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

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

## **Abstract**

A school leader is not an easy job. Decisions are not always clearly defined and courage, strength, and confidence are needed to make difficult choices. But, if you are leading with integrity and fairness and exhibit ethical, respectful behavior while applying humor where appropriate, then you will be a better human being and a better school leader. This is my goal. As Vince Lombardi aptly phrased it, "there is only one way to succeed in anything and that is to give everything."

# WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

And Postsecondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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As a teacher for many years I have always believed that our future will be a better place because of our children. Their knowledge, experiences, and how they will handle the challenges of the future, like every generation before them, depends on how we provide and educate them today. I believe that all students can learn and should be treated with respect. In my classroom I have always treated my students the same as I would want my own children to be treated. I have always tried to provide a positive, nurturing, and caring environment providing each student with a stimulating, challenging, and creative approach to the assigned curriculum. My enthusiasm and joy of teaching have made a most pleasant career for me and I hope for my students and associates as well.

I became an educator somewhat by accident. When I was in college (1973-1977), I had the opportunity to teach night classes for the Lighted Schools Program for the Davenport Schools. It was my sophomore year at St. Ambrose and the art department received a request for a student to teach arts and crafts at night in some of the elementary schools. I answered the call with some apprehension knowing that my lack of experience would create some unexpected challenges. Through all the planning of the curriculum and mentoring from the teachers at each of the locations, I grew to love the involvement with the students and staff in this capacity. To my surprise I also gained much confidence and was enriched by the involvement with the diverse groups I was assigned to teach. I decided then to major in Art Education.

My thoughts on education are summarized best by the fact that education is ever changing and evolving. We cannot stand still nor sit back. We must continually move forward and grow educationally and professionally with our ever-changing world and reflect on its effect on our environment and us. One of the areas with the biggest change

is computers. I see it in my own children. What once was nonexistent is now a necessity. In our classrooms the computer as well as computer labs are a necessity and assist in the everyday business of education. Students today are known as the copy-paste generation since so much current information can be gathered in seconds off the web. It is the teacher who needs to bring the human element and accountability to the classroom.

Another area of change is the frequency at which today's students change schools. This poses its own challenge to teachers when students come, go, and then return. Educating our students must be done with flexibility, organization, and creativity. With the current trend we as teachers have to reintroduce information and catch these students up educationally, emotionally, physically (Physical Education) and socially. As a child, my own teachers left a lasting impression on me. They were strict, yet nurturing and instilled in me the importance of an education. My parents sacrificed a great deal to put me through school. Their values and strong school work ethic extended to our home following the school day. My goal is to instill the same values in my students and children.

After graduating with a degree in Art Education and minor in Physical Education, it was difficult to get a teaching position. So I worked for two years in banking and in the graphic arts field. Finally, with my strong desire to teach, I was able to secure a part-time teaching position in 1979. Then I decided to gain certification in Elementary Education with a Reading Endorsement and broaden my options and provide additional resources to a school district.

As mentioned earlier, while striving to provide the best nurturing and learning environment for my students, I have tried to keep abreast of and to implement the current

trends and research where applicable in my area of curriculum and teaching assignments. These assignments have varied from Kindergarten Art to 4<sup>th</sup> grade Social Studies to High School English. I have embraced each opportunity and enjoyed the experience at six different schools. The leadership qualities and administrative styles and educational background of each of my principals have driven me to seek my own master's in administration.

As a student in school I was academically challenged having to study more intensely than many other students. This experience was humbling and has driven home to me the importance of having well trained and caring teachers and administrators available to all students to experience success. Facing educational challenges over the years taught me to persevere. Now the challenge of being a student again has reawakened my struggle and enlightened me on the challenges of my own students. My present successes are directly related to the support I am receiving from my family and cohort members in this program. Through this program I am learning and applying the latest information in education, and applying skills and technology in the educational setting.

