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A vision for leading schools : a reflective essay

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A vision for leading schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Education has undergone many changes in the past few decades. Many of these changes are due to our changing society, and others are due to those in education who see the need to make changes. Still other changes come from government directives. Our world is not the same world that it was when public.education came into being. The two parent family where mom stays home and dad goes to work as seen in 1950's television shows very rarely exists. Rural one-room schools under county jurisdiction have given way to larger consolidated school districts.

With legal mandates to include disabled children in the mainstream of education we face another set of challenges. Add to that the federal government's contribution of "No Child Left Behind" and our schools will continue to undergo as-yet unseen changes.

Educational administrators need to be on top of these changes. They need to be the voice of the people, the ears and eyes of the public. They need to listen and respond to the changes that are taking place, but more importantly, be proactive and anticipate changes that may take place.

A VISION FOR LEADING SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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

by

Karen J. Coates

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master

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Education has undergone many changes in the past few decades. Many of these changes are due to our changing society, and others are due to those in education who see the need to make changes. Still other changes come from government directives. Our world is not the same world that it was when public education came into being. The two parent family where mom stays home and dad goes to work as seen in 1950's television shows very rarely exists. Rural one-room schools under county jurisdiction, although very prevalent forty years ago, have given way to larger consolidated school districts.

With legal mandates to include disabled children in the mainstream of education we face another set of challenges. "The public education system in America is large, diverse, federalistic in nature, with all fifty states having unique origins that add strength and vitality to the whole." (Alexander, 2001) Add to that the federal government's contribution of "No Child Left Behind" and our school will continue to undergo yet unseen changes.

Educational administrators need to be on top of these changes. They need to be the voice of the people, the ears and eyes of the public. They need to listen and respond to the changes that are taking place, but more importantly, be proactive and anticipate changes that may take place.

Visionary Leadership

Whenever someone begins a new endeavor, there is always a goal in mind. When a team begins to play a soccer game, the players try to score as many goals as possible, with the goal being to outscore the opponent, thus winning the game. When a student starts school, the goal is to receive an education, acquire a high school diploma, get into college or the job market and earn a comfortable living. A building principal wears many

hats and has many varied responsibilities, but should always keep the goal of education in mind, to promote learning of all of the students in his or her care.

It is easy to lose sight of the goal. With issues such as student discipline, textbook adoption committees, parent concerns, student safety, and the countless other responsibilities that a principal has, it is easy to just try to make it through the end of the day, or to compromise the goal of student achievement in order to satisfy special interest groups.

Much can be learned from the business world. Lee Jenkins (1997) takes the successful business management techniques of Dr. W. Edwards Deming and applies them to improving student learning. Dr. Deming explains that every system is comprised of seven elements: aim, supply, input, process, output, customers, and quality measurement. If any element is missing or not working in conjunction with the other parts, one has a collection of pieces, not a system. The first and foremost of the seven elements is aim. Without aim, the parts of a business will never work together as a system. The same is true of education. Unless a school system has aim, students and teachers do not know what is expected of them as an end result, therefore schools are unsuccessful in helping society gain more outstanding high school graduates. It is the responsibility of the principal to always keep that aim, or goal, in the forefront.

A principal who has been in his or her current position for a long time and a principal new to the school both need to keep focused on the goal of student achievement. Likewise, a school involved in reform and a school satisfied with the direction they are going both need to keep focused on the goal of student achievement. The big difference is that a school with a new principal or one involved in reform will expect the principal to

articulate and outwardly implement the school's goal. A school not undergoing reform or one with an experienced principal may not expect such focus. They should!

In her chapter about the visionary leader, Wilmore (2002) reminds us that if we have no idea in what direction we are headed, all the talk about curriculum, instruction, student learning, school organization, operations, and resources is a waste of time. We must remain focused on our goal, articulate it to the learning community, and measure the goal outcomes. This is true of all schools, not just those with a new principal or one involved in reform.

Cunningham and Cordeiro (2000) identify ten dimensions that focus on the success of school improvement: goal focus, communication adequacy, optimal power equalization, resource utilization, cohesiveness, morale, innovativeness, autonomy, adaptation, and problem solving adequacy. It is not a coincidence that the first dimension is goal focus.

