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A preferred vision for leading an exemplary school : a reflective essay

Shauna Dennison
University of Northern Iowa

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A preferred vision for leading an exemplary school : a reflective essay

Abstract

While all the elements of a school are important, an educational leader needs to lead by example; he/she should be the model. Leadership traits considered absolutely necessary are professionalism, honesty, trustworthy, and the ability to communicate effectively. A well-rounded principal truly has the best interest of the students, staff, and community at heart, and is knowledgeable about all aspects of a district. Precise and timely decision making involving concerned, upset, or maybe even hostile individuals needs to be addressed immediately and effectively. A good leader has common sense, great communication skills, and of course, compassion.

A PERFERRED VISION FOR LEADING AN EXEMPLARY SCHOOL

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Shauna Dennison

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Dr. Reed

What are the characteristics of a good leader? What are the characteristics of a good student? What is the purpose of education? As an educator for sixteen years, I have pondered these questions and many more. While all the elements of a school are important an educational leader needs to lead by example; he/she should be the model. Leadership traits considered absolutely necessary are professionalism, honesty, trustworthy, and the ability to communicate effectively. A well-rounded principal truly has the best interest of the students, staff, and community at heart, and is knowledgeable about all aspects of a district. Precise and timely decision making involving concerned, upset, or maybe even hostile individuals needs to be addressed immediately and effectively. A good leader has common sense, great communication skills, and of course, compassion.

I believe all students have a right to learn. Whether the student decides this to be true is purely up to the student learning. Students at a certain age do make the decision to perform or not perform. Teachers need to make sure all possible solutions are exhausted before failing a student. This includes communication and more communication between the teacher, the parents, and the student. All parents have the right to be involved with their students learning. Parents need to encourage, support, and serve as advocates for their children. Communities need to be involved with schools to promote the community. Schools, a lot of the time, are the community. If a community fully supports a school district, great things will be accomplished. The state dictates things that have to be done, and the decision is forced onto school districts. A district tries to understand state mandates, adjust to the mandates, and hopefully makes the changes necessary to accommodate the mandates. Doing these things leads to a positive change in the district.

My personal values for good leadership include, administrators who demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively with students, staff, parents, and a board of education. A second value is fairness. Adults, as well as children tend to view things as fair or not fair. An administrator needs to be fair and consistent. An administrator who is honest and upfront is also an important value. An educational leader is a person capable of admitting mistakes and correcting those mistakes.

Making a difference as an educator occurs when a person puts forth the effort to be the best. Being the best means going to work everyday facing the challenges that lie ahead with a smile, always finding ways to improve, treating others around you with respect, listening to others, and not importantly being a role model for students and peers.

Society has changed drastically creating generations with very different work ethics and moral differences. The pendulum of education has swung heavily in the last ten years. Students have become much more self-absorbed and materialistic. Parents have become more blaming of society concerning their child's misbehaviors and abilities.

As a leader and teacher it is very important that all students in the classroom are learning. Teachers and leaders need to set high expectations for all to learn. Schools are given a sacred trust by parents to educate their children. If children are not learning then educators must discover why and teach so they do learn. Education is a tool for all to take advantage of. How an individual chooses to utilize the educational tool is up to that individual.

My motivation for entering the educational leadership program is the desire to improve my educational background, expand my learning, and the satisfaction and sense of purpose new experiences give me.

What I believe about leadership is that an administrator needs to keep the vision of the school in the forefront, help develop students that are kind, resourceful, resilient, and trying their best.

I believe a principal needs to set expectations for their staff, students, and parents.

Teachers need to expect professionalism from their principal and hold the principal accountable.

I believe creating a team within the building should be a top priority. Students, staff, and parents need to feel they are listened to, appreciated, and treated fairly. I know that staying positive and making people feel welcomed as well as appreciated, can create an environment we would all enjoy working in, this will help achieve educational excellence.