As I am seeking and accepting leadership roles, I find it is an incredible responsibility and a test of character. Just as the research tells us, whether in the workforce, in coaching, or in schools, a leader must be organized, well educated and have the skills to nurture, sustain, and advocate for every person to meet the goals of the particular situation. Drive and passion are needed for leaders to do everything he or she can to promote the success of all individuals. In decision making a leader must provide consistency and ensure equity and fairness. A leader should also include others in the planning and decision making when possible to give them ownership in the goals,

process, and production. This builds a community within a community and brings out the best in all individuals.

### **Knowledge Provides Vision**

Through our assigned readings I have gained insight into the global and proactive philosophy of school leadership provided in the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards and also the ISSL standards for School leaders required for licensure in Iowa. These standards guide current principals, assistant principals, and deans of instruction, instructional supervisors, educational and other professional associations and anyone interested in developing and nurturing the school community. Based on the ISSL standards, an exemplary educational leader must first have 'vision' and set professional and personal goals for success. These goals will then carry over into our professional job assignments. Every student in administrative leadership program must base his or her future on a vision of goals. Like the ELCC my philosophy on this educational experience of obtaining a higher degree has been a vision of self-improvement and a desire to know, *What are principals taught?* As I delved deeper into the history and history makers in educational leadership I have gained insight into the challenges of the past and have been inspired to continue on this road to become an exemplary educational leader. I am developing my own big picture of education.

"We can have more than we've got because we can become more than we are" (Rohn 1993, p.3). Personally this journey has been like a roller coaster ride. From the excitement of plunging into the master's program itself, to despair when my mother died in September 2003 and presently learning time management skills from seasoned co-teachers who have attained their masters degrees I remain optimistic overall. I keep the

stress level in check by exercising regularly and positive perspective by remembering this quote from Erma Bombeck, "Life is something that happens to us as we're busy planning for it" (Bader, 1998, para. 3). Or my own version, "Life is what happens when you make other plans." So I am doing my best to be unscathed when so many unexpected interruptions or events occur. Flexibility is the key as I have learned from my years of teaching. All these experiences are contributing to my preparation as a future administrator and becoming a well rounded individual. I am getting more proficient at important skills that include time management, organization and goal setting.

Education, whether it is at the beginning of one's career (pre-school) or nearly the end (Masters or Ph.D.), makes us more human, compassionate, insightful and enlightened. Along the way we gather learning strategies for attaining knowledge or skills. But the bottom line, as an educational administrator, is to be focused, organized, and have a vision or passion about who we are, what are our responsibilities are and how we apply our knowledge to assist others along their educational journeys. Our lives reflect this journey as well and where it leads us is our responsibility to ourselves.

As expressed earlier, I am enlightened and inspired by the outside research reading and information I have gathered. Part of this research includes several strong women leaders in history who prompted other women to seek higher education and meaningful positions, usually as teachers and, in some cases, principals in a male dominated society. They had vision, knowledge, and perseverance and were dedicated to promoting and assisting others. Their historic journey is inspirational for me and visionary in spirit. In the book, Managers of Virtue by David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, male leadership in the common school movement is discussed. In the 19th

century, and since, men have received most of the credit for creating and running public education. In part this resulted from the widespread assumption that leadership in the public sphere was a male prerogative. It also stemmed from the fact that the very important ways in which women contributed to the common school were less apparent because they were largely confined to a women's sphere. But networks of women leaders and their widening circles of co-workers were central forces in the rapid spread of public schooling in America.

In the campaigns of historic and visionary leaders such as Catharine Beecher, Emma Willard, Mary Lyon and Zilpah Grant appeared many of the central themes that characterized Victorian educational leadership. Because of the constraints on women's public activity, female leaders devised their own strategies of influence. They drew on their access to other women through the bonds of sorority, the resources of time and [through their families] funds available to middle-class women, and a common commitment to bringing about a millennial future through the proper upbringing of the young. Essentially what most female leaders did was to enlarge women's sphere rather than to question it, using the moral authority and social prestige accorded to women but not directly challenging the view that power in the public domain belonged to men. Among women the female leadership was direct and powerful, but when they moved among men they took care to preserve the appearance, if not the reality, of deference. Even the most ambitious and effective female leaders often needed men to front for their activities and to persuade males to grant the resources of money and power they required to pursue their work.

