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What I believe about leadership and education

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What I believe about leadership and education

Abstract

The importance of being a strong educational leader and demonstrating successful practices as a reflective practitioner, leader of educational change, leader of learning for both students and teachers, and a leader of service is essential to the growth of all our country's students, and the educational systems from which they learn.

Being an educational leader encompasses every educational title and every educational position, from teacher to parent, and principal to school board member. By successfully collaborating and communicating among all stakeholders, educational leaders can guarantee that every child will succeed and develop into productive and knowledgeable citizens.

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

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Many people believe that public education is deteriorating. I believe that public education is in the same place it was 50 years ago. In my opinion, this status is just as bad as if it was deteriorating. Over the past 50 years, aspiring teachers have made huge gains in observing different learning styles, recognizing a wide range of learning disabilities, and implementing many different teaching strategies to help students learn. I truly believe that our country has the best educators in the world. These great leaders of education emerge from college with high hopes and dreams of changing the world. These same teachers arrive in schools where they are faced with crowded classrooms, dwindling parent and community support, a lack of resources and supplies, and students who may not even understand or speak English. Today's teachers are faced with insurmountable odds, yet they are expected to perform and achieve greater levels of success than their predecessors with less support and funding. The problems with today's schools are not the teachers, students, or the changing communities. The problems with today's schools are the school systems.

All great businesses adapt to the changing times, diversity, and demographics around them to meet the needs of their consumers so they may continue to have a successful product. The leaders of our school systems, for the most part, have yet to grasp this idea, and they continue to operate schools in the same way they were operated 50 years ago. School systems are expected to do more with less and turn out an equal or better product than 50 years ago. If

teachers are required to adapt to their students' learning styles, why are schools not required to adapt to their changing communities?

When I decided to become a teacher I was influenced by teacher and author, Marva Collins. I loved the way she taught kids that other schools had given up on teaching. She dedicated her life to giving hope to kids. When I look at rosters of 37 to 40 kids in a class, I often think to myself, "I don't know how you do it Marva," but I know that if I do not try in those 43 minutes to connect with the kids as well as educate them, I become the teacher that pushed them out and gave up on them. For that reason I became an educator. Because of these large classes, I also know that as hard as I may try, I cannot reach kids as effectively as I should be able to, thus causing some to slip through the cracks. Not allowing kids to slip through the cracks has become one of my driving reasons for becoming a principal and educational leader.

As an administrator and visionary leader, I hope to change the complacency within our school system. I plan to accomplish this by helping it progress to a stage where it no longer serves as a system of outdated schools moving students from grade to grade. Instead, I would like to see large school districts restructured into smaller community-based facilities of education where students are promoted to a level of education due to skill level, not grade level, ensuring success before promotion. As an administrator and instructional leader, I will also continue being an active advocate for teachers. Many teachers are too

humble about their accomplishments. As principal, I will recognize not only student achievement but teacher achievement as well. Being a teacher is a thankless job, but it does not need to be. Just as students need encouragement to succeed, so do our teachers.

Becoming a teacher is not a career choice, it is a career calling. Teachers are called to become educators because of the love they have in their hearts for children and the desire they have to help others succeed. Often times, teachers have that love questioned and attacked by people who feel teachers are not doing enough or are not trying to help students succeed. These teachers, as compassionate as they are, can only take so much abuse before they question themselves or are forced to lower their expectations. As a motivational leader, the principal needs to make sure that teachers do not get to this point. By constantly interacting with their staff of teachers and giving them encouragement and support, principals should be able to limit these occurrences.

A great leader is not always the person who makes sure all I's are dotted and T's are crossed or the person with whom everyone is friends. A great leader is someone who has a burning desire and passion for what they do. This desire and passion drives them to become the best at what they do and encourage everyone else around them to do the same. A great leader becomes consumed by what they do, live for the chance to do it one more day, and cannot imagine doing anything else. This desire and passion for improving education burns inside of

me. I decided to enter the educational leadership program to learn how to focus this desire and discover new ways to improve education by using my passion. I believe by improving education, every aspect of society will begin to follow and also improve. Therefore, becoming an educational leader is one of the most important things I can do for my life and for the lives of others.