Whether we call it aim, goal, or vision, it is the basic foundation or cornerstone of education. It certainly cannot be ignored and must continually be articulated, implemented, and measured. According to the Iowa Standards for School Leaders, Standard 1, Visionary Leadership, "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community" (Wilmore, 2002). The knowledge indicators, dispositions, and performance indicators further specify how the principal accomplishes and documents the goal, or vision. It all begins with a goal.

As a building administrator I will keep the goal posted in my office. It will be included in the student and staff handbooks. It will be revisited throughout the year both formally and informally, formally through staff meetings and staff development, and informally throughout the day. When it comes to budget requests and allocation of resources, I will ask myself in my head and out loud when necessary, "Does it contribute toward student achievement?" I will not be afraid to ask the same question of stakeholders when they have similar requests.

Instructional Leadership

ISSL Standard 2 centers on the administrator's responsibility as an instructional leader. In this standard, the principal continues to promote the success of all students that was started with the vision. The framework of instructional leadership is developed through the culture of the school, instructional programs available to students, student learning, and professional growth.

The principal is responsible for encouraging and nurturing appropriate strategies toward creating a positive school culture. Although it is up to the entire school community to nurture and support each other, it is the role of the principal to keep the momentum going.

Instructional programs are chosen using principles of effective instruction, research, research methods, professional literature, and school and district data. Goals are made, evaluated, and adjusted as necessary.

Students' learning can be achieved through many instructional methods. By getting to know the school population on a very personal and individual level and by taking risks, students are more likely to be interested and will more likely learn.

The last, but certainly not the least, responsibility of the instructional leader is that of professional growth. In order for the school to continue moving forward, the entire school community must be encouraged to set personal goals. The principal must then do everything possible to help the members of the school community reach those goals. In addition, the principal must be a true role model by setting and attaining personal goals.

Being a good instructional leader requires a lot of hard work, but it can be a lot of fun. It is a great opportunity to get to know all the members of the school community; their needs, strengths, goals, and aspirations. It is a great time to celebrate diversity.

The instructional leader must lead by example. This is accomplished by setting personal goals and making those goals known to the school community. Students, teachers, and parents who see the principal take risks to grow will more likely follow.

The instructional leader must seek input from many sources when making instructional decisions. Although the buck certainly has to stop somewhere, it would be irresponsible for the principal to make decisions about curriculum and instruction without encouraging and valuing the input of the staff, parents, students, and other community members. Although many curricular decisions are made on a higher administrative level, the school community can still have valuable input on the day-to-day delivery and management of school instruction.

The instructional leader must keep abreast of current issues and available technology in education. The instructional leader also needs to know where his school is in comparison to the rest of the world. He needs to be aware of the data that is available from multiple sources, from standardized test scores to district and building data.

The instructional leader is one who nurtures and supports others, plants the seeds of professional development in others, and encourages others when they are down. He is one who always has his eyes and ears open, looking for and embracing change, but always keeping in mind the true purpose that we are all here – to enhance student achievement.

<div align="center">Organizational Leadership</div>

Communication is the key to any successful relationship. Couples who do not effectively communicate with each other have a difficult time maintaining a successful relationship. Businesses who do not communicate with their clients do not sell their products. Coaches who do not communicate with their players do not produce winning teams. The list goes on. Schools are no different.

Communication responsibilities are woven throughout the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) Standards for School Leaders (Wilmore, 2002). In Standard 3 (Organizational Leadership) communication is essential for effective group decision making.

The chief communicator in the school setting is the principal. It is his or her responsibility to communicate with all of the stakeholders of the school, from the School Board, superintendent and other Central Office personnel, to the students, teachers, parents, and other community members.

It is vitally important to communicate with others on an ongoing continuous basis. Communication is the key to helping people respond to you in a positive way. People want to be informed. Communication must be done in many different forms. Some of our stakeholders rely heavily on electronic communications, checking their email,

reading the newspaper online, and browsing favorite web sites on a daily basis. However, in our urban setting many of our stakeholders do not have access to a computer, and would not know how to access electronic information even if they wanted to. That is why face-to-face communication, notes sent home, letters sent to the house, and phone calls continue to play an important role in the communication process.

