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# What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

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# What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

## **Abstract**

I believe that the role of the principal is vital in the development of a school climate and a culture where instructional leadership emerges from the teachers themselves. Building a culture that supports and builds capacity for shared leadership and learning takes work. "Such a culture doesn't magically appear; it evolves through explicit and intentional work at defining, redesigning, and continuously improving every aspect of the way they do school" (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001, p. 114). Although every person within the organization plays a role in initiating this culture, shared responsibility and leadership, the most significant role a principal can play is in the "creation, encouragement, and refinement of the symbols and symbolic activity that give meaning to the organization" (Schein, 1997, p.5).

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

by: Cheri Thomas Cederlund

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Master of Arts in Education.

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WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Cheri Thomas Cederlund

July 2004

Dr. Robert Decker

## What I Believe About Leadership and Education

### A Reflective Essay

I am a humanist, an encourager, an optimist, and a risk taker. I am extremely reflective in my thoughts and actions. I look for honest evaluation, and I expect accountability and fairness. It is my goal to be a principal.

I began the profession of teaching over thirty years ago. The very first day of my career in Pequannock, New Jersey, our professional organization voted to strike. That dispute was quickly resolved, and for five and a half years I taught Home Economics and ran the Cooperative Home Economics program, designed to help at-risk students find and keep jobs. I also started a sex education program and a childcare program for preschoolers in the community. I worked with students to prepare and serve luncheons for visitors, and I coached girl's basketball. When I got a job in Waterloo in 1979, I did not expect to get laid off three times, but a counselor helped me reflect on the growth there is in movement. She was a very wise woman!

Expo has allowed my creative organizational skills shine. I was allowed to design, develop, and build a childcare center whose focus was to help teen parents graduate from high school. For sixteen years I nurtured a growing program and its staff. Now, as I reflect on why I waited so long to get into administration, I realize that my need to lead was being filled in the role of childcare director.

### My Values and Beliefs

I am proud to be an optimist. I have been called a "Pollyanna" and a "goody two shoes", but I prefer to think as Colin Powel does "Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier" (Powell,

1996, p. 1). I believe in truth, justice, and the American way. I believe that this country is great because of its government and sometimes in spite of its government. I am passionate about public education and the belief that what makes democracy work is the education of all people. I believe that schools are vital elements in every community. I know that we must educate children in both mind and morals. I have experienced small communities and metropolitan areas, and I have seen good and bad in both. I believe in holding people accountable. I understand the importance of process and procedure in promoting equity and value for people.

Personally and professionally, I want my life to focus on helping others discover how to get what they want in ways that offer dignity and respect for themselves and others. I want teachers to enjoy their jobs because they are competent while creating an environment where students feel safe and secure and are able to meet academic potential and develop talents. I want my school to be one where teachers offer adventures in learning which create problem solvers, develop moral character, expand intellectual growth, develop talents, and motivate students to become self actualized.

I want staff to share stories about student's strengths and encourage parents to help their children in all areas of life. I want coaches and parents to understand that high school sports are a means to becoming a better person for the majority, not a way to earn a full ride to college or become a professional athlete. The lessons of winning and losing, of working everyday on something of interest, of reaping physical benefits, and learning the game will produce happier and healthier people.

## Visionary Leadership

Vision is a critical element in the leadership quest, and I know that good schools have a foundation of shared mission, vision, values and goals. I believe many school principals or assistant principals are missing this critical element and often are not even aware of the need. Vision is my passion, my strong suit. I believe with all of my being that an organization must constantly evaluate where it is going. When Expo struggles with the rules, the lack of effort of students, the descent among staff, I am the one saying, "What is our vision?" Where do we want our school to go? Some want to create more rules, more requirements, and more obstacles for students however; if we can create a vision for what each of us must do, we have a chance to look at the reality of what is needed and how rules and programs fit our students. We must "begin with the end in mind" (Covey, 1989). Vision is the driving force behind building a future and investing where we believe it counts for our students and our school.

"A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 19.)

"We would argue that being clear about school mission is probably more important today than it's ever been" (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001, p. 23). Some principals do not put emphasis on a school vision or mission. Some consider vision to be the "soft stuff." The most successful schools will find a way to channel staff and student efforts toward a clear, commonly shared purpose for student learning. They will create opportunities for teachers to collaborate and help

one another achieve the purpose, and teachers in these schools take collective responsibility for student learning (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001, p. 67).

