A preferred vision for leading secondary schools: a reflective essay

Jeffrey A. Haverland
University of Northern Iowa

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A preferred vision for leading secondary schools: a reflective essay

Abstract
I believe there are four critical elements necessary for any administrator to be a successful leader of learning. The first critical element is the creation and maintenance of an exceptional school climate and culture where learning is approached with enthusiasm and wonder. Second, the administrator must maintain a direct connection to the learning environment, at all times, so that learning is seen as important and expected. Third, ethical leadership of the school community is foundational to the success of the school community, and the building administrators must always act with integrity. Finally, the administrator must develop, implement, and continually support a strong and unified vision that is much more than writing on a wall.

Where these elements are absent, an administrator can accomplish little because these elements focus and provide the passion for making education exemplary in the face of tremendous challenges in today's schools.
A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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Jeffrey A. Haverland

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Advisor/Director of Research Paper

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Date Approved

Gregory A. Reed
Second Reader of Research Paper

2-16-04
Date Received

William P. Callahan
Head, Department of Educational
Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary
Education
Passion and Background

I believe there are four critical elements necessary for any administrator to be a successful leader of learning. The first critical element is the creation and maintenance of an exceptional school climate and culture where learning is approached with enthusiasm and wonder. Second, the administrator must maintain a direct connection to the learning environment, at all times, so that learning is seen as important and expected. Third, ethical leadership of the school community is foundational to the success of the school community, and the building administrators must always act with integrity. Finally, the administrator must develop, implement, and continually support a strong and unified vision that is much more than writing on a wall. Where these elements are absent, an administrator can accomplish little because these elements focus and provide the passion for making education exemplary in the face of tremendous challenges in today's schools.

In the past, I aspired to be a great teacher. Presently, I do my best to realize that goal. Now I have set a new goal of becoming a great administrator. At each stage in my life, I want to move through the ranks of education until I reach the very pinnacle of my career, wherever that may take me. At the end of my career, I want to leave knowing that I gave everything I had—every single day—no exceptions.
I want to be the driving force behind positive changes. I want to make my school a place where teachers, staff, and students want to go because the atmosphere is friendly and conducive to success. I want to be involved in hiring, policy-making, and budgeting in order to positively impact education by facilitating continuous improvement and change. After all, a school community deserves trail-blazing reform, not maintenance. In the end, I want to create a place where teachers, students, and staff are driven to take part in creative, exciting, and exceptional learning opportunities. My ultimate goal is to create an environment that focuses upon the improvement of student learning and teacher quality.

Intrinsically, I want to create a school that maintains a vital focus on the individual. I want to integrate massive amounts of technology and cross-curricular activities into the daily routine because these things are essential to the success of each and every student. I want to provide teachers with the resources and the know-how that they need to be their very best. Ultimately, I want to empower students and teachers to overcome their own personal obstacles to realize and even surpass their goals.

I want classrooms to be cooperative and hands-on, where students and teachers are actively engaged and motivated. Teachers need relevant and substantial professional development activities; they must be recognized for their efforts above and beyond the status quo; and they need to know that the principal
supports them. Most of all, teachers need to see what they do is far more than just a job. Changes such as these should create an environment in which people want to be a part of each day and will provide a basis for success that is aligned with the school community's vision.

There is a certain atmosphere that one experiences inside a great school. Students want to be there, staff are excited to try new approaches to education, test scores increase, attendance issues disappear, and those students who were once thought lost are rediscovered. It will be my challenge as a building principal to make these dreams a reality. I am filled with an amazing level of excitement and motivation, but enthusiasm alone will not create an exemplary learning community. An effective leader must first create the foundation for a superior school, beginning with a positive and supportive school climate and culture.