Our education system is in desperate need of help. Low test scores, graduation rates, and trust in our school systems are compounded with budget cuts, leading to the demise of our public schools. Strong leadership is needed now more than ever. Our schools need leaders that will bring students, teachers, parents, and communities together in a common goal of success, as well as leaders that will prepare students not only for college, but also for the work force through business partnerships, apprenticeships, shadowing, and mentoring programs. I think the leaders in our schools need to work to take schools into the future and not back to the past. By completing the UNI Educational Leadership Program, I will develop the skills and knowledge to lead students, teachers, and stakeholders into a bright and promising future for public education.

The following pages are a blueprint of how, as an educational leader, I plan to address the importance of being a reflective practitioner, leader of educational change, leader of learning for both students and teachers, and leader of service. The ideas included in this paper will also address the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) six standards of leadership.

The first section of this paper addresses a leader's role as a reflective practitioner. The ideas in this section align with the ISSL standards of visionary (standard 1) and collaborative (standard 4) leadership.

Reflective Practitioner

When I first began teaching, I prepared wonderful lessons and strategies that I could not wait to implement. I was like a kid on Christmas morning who was allowed to open presents but then had to try on new clothes before I could play with my new toys. The majority of my lessons and strategies went great, but a few of them flopped, and flopped big. I knew they were good lessons, so I was not sure what had gone wrong. Fortunately, my mentor helped me reflect and collaborated with me to make adjustments. The next time I tried the lessons that had previously failed, I received much better results, I was not the only one interested in the outcome. Because my mentor was involved in the refining of my lessons, he also took more interest in the outcome.

Two insights I gained from that situation were: (1) by taking the time to sit down and reflect on what I had done, right or wrong, I was able to make corrections that would benefit my next classes even more than the original; and (2) by having someone to reflect and collaborate with, I gained an outside perspective, investment, and support in what I was doing, and had someone else take stake in the outcome.

Recent research on being a reflective practitioner as the leader of learning shows that leaders who take the time to reflect on their practices develop into thoughtful leaders. In the article *Developing Thoughtful Leaders*, Bess Sullivan Scott, a principal of Goodrich Middle School in Lincoln, NE, documents a program in Nebraska which is geared toward school principals collaborating and reflecting on leadership. Through this program, Scott (2004) notes “Competition has changed to cooperation and support among middle level and high school principals who participate in the program because they systematically and purposefully build relationships, acquire knowledge and develop new leadership strategies” (p. 25). Research also indicates that “problem solving, dialogue, and reflection” (Zepeda, 2004, p. 150) by leaders of learning also develop stronger learning communities. These three strategies are presented in a study “to meet the learning needs of 125 teachers and create an environment conducive to staff development” (Zepeda, 2004, p. 145). Also, in this study Sally J. Zepeda (2004) says, “Reflection on practice became part of the school culture because the principal encouraged it” (p. 150). This study shows how teachers and faculty in a school improved its practices by using reflection in and out of the classroom.

Even as far as Nottingham, England, where “The importance of school leadership prompted the establishment of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL)” (Southworth & Du Quesnay, 2005, p. 213), research is being done on reflective practitioners. The NCSL was “founded on the belief that a

need exists for dramatic changes in the way school leadership is defined and practiced in a standards-based system” (Southworth & Du Quesnay, 2005, p. 213). One of the NCSL’s objectives is based on research that shows reflection used by school leaders in collaborative settings at the NCSL: “Promote collaborative learning and communication so that all school leaders feel that they are a part of a network of vibrant professional learning communities and have opportunities to contribute to educational policy developments” (Southworth and Quesnay, 2005, p. 213).

