learning. We see students falling through the cracks of the educational structure we have built, and we feel powerless to do much more than retrieve the struggling students only to to teach them the same material using the techniques of either more time or less substance. The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, dubbed "No Child Left Behind," has generated a wide variety of reactions, both critical and celebratory. It has also served to focus concentrated – if somewhat frantic – attention on student achievement data.

It's not as if information on collecting and analyzing student achievement data didn't exist before NCLB put the fear of sanctions into every public school setting. In fact, researchers in the field of education had already begun to publish studies and recommendations regarding the importance of basing all decisions in education around student achievement data.

One of the most prolific proponents of the use of such data in school improvement efforts has been Mike Schmoker, a former secondary English teacher and central office administrator. Schmoker (1995) was an early advocate

of the importance of making decisions based on the results of student achievement

data and diligently putting to use what we know and are learning about effective

school improvement (Schmoker, 1997b). He also suggested focusing our efforts

on a few goals, one of which must be improving student achievement (Schmoker,

1997a). Schmoker's culminating works on the subject to date are his books

dealing with the importance of continually looking at results in order to assess

effectiveness and his suggestions for strategies of putting results data to use in

making decisions for school improvement (Schmoker, 1999). Even before NCLB

inspired the educational community's renewed diatribe against standardized tests,

Schmoker (2001) expressed the opinion that, although they might be incomplete

and somewhat approximate, standardized tests have value because they are

"numerical and intelligible" (p. 63) and provide "vital information about patterns

of strengths and weaknesses among students in a classroom, a school, or a

district" (p. 64).

We are currently working to close the achievement gap. We must admit to

ourselves and to the public that, while standardized tests may not present the

entire picture, the responsibility for the gap still lies with the schools. We must

ask ourselves, then, how can we use these imperfect tests and other data to best

effect change?

Perhaps the first goal of every principal is to acquire, and then to impart to

his or her staff, what has been termed assessment literacy (Stiggins, 1995). Data,

no matter how good it is, is meaningless unless able to be interpreted and put to

effective use. The field of education has experienced an explosion of data availability, and, particularly in the years since the inception of NCLB, educators often perceive that this data is being used more as public and political surveillance than as a tool for meaningful improvement (Earl & Fullan, 2003). In fact, most teachers and many administrators still have little immediate feedback on how their efforts affect student achievement on standardized tests (Schmoker, 2003). It is critical, therefore, that all who are involved in education become skilled in the interpretation and use of data (Popham, 2004). Software manufacturers, most notably Swiftknowledge, Inc. (2004), have responded to the need for clean and manageable data by marketing programs to help with this effort. The goal of Swiftknowledge and similar programs is to get good and usable data into the hands of teachers, the people who can best put the information to use.

Perhaps the greatest challenge, however, is not to let public pressure or the fear of sanctions under NCLB interrupt or misdirect the work toward improving student achievement. A focus on student achievement does not imply that data can be collected and acted on in some sort of vacuum. Data alone – no matter how well understood – will not bring about a rise in student achievement.

Peter Senge (1990) has been among those who have helped the educational community to understand that schools comprise complex interdependent social systems. In addition to student achievement data, an educational leader must also consider data-based best practices related to increased student achievement in order to avoid repeating past failed school reforms, and he or she must also keep

constantly in mind the context in which problems are identified and solutions are proposed. That being said, a consistent focus on student achievement also allows the principal to expect the best not only from students, but from teachers as well.

If conversation and efforts always center around student achievement, it encourages teachers to take responsibility for their actions and to accept that in the classroom the "teacher is the variable" (Whitaker, 2003, p.13). A focus on student achievement also makes efforts at assisting teachers to improve their instruction – or, if those efforts aren't effective, to find another occupation – a professional rather than a personal issue.

So how would a new principal go about improving student achievement? Before even being hired, the candidate would be well-advised to go into the interview with a basic knowledge of how the school was doing according to the required measurements.