A Positive School Culture

"Schools must unabashedly teach students about such key virtues as honesty, dependability, trust, responsibility, tolerance, respect, and other commonly-held values important to Americans" (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2001, p. 30). Our lives have changed dramatically over the past decade with events such as Columbine and September 11th. Many students no longer have a safe harbor to protect them from the harsh realities of life. Each day principals and teachers play a critical role in the development of the future by providing students and staff with a positive school culture that
promotes direction, motivation, confidence, and hope. School leaders are charged by the Iowa Standards with promoting "the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 32). We cannot expect any portion of our school culture to function efficiently if our students and our staff are not committed to the ideals of a productive, supportive, and success-driven environment.

Our students come to us with uniquely diverse backgrounds, learning abilities, and obstacles to success. *No Child Left Behind* "seeks to ensure that every student, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, has the opportunity to learn in a safe, supportive, standards-based environment" (George, 2002, p. 6). As educators, we are faced with the increasing burden of accountability like no other time in the history of education. School personnel are feeling increased pressure to perform while budgets continue to get smaller, classrooms get larger, and schools become increasingly dangerous. Consequently, the job of administrators becomes ever more challenging in their quest to create an environment where success overcomes all else.

Exceptional schools must begin with a strong and unified staff. Therefore, the principal must strive to seek out and retain extremely qualified and passionate educators. Research indicates that "staff members are highly motivated to increase learning in schools that have site-based management" (Cunningham and
Cordeiro, 2003, p. 208). Site-based management allows teachers to “exercise leadership” (Cunningham and Cordeiro, 2003, p. 209) and take ownership in their school. Teachers and staff feel empowered to make decisions, and ultimately increase the effectiveness of the school community because they are able “to more quickly make decisions regarding curriculum, program innovations, and professional development” (Cunningham and Cordeiro, 2003, p. 209).

For years, teachers have become more and more limited in what and how they can teach. As educational leaders we must be willing to innovatively test the waters and give teachers professional freedom, while at the same time making them effective and pioneering problem solvers who can maneuver obstacles. “When teachers begin to see the potential power in their positions and accept challenges instead of seeing just problems, then positive change will occur” (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker and Jefferies, 2000, p. 18). School leaders who can inspire and promote these attributes in their staff are said to be:

Committed to the concept of learning and developing a community of learners. That they are visionary, change agent, and expert at dealing with complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty are often the descriptive attributes employed when defining quality leadership. Of primary importance is the level of care the principal demonstrates towards his/her teachers” (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker and Jefferies, 2000, p. 20).
We must care for our teachers. If we do not care about them, why should they care about the children who are entrusted to their care? A stimulating climate and engaging school culture are essential components required for exceptional teaching to occur because inspiration does not arise from complacency.

Educational leaders must inspire teachers to always strive for more. Leaders must make sure that the status quo is never the case in any classroom in their school, and if it becomes such, the principal must work with teachers to revive their passion. *No Child Left Behind* has now made hiring and retaining quality teachers more important than ever, and the state of Iowa is providing principals with the power to differentiate the exemplary from the mediocre. Principals now have the ability to ensure that quality teaching takes place and to promote a school culture and climate that are highly conducive to success. The ball now is in the hands of each school leader to make education the way it was always meant to be. It is up to that leader to motivate his or her teachers and staff to want to seek that Promised Land. This may seem Utopian, but if we are to effectively take education through the next century, we must strive for excellence. It must begin with an exceptional school climate and culture.

What is an exceptional school climate and culture? First, it is an environment where "the focus is on quality work, discipline is maintained without coercion, and students continuously evaluate their own work" (Green, 1994, p. 2). A school climate and culture must be cooperative, productive, and most
importantly, students and staff must decide what quality means. They must “discuss it, define it, [and] learn how to recognize it” (Green, 1994, p. 4).

Equality must also be a focus because:

Quality relationships are never built upon fear. Instead they are supportive, caring, and friendly. In working toward quality one must learn principals of management based on an understanding of basic human needs and internal motivation so that one acts as a ‘leader’ instead of a ‘boss.’ (Green, 1994, p. 6)

We must create a community where teachers feel empowered to teach, students feel empowered to learn, and everyone feels empowered to lead. In order to facilitate this, the leader must establish “a gracious and hospitable place for people to work together” (Bonstingl, 1996, p. 63). Schools are fundamentally similar to businesses, and for businesses to be successful; employees must be happy, safe, valued, and actively involved.

