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A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Defining effective leadership has been done by assembling lists of dispositions and traits that are found among individuals that encompass what a good leader should be. But to be that effective leader, the awareness of the characteristics is not enough. Instead, these idiosyncrasies should be at the core belief system of a leader. If these characteristics become instinctual, then they are represented in an effective leader's actions and they are accessible as a guiding force in times that are the most challenging.

This paper will explain what I believe to be the essential components that encompass my core beliefs I accredit to effective leadership. These elements are what drive the structure of my leadership principles and will affect the decisions I make as a school leader.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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By

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Dr. Gregory Reed

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Defining effective leadership has been done by assembling lists of dispositions and traits that are found among individuals that encompass what a good leader should be. But to be that effective leader, the awareness of the characteristics is not enough. Instead, these idiosyncrasies should be at the core belief system of a leader. If these characteristics become instinctual, then they are represented in an effective leader's actions and they are accessible as a guiding force in times that are the most challenging.

This paper will explain what I believe to be the essential components that encompass my core beliefs I accredit to effective leadership. These elements are what drive the structure of my leadership principles and will affect the decisions I make as a school leader.

My ethical platform is based on the essential building and maintaining of mutual trust. That is on all levels, there is the basic level of trust between administration, teachers, parents, students, and the greater community. Trust is built in every interaction and conversation but falls on the essential elements of honesty, integrity, and consistency of character. I believe that these four elements can be demonstrated with creating a shared vision, effective communication, being an effective instructional leader, and exhibiting effective organization and management.

“Vision is the fundamental force that drives everything else in our lives” (Covey, Merrill, & Merrill, 1994, p. 116).

It seems pretty clear what we all want from education; students to be successful, develop the skills and a passion to be life-long learners, and to take their knowledge into the world to be good, contributing citizens. Through this, mission statements are born and tacked up in hallways, only to be lost in the shuffle of “actual” or “realistic” goals. Lacking the specificity to invoke any action, these school goals are merely a basic foundation of beliefs on

which to build a shared vision within a school. To be an effective school leader, one must possess the ability to facilitate and carry out a shared vision. The importance and relevance of this goal is addressed in the Educational Leadership Constituent Council Standards, and does not escape the attention of being standard one. It states, "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).

The purpose behind establishing a shared vision within a school is, to put it simply, school improvement. Schools must evolve to keep up with the communities that surround them. Schools must change with the ever-changing environment in which they are in, advancing technology, and increasing governmental demands. However, change can be a daunting and tedious process and does not always mean improvement, unless it has a purpose, meaning, and direction, or, to sum it up, vision. Many understand the urgency for vision in the role of school improvement. "The lack of a compelling vision for public schools continues to be a major obstacle in any effort to improve schools. Until educators can describe the school they are trying to create, it is impossible to develop policies, procedures, or programs that will help make that ideal a reality... Building a shared vision is the ongoing, never-ending, daily challenge confronting all who hope to create learning communities" (DuFour and Eaker, 1998, p. 64).

The initial development of a school's vision must assess the beliefs, backgrounds, priorities, and personal values of the stakeholders, which may include administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members. It is not enough for an administrator to declare a vision and impose it on staff members. Collaboration and communication is vital in

developing the drive and commitment necessary to bring about authentic change. Cooperation and participation are mandatory to establish the ownership that will translate to the dedication for carrying out the objectives set forth in the vision of the school. This means a change in roles between administrators, teachers, students and families. A top-down method of direction is no longer sufficient but requires a sharing of the governance between many levels of the system. This empowerment does not only strengthen buy-in but encourages new personal development. “New roles are accompanied by new perspectives and responsibilities. As roles evolve, members of a school community reach a point of collective responsibility—a condition demonstrably linked to high student achievement” (Lambert, 1998, p. 95).