In public schools women rapidly became the majority of teachers, but men continued to run the system as school board members and superintendents. There were some exceptions---a few female school board members or superintendents---but they were rare except in the far western states that were the first to permit women's suffrage. Women pioneered in the professional preparation of teachers, but men typically received the credit for instituting normal schools.

Ella Flagg Young, who became the NEA's first woman president in 1910, recalled that when she first attended a meeting in 1867, women were simply permitted to sit in the gallery and listened to discussions carried on by the men.

Lady Pilgrims were to be seen and not heard; they were to appreciate and not criticize. Rare were the women who openly protested male dominance of professional associations and public leadership of the educational crusades. One such outspoken feminist was the Quaker teacher, Susan B. Anthony. In a teacher's convention in 1853, she listened with rising anger as men debated for three days about why teachers lacked the respect accorded doctors, lawyer and ministers. Finally she asked to speak. The men argued for half an hour about whether to hear her and then, while she stood waiting, reluctantly gave her permission. Susan's anger relates well to a slogan on a button I recently received from one of my three daughters which reads, *Well-behaved women rarely make history*. I appreciate my daughters' ingenuity and encourage their ambiguity as they meet life's challenges in high school and college and seek their dreams.

Emma Willard, one of the earlier mentioned visionary leaders, was an excellent speaker and typically asked a man to read her public lectures. Women often achieved power through indirection. The women leaders of the past generally avoided antagonizing

traditional males, for they depended on them for funds and political support in their enterprises. As a professional educator and successful future administrator I will need to apply similar diplomacy while dealing with students, staff, and the community on many issues.

In the classic musical *South Pacific*, Bloody Mary sings a song called "Happy Talk." In it she admonishes her daughter and a young navy officer that they must have a dream. If you do not have a dream how can you have a dream come true? In like manner, motivational speaker Les Brown encourages others to reach for the moon, even if you miss it you will land among the stars. It amounts to the vision of excellence for the school and becomes a matter of high expectations. You reap what you sow. Dream big, get big results. But if you set minimum standards or expectation that's exactly what you'll get. Either way, you reap what you sow (Wilmore, 2002,p.14).

Now my dream continues with becoming a visionary leader. I feel empowered to succeed with each step along the way. My family, friends and the realities of teaching keep me grounded for the long haul.

### **Instructional Leaders Embrace Cultural Differences**

To be an instructional leader the principal needs to focus on the curriculum and development of both the students and teachers education. To become an excellent instructional leader a principal needs to concentrate on staff development: instructional supervision, programs, teacher and student evaluation, and the continuous improvement of teaching and learning. They also need to help shape the culture in the school so that students and teachers can complete their work effectively.

Culture gives meaning to school work and provides an understanding of how organization moves from values and outcomes to work performance and finally to actual results. The goal of leadership is to make culture work for leaders and for the improvement of educational performance so that new ideas and improvement can occur. The best schools and teachers “provide strategies and tactics that are useful in developing the sorts of cultures that will help to produce positive student outcomes.”

### **Communication is the Key to Instruction**

The most effective principals are those who are more likely to communicate about instructional matters, to discuss curriculum and instruction, to focus on how well learning is mastered in communication between students, teachers, and parents, and are a visible presence in the school environment. Improvement will not occur (in academic performance) without the principal’s time and attention. They need to be the coordinator of the learning environment; who along with the teachers and students are a learning team.

Former First Lady and present Senator from New York, Hillary Rodham Clinton, expressed her support of education and quoted the African Proverb that states, ‘It takes a village to raise a child.’ The real question we as leaders need to ask is ‘What does it take to raise a village’ (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2002, p. 141). Answer, a well trained staff.