How do we achieve educational excellence in schools today? Much attention lately has been given to school budgets, school standards and benchmarks, and student achievement. What makes a school stand out above all others? It would most certainly have to be those schools, which put trust in front of all other components. School districts need to have an outstanding rapport with their communities to be successful in student achievement. To become a community of learners and a school of excellence, a school must be all of these things: “a purposeful place, a communicative place, a just place, a disciplined place, a caring place, and a celebrative place” (Boyer, 1995, p. 16).

To become a purposeful place, a school must establish a shared vision and clearly define their goals. To achieve educational excellence and build a school where trust is established, the school must have a purpose and a plan to excel toward their goals. It is absolutely imperative that faculty, staff members, families, and community members gather to communicate. To create a vision, “It is imperative that everyone sits down, talks about it, and decides together where it is that they are all going” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 20). An administrator will need to use great

leadership skills, a little passion, and an extreme commitment on keeping the goals focused and attainable. This requires the administrator to be a good listener, appreciate and respect divergent views, and build a consensus through discussion and dialogue. There is no room for sudden decision-making. All decisions need to be based on law and policy. This will be a true partnership that requires a, “together we can spirit” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 66).

A communicative school involves integrity. The root of integrity is the establishment of trust. Children must be the first interest when tough decisions have to be made. It is so very important for school districts and leaders to have strong integrity and model it. District personnel need to be open and honest when communicating. They must have a clear goal in mind and focus on what’s in it for the community and district. “No forward positive strides can be made unless districts and leaders are willing to assume responsibilities and a caring leadership role in schools” (Pascopella, 2001, p. 40-42). Developing unity will be essential with the understanding that all points of view are appreciated. This does not mean that all points of view are agreeable. The administrator needs to be visible, solicit help, be proactive, and provide feedback to all involved in the goal setting arena. The phrase “Manners Matter” is important. Use manners and value all who participate. Everything said and done is aimed at teaching and learning. We must do what is best for children.

When districts start working with communities to improve student achievement, it is absolutely necessary that the school be viewed as a just place. The word “just” means, honest and impartial in one’s dealings and actions. This requires respect, acknowledging one another’s dignity and ideas, interacting in a courteous way, and genuinely talking and listening to one another. A just place is a place where respect is the fundamental ingredient of trust. Imagine a time when justice was not an ingredient in the recipe! Do people feel knowledgeable, competent,

or respected in an environment lacking righteousness? Absolutely not! An administrator needs an agenda, because things need to be very well planned out and communicated, so things can be discussed openly and fairly. "Administrators need to make sure that they are honest and impartial and that they behave in an ethical and moral way" (DeBurn & Ricabaugh, 2001). It is much easier to deal with our own ethics, than to deal with others. Our character and ethics are joined at the hip. It is very important that everyone is held accountable.

It is a proven fact that academic achievement improves and children do their best work when they feel safe at school. This leads to developing a well- disciplined place. This does not imply drill sergeant discipline, but working to develop an environment that expects certain outcomes. Rules need to be reasonable, explained, and enforced fairly. Staff, parents, students, and communities have respect for fairness. Students, along with other members of the staff and community, should all have a role in defining a Code of Conduct for students. Administrators, staff, students, and community members should strive for the standards of kindness, punctuality, and courtesy. Of course, these standards need to be modeled and taught by all individuals working toward a school of academic excellence, with each individual remembering that chaotic climates do indeed create chaos.

Let's face it, it is not always simple to be a nice, cheerful, and respectful individual. We all have bad days. A school striving to achieve excellence will need some leadership that exemplifies these qualities to allow the creation of an environment that is caring, both professionally and personally. "To become a caring environment there are three categories that need to be established. They are: attentiveness, the extra mile, and belonging" (Boyer, 1995, p. 26). All people, children included, need to have the sense of belonging. Once someone feels that they belong, they feel valued and accepted. Many ideas and thoughts are shared when people feel

this way. Too many people are experiencing the isolation of not belonging. An individual who feels lonely, neglected, or threatened will not strive for excellence. Instead they will strive for survival, therefore learning becomes secondary.

Being attentive and caring about one another is another absolute category. Caring about the people we work with is important. "Getting to know about colleagues is valuable, because it lets others know someone cares personally about them" (Deburn 2001). Staff must listen to one another and share ideas.