Although effective communication with all stakeholders is important, perhaps the most important communication takes place with parents. How many times have you heard someone say about a school employee, "My taxes pay their salary!" Brock and Grady (2004) suggest that effective communications with parents builds a trusting relationship with them. No truer statement has ever been made. Parents can be our best advocates or our worst adversaries. If they are happy, they will tell the whole world. If they are unhappy, they will tell the whole world. Brock and Grady (2004) further tell us that parents want communication that is frequent, reliable and two-way, opportunities to share information and opinions, to hear about their child's progress, including good news, not just the negative side. They also want information about school policies, programs, schedules, and classroom activities. They suggest that it is best to establish a communication schedule, such as monthly bulletins, weekly classroom updates, quarterly conferences, and daily homework folders. Whitaker (2003) reminds us that by contacting parents sooner rather than later; parents asking why they were not informed of a situation can be avoided. Being proactive makes so much sense.

Of course communication cannot and should not be done by a principal alone. Teachers have the opportunity to communicate with many different stakeholders on a regular basis. A principal cannot just value his or her own communication, but must value

the communication by teachers. Teachers do and should have much more contact with parents and students than the principal. They are often the first line of contact. As a principal in an urban school will probably be responsible for a minimum of 500 students, sometimes many more, the task of communicating with parents must be shared with all of the teachers. In my personal experience, elementary teachers do a fairly good job of this, as they are typically responsible for less than 30 students per year. Secondary teachers who may be responsible for in excess of 100 students may find the task overwhelming. But since many secondary teachers share the same students throughout the day, if each teacher were responsible for contacting 25-30 parents, each parent would be contacted by at least one teacher.

Communication with students is also crucial, and is most often accomplished with face-to-face contact. It can be a method of proactive discipline. Students like having the principal talk to them and call them by name. They like when a principal asks about their lives outside of school, like how their soccer team is doing. They enjoy hearing their names over the public address system and receiving recognition for a job well done. A good principal is a good communicator. Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004) identify 21 key areas of effective leadership which positively correlate with higher levels of student achievement. Not surprisingly, one of these areas is the responsibility of establishing strong lines of communication with teachers and students. Effective principals are effective communicators.

Collaborative Leadership

What is collaboration? Why is it so important in educational leadership? According to Standard 4 of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL), "A school

administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members" (Wilmore, 2002). Collaboration is directly linked to school improvement and to children's and adults' learning (Lambert, 1998).

Collaboration is shared decision-making. It is involving all stakeholders in decisions at all levels. Although ultimately the principal will be held accountable for all decisions made at the building level, it is his or her responsibility to actively seek input from all of the parties that will be affected by the decisions made. Collaboration is also accessing and making full use of the resources within the larger school community.

Collaboration with families cannot be overemphasized. Wilmore (2002) reminds us that without families we would not have students. Collaborating with parents formally and informally is a vital part of an educational leader's routine. Meeting with organized parent groups such as the Booster Club, Band Parents, and PTA adds much to the ownership that parents perceive they have in the school. Scheduling informal get-togethers with groups of parents over coffee or doughnuts opens the door for many parents who might not otherwise choose to get involved. Asking impromptu questions of parents on a current topic of concern when they have come to school for a different purpose makes them feel a part of the school, not just an outsider whose children attend the school.

A school has different kinds of working groups. The first is a governance group responsible for facilitating the decision-making process in the school. The building principal is the head of such a group. Also included in that group are teachers, other administrators, students, parents, community members, and possibly district personnel

and university faculty. Equally important are multiple groups for getting the work of the school done. These groups may include collaborative action research groups, grade-level groups, and interdisciplinary groups. Leadership skills needed for collaboration include the ability to develop a shared sense of purpose with colleagues, facilitate group processes, effective communication, understanding of transition and change and their effects on people, mediate conflict, and an understanding of adult learning from a constructivist perspective. Effectively using these skills enables the school to create mutual trust, hear each other, pose questions and look for answers together, and make sense of the school's common work (Lambert, 1998).