Seeking inspiration and information from strong educational readers I came across the book, *Profiles of Leadership in Education*. Author, Mark F. Goldberg, in the late 1980’s, did a series of interviews—to date he did more than forty interviews of important educators and public figures.

An interview with Shirley Brice Heath was particularly interesting to me by the way the author describes her. She is an anthropologist, linguist, and social historian, who studied diverse communities in the United States and Latin America. Heath wrote on topics ranging from government language policies to the importance of reading bedtime stories to children. Her experiences include teaching at Elementary and Secondary schools and at the University level. She approached her work with passion and commitment, sharing it with audiences on five continents and influencing many educators and administrators with the importance of how schools and families must work collaboratively. Also how influential the neighborhood is in educating it's young people.

In Heath's research she discovered that having a mentor who cared and had sustained involvement in one or more neighbor-based organizations were factors in that success. On the impact that mentors have on students, especially lower income students, her belief is that every dedicated mentor can make an important difference and keep work alive, meaningful, and influential extending beyond the classroom.

As a mentor of another teacher at Wilson school, I am pleased to be involved with the program our school district established a number of years ago. It has served our new teachers well in providing them with leadership, guidance, organization, and to create a smooth transition for their first year.

As the teachers gain experience they will begin to view themselves as leaders, they will take on the mantle of mentor, facilitator, coach, and mediator. This perpetuates a strong cohesive school staff.

## **Developing a Collaborative Team**

We, as educators and educational leaders, have many areas in education to consider when “trying to make a difference” in the lives of our students and each other. Focus should be first on people, not programs. In the book, What Great Principals do Differently, *Fifteen Things that Matter Most* (2003) by Todd Whitaker, the author, includes tips and strategies great leaders use. He talks about what the best principals do. The difference between more effective and less effective principals is not what they know, but what they do that sets them apart. Collaboration is essential.

As my experienced co-educators and I know our responsibilities in education have become more complex every year mainly due to societal changes in families, technology, and media. Inspiration, motivation and dedication are critical to overcome these challenges and through collaboration. By attending graduate classes, workshops, and through staff development we become better educators by applying new ideas, planning, goal setting, and by working alongside our fellow teachers.

### **Enlightenment from Peers**

I gained some reflective inspiration from a colleague of mine who shared how teaching had changed over the years and that a constant companion in her classroom at one time was a poster of “Jonathan Livingston Seagull.” The poster had two seagulls flying, accompanied by the phrase, *They Can Because They Think They Can*. When she saw frustration in her student’s eyes she would say, “Seagulls.” They would look up at the poster, muster up a smile, and know that they needed to keep trying to accomplish the difficult task at hand. Researchers use the term “efficacy”—the idea that most people who undertake a task have some reasonable expectation they’ll succeed. Students need to

spread their wings and dare to soar free in the knowledge they are not alone. We are in this together and more powerful because we care and help each other. That attitude almost always determines the “attitude” in life. At Wilson Elementary school our slogan is ‘Taking care of each other.’ As the research suggests and Wilson school demonstrates, a spirit of teamwork must be established. Every person who works in the school must feel that he or she is vital to the school’s success and are contributors to a collective goal. Their work becomes more meaningful, and the quality improves. Visitors to Wilson can attest to the positive school climate and team commitment of its staff.

### **Do The Right Thing**

With those thoughts in mind I continue with my journey of learning how to be that exemplary educational leader. My motto at school and in teaching my students is to ‘Do the right thing’ when making choices. In Whitaker’s book I found his opinion on *The fifteen things that matter most* are keys to doing the right thing as an administrator. It is also sound and simple advice. Some of those qualities and practices that are important for principals are the following: Image, it is important to look great; set expectations at the start of the year; people are important, not programs; treat everyone with respect everyday, all the time; make it cool to care; hire great teachers; and base every decision on your best teachers. With these qualities modeled, encouraged and developed, all the teachers, staff, and students can be the best that they can be. Let them be superstars.