Thanks to NCLB, there exists a wealth of comparative student achievement data. Based on that knowledge, he or she could then ask questions in the interview to help ascertain the attitude of the administrative team, the teachers, and the community toward its students' current achievement levels.

How do the stakeholders view the results and, perhaps no less importantly, each other? Does there exist a culture of blame, citing external factors such as low socioeconomics, poor teachers, insufficient funding, or is there recognition that to improve student achievement, the structure of the system itself must be examined and the structural flaws corrected? If the former is the case, are the

teachers or parents blaming each other or the past principal? A culture of blame can be one the most corrosive elements in any system and prevents the search for objective solutions (Thornton, Peltier, & Perreault, 2004).

If the former principal is perceived to be at fault, as soon as the new principal signs the contract, he or she should accept responsibility for previous achievement results, in order to model taking responsibility rather than affixing blame. Even without the element of blame, a new principal should begin his or her tenure with an eye toward building a collaborative culture and promoting increased capacity within each staff member. If there are concerns about low test scores or a large achievement gap, it will take an extra measure of diplomacy and tact to help prevent returning staff from taking a defensive stance.

A new principal should find out what the teachers know. Often, it's the teachers who can best ascertain what is getting in the way of their students' achievement. It is more likely that the teachers are aware of how the taught curriculum for their subjects compares to what is being tested. Ask them if there are concerns which need to be addressed. Have teachers compare the timing of instruction with the dates the tests are given to detect if areas of low performance might be corrected by a change in the instructional schedule. In other words, the principal should be able to help the staff pose the right questions to find the gaps in the system.

Any principal – new or otherwise – can best help a school by helping to identify these systemic gaps or inadequacies. While other problems closer to the

end result might initially seem easier to address, the majority of what goes wrong in a school district – or any organization – is due to a gap in the system itself, rather than with any student's or staff member's lack of skill or ineffectiveness (Deming, 1986).

Just as the teacher is the variable in the classroom, the principal is the variable in the school (Whitaker, 2003). The required focus on student achievement is not just about the scores or type and level of instruction. Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) identified several characteristics of effective educational leaders, which are statistically related to student achievement. These characteristics include fostering a sense of community and a collaborative vision, establishing a set of operating procedures and routines, protecting teachers from distracting issues, and establishing strong lines of communication. Those four aspects of the culture are perhaps the first ones to monitor and on which to spend precious time and energy. It is within this complex context – this living, interconnected entity – that a principal helps to foster understanding of achievement gaps, identification of possible solutions, and insistence on the best from all teachers and from him or herself.

The ability to create and maintain a focus on student achievement would meet multiple educational leadership standards (Wilmore, 2002). Within a culture of community (Standard 1 and 4), collaboration can instill a sense of trust and a freedom to strive to do one's best. As that culture is growing, other steps can be taken that can add to the collaborative and professional atmosphere. Professional

development can be aligned with student achievement goals. Innovation and

action research can be encouraged. Ideally, rather than pushing the staff toward a

common goal of improved student achievement, the principal, guides the staff,

asking a few of the right questions at the right time, thereby allowing all involved

to reach a broadly-supported decision on what resources allocated toward the

goal of student achievement and in what manner (Standards 2 and 3). Even if that

utopian atmosphere is never quite fully attained, it should still remain the goal,

and every step toward it should be celebrated (Standard 1).

## Promoting Parental Involvement

Research shows that parent involvement in education is the single most

influential factor in school effectiveness. Increased parent involvement has been

shown to build a climate of student academic success, higher attendance rates,

lower violence and suspension rates, stronger community support, and greater

teacher satisfaction (Peterson & Skiba, 2001; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). In the

wake of the No Child Left Behind Act, it is additionally important to note that a

well-designed parent involvement program can raise low-income students' test

scores to levels expected of middle-income students, thereby minimizing the

impact of socioeconomic status on student performance (Jones, 2001). Anne

Henderson, (cited in Amundson, 1998), an educational policy consultant with the

Center for Law and Education, summarized nearly fifty studies of parental

involvement over a decade ago and concluded:

> Programs designed with strong parental involvement produce
> students who perform better than otherwise identical programs that
> do not involve parents as thoroughly, or that do not involve them at
> all. Schools that relate well to their communities have student
> bodies that outperform other schools. Children whose parents help
> them at home and stay in touch with the school score higher than
> children of similar aptitudes and family background whose parents
> are not involved. Schools where children are failing improve
> dramatically when parents are called in to help. (p. 35)

Parent involvement programs in public schools can also create greater

cultural and personal understanding between ethnic and socio-economic

populations in a school district (Dodd & Konzal, 2000) and can lead to greater

success of students in later life (Epstein, 1995).

     All schools make some attempts at parental involvement, but it is the

disorganized nature and low level of many of those attempts that make them less

than meaningful. Daniel Kinnaman (2002)described a taxonomy of four levels of

parent involvement ranging from the "supporter,"(p. 72) at the low end, who

attends events and monitors homework, to the "developer" (p. 72), at the high

end, who is actively involved in planning and executing school-improvement

initiatives. Joyce Epstein (2001) has proposed a model of overlapping spheres of

family, school, and community influence and suggests, from her two decades of study, that the goal is to create "school-like families" and "family-like schools" (p. 17). Fortunately, in her work as director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, she has gone beyond the role of research scientist and has continually striven to provide a useful framework for schools attempting to improve their level of parent and community involvement as well as support and recognition for such activities through her National Network of Partnership Schools (2003).

As early as the mid-nineties, Epstein (1995) developed a five-step plan to create school, family, and community partnerships and identified the six types of involvement, providing a researched and field-tested framework within which to work. Her techniques have been proven and revised as schools have implemented the plan.

As a principal, I would look to Epstein's (1995) work to provide guidance on how to foster parent involvement in an effort to create an excellent environment for learning. The following proposed plan is drawn from her articles and book and from the website of the National Network of Partnership Schools (2003), which she directs. As a new principal, my first step would be to identify the teacher leaders in the building who are already effectively using parent and community involvement strategies to encourage learning. These teachers would be the most likely to be interested and energetic members of a partnership action team. They would also likely be able to provide the names of parents, non-

certified staff, or board members who would be good candidates to serve on the team.

Epstein (1995) suggests six team members as a minimum number so that one person can oversee each type of parent/community involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Terms would be for two or three years to provide continuity and a rotating membership. Assuming I am working in a smaller, rural district comparable to the one in which I currently teach, I would keep membership on the team to six, provided six effective members could be identified.

Secondly, I would apply for district funding for the project while still in the planning phase, even if this initial funding were relatively minimal. Having funding in place is important in order to demonstrate district support at the first meeting rather than presenting the group with nothing more than starry-eyed altruism. Too often teachers and parents are ready to do what needs to be done, but they are told that they will have to either accomplish the task with existing resources or raise the funds for the program. Starting off ill-equipped for action can dampen - if not snuff out - the group's enthusiasm. Also, if the team's first action is to start planning fund-raisers, it will get in the way of the real planning they need to be doing.

Before the first meeting, I would provide information to the group about the research that proves the importance of parent involvement. They should also

receive information about the guidance and support available from the National

Network of Partnership Schools (2003). For example, the Partnership Network

website provides many suggestions for assessing the current patterns of parent

and community involvement as well as methods that partner schools have used

with success. It will be helpful for the team to know that they have resources

available to them.

It would be my job, as a member of the action team, to present some

possible solutions, but to also encourage the other members to research and think

of possibilities on their own. The team should act together to assess the current

environment and to identify objectives and goals. From these decisions, the team

will develop a three-year plan and a detailed one-year plan. Of course,

procedures will be developed to periodically assess what is and isn't working to

keep the goals on target.

Even though we may be well into the academic year before the team is

ready to take action, I would encourage the group to actively identify some initial

steps that could be taken before the end of the current school year. Epstein (2001)

encourages trying to find at least one activity in each of the six areas to implement

initially. Action is important to the momentum of the group. Even a small

success can give the group confidence and a renewed desire to accomplish the

group's goals.