The last category is the extra miler. It is always important that all details and loose ends are handled. Going the extra mile means doing something at 110%, not 100%. An administrator needs to demonstrate his/her willingness to go the extra mile, this will cause others to see that their ideas and thoughts are important. An effective leader is very much aware that results may not be achieved unless we are willing to assume responsible and caring leadership roles in our schools.

"The final sequence in developing a school of excellence is making the school a celebrative place" (Boyer, 1995, p. 21). All schools need to create reasons to celebrate. The celebrations do not have to be huge, events can be as simple as celebrating the 100th day of school. Elementary schools seem to do a better job of celebrating school. Administrators need to create celebrations, like having a beginning of the year celebration, not just an assembly of expectations. Have the staff develop a welcome back skit or anything jovial to get the attention of the students. With all the multimedia devices available, we need to be better at entertaining. Learning can transpire through meaningful entertainment. Celebrate the beginning and end of ITBS. Develop a committee to create monthly themes for staff and students to celebrate. Sometimes as educators we forget that school can be fun.

Achieving educational excellence is possible. It requires the hard work of all involved. It requires getting people to buy into the idea of the realistic and obtainable goals and vision. Create a vision and stay with the vision. Create the goals and modify them as you achieve. Keep talking and keep plugging away. This is not something to be achieved in two to three weeks. This will be a commitment for eternity, requiring endurance, taking maybe three to four years to even start seeing results. Things need to be taken in stride. Prioritize the goals and start working. "When everyone is on the same page, working toward common goals, great things can be created, developed, and achieved" (Armistead, 2002, p. 24-27). Everything needs to be aligned with the ultimate goal of student-centered achievement in mind. We need to do the right thing, for the right reasons, in the right way.

Education demands a serious commitment from people who are willing to go above and beyond the call of duty. A successful school has a successful leader, leading the way and setting a culture that is supportive, professional, safe, and where everyone feels appreciated. The administrator determines the morale and climate of the school.

"The best teacher is the one who NEVER forgets what it is to be a student. The best administrator is the one who NEVER forgets what it is like to be a teacher"
(Connors, 2000, p.11).

-Neila A. Connors

"School culture is the spirit or the feel of the school" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 33). Shaping school culture is a critical element to developing the best school. "School leaders need to read their culture and understand where the culture has come from, and it is important to understand the district's history" (Deal & Peterson, 2002, p.8). Leaders need to also identify positive, supportive norms, values, rituals, and traditions of their staff. They will also need to pay special

attention to cultures that are negative, harmful, or toxic. Administrators must work to reinforce positive cultures continually. If this is not nurtured, the school culture can wither and die.

All schools develop a unique personality through solving problems, coping with tragedies, and celebrating success. This is related to the idea that this is the way things are done around the school. Sometimes this can be a barrier when trying to change the culture into a more positive element. "The culture influences and shapes the way teachers, students, and administrators think, feel, and act" (Deal & Peterson, 2002, p.9). "Creating culture that is positive requires relationships between administrators, teachers, students, and parents to move from hierarchic, blaming and controlling, to caring, positive expectations, and participation" (Krovetz, 1999, p.108). Schools that recognize accomplishments, values, efforts, and support one another will be motivated to work hard, and thus rubbing off on the students to do the same.

To build a positive school culture administrators need to identify the current values, beliefs, norms, and assumptions of the staff. Values are what the staff considers important, what is "good". Beliefs are what is considered about the real world, what is the "responsibility" of all involved. Norms are what a staff expects regarding morals. Norms are unstated rules that staff and students are suppose to follow. Assumptions are a "system of beliefs" that guides behavior. Assumptions are not necessarily true, just believed. Therefore assumptions play a huge part in influencing our actions, thoughts, and feelings.

The building of the above categories does not happen over night. "School culture is built up over time as people work together, play together, fight together, cry together, and laugh together" (Deal & Peterson, 2002, p. 49). The vision of all involved needs to be precise, reviewed often, reinforced, and meaningful. This can install great purpose for schools. Schools with purpose have students who achieve.