As a leader of learning, I find that much of the current research on reflective practitioners coincides with current trends in education, leading teachers to become more collaborative. Therefore, it only makes sense that reflection and collaboration start from the top down. In today’s urban education systems, I believe that there is a growing belief that to be a successful principal you must take time to reflect and collaborate with other school and district leaders to strengthen public education. When school leaders join together to reflect and share current achievements, failures, concerns, and ideas, our education system truly does become less competitive and more cooperative in attaining success for our students.

As a principal, I will incorporate being a reflective practitioner into all aspects of my school. The benefits that come from reflection are too great to limit only to being a principal. As a principal, I envision students and teachers

reflecting on learning needs and styles to increase comprehension, teachers reflecting with other teachers to expand teaching techniques, teachers reflecting with principals to strengthen curriculum, principals reflecting with other principals to enhance learning and teaching, and principals reflecting with communities to improve society.

My research on being a reflective practitioner as the leader of learning connects with all six ISSL standards. From visionary to political leadership, becoming a reflective practitioner promotes the success of all students in a variety of ways.

Seeing how being a reflective practitioner aligns with all six ISSL standards strengthens my faith in the research I have found and makes me realize it is an essential element of being a successful principal.

Being a successful principal also requires knowing when and how to implement change. The concept of change causes many educators to become apprehensive and defensive, it can also cause educators to feel revitalized and encouraged. Because change can evoke such a wide variety of emotions, it is essential that principals become effective leaders of educational change.

Educational Change

“Change is a beginning, which, in turn, means that what was happening before must now come to an end” (Israel, 2004, p. 17). This is a frightening

thought for a lot of people. Change raises the questions: Will I be better or worse off? How much discomfort will I experience? Will life become more difficult? Will I be up to the task of doing things differently? Change can create feelings of uncertainty, and uncertain people can be very prone to fear, resentment, and distrust. Many people who resist change tend to think of it as a negative and do not really understand change or how it is essential for growth. Without change, nothing will ever improve. The whole premise of education is change: Changing how our students think, learn, behave, and adapt. Teachers are the ultimate advocates for change! Yet, teachers themselves can be very apprehensive to change what they do.

Research tells me that as a leader of educational change, “One cannot, of course, change a school culture alone” (Bath, 2002, p. 6) and “efforts to motivate and energize disaffected teachers and forge relationships among otherwise disconnected teachers can have a profound effect on the overall climate of the organization” (Fullan, 2002, pp.18). This is why, according to Michael Fullan, (2004) “the single factor common to successful change is that relationships improve” (p. 18). Asking teachers to change what they feel has been successful for years is a difficult task; getting them to commit to the change is even more difficult. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky (2004) add:

Participating in adaptive change often demands some disloyalty to our roots. To tell someone that he should stop being prejudiced is really to tell

him that some of the lessons of his loving grandfather were wrong. To tell a teacher that she has to begin measuring her success by how well she raises student test scores or teaches the “unteachable” students may challenge a great deal of what she was taught about her job (p. 36).

Simply telling someone that what they have been doing is not sufficient anymore, or that you expect them to find a way to change on their own, will guarantee no positive change. To obtain successful change and improve relationships, Heifetz and Linsky (2004) found the following to be true:

You need to respect and acknowledge the loss that people suffer when you ask them to leave behind something they have lived with for years...people need to know that you realize that the change you are asking them to make is difficult and that what you are asking them to give up has real value to them (p.36).

My fraternity has taught me “The proper way to deal with an erring brother is with tolerance and sympathetic understanding”. I believe that the same philosophy can apply to teachers who are upset with change. As an instructional leader, it is imperative that professional development opportunities and time to help the teacher become successful at changing are provided. Providing teachers with support, encouragement, and the proper tools for change are huge steps to becoming a leader of educational change.