Schools have many opportunities to seek collaboration with the community. These may come in the form of partnerships with private agencies, community agencies, the business community, or universities. The entire school community can gain benefit from these collaborative efforts. Students can benefit in the form of field trips, guest speakers, community service opportunities, career exploration, and receiving college credit while still in high school. The community can benefit by the use of the building for community education and social activities. Teachers can also benefit through summer job opportunities and collaboration with universities to conduct formal and informal research studies into the effects of instructional approaches. Schools can only achieve their full mission by building and strengthening their links with other institutions in the community (Danielson, 2002).

Black and English (2001) stress that letting community members know that they are important, valued, and have the ability to make significant contributions to the school

is essential. Attempts at collaboration cannot be superficial. Genuine input from community members must be solicited and implemented.

Collaboration builds a sense of pride and ownership. It builds a sense of community and belonging. As a building principal I will, through continuous genuine collaboration, strive to make all parents and community members feel that the school is more than just a building, but a community in which they and their students can live, learn, work, and grow.

An important part of the ISSL Collaborative Leadership Standard is "responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources". (Wilmore, 2002, p.71) As educators, and especially educational leaders, we must demonstrate to our families the importance of the traditions, values, and beliefs of all of its stakeholders. Diversity involves not only race, gender, culture, and religion, but also socioeconomic status, political preference, differing learning modalities, and disabilities (Wilmore, 2002).

Ruby Payne (1998, p. 42) shares with us how different people think and react to school according to their socioeconomic status. Students from poverty react quite differently to the same school stimuli than students of middle or upper class. This is particularly important to remember, as the number of students in poverty is on the rise. Increases are evident at all races. The percentage increase of students in poverty from the 1980 to the 1990 census is 14.1%.

Diversity as related to minority populations must also be embraced. Statistics from all of our schools in Iowa will surely evidence the rise in minority populations. In the Council Bluffs Community School District there has been a steady rise in student

minority populations. Accurate statistics are available for at least the last eight years. The number of minority students in Council Bluffs has increased from 8.41% in the 1997-1998 school year to 11.87% in the 2004-2005 school year. D. Fringer (personal communication, September 15, 2004). Although this is not a huge increase, each year the number of minority students increases. There are 472 active ELL students and 60 students who are on a monitor status in the Council Bluffs Community School District. J. Smith (personal communication, September 20, 2004). Even in a school district of approximately 10,000 students, the needs of more than 500 students cannot be ignored. "We must prepare all students to contribute to and thrive in a complex global society and economy." (Williams, 1999, p.90)

<div align="center">Ethical Leadership</div>

ISSL Standard 5, Ethical Leadership, "sums up all other standards". (Wilmore, 2002) Although it appears obvious that all educators act in an ethical manner, this is not always the case. It is the responsibility of school leaders not only to act in an ethical manner themselves, but to also make sure that everyone acts in an ethical manner. Being ethical means one acts with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

The key ingredient of integrity is trust. Trust is not automatically given to anyone. It is earned. It is easy to lose trust, but very difficult to regain. By acting in a consistent manner with all members of the school community and portraying that you genuinely care about them, the school leader can gain the trust of the community. By doing all you can to promote the success of the entire school community they will keep their trust in you.

Fairness is the second component of ethical leadership. It is easy and certainly human to show favorites. A good leader will avoid playing favorites. It is okay to make a mistake as long as you learn from that mistake. To be treated fairly you must treat others fairly.

The ethical leader is above reproach. He believes in the ideal of the common good. He makes decisions that are aimed at promoting the success of the entire school community. He makes those decisions based on integrity, fairness, and ethics. He further protects the rights and confidentiality of students and staff.

A leader lives in a glass house. Everything that he does, every decision that he makes is under constant scrutiny of the entire school community. He cannot only act in an ethical manner when he thinks someone will be watching. He needs to be fair and consistent all of the time.

The climate of a building will tell you if you are in the building of an ethical leader. Upon entering a building, you will be able to tell within a short amount of time through the constructivity and productivity of the rest of the school, whether or not there is an ethical leader in charge.

An ethical leader must be proactive. By anticipating the worst-case scenario and being prepared for difficult decisions, he will be better able to make good decisions when the time comes. Even the best-prepared leader will occasionally be faced with something he is not prepared for, but by applying ethics to all situations, he will be able to make a decision that he can live with.