Good school cultures demonstrate most of the following characteristic. The teachers and students consider themselves learners. They all have a huge sense of purpose, positive beliefs and assumptions, a strong professionalism, shared responsibilities, and good communication. There is a blending of leadership among the staff and administrators, and most importantly a shared sense of respect and caring for everyone.

So what happens when the culture is negative? Things literally become destructive to morale and student learning. Destructive cultures and subcultures have characteristics such as no shared vision or purpose, little sense of community, poor leadership, and the feeling of hopelessness, discouragement, and despair regarding the school. Destructive cultures form the same way positive cultures form. "Over time as the staff and leaders face challenges, try to solve problems, and cope with tragedy and difficulty, they build up negative views of their work, their abilities, and their students" (Deal & Peterson, 2002, p. 89).

To rebuild the destructive culture start by providing leadership that encourages and supports the staff. Find staff than can help build and support a more positive vision and mission. Be a leader that believes in the abilities of their staff and students, and has high expectations and purposeful support for staff and students. With reasonable, positive, public, known, and consistently enforced polices and procedures in place staff, parents, and community members know what to expect. When a culture is positive and centered on high expectations and purpose, schools will experience wonderful outcomes.

To maintain a culturally sound school, principals assume many different roles. "They are managers, working to keep the school running smoothly by attending to the school's structures and activities, policies and procedures, resources and programs, and rules and standards" (Deal & Peterson, 2002, p. 107). They also play a role in shaping the values by being precise about

values, keeping the vision focused, and recognizing accomplishments. Being an effective leader is sometimes being the healer of past failures and a supporter of making a difference. Teachers need to feel they make a difference and there is a deep sense of passion and commitment from the principal to achieve this feeling.

Reading the culture of the school is usually a matter of stepping back and reading between the lines of daily events. The easiest time to do this is when the principal is new and has not had the opportunity to fully understand the existing norms of the staff. Successful practices need to be reinforced and celebrated. The more negative practices need to be changed. Effective leaders encourage teachers to do what is best for their profession, school, and students.

The current reality of schooling is this,

“We often hear people voice the opinion that industrial-age schools are hopelessly failing. In the United States, this perception dates back at least to 1983, when the U.S. government report, “A Nation at Risk,” came out, arguing that the U.S. population was too poorly educated to compete in the global marketplace” (Senge, 2000, p. 9).

Although many of the findings for “A Nation at Risk,” have been proven false. We are now at the new age of No Child Left Behind. Schools face more pressures today than ever before. It seems not to be about educating children, but about who is the best and who is the worst. “While the world has changed, our schools have not. Why is that? The answer is rather simple: those who would bear the brunt of change do not desire it. Is this really something we as educators should be so overly concerned about” (Hess, 2004, p. 7)? Absolutely. It is time that the educators of this nation pull together and start telling the citizens what needs to be done to fix our schools.

Developing a shared vision in a school district is absolutely vital for being one of the best schools. The word shared has many definitions. Shared means “to receive, use, experience,

enjoy, endure, etc. in common with another or other's" (Simon and Schuster, 1980, p. 1,309).

Vision means "the ability to perceive something not actually visible, as through mental acuteness or keen foresight" (Simon and Schuster, 1980, p. 1,588). So when we put shared vision together we experience the ability to perceive a common goal. In other words we are driven by a vision, a commitment to make our school one of the best.

When this process starts the purpose needs to be clear. It is like a child learning to ride a bike. They want to learn this so they can play with their friends. The motivation of improvement comes because the purpose is clear and exact.

Many educators believe that creating vision in schools means letting people do whatever they want as a result, they think teachers will lower their educational expectations to meet guidelines of No Child Left Behind and standardize testing scores. This simply is not true. When administrators and teachers become focused on a shared vision, such as improving test scores, increasing attendance, or classroom management, and everyone works together, this vision will be the driving force behind improving a school.