When a school is working on its purpose and the direction it wants to go, it is important to not only think about the vision, but also the mission, values, and goals of the learning community (Eaker, DuFour, 2002, p. 3). When working with these four functions, the questions become: "Why do we exist? What kind of school do we hope to become? How must we behave in order to create the kind of school we hope to become? What steps are we going to take and when will we take them?"

I really appreciated Wilmore's statement about vision: "It simply means that at this moment in time, this is the school's vision" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 21). Everything does grow and change. This is difficult for non-visionary staff to comprehend. The philosophical framework of vision has four steps: development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of the vision (Wilmore, 2002, p. 20). Collectively deciding where a school is going is the development of the vision. It involves the stakeholders' time, quality conversation, and data to determine where the school is now, and where it wants to be in the future. Articulation of the vision is the communication of the vision. Each of the stakeholders must be a part of the vision, and each needs to be able to communicate it effectively. Implementation is making that vision a reality and everyone must be involved and empowered. People will support what they have helped to build. Stewardship of the vision is where I often see failure. It is necessary for success to stay focused on the vision, then deeply reflect, and analyze its effectiveness. This is a tough assignment. "A true steward of the vision is always there to encourage others and themselves to

get back up when they fall down" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 23). This is possible, but I must reiterate it is difficult. One must keep an eye on the true vision and evaluate the progress of that vision with its designers.

Expo completed a mission, vision, and belief statement I was instrumental in creating. It was a long process, and getting the staff to believe in the importance of this document was a monumental task.

As I reflect on the process, I conclude it is the process of writing the document as a staff that is more important than the document itself. I am proud of the work we did and the expert resources we utilized in completing this process. I believe I was successful in creating a process, which developed a vision of learning for Expo that promotes the success of all students.

I have had many wonderful opportunities to be visionary and see those "Blue Sky" ideas become reality. I have had many principals who supported my vision for the school or the departments where I have worked. I greatly appreciated their trust in allowing me to do what I felt needed to be done. Allowing others to branch off with projects that fit within the framework of the overall vision is important. There is no way one person could, or should, know all. Each and every staff member is important and needs opportunities to develop professionally and help the school grow and change. That leads me to a second critical element, instructional leadership.

### Instructional Leadership

"A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional development"(Wilmore, 2002, p. 32).

If a principal is truly an instructional leader, she is viewed as the leader of leaders (Eaker, et al. 2002). This is the part of being a principal that did concern me the most because I felt I was weakest at figuring out data, and what to do with it. The many practicum experiences and the resources we have used in Curriculum and Instruction with Dr. Englebrecht have built my confidence and increased my knowledge.

Instructional leadership starts with the climate, the way the building feels; and the culture, the way things are done. These create the powerful conception of what the school values, what its expectations are, and what image it projects (Wilmore, 2002, p. 33).

I believe that the role of the principal is vital in the development of a school climate and a culture where instructional leadership emerges from the teachers themselves. Building a culture that supports and builds capacity for shared leadership and learning takes work. "Such a culture doesn't magically appear; it evolves through explicit and intentional work at defining, redesigning, and continuously improving every aspect of the way they do school" (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001, p. 114). Although every person within the organization plays a role in initiating this culture, shared responsibility and leadership, the most significant role a principal can play is in the "creation, encouragement, and refinement of the symbols and symbolic activity that give meaning to the organization....it is the important, informal aspects of their symbolic authority that often enable principals to exercise influence effectively. In short, the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture" (Schein, 1997, p.5). Create and manage culture! What a simple truth that is to embrace.

I was Principal at Expo during our May Term, and Expo sponsored a softball tournament. Metro, the alternative school from Cedar Rapids brought forty students to play. My past history with the Metro campus told me that I needed to be at the tournament to make sure things progressed in a healthy, safe manner. It was a freezing cold day, and I was dressed in sweats, jacket, earmuffs, hat, and gloves. There was no defining way to tell I was the principal, no badge, no suit. When the students' language and gestures got out of hand, I went to the other coach and asked him to please have his kids stop the profanity. He went directly to the two students who were the worst offenders, one on the pitchers mound and one in center field. They stopped the vulgar language and the game continued in a healthy, competitive fashion. I stayed at the field where the same team from Metro was playing for the next game. This time they were doing chants of U.G.L.Y ... and other demeaning and degrading insults. I went to their dugout and spoke to them calmly about stopping these insults and inappropriate chants or I would have to end the game before someone got hurt. I then went to our students, told them what I had said to the Metro team and what I expected from them. The game continued, again in a calm, fun, healthy, and competitive way. When I read Schein's statement "the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture", the reality hit home. I expected and requested that they act differently. I created the culture I expected, and students conformed. I also knew the consequence of sending them home was a reality, and the Expo students responded because their reality was that I would follow through.