While no change insures no growth, too much change at once can cause undesirable results. Marla Israel and Beverly Kasper (2004) say “effective strategies for supporting change warn that trying to change everything at once is a sure path to failure” (p. 23). Instead, leaders of educational change should “channel the efforts...into one or two specific goals” (Israel and Kasper 2004, p. 23). I believe it is important for principals to not overwhelm their students, staff, or stakeholders with too much change at once. Taking on too many changes at once leads to confusion, disappointment, and dissatisfaction. The result of implementing change should coincide with the vision of the school. To effectively reach the school’s vision, the principal should establish goals and use change to accomplish those goals a few at a time, not all at once. Research by Michael Fullen (2002) states, “Principals not attuned to leading in a culture of change make the mistake of seeking external innovations and taking on too many projects”, and “Cultural change principals...concentrate on student learning as the central focus of reform and keep an eye out for external ideas that further the thinking and vision of the school” (p. 19). It is important to remember that change should not be done just for the sake of change. Rather, change should always provide a more promising and rewarding future for all students.

Being a leader of educational change strongly incorporates the ISSL standards of being an instructional and collaborative leader. Providing the staff with opportunities to work collaboratively with peers for improving student

learning and insuring that professional development opportunities are readily available to staff members are integral parts of school improvement and change.

The ability to influence people to change is one of the strongest attributes of a great leader. Great leaders know that change is not necessary whenever the wind blows in a different direction and that sustaining change takes support, dedication, accessible resources, and understanding. As a leader of educational change, only one question needs to be answered to evaluate if change is needed: Is it best for kids? Once this question is answered, the rest is academic.

Implementing successful change for improvement requires continuous learning by all members involved. It is the responsibility of the principal to make sure that teachers and students have access to the resources needed to accomplish successful change. By improving the learning of our teachers, our student's learning will improve also. Being a leader who can successfully improve the learning of teachers and students incorporates the practices of the ISSL standards of an organizational (standard 3) and ethical (standard 5) leader.

Improving Learning for Students and Adults

All educational leaders should be proponents of life-long learning. Encouraging students and adults to never stop learning is the key to being successful. "Passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act increases the pressure for enhanced performance by schools and students" (Ruebling, 2004, p.

243). To enhance the performance of teachers and students, educational leaders must make sure that opportunities for improvement are available.

If student learning is expected to improve, we must first address improving our teachers' learning. Susan Black (2004) says, "Beginning teachers do not enter the classroom as finished products" (p. 46) and, "Teachers, like other professionals, need time in which to hone their skills, but they seldom get the time they require" (p. 47). Many new teachers experience a sink or swim feeling because of a lack of coaching, mentoring, or guidance given to them during their first few years of teaching. Far too many young, outstanding teachers quickly become overwhelmed and burned out because they have no one to learn from once they are hired. After a few practicum hours and a semester of student teaching, many new teachers are expected to be teaching experts. On the contrary, "Beginning teachers need time to improve their skills under the watchful eye of experts-and time to reflect, learn from mistakes, and work with colleagues as they acquire good judgment and tacit knowledge about teaching and learning" (Black, 2004, p. 47).

Beginning teachers are not the only ones who would benefit from ongoing learning. Experienced and tenured teachers could also work toward improving their teaching by continuing to learn. Principals must not only offer staff development, mentors, coaches, and continuing education opportunities to their

staff, but also make sure their staff actually takes advantage of opportunities to improve as teachers.

Principals must maintain respectable staffs. Having a staff of hypocrites who preach the importance of life-long learning to their students, yet do not model life-long learning for their students, ruins the reputation of the staff and the learning community. As educators, we hold our students to high expectations of being the best. Principals should hold their staffs, and themselves, to no less than these same expectations of being the best. By improving the learning of teachers, the learning of students should also be positively affected.