Vision is not the top leader's job. The superintendent and school board should not be solely responsible for this. If this is the case "visions based on authority" will not work. Sure it may help a district through a crisis, but once this crisis is over people will fall apart, and their hopes and dreams of the best school will go with it.

There are necessary steps in developing a shared vision. They are, forming a team, communicating, implementing, and reflection and refinement. When forming a team people to be included are parents, teachers, students, administrators, and school board members. This meeting of people needs to have ground rules. It is important that all rules are understood. The leaders need to model positive and acceptable behavior. Important rules to include are; no individual

teacher will be talked about, and there is no hidden agenda (we do not want to change parents' attitudes), we are here to listen and learn together. We gather to inquire from one another. Build the necessary trust to have a good rapport.

Building that good rapport will lead to communication. People at the meeting need to feel they can discuss their deepest hopes and desires for their children and community. "Only then will people feel not just relief, but a genuine sense of hope. Only then can they recognize the source of each other's aspirations, enough to generate momentum and mutual trust" (Senge, 2000, p. 290). If the people involved feel satisfied with creating this new- shared vision the bridge of rebuilding mistrust is now starting to be rebuilt. This process of people acting and thinking together creates a partnership between teachers, administrators, parents, and students.

A community vision meeting is unique to developing a shared vision. What happens is the community members gather for a two-day annual school community meeting. The tables are arranged so that parents of kindergarteners are sitting with parents of fifth graders or even college bound students. The process starts with everyone introducing himself or herself. Each table will work together to build ideas, concepts, and concerns that they have about their children and the school. The table-team members then will select five of the most critical concepts from their discussion. Each one of these concepts is written on a note card or some other type of paper. Then the team will spend time answering these two questions for the critical concept they recorded. "What should be the role of the school in addressing this issue? What should be the role of parents" (Senge, 2000, p. 298)?

After all of the groups have entered their critical concepts, there will be reoccurring themes amongst the groups. This creates a sense of each other's priorities. "Having talked about current reality, people should feel some sense of closure. They don't know what's coming next,

but they know that their critical concerns have been raised. They are ready to talk about a shared vision for the school system” (Senge, 2000, p. 298).

The next part of this planning involves having the teams create the ideal school. The following questions from Schools That Learn are suggested. “What kinds of things take place during a typical day? What range of subjects are taught? How are they taught? What do children know at any particular age level? What knowledge do teachers have? How are parents involved? What is the relationship between the school and the community? What does the building look like? How does the school handle its children’s academic and social needs? How does the school raise money? What happens to the graduates? What expectations and information are given to parents who come to the school? How is the student’s achievement assessed” (Senge, 2000, p. 298)?

The next part is implementing the vision. This is the part that makes the vision a reality. “We need everyone involved and empowered. People support what they help to build” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 21). This is the part where the members think through and internalize the comments to develop key strategic priorities for the school. All visions need to stay strong, so that the view of current reality becomes more precise and vivid.

First, set a goal and create a description. This process is not necessarily always attainable but it is a great starting point for further dialogue. Next it needs to be decided what programs and processes work best with all types of students. It is important here to look at teacher training, school goals, educational beliefs, and the school climate very closely. With these things in mind it is now time to consider the strategic priorities of the school. The last thing needed is accountability teams. These teams do not necessarily implement the new projects; they develop the vision, establish a few goals, and start experimenting to reach these goals.

The last part of this process is reflection and refinement. There is a large reflective session at the end of each school year. The purpose of this session is to rethink and polish the vision for the school. New goals may even be added. The shared vision movement is powerful because it's always revolving. Parents get a deeper understanding of the school, and how to get involved. Teachers will feel more supported and see more opportunities available outside the classroom. "Now they are automatically involved in a process where they do not just look at problems, but at their desired future; where they don't just talk but act; and where they don't run out of steam but continue in a constructive fashion, seeing the fruits of their efforts unfold, year after year" (Senge, 2000, p. 301).

A shared vision developed through the use of the community, teachers, students, administrators, and school board members does lead to producing a school of excellence.

"Excellence can be attained if YOU . . .

. . . CARE more than others think is wise.

. . . RISK more than others think is safe.