I found it interesting how outstanding teachers, staff, and students need two things to make them contented or motivated: autonomy (freedom to do the things they know are best) and recognition. Allow them to take chances and risks, and implement innovations that all the rest can learn from. Giving our staff autonomy also means that we do not

attempt to control the behavior of less positive faculty members by establishing rules. Every time we put in a rule the good people will follow it and thus lose autonomy. The others, for whom it was intended, will ignore it anyhow.

To improve and grow from year to year, collaboration is also required in the form of feedback from staff, parents and, sometimes, from the students. Feedback provides equality and shared decision-making and avoids letting the *squeaky wheel* to drown out everyone else to *get his or her way*. Whitaker (2003) suggests “using a year-end summary teacher evaluation/checklist” (p. 84), which is an efficient and concise form that would give necessary feedback to help plan the teaching strategies and goals for the next year. “Celebration” should become an inherent part of personnel functions. This is one step in bringing about change that is frequently overlooked by many school leaders. Educators do not celebrate their success enough (Bartlett, Weisenstein, and Etscheidt, 2002, p.238).

Our schools are integral parts of the community where the educational leader must reach out to other entities to develop collaborative partnerships for the benefit of students, families and society as a whole. A collaborative leader should have the basic philosophy of “seek first to understand others of differing race, gender, religion, culture, and political opinion.” Also, they must give voice to all stakeholders, identify common values, and resolve conflict while building the team, in its unity, and its vision. Each group must be willing to stop, reflect, and think about where the other group is coming from. Then progress can be made and each side will gain the other’s perspective. Once that occurs, common ground can be established, and people can begin laying a foundation for conflict resolution and problem solving.

Involving others in informed, data-driven decision making, provides ownership in the process, the product, and the school itself. For example, research data describes several advantages to block scheduling (Cunningham and Cordeiro, 2000, p.243). Starting the 2005-06 school year, West High will be on the block schedule along with the other two high schools in Davenport. It requires effort to develop mutually trusting relationships, especially with families whose views may be radically different from the mainstream of the schools.

My principal and mentor, Mr. Long, often interacts with the public in an exemplary manner. Through his years of experience he demonstrates how educational leaders must have refined public relation skills and be diplomatic even when we want to say the honest truth. During times of crisis, members of the media can be your best friends or your worst enemies (Wilmore, p. 68). The media is powerful tool. Inviting them to positive, creative, and unusual happenings at your school will help market your school. As our research has indicated, let the media experience your climate and culture and use their marketing abilities to articulate the vision and passion that makes your school unique, successful, and a vibrant place for students to learn.

Our public school system is part of the community agencies designed to help families meet the demands of life. This gives us a common purpose with the service agencies. Many schools have developed creative partnerships with unique community groups (Coat Fund, Story Book Fund) to help students have what they need to succeed or simply to have a better existence. This partnership creates a *win-win* situation by allowing each group to give, receive and benefit (Covey 1990). Most of these groups will want nothing, but you should ask anyway and demonstrate good stewardship by reciprocating.

As a country, we hold education in high regard, have a sincere concern for our young, and a willingness to do what it takes to get things done to create a better tomorrow. As a school team we should plan ways to solicit and involve multiple stakeholders from families and entire communities to become involved with and invested in the progress of our schools. Involvement could be monetary and/or voluntary (time, talent, expertise, and/or other resources). We need the support of the entire community to support the vision of excellence to achieve the school's goals. This can only happen by our getting out in the community and getting involved. Potential problems can be averted by checking ahead of time to ensure that a plan is legal, ethical, and within regulatory guidelines. "Time is more valuable than money. You can get more money, but you can't get more time" (Rohn, 1993, p 14).

### **Humor is an Asset in the Political World**

Politics is inherently a part of any school district. A districts past, present, and future are affected by the politics of the community, the school board and each school administration. We, as educators and administrators, must be prepared to address the issues that affect the education process, whether these issues are popular or unpopular.