The development of a school’s vision sets a framework that provides an explicit agreement that guides behaviors and decisions. It is the educational compass that aligns a set of core values to initiate and support progress toward the end objectives. An environment in which the academic focus is clear generates participants who are more likely to stay diligent on student learning. “What separates a learning community from an ordinary school is its collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they seek to create. Furthermore, these guiding principles are not just articulated by those in positions of leadership; even more important, they are embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the school” (DuFour and Eaker, 1998, p. 25).

Behavioral norms are established and become second nature as people are speaking the same language, have the same kinds of informal expectations for one another, and establish more common ground. “In building shared vision, a group of people build a sense of commitment together... Without a sustained process for building shared vision, there is no way for a school to articulate its sense of purpose” (Senge, 2000, p. 72). Therefore, an

effective school leader, above all, must create a climate and culture for creating, implementing, and sustaining a vision that is shared and supported as an integral component of the improvement process. They do this by keeping the goals at the forefront of the daily activities of their school. They are also reflective leaders who are constantly revisiting their school's vision and identifying discrepancies between beliefs and actions, and work to readjust those inconsistencies. And vitally, shared vision does not exist without communication. Stephen Covey states his belief of the importance of communication in his fifth of seven habits of Highly Effective People, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" (Covey, 1990, p. 235).

To be an effective leader, the foundation must be built on being successful at communication. I do not refer to a good communicator as one who is simply good at public speaking or can give great pep-talks or advice. Nor am I referring to individuals who are good listeners; who are reassuring and encouraging. These examples are critical in my definition of a good communicator but it also must include more substantive concepts of communication. Once again the Educational Leadership Constituent Council Standards serve as a guide. These standards resonate with words and phrases that allude to the need for strong communication such as, "articulation of vision", "advocating", "collaborating", "responding and influencing" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 114-15). These words imply action and team associated relationships.

One of the most important things that an administrator needs to communicate to their staff is the vision and the goals that should drive instruction and decisions within the school. It is the principal who must continuously revert back to this vision and convey it's relevance in the school. To communicate this vision many avenues must be used that include, stating it

verbally and in writing whenever and wherever appropriate, visually posting it in the building, and most importantly communicating it through the actions of the administrator.

For a vision to be carried out by the staff and others there must be strong relationships within that school community. Effective communication is essential for building and maintaining these relationships. Regular communication builds a system that allows people to know what is happening and creates a stronger team attitude and mindset. Constant exposure to valuable communication leads to the understanding of other viewpoints and the realization that others struggle with similar problems and barriers. This, then can lead to an awareness that provokes support from one another. Most importantly, communication that is honest and relevant builds trust. It is within teams or partnerships that are truly working together to achieve a common goal that the biggest improvements can be achieved. Michael Fullan suggests this idea in the following way.

The environment cannot be improved only from the top. The top can provide a vision, policy incentives, mechanisms for interaction, coordination and monitoring, but, to realize this vision, there must be lateral development—that is, people at one's own level giving and receiving help (Fullan, 2003, p. 47).

Putting people together and having them talk does not automatically guarantee that they are effectively communicating. While talking comes easy for most of us, learning to communicate is no easy task. Covey observes, "The greatest need of a human being is psychological survival—to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated" (Covey, 2000, p. 103). It is only after these needs are met, participants become willing to open up and contribute to the overall good of the group and work collaboratively. It may indeed be true that the type of skills required are not automatically attained but may need to be taught

and practiced. Setting boundaries and ground rules for formal meetings may help to ensure that only positive communication is exhibited.

Just as important as public communications, such as all-staff meetings, newsletters, and other bulk communications, are the opportunities for one-on-one and informal conversations. One especially important kind of feedback for administrators is letting staff members know how well they are doing their jobs. Effective school leaders give plenty of timely, positive feedback. However, the feedback should be honest and specific. Words of encouragement and praise have benefit if they are sincere, but there is also need for useful, more evaluative positive feedback that individuals can build from. It is also important to give negative feedback, but this should be done privately, it should be factual without personal judgments, and should also be constructive. These types of encounters can easily be spontaneous or on an as-needed basis. However, it is also important to have a schedule for such conversations. "An information and feedback system needs to be consciously planned and implemented to ensure that frequency and quality of communication are more nearly the same for everyone" (Lambert, 1998, p. 95). This ensures that not only the most visible teachers get the most attention.