In addition to serving on the team, and ensuring the implementation of the

team's decisions, an important aspect of my role will be the collection of data and

the delivery of information to the group. It is important to establish a data base of parent and community resources (Bloomstran, 2002), but it would also be critical, to systematically compile and communicate data on relevant student issues such as attendance, behavior, and performance; those issues which would most likely be affected by a comprehensive and well-organized partnership program.

As I contemplate what such a partnership program could become, I envision the effort expanding beyond the building I lead to the rest of the school district. I see the school becoming an active member of the National Network of Partnership Schools and a lead participant in an expanding school/family/community partnership effort in the state.

I strongly believe that an effort toward greater parent and community involvement would be the single most beneficial thing I could promote as a new principal. Such an effort would correspond to several of the national leadership standards (Wilmore, 2002). It would involve the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school vision, admittedly with team assistance (Standard 1). As we all worked together to make our school a better place in which to work and learn, there would be a greater feeling of shared culture (Standard 2). The funding, data collection and communication required toward this effort would take organizational and management skills (Standard 3). I would need to help the team make decisions for the good of all, ensuring that no group is treated unfairly (Standard 5) and demonstrate and encourage a sensitivity to the political, social, and economic context of the community (Standard 6). And

finally, serving as a facilitator toward greater family and community collaboration would directly address the partnership-building requirement of Standard 4.

## Leading with Courage

All priorities described thus far will mean little, however, without the courage to serve in an often lonely position in which one quickly realizes that there is no way to please everyone all of the time. For anyone in a leadership position, it takes a great deal of courage to weather uncertainty and change and help others do so as well, to sustain initiatives, to do what's right, to truly hear opinions that differ from one's own but which may yet hold insight, to care and be vulnerable, to trust others and be in service to them, to maintain balance between personal and professional time, and finally it takes courage to fail and to learn from that failure. I believe it is courage that helps a skilled manager to be a true leader.

Margaret Wheatley (2002) uses the following eloquent description of courage in which she exhorts leaders to maintain a strong spiritual core in the face of chaos, of which there is plenty in the field of education, as in life.

Courage comes from our hearts. Where do we find the courage to be leaders today? The etymology of the word courage gives us the answer. Courage comes from the French word for heart (coeur). When we are deeply affected, when our hearts open to an issue or person, courage pours from our hearts. (p. 44)

And Wheatley is not the first author to emphasize the importance of courage.

Walston (2003) quotes the writings of Aristotle, who believed that courage is the first human virtue, because it makes all the other virtues possible. Heishman (2002) also cites early writers on the topic of courage.

> Hemingway defined (courage) simply as 'grace under pressure.' Pericles pictured the courageous person as the one who '…best knows the meaning of what is sweet and what is terrible, and then goes out undeterred to meet what is to come.' (p. 22)

Why is courage important in educational leadership? Johnson (2004) tells of the work of Morem Klein, the director of an international training consortium, who has spent years studying why some teams excel in the face of adversity and others do not. He believes that the most important characteristic of such teams is courage. What does it mean to have courage - to have heart and spirit- as an educational leader? What does it mean to encourage others, to bolster the heart and spirit of those with whom we work in the service of education?

Much has been written about the management details of educational leadership. Principals are data managers, communicators, disciplinarians, results monitors, and so on, much of which requires a high level of organization and considerable intellectual ability. But Wheatley (2002) reminds us that "courage does not come from the root word for strategic planning or multivariate analysis" (p. 44).

A principal who acquires the strategies of leadership without cultivating the heart and soul of leadership is only doing part of the job and perhaps not even the most important part. In the wake of corporate scandals and international disasters, we would do well to remember our place in a larger system of interconnected beings. Every decision we make, every human connection we either cultivate or

let wither, will have an effect beyond our finite boundaries. In addition, it can sometimes seem tempting, in the face of external pressures, to let those external events define who we are and the decisions we make. We must be able to find a quiet place in the middle of the storm where we can ask, "What is going on in my heart?" (Thompson, 2004, p. 61). If a leader can get back to that center, he or she can lead with heart and with courage.