Political Leadership

A political leader regularly attends school board meetings. He also is aware of the national news either through the television, internet, or newspapers. He reads the local newspaper and makes that paper available to staff members, and if possible, students in the school. He is a member of professional school organizations and reads professional publications, keeping abreast of the current trends in education. A political leader uses his voice to advocate for policies and programs that promote learning in an equitable manner.

All school administrators need to be aware of diversity within the school population. A political leader will seek input from representatives of diverse groups on a continuing basis. He will make sure that members of all groups feel comfortable being involved with the school. If members from one group are consistently not represented it is the school leader's job to make phone calls, knock on doors, or do whatever it takes to get people to be involved.

As populations continue to move and grow, we cannot ignore and resist opportunities to adjust learning experiences to more successfully educate increasingly diverse populations. Many efforts are being made to strengthen the relationships between staff and culturally diverse students in order to improve learning. These innovations all emphasize the need to know students of diverse populations better and to strengthen relationships. The staff of an elementary school in an urban city in the Midwest decided to attend a local church service to learn more about the cultural life of students and respect for their cultural experiences. In another district the entire school staff took a field trip to the neighborhood surrounding the school so that the teachers, who do not live

there, by speaking to individuals and local business owners to identify available

opportunities and knowledge, could become familiar with the community and daily

experiences of their students. In yet another school the school newsletter regularly

features interviews of parents and community individuals in an effort to strengthen

parental involvement. Because student-led conferences result in increased parent

involvement, it is a practice that is good for all students, but particularly important for

schools with diverse populations, since these parents may be more reluctant to come to

school. In addition to increased parent involvement, looping (teachers remaining with the

same students for more than one year) results in improved student attendance and

teachers' knowledge of their students, which is especially important when teaching

diverse populations (Williams, 1999).

Terrance Deal (1999) describes an award-winning elementary school in Arizona

that is the pride and joy of the community. The school thrives even though the town has

one of the highest unemployment rates in the country and forty-six percent of the families

do not have running water. Despite the fact that across the district's one thousand square

miles 35% of the families have no access to electricity, Ganado Primary School is

nationally recognized for its excellence. What is responsible for the large, modern

building's success? Throughout the school the cultural values of the Navajo community

are embraced. A room used for meetings, reflection, and community gatherings is shaped

in the form of a hogan, an ancient and specially shaped Navajo home. Navajo rugs,

traditional wooden posts, a replica of a spiritually significant sandstone rock, and other

Navajo symbols are interwoven throughout the building along with the modern

technology of computers, scanners, camcorders, and VCRs. This is a school that has truly shown that the traditions, values, and beliefs of its stakeholders are important.

The best way for schools to become a community is to understand different perspectives and appreciate and respond to diversity. When all families feel a part of the school, it operates as a whole, not a bunch of parts. When others are involved in the school there is a greater sense of trust, pride, and ownership. The principal is the facilitator of such an accomplishment. It is his or her job to open the lines of communication and make all families feel welcome. It is the principal's job to constantly and continually celebrate diversity. There is so much for all of us to gain from being with people of diverse cultures and backgrounds. In our ever-changing world, it is crucial that we prepare all our students to compete in a society of diverse people.

Sometimes a school leader has to take a difficult political stand. Earlier this school year, the Pottawattamie County Sheriff's department attempted to issue minor in possession citations to more than 40 students at a nearby high school within the school building. These students attended a party that resulted in the death of a fellow student. The school superintendent, based on advice from legal counsel, would not let these citations be issued at school. No matter how much we may loathe the actions of the 40 plus students, and no matter how much we may grieve for the deceased boy's family, we must recognize the political stance that the school has taken. The superintendent is acting in the best interest of the students to protect their rights while they are in school.

Conclusion

Being an effective leader in today's schools is certainly a challenge, but one worth pursuing. It is up to the educational leader to make a difference. "Education leaders want to accomplish goals that matter, inspire others to join them in working toward those goals, and leave a lasting legacy" (Hargreaves, 2004). It is my desire to leave a lasting legacy. By applying the standards of visionary, instructional, organizational, collaborative, ethical, and political leadership, I think I can do just that.

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