I believe that instructional leadership is more than culture and climate: good schools have a focus on results as evidenced by a commitment to continuous improvement. School

effectiveness should be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions (Eaker et al., 2002). Educators are being pulled to use data within the understanding that data make better teaching decisions to improve student performance. Educators need to use data to help guide their decisions regarding what actions should be taken at a systems level to improve teaching and learning (cf. Chapter 281.12 of the Iowa Administrative Code). This statewide initiative is known as "School Improvement" (IA. DE, 2003, p. 0-27).

As education moves into the 21st Century, the research, the technology, and the politicians are demanding more and more from educators. Teachers, Para-professionals, and principals must work together as colleagues to improve the teaching and the learning in school. When working toward school improvement, everyone involved must understand how systems work and how each individual within the system contributes to the performance of the whole. It is critical that everyone in the organization willingly take responsibility for the performance of the whole system (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001).

The other day in a staff meeting I was reflecting on the fact that our students who did not reach the graduation goal of 251 in math were all young women of color. It was stated as a concern, a fact. A male math teacher spoke up, "And you are saying that is our fault? Well then what is your point?" My response was that it is not our fault, but it is our responsibility, all of our responsibility, to teach our students what they need to know to survive in this world. The question is: How can we do better?

I know from experience and from current research that good teaching and learning go hand in hand. It is respectful, learning happens in an environment where learners are active

participants, where they are required to give effort and they are directed by goals (Leithwood, Aitken, & Jantzi, 2001). It is interactive and student focused, when the focus of teaching puts the students own efforts to understanding at the center of the educational learning, there is dramatic change (Hoy & Hoy, 2003). It involves preparation, planning, and alignment, and it develops the whole person. Understanding content is not enough; the material must be transformed through instructional design into sequences of activities and assignments that make it accessible to students. All aspects of the instructional design should be appropriate to both the student and the content. Assessment tools must be appropriate in substance and in process to the learning goals and to the students being assessed (Danielson, 2002).

One of the most important cultural shifts that must take place in schools is a shift in the primary focus from teaching to learning (Eaker, et al., 2002). The main difference is in the questions we ask. We need to have deep collaborative discussions about the key questions that are associated with learning, and include the following:

- What exactly do we expect students to learn?
- How will we know what students are learning?
- How can we assist and support students in their learning?
- Based on a collaborative analysis of the results of our efforts, what can we do to improve student learning?
- How can we recognize and celebrate improvements in student learning?

(Eaker, et al., 2002, p. 19)

It is ultimately teachers who determine the success of students; they are the ones who are in the best position to transform students' lives, to motivate and inspire students, and to get students to do things they never thought they could do. When I reflect on the best teaching I have ever done, I am proud I worked to be caring, encouraging, challenging, organized, creative, and motivating. These are the roles of a great leader, and I strive to be a great leader. So how do principals help educators develop the insight, knowledge and skills they need to become effective classroom and school leaders and better able to increase student learning? Professional development needs to be more than the teaching and learning that we do with students. Adult learning needs to be different. Instructors of adults need to establish a positive learning climate and a spirit of mutual inquiry. "Something dramatic happens to their self-concepts when people define themselves as adults. They begin to see their normal role in life no longer as being full-time learners. They see themselves increasingly as producers or doers" (NASSP, Sept. 2002, p.67). This suggests a teacher's self-concept as it relates to learning demands learning to involve personal freedom, choice, and relevant experiences. This discovery will promote "motivation to learn and a strong desire to continue the learning process" (NASSP, 2002, p. 67). The challenge for principals is to create a professional environment conducive to self-directedness and allow it within the parameters of the school mission and goals.

### Collaborative Leadership

A third critical element is collaborative leadership; schools and communities working together in a collaborative partnership for the benefit of society. It is the principal's responsibility to give a voice to all stakeholders, identify common values, and resolve conflict while building

the school, its unity, and its vision. It can be very challenging when you are working at bringing all stakeholders to the table.