The communication between administration and the greater school community has another important function, to eliminate barriers. First there are the communication barriers, factors that make it difficult to truly understand what others are trying to say. The background of the person speaking must always be considered and their words put into the context of their perspective. Whether it is a teacher, a parent, or a student, one must stop to put value in their words and to not let emotions become an obstacle for understanding another's point of view.

There are also the barriers that keep individuals from doing their jobs. It could be lack of supplies, individuals with different priorities, or any number of things that stand in the way of getting the job done. As an administrator, one must be open to hearing the challenges of the staff and work to fix them. For this to occur, an administrator must be approachable.

Communication should not only take place at staff meetings or by email. Instead, one-on-one conversations that include both personal and professional topics help to create stronger relationships as mentioned earlier. Having an "open-door policy" ensures a greater likelihood of being approachable to field those questions or concerns that staff may be having.

One definite way to have a staff that categorizes you as accessible or approachable is to have high visibility. Regular visits to classrooms, having lunch or recess duties, or even being in the hallways before and after school communicates that you want to know what is going on in your school and that you are available and welcome personal contact with others. An administrator who takes the time to get to know the staff will be able to identify, develop, and make the best use of each staff member's capabilities. Administrators who know their students and families will be able to deal with problems more easily or better yet, cut down on the number of problems they encounter. Some will argue that the time restraints put on an administrator are too much and do not allow them to be out of the office. However, as one author points out, "Less effective principals have dozens of reasons for not having time to visit classrooms daily, or at least weekly. Great principals have an equal number of demands placed on their time. They just do not let these reasons keep them from doing what matters most..." (Whitaker, 2003, p. 37).

It is not just within a school that effective communication should be developed. A successful school environment can not exist without a connection and communication to the

greater school community including parents and community members. Effective communication systems should be in place to keep stakeholders informed about happenings within the school. Veteran principal James Abbott warns, "Schools are experiencing a loss of credibility with society because we have failed to communicate effectively with our colleagues and out customers" (Abbott, 1998, p. 37).

Communication should be free-flowing throughout the school and greater community, between all levels, with a system that reaches everyone. Communication break-downs can be the biggest barrier in a constructive work environment. Communication is the backbone of a successful school and creates an atmosphere of collaboration that deserves the time and energy required. Abbott sums it up by saying, "When teachers, principals, classified staff, superintendents, school board members, parents, and students speak and listen to one another, they reduce the monolith of bureaucratic lines of management into small, resolute pieces of human discovery. When we realize that we are all in the system together and that each person has something special to offer, an accepting, unifying voice emerges" (Abbott, 1998, p. 33).

Addressing the vision and communication of a school is not all that drives changes in a school. It is a common mission in schools to encourage each child to become a life-long learner. This too must be the case for the staff of the school; all must not only be teachers but also learners. To achieve an environment such as this, it must be lead and supported by the school's principal who, to be an exemplary educational leader, must be a successful instructional leader.

Driven by standard-based accountability that resonates through current legislation, a school principal must have a working knowledge and direct involvement with the fundamentals of the school, that is, the academic growth of all students. Having this

connection is essential and includes a familiarity with curriculum to ensure effective instructional programs are selected and thus can determine that goals are monitored appropriately based on data. Also, having a working knowledge of academic areas of the school safeguards against the vulnerability of ineffective teaching and allows for opportunities to provide effective models of learning. This can only happen when an administrator is visible throughout the school, familiar with what should be taught in each classroom, can evaluate deficiencies, and create meaningful learning opportunities for teachers to make improvements. An administrator cannot be an educational leader if they do not know the curriculum of the school.