I will ensure that teams work at every level to communicate their needs and problem solve to make our school successful without fear or coercion. Site management, action teams, staff and student social activities, and comprehensive school improvement plans are essential to an effective school, and they will be part of the school I lead. Some decisions must be top-down and others will originate from shared decision-making, but the overriding theme will be productive cooperation. I envision a safe, equitable, and motivating environment
for everyone, and the climate of the school must mirror this vision. This vision can only be realized when everyone within the school community realizes the value of lifelong learning.

Lifelong Learning and Instructional Leadership

“The principal will lead a constant search for better instruction, setting standards for acceptable teaching practices and providing support, resources, and ongoing professional development to facilitate effective instructional strategies” (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2001, p. 21). Together with deep-rooted ethics and a safe, motivating school culture, a strong vision can be established. Upon this vision, true organizational leadership can create a school that is second to none.

The role of the principal has constantly evolved throughout the course of education, and with each subsequent change, principals have become more focused on management and less focused on instructional leadership. In fact, “many are wondering how will they have time to be instructional leaders when they are so busy dealing with daily school-management concerns” (Davidson-Taylor, 2002, p. 30). It is truly amazing that the leaders of our schools have been taken out of their most important role for so long, but educational leaders are seeing the tide turn and the spotlight once again focusing upon leading for learning. In order for administrators to excel in this crucial area, they must encourage and model life-long learning; they must initiate and facilitate quality
professional development; and they must make curriculum decisions that are based on teacher knowledge, experience, and scientifically-based research. With these tools, principals can once again get back to what really matters—being a teacher and a leader.

In order to be an exceptional instructional leader, the principal must model and set the precedence for the importance of life-long learning because “effective principals love to learn and are driven to make a difference for students” (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2000, Self Understanding of Principals, para. 5). What becomes an obstacle between principals and quality instructional leadership is credibility. According to Buchen (2002):

If a principal has spent more than five years away from the classroom, this may pose a problem of credibility in his or her instructional leadership. Teachers are reluctant to accept what they consider to be outdated teaching techniques and curriculum goals. While some will argue that principals’ classroom observations keep them current, the truth is that many principals are not as familiar as they should be with contemporary classroom dynamics, cutting-edge pedagogy, and brain research. Without the recent experience of having to prepare unmotivated students for high-stakes testing, principals as instructional leaders may appear in the unattractive light of failing to practice what they preach (Credibility section, para. 1).
The only way to preserve this credibility and to motivate staff to further their own professional lives is for the principal to “spend some time in the trenches” (Buchen, 2002, Credibility section, para. 1). Principals must be willing to work with students to ensure that they do not lose touch with the teachers and the issues that educators face. Furthermore, school leaders must be willing to continue their own pursuit of knowledge by keeping up new trends, ideas, and research. A common problem is that “educators are all too quick to tout the virtues of ‘lifelong learning,’ but many teachers are not active participants in the very disciplines they teach” (Peery, 2002, p. 25). What has to be conveyed to staff is that the principal is unrelenting in his or her pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement, and that staff should be also. Principals cannot sit idly by and expect teachers to be lifelong learners if they are not willing to “practice what they preach.” If the principal is seen as valuing and furthering his or her own education, staff will be inclined to do the same, and eventually students will reap the benefits of extrinsic motivation to be lifelong learners. According to King (2002):

Today’s principals and superintendents are learning leaders: They participate in regular, collaborative, professional learning experiences to improve teaching and learning. They work alongside teachers in adult learning activities—study groups, school visits, and examination of student work. They recognize their own need to develop a broad
knowledge base in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and they seek ongoing professional development activities to achieve that goal (Lead Learning section, para. 1).