. . . DREAM more than others think is practical.

. . . EXPECT more than others think is possible."

Author Unknown (Connors, 2000, p. 107).

Over the past years there has been great debate everywhere concerning the differences or similarities of the words management and leadership. According to Webster's dictionary management is "one who manages affairs or expenditures; management is the act, art, or manner of managing, or handling, controlling, directing etc. skill in managing; executive ability" (Schuster & Simon, 1980, p. 8). Leadership on the other hand is; "the position or guidance of a leader, the ability to lead, the leader of a group. A leader is a person or thing that leads; directing

commanding, or guiding head, as of a group or activity” (Schuster & Simon, 1980, p. 801). What is the difference between management and leadership? How do they work together? What skills are necessary to be an effective principal?

Management and leadership have to be interchangeable. Over the past five years, education terminology has changed from calling administrators “managers” to “educational leaders.” A superintendent is a manager while a building principal is a leader, although both positions require management skills and leadership skills.

There is a difference between management and leadership. “Management can be defined as the attainment of organizational goals in an effective and efficient manner through planning, organizing, staffing, directing, and controlling organizational resources” (Daft, 2005, p. 16). Management is considered the “hard” skills.

Management deals with more of the fiscal matters, transportation, and facilities of a district. Management focuses on budgeting, keeping monies in line with allowances, directing the staff, creating boundaries, acting as the boss, being non-emotional, and getting things done. Most management will focus on the specifics of schedules, segments of plans, and getting specific results. Management tunnel vision focused on the day-to-day details of running a school.

“Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes and outcomes that reflect their shared purposes” (Daft, 2005, p. 5). Leadership is considered the “soft” skills, the touchy feel good stuff. The real difference here is that followers of leaders are very important and that a leader has the ability to follow. Leadership is a shared position with people unlike management.

Leadership focuses on long term visioning, shares values to help others grow, focuses more on people rather than projects, is a good listener, and creates a culture that is conducive to involving all people in the school. Leadership deals with district communication.

“Leadership cannot replace management; it should be in addition to management” (Daft, 2005, p. 16). Leadership relies on creating visions, planning the future, and setting long-range goals. It is the ability to see the whole picture.

It is important that principals find that balance between leadership and management. “The difference between more effective principals and their less effective colleagues is not what they know. It is what they do” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 1). Effective principals understand improvement is always accessible and necessary to being a great leader.

What skills does a person need to be a successful principal with great leadership qualities and management skills? Effective principals are open-minded, flexible; good people persons, communicate efficiently, take responsibility, and always have the interest of the institute as their main focus. It has also been stated that if great people surround a leader, the leader will be a top-notch manager/leader. Part of being an outstanding principal is having a sense of personal mastery. “Personal mastery involves learning to keep both a personal vision and clear picture of current reality before us” (Senge, 2000, p. 390).

Effective principals combined the skills of management and leadership to develop a successful reign. Leadership now deals with a lot of collaboration, diversity, higher purpose, and openness to new and exciting ideas. Doing everything the same way year after year will not be successful. Change is good and needs to be tried. Some people’s greatest successes come from their failures.

Management and leadership skills combined sums up the reality of an individual leading a school successfully. There is no magic pill that creates such an individual. According to Todd Whitaker, "There are really only two ways to improve a school significantly: 1. Get better teachers. 2. Improve the teachers you have." (Whitaker, 2003, p. 7-8). Leading a school means to surround the principal with good people. It is up to the principal to hire good people. We are not born to be a natural leader; it is something we learn how to do through experience. The Great Man Studies proved that the idea of being born a natural leader is frivolous. "An important point to note is that the researchers believed that great men possessed natural talents and skills. Such qualities were thought to be inborn qualities that could not be acquired by training or experience. The effort to find universal qualities of leadership in the biographies of great men proved fruitless" (Greer & Short, 2002, p. 24).

Leadership and management combined are critical elements for achieving exemplary educational leadership. It is important that leaders take the time to assess their leadership and understand their own goals and values. If these attributes are clear and concise a leader will be successful.

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