Knowing the curriculum of the school is only part of the background knowledge that an administrator must have in order to be an educational leader. An administrator must also know their teachers. Knowing and understanding individual teacher's strengths, weaknesses, and beliefs is necessary to make staff development appropriate and meaningful. Staff development should be a reflection of the school's needs, not just a current trend developed by outside companies. Professional development opportunities are relevant when they are applicable to a teacher's current needs that are discovered through conversations and observations. But to assume that an administrator can define what teachers need without their input is to not take into account the most important component. As a researcher of qualities that make effective principals, author Dr. Whitaker found that principals who are more effective, do in fact, always seek teacher input from their strongest teachers.

Before making any decision or attempting to bring about any change, effective principals ask themselves one central question: "What will my best teachers think?"

This does not mean that effective principals do not consider views from anyone else; but they *always* consider what their best teachers will think (Whitaker, 2003, p. 68).

Without the connection and input from teachers about their current needs as well as their skills and competencies, Peter Senge tells of the ineffectiveness of staff developments that are one-time trainings, or as he has coined, “drive-by staff development” that do not take teacher input and background knowledge into consideration.

Such training should not be one-shot events that are disconnected from the core work of schooling...In a school system that is acting as a learning organization, no kind of staff development should be undertaken without taking into account what the teachers, administrators, and support staff already know and what specific challenges they face in educating young people. But often external trainers in “drive-by staff development” don’t know what the staff already knows, what problems they face, or anything else about the school or district” (Senge, 2000, p. 385).

Instructional leaders are not successful for knowing the curriculum and climate of the school; they are successful when they are able to act on this information and insist that student and adult learning be top priority within their school. In order to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills to do their best, administrators must insist that the best practices are being employed in their schools. School administrators must know what best practice is, what it looks like, and expect it to be done in their school. Staying current and being aware of up-to-date instruction is essential to help staff regardless of whether they are using tried-and-true approaches or current strategies based on scientific research. Administrators should be able to act as a resource for teachers. This is even more vital when the remarks of Brock and Grady

are taken to heart. "The quality of student learning is directly proportionate to the dedication and skill of the teacher" (Brock & Grady, 2004, p. 56).

They go on to confirm that teachers need support and ongoing development in order to maintain and develop the necessary skills for successful teaching. "Teachers do not emerge from college with all the teaching skills they need for the duration of their careers. The art of teaching is a developmental progress that begins during preservice education and continues throughout a career" (Brock & Grady, 2004, p. 57). Because of the impact teachers have on student learning, it is undeniable that developing teachers should be one of the highest priorities of a principal.

One of the greatest resources for a teacher's development is other teachers. For that reason, administrators need to encourage and support a collaborative environment.

Establishing a common language for instruction and professional growth helps to eliminate confusion and allows conversations to be more meaningful as a universal understanding is shared by all. Then conversations can evolve that address the priorities of the school as reflected in the goals and expectations.

For student learning to be the priority of the school, it must start as the core belief that becoming a life-long learner has the biggest impact on the success of the student. Students need to be encouraged and supported as they become life-long learners but developing this component in teachers is just as essential. An administrator needs to model this belief and support others as they reach for this goal.

With the essential components of vision, communication, and instructional growth of a school considered it then becomes essential to give attention to the organization and management of the school. An effective organization of a school sets the tone, and establishes

the climate that affects the success of the school. Organization encompasses many aspects from the way the budget is managed to the physical layout and use of the school building. Considering the organization of a school as a critical element in promoting student achievement is to say that managing and maintaining the school should be a top priority for a school to run effectively and efficiently. "An orderly, efficient school environment is prerequisite to the emergence of visionary leadership and optimal student learning" (Brock & Grady, 2004, p. 29).