Courage in educational leaders is especially critical now. Our system of public education is under particular scrutiny from without. Those pressures added to all the rest might make it difficult to stay focused on the essential goals of doing what is best for students, for teachers, for the community and for our society. Who can stay focused on those issues when day-to-day pressures mount or when your school's name appears on the Schools in Need of Assistance list (SINA)? How does a principal resist the temptation to cut curriculum or activities in order to drill the narrow subject areas of the test? If we radically change our priorities in the face of high-stakes testing, does that mean that we didn't believe we were effectively educating the students before? Courage will help a principal and a school community continue to ask, What do we know in our hearts to be the best thing for students?

To have courage is to think for yourself. It is to reason independently when assaulted with conflicting opinions. It is to have clear and firm values, of which you are proud, and which support you under stress. It is to have faith – in yourself, your family, your organization, your religion, your country, your ideals, your profession, your friends. Each person has faith in different arenas. What matters is that you be capable of faith, which makes you independent of the winds of doctrine

that blow around you. You have the power to generate inner data that

exert more influence than external data. (Koestenbaum, 1991, p. 189)

To have courage is to be authentic, and authenticity must be cultivated.

Part of the process to developing authenticity is to have the courage to be truly

reflective of one's thoughts and actions, to be able to move beyond the areas of

comfort, to be unafraid to seek change within ourselves and within the

organizations we lead.

Courage ignites leadership...It propels us to ask, What really went

on? In the present, courage sparks energy, asking, What is really going

on...And courage invites a common exploration of the future. It challenges

us to search for common good amongst the diversity of perspectives

available to us. It searches for unity without uniformity. Courage takes us

through the transition from authenticity as concept to authenticity as

embodiment. (Terry, 1993, pp. 246-247)

In short, I believe that it is impossible to be a good leader without a

fundamental and humble courage or a willingness to cultivate it. The absence of

courage is fear, and there are already too many fearful leaders in education. I

agree with the university professor of educational leadership who believes that a

school administrator must go to work every day knowing that he or she can walk

away from the job rather than compromise one's principles in order to keep it. A

leader with courage will stay focused on what is important both for the school and

for the people in the school and will strive to be an intentional and calm presence

at the center of any storm that may blow up in his or her building.

Maintaining courage primarily addresses the educational leadership

standard 5 of leading with integrity (Wilmore, 2002), but in essence this one

quality has the potential to lay the groundwork for effective implementation of all the other five standards. Without integrity, trust is undermined and mistakes, which inevitably occur, can begin to seem like dishonesty.

## Summary

I believe that an educational leader must walk into any position with something of a dual personality. He or she must be able to examine and interpret the minutiae of research data and best practice, to handle the day-to-day crises of students, staff, and a community, and to work with such details as schedules and commitment of resources. He or she must continually be willing to ask, Why do we do things this way? Does it work? How might we do better?

On the other hand, in order to handle details effectively over time, the educational leader must also be able to continually keep sight of the larger context within which all those details exist. The building principal must be able to take what he or she learns at workshops and conferences and apply that knowledge within the context of the school and wider community (Fullan, 2002). A principal must understand that to institute change means causing an adjustment or reaction in the overarching system of the school and wider community (Senge, 1990). He or she must also understand that no sustainable change can occur without broad-based commitment to a shared vision and that defining that shared vision may mean learning how to follow first in order to lead later (Sergiovanni, 1992). And finally, the inspired and inspiring educational leader never ceases efforts to bring the external and internal together both personally and organizationally. He or she strives to remove the barriers of ego – both his or her own and that of others - in an attempt to create a better whole (Daft & Lengel, 1998).

In sum, returning to the ideals stated in the introduction of this paper, my vision of educational leadership involves personally cultivating depth of understanding, seeking breadth of experience, and acting with quiet humility in the service of education specifically and humanity generally.

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