“A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 66).

My entire career has been spent working collaboratively with communities. In my first job in 1972 I worked to place students on the job in Pequannock, New Jersey. I then moved into setting up a free preschool program for parents utilizing the child development students for instruction and opportunity for all groups. When I moved to Waterloo I continued my collaboration by offering a dinner with the high school theater class, having advanced foods class cater the North Central Evaluation team reception, and inviting a large number of community people to speak to my classes.

When I started at Expo, I had the opportunity to start a childcare center where I worked with the Department of Human Services, other childcare directors, and numerous agencies that dealt in health and human service. I have served on the board of Family and Children’s Council, Young Parents Together, Site Council, Partners in Education, and our church session. I have served on community advisory boards for Carl Perkins funding and have spoken to many community groups about various projects. I do believe collaboration is important, but it can also be very difficult.

Waterloo has certainly had its share of conflict over the past fifteen years. I was personally involved when the Board of Health decided to put school based health centers in the

schools. I felt strongly this was a service our high school students needed. It was on this platform that Elaine Jaquith gained power. At one point, when I tripped over her oxygen tube that was strung across a doorway, she started yelling "She's trying to kill me; She's trying to kill me!" It is very funny now, and a great story, but at the time I was trying to treat her with dignity and respect, and yet keep her from searching for the principal's office. It was a very stressful time. It was a fight worth fighting, though it was hard and the opposition was mean and unfair. Luckily what's good for kids won out over the evil of power and control, I maintained my dignity and respect and learned a great deal about working with the opposition.

I believe that I am a good steward of our vision both inside the school and in our community. I know that it is the role of the principal to be visible, proactive, and tell the school's story to the outside world. We need to share the triumphs as well as our needs. I am amazed what community members and groups will do for a school when they understand the need. Schools do need help, and the Partners in Education program the Waterloo schools have in place are a wonderful opportunity for the school and the partners. Students need more adults in their lives and more opportunities than our buildings and staff can offer. It is our role to improve society by producing literate, self-supporting citizens who make a contribution to their world. We must however ask for help. As a parent I want help, and as a school we must ask for help.

All of our tomorrows are directly linked to our children. As a collaborative school team, we should plan ways to solicit and involve multiple stakeholders from families and the entire community to become involved and invested in the progress of our schools toward our collaboratively developed vision of excellence (Wilmore, 2002). We need all the resources;

time, talent, expertise, and money. They are all needed in the development of capable young people. But we also need support. Moral support of the entire community is critical to the success of public education and it is the job of the principal and administrative team to create the team approach. This is our community. The river does not keep the problems on the other side. All children deserve the best, and it is the responsibility of everyone to work at creating that reality, one person at a time. We must promote the success of all students.

In his book *Collaborative Leadership: Developing Effective Partnerships in Communities and Schools* Hank Rubin (2002) explains that building and sustaining collaborative relationships with other agencies, institutions, and community groups is the only way educational leaders can accomplish the seemingly impossible task of helping all students match ever-rising expectations. He believes that collaboration is “democracy’s mandate” but “the wonderfully complex relationship of schools, communities, and legislatures creates a hierarchy of educational leaders with *influence* but little *power*” (NASSP, 2002, p. 78).

### Ethical Leadership

“A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 80). Being known as an ethical leader, a person with integrity and honor is most important to me. I work hard at walking my talk, and we all know that at times that can be very difficult. I remember saying to a mother of one of my daughters classmates that my daughter was not going to quit; she had to finish out her year of band. Then after meeting with the director, and getting nowhere with a discussion of how he was treating students unfairly, I let her quit. I am sure that the

mother felt I had no integrity. To me, listening to my daughter, and then understanding her was more important, I do know my integrity was damaged. I am sure that will happen at times as a principal, especially as the element of perception is added to the formula. In the book *The Four Agreements*, by don Migal Ruiz (1997), one of the four agreements is “to be impeccable with your word”. I know this is important, and I work daily on this important part of who I am.

I believe that handling mistakes in a strong yet humble manner is important. I also know I must have a plan for how to fix those mistakes. I believe in treating all people with dignity and respect, and along with that, is the responsibility of treating them fairly. I get angry when people who have the power do not act with integrity. The Waterloo district has had a principal who had sex in his office, two principals who are married and have beaten their girlfriends in public and been charged with the offense, many who have screamed at staff members while students were present, and several who could not manage the budgets and keep track of money. What is the difference between poor judgment and integrity? Perhaps in the years between Watergate and Monica it is hard for America to determine that question!