Creating a positive first impression for staff, students, parents, and community members establishes the atmosphere of the school. Supporting and encouraging student work or achievement charts be displayed in classrooms and hallways communicates the purpose of the school, that student success comes first. Safety must also be considered. Hallways need to stay cleared and should not be blocked; maintenance upkeep is required throughout the building. Although this is the main responsibility of the school's custodial staff, it is ultimately the job of the administration to ensure such action is taking place. A school that has a warm, welcoming appearance, through colorful displays and cleanliness, invites families to want to be a part of the school community.

An administrator may not have control over the physical layout of the school, but how the school building is used needs to be considered as an essential component of how smoothly the school runs. Utilizing space should involve considering the best use of classrooms and open spaces for academic support. For instance, to reinforce collaboration efforts, teachers who work together should have easy access to one another by having classrooms within the same vicinity. Easy access for students to the areas that they need to utilize should also be controlled as much as possible.

Although class sizes and schedules are adopted as a new principal accepts a position or even from year to year, these components of organization need to be evaluated to ensure that resources have been used as efficiently as possible. Schedules are hard to change because every piece is dependent and related to another piece. However to secure a schedule that is best for student success, best efforts should be made to find creative solutions that may not be obvious choices at first look. Block scheduling for higher grades or multiage classrooms for elementary grades are some examples that may open up schedules that can meet needs for students and staff. Schedules may accommodate teachers' preferences when possible but the focus must remain on what is best for students. A schedule can also be created to foster collaboration by creating time for teachers to meet and discuss curriculum, lessons, and student needs.

Schedules and structures that reduce isolation of the staff are important so that they can come together. Policies that foster collaboration and provide staff development should be in place. Time is a vital resource and the hardest to find. This factor is bedeviling and currently being explored so that more creative ways may be found to create time for staff to meet and do collaborative work (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 199).

The same is true for class size. Student and staff ratios are set and may not be able to be changed, so other options have to be considered. It will become important to evaluate if all staff resources have been examined, even if it means that some faculty will have to be utilized in non-traditional roles. Considering how best to use associate teacher by their assignment should reflect the school's need once again, aligning with where they will have the greatest impact of students.

The allocation of resources goes beyond staff assignments but falls to the administration to make decisions regarding supplies and materials. Budget allotments needs to be planned early and managing the spending should always be closely monitored. Planning to assess potential needs is important. Items that will aid in reaching student achievement goals will support curriculum and programs that have been determined to align with these goals. To reiterate the importance of making resources available to staff, Wilmore makes the strong connection between resources and learning.

The issue of resource allocation is directly related to the organization and operation of the school for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. We will not make the world's best progress toward campus goals if we have no resources to help us achieve them" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 57).

The arrangement of students within the school is an organizational aspect that also can be adjusted to better meet student needs. Students organized into smaller communities create a better sense of belonging. In lower grades this is done by homerooms but it can be expanded into middle schools and high schools by dividing students into smaller units like houses, for instance. Having a personal relationship between a smaller group of students and a teacher creates a more supportive environment for student development.

A supportive environment is also important for staff and therefore the communication system that a principal establishes should consider staff schedules and time but also recognize the importance of group discussions and cooperation in setting the school's goals, evaluating the progress, and maintaining the alignment of the school's mission across classrooms, curriculums, and grade levels. Email can be an effective tool to communicate with staff as long as enough time and effort has been given to efficiently run staff meetings and training.

The ultimate goal for successful organization of a school is that all structures are continuously being evaluated for their effectiveness in regards to student achievement. This is not to say that things need to be in constant change; if things are running smoothly and are meeting student needs, then to confirm the success of an organizational component may be all that is necessary. However the flip side is that if something is not working, the administration must be willing to make changes to get the maximum benefit for the school. All of these structures should be flexible and designed to maximize teacher and student success, encourage in-depth teaching and learning, and integrate as many different resources as possible.

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