In addition to focusing on improving teachers' learning, principals should also focus on curriculum, another vital component to improving student learning. Charles Ruebling (2004) says, "Research increasingly affirms that the key to school improvement and student achievement is for school leaders to focus on the academic program (namely the written curriculum)" (p. 244). As an instructional leader, providing the best curriculum available to students is essential for success. Charles Ruebling (2004) recommends having, "content area committees studying the expectations of the national and state standards" (p. 245). Following Charles Ruebling's advice would be a great way to help ensure a useful and meaningful curriculum for all students. By focusing a school's curriculum around the standards students are evaluated on by national and state tests, teachers know exactly what information they are responsible for presenting to students.

Focusing the curriculum toward specific objectives eliminates questions teachers may have about teaching students what they need to know. Although curriculum is a key to school improvement, it is not the only key needed. Charles Ruebling (2004) also identifies “effective teamwork, measurable goals, and performance data as key ingredients for school improvement” (p. 252).

Improving learning for both students and adults is not a goal that can be accomplished overnight. Richard Elmore (2002) says, “Clearly, successful learning for adults and students in schools is a cumulative process over time” (p. 23). In today’s fast-paced world, leaders are often expected to show drastic improvement in short amounts of time. The window of time to prove success becomes smaller with each generation. Principals and teachers know these expectations better than anyone. With legislation such as No Child Left Behind, schools are placed on short time tables by the federal government to demonstrate improvement before facing negative consequences. If schools began modeling the same philosophy as the federal government, our teachers would no longer be educators, but enforcers.

Students and adults are not computers that can simply be improved by downloading new software. Sometimes it seems in our fast-paced, technological society that this fact is forgotten. People’s learning styles are as different as people themselves. To expect all students and adults to show improvement at the same rate is as absurd as expecting trees to grow at the same rate as flowers. It is

the role of the leader of learners to not be quick to judge the rate of improvement and to make sure that improvements in learning continue to occur.

“Effective leaders model for others what it means to exercise control over the conditions of one’s own learning and to make that learning powerful in the lives of others” (Elmore, 2002, p. 25). By modeling for students and teachers what a life-long learner is, principals demonstrate that improving learning is not something that only takes place between kindergarten and college, but for a lifetime. The principal, as the leader of learners, must make sure that all improvements to learning and the school occur in favor of what is best for kids. Many times, making improvements can mean trying new strategies and breaking away from traditions. Principals must be careful, but not afraid, of taking risk to achieve improvement. Charles Ruebling (2004) alludes to taking this risk by making changes to achieve school improvement:

To achieve school improvement, school leaders must help teachers and parents think beyond the strategies of reduced class size and traditional schools that have been organized around one classroom teacher in each classroom and many specialist teachers. This kind of change is not easy, but it is clear that old strategies have not satisfactorily improved learning results over the past several decades. Leaders must orchestrate multiple changes that provide opportunities for teachers to work in teams, focus

resources effectively on curriculum development and implementation, and establish accountability for results. (p.252)

There are many strategies and philosophies that lead to improving learning for both students and adults. However, a principal must answer only one question to determine if the strategy or philosophy is worth implementing: What is best for kids? Once this question is answered, the decision of how to improve learning is easy.

Conclusion

The future of education presents many ominous challenges, frustrating setbacks, and tremendous successes. The importance of being a strong educational leader and demonstrating successful practices as a reflective practitioner, leader of educational change, leader of learning for both students and teachers, and a leader of service is essential to the growth of all our country's students, and the educational systems from which they learn. However, it is not the sole responsibility of the principal to lead, "Indeed, if schools are going to become places in which all children are learning, all teachers must lead" (Zepeda, 2004, p. 50). To truly improve public education and student achievement, all stakeholders involved in education must realize that being an educational leader is not limited to certain titles or positions. Being an educational leader encompasses every educational title and every educational position, from teacher to parent, and principal to school board member. By successfully collaborating and

communicating among all stakeholders, educational leaders can guarantee that every child will succeed and develop into productive and knowledgeable citizens.

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