There are moral and ethical reasons for teaching all students well. For better or worse, success in school is a ticket to opportunity in the wider world. If a school wants to help students to escape poverty it must help them achieve at least a high school diploma, and today the education need is much more. But escaping poverty is only one of the issues. Building a degree of confidence with which one approaches new challenges is reflective of past successes. School success or failure is an essential component of an American student’s identity.

Principals make tough decisions on a daily basis, but sometimes the rules and the ethics do not match. As the building administrator, I have been faced with these kinds of challenges. My third week at Expo, one of our students was shot. There had been a party, with many of our students and some outsiders in attendance. One of the outsiders pulled a gun, our student did not believe it was a real gun, rushed him, and was shot. Several of our students took him to the hospital. It was touch and go for a while and luckily he pulled through. The bullet could not be removed from his chest and he was in the hospital for several days. His girlfriend and best friend, both Expo seniors, were at his bedside for two days.

This is where the rules, the ethics, and compassion clash. At Expo we have formulated rules about attendance. It affects credit as well as the rights they earn as students. I made a decision about two of the students who were very close to this young man, and excused two days of their absences. In our Wednesday staff meeting there was some very vocal and unhappy staff, who felt I had betrayed their trust and broken the rules.

After listening, at times in disbelief, I stood and explained my decision, the relevance of them being teenagers, and said my decision stands. A colleague of mine, who is usually on the other side of the fence and was on this issue too wrote the following: "Cheri, Congratulations on handling your first 'controversial' issue here at Expo with the class, dignity, and honor of your position. It was bound to happen at some point, but you left it in the realm of process and procedure and worked hard at keeping 'us' out of the arena of personality. Good Job" (R.-R. Brown, personal communication, February 18, 2004). Although some of the staff may not agree with me, I believe this decision was consistent with my values and beliefs, of no surprise to most

staff, and that it is what I would do for any human being who had experienced a similar crisis. My goal as a principal is to make the world, inside and outside of Expo, a better place. I must be an advocate for every child. “If being a proactive advocate for all children is not our role, whose role is it? It is our role, our duty, and our obligation to educate every child” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 101).

Stakeholders need to know that they are led by a principal with character, who values honor, who is driven by an unending passion to do everything to promote the success of all students, faculty and staff member, families—of the entire learning community, to reach a vision of excellence (Wilmore, 2002). That’s integrity.

“The Rotary Club International has something they call the Four Way Test, comprising four questions Rotarians should ask themselves when confronting any issue. They are:

Is it the truth?

Is it fair to all concerned?

Will it build goodwill and better friendships?

Will it be beneficial to all concerned?” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 10).

Wilmore suggests changing the third test to: “Will it build goodwill and facilitate greater student learning and success (Wilmore, 2002,). I agree, this would be a great set of educators’ ethical benchmarks.

## Conclusion

Veal, Rizzolo, Fain, Cunningham, Cordes, Bock, Corson, Tyson, Richardson, Clark, and Moon are the high school principals for whom I have worked with since my teaching career began thirty years ago. When I think about why I want to be a principal, I think about myself, but I also think about my work with these eight men and three women and about their strengths and weaknesses. What was most important to me with each of these professional people was the way they treated me as a teacher, whether they supported me with discipline, whether they were fair and respectful with students, whether they were ethical, and whether they were visionaries. The understanding of what I wanted as a first year teacher, or a thirtieth year veteran, is my picture of what I want to be as a principal and why I want to be a principal.

My strengths are thinking outside the box, being resilient, being ethical, moral and fair while working for the good of all. I agree with Michael Jordan who said "Obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it" (Streep, 1996, p. 2).

The true challenge for me is how as a principal I might reach the ideals of empowerment! My dream is that each and every staff and student become empowered to their full potential. Shoot for the moon and if you miss you will fall among the stars. I believe the answers can come from leadership and I believe there are many right answers! Think about the potential of a school

that is passionate about teachers and the community: modeling core values, getting great results, and developing enthusiasm and esteem in the lives of children and of each other. We would develop a love of learning, and then the ideals of everyone becoming life-long learners and productive citizens could become a reality.

"Imagination is more important than knowledge.  
Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world."

-Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

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