An administrator, who I personally admire for his political leadership is Dr. James Blanche, the superintendent of the Davenport Community School District, retired in June 2004. His composure under pressure while handling politically unpopular or difficult issues such as school closings is commendable. Dr. Blanche represented our district in a relaxed yet professionally polished style adding humor when and where appropriate in regards to the community and the media communications. His experience in the district as a teacher, principal, and superintendent provided for a vast knowledge regarding our

district goals and for an in-depth understanding of a large and diverse spectrum of programs.

Dr. Blanche accomplished many great things for our district. Blanche stated publicly that, "No one person does anything in a school district. The most important things that happen are in classrooms." "Teachers," he added, "carry the water. "We as administrators are the bucket." Blanche stepped into the superintendent position in July of 1998 before the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, which placed strict accountability standards on schools. Like many of us, Blanche is generally critical of NCLB because schools must show they are on a path to continuous improvement, usually without the funds to support the improvement. Our districts test scores showed promise during this past year, especially in the elementary schools. Some gains were made on closing the achievement gap between white and minority students as well.

As stated earlier, Blanche recommended some significant changes in our district when the deficit topped more than \$2 million. He recommended the controversial closing of Johnson and Grant Elementary schools, as well as reducing a program serving pregnant teens. This program, the Teenage Academic and Parent Program (TAPP) was where I taught at the time, and affected me personally. The staff and I were deeply committed to the successful and nurturing program and were not supportive of his decision.

To keep him grounded, Dr. Blanche adopted one school a year to visit every Friday and read or just spend time with the students. Dr Blanche believed it is all about what goes on in the classroom that makes a difference. It is my hope that the next superintendent will continue with this connection to a school in our district.

During my tenure as a teacher, Dr Blanche has acted as a role model of professionalism demonstrating leadership skills and earning the respect of the Davenport schools and community. Interestingly enough and as a side note, my mentor and principal, Mr. Long, originally hired Dr. Blanche. Both have modeled the use of humor in their leadership skills effectively..

In my research I have learned that the concepts of politics, social justice, economics, legal regulations, and cultural sensitivity are addressed from their larger contextual perspectives, as they relate to and shape both the school and community. The educational leader must take a proactive stand with representatives from diverse groups as an advocate for all children, regardless of socioeconomic background, race, ethnicity, gender, learning style, or any other differences (Wilmore, 2002, p.92).

**Integrity** is an important key to successful leadership and relationships. If it is lost it is difficult and time consuming to rebuild the trust in a relationship. The staff and community of stakeholders need to know that you are a principal with character and honesty, and that you are driven by an unending passion to do everything you can to promote the success of all students, faculty and staff members, families, and the community to reach a vision of excellence (Wilmore, p.81).

**Fairness** is also an important key to successful leadership and relationships. You must build safeguards into your decision-making process to ensure you are not biased, and to ensure equity and fairness. Admit your mistakes and learn from them and, as mentioned earlier, use a sense of humor with minor mistakes. A standards-based leader is forgiving and willing to help others and act as role models.

**Ethics** and ethical behavior is a life choice. All decisions must be based on good judgment and basic moral and ethical standards, falling within legal and policy guidelines. Some ethical decisions are not simple, both sides of an issue having pros and cons. Ethical questions have no easy answers; every aspect of the situation must be considered, the facts analyzed and the conclusion should be data-driven (Wilmore, p. 83). Ethical questions must be treated with integrity and fairness. When confronting any issue these four questions will frame your response: is it true, is it fair, is it beneficial to all concerned, and will it build goodwill and greater student learning and success.

### **Conclusion**

A school leader is not an easy job. Decisions are not always clearly defined and courage, strength, and confidence are needed to make difficult choices. But, if you are leading with integrity and fairness and exhibit ethical, respectful behavior while applying humor where appropriate, then you will be a better human being and a better school leader. This is my goal. As Vince Lombardi aptly phrased it, "there is only one way to succeed in anything and that is to give everything" (BenShea, 2002, p.135).

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