The bottom line is that principals must be lifelong learners. If not, they are not setting the example that learning is a valuable and essential tool.

One way to ensure lifelong learning is through quality professional development. Every educator has sat through horrendous inservice sessions that inspired more anger than motivation. According to Quinn (2002), “the traditional short-term approach to professional development, focusing on one-shot workshops or courses that have little relationship to the school’s overall goals and objectives, are unlikely to yield positive results” (Emphasize Professional Development section, para. 1). Professional development must be specific and personalized. Peery (2002) offers five key ideas that should be considered when creating professional development activities: 1.) Take stock: Honor the individuality, identity, and integrity of teachers; 2.) Turn teachers into students: Experiencing subject matter from a student’s perspective informs and refreshes teachers’ instructional practice; 3.) Look in the mirror: Each teacher needs to see his or her teaching through another’s eyes; 4.) Show what you know: Have teachers share best practices; and 5.) Add to the toolbox: High-quality, whole-faculty inservice expands teachers’ repertoires. The overriding theme is personalization. Teachers must be compelled to take part in professional
development activities, and that must come out of interest and involvement—not coercion. As an educational leader, principals have the ability to make professional development worthwhile and productive. As an effective instructional leader, principals should make this a priority.

Principals can pursue lifelong learning and generate incredible professional development activities, but without a strong and research-driven curriculum, the success of the school community will never be realized. "The principal is expected to lead in the design of a curriculum that meets the learning needs of all students [and] is aligned with state and local standards, to know what constitutes good instructional practice" (American Association of School Administrators, 2001, p. 1). In a quality school, there should always be a pursuit of a better way to provide instruction. Furthermore, "in the current context of performance standards and accountability, instructional leaders know that they must develop the skills to collect and use data from a variety of sources in order to inform school improvement decisions" (King, 2002, Use Data to Inform Decisions section). No Child Left Behind has ultimately put the need for a high quality, effective curriculum at the forefront of all educational reform. Even the schools that are performing quite well cannot wait until their scores drop to take action. Education must be proactive, but many schools are finding their current situation quite reactive when responding to NCLB legislation and state guidelines. Effective instructional leaders must ensure that their school is constantly
improving and exploring new avenues in the way of curriculum. Educators no longer have the luxury of time. They are faced with a new set of challenges, and must look to their instructional leaders to pave the way.

“Despite being inundated with daily challenges, effective principals [must] reorder their job duties to make time for instructional leadership” (Stiff-Williams, 2002, p. 18). Instructional leadership requires principals to take an active role in their school and community, and it helps promote vision and leadership in all other areas that are charged by the Iowa standards. Education cannot exist without instructional leadership. It is sad that up until now, many leaders have been unable to realize the necessity. The importance of instructional leadership must be addressed by all who play a part in education—especially those who guide legislation. “As policymakers in Washington, DC continue talks of reforming public education, raising student achievement, and holding schools accountable, the essential and critical role of a school’s instructional leader—its principal—cannot be neglected” (National Association of Secondary School Principals, November 2001, Conclusion section, para. 1).

Ethical Leadership

“Teachers are those who use themselves as bridges, over which they invite their students to cross; then having facilitated their crossing, joyfully collapse, encouraging them to create bridges of their own” (Canfield and Hansen, 1996, p. 113). With this thought, it makes one think of the impact that teachers have on
students in both what they say and what they do. Educators must strive to teach students to be compassionate, altruistic, and moral; and educational administrators must facilitate the ethical growth of students and faculty. It is with this ethical guidance that all become generous or to the very contrary, malicious. “Positions of leadership and power carry a strong responsibility to provide an ethical example. A leader generally sets the tone for the group, so his principled conduct, or lack thereof, can have a major influence on the group, as well as affecting its morale” (Breeden, 2001, p. 22). We gain respect by giving respect and we promote morality through our own ethical conduct. How we deal with trying times says much about our character and the organizations with which we associate. Ultimately, ethics becomes the foundation for everything that is built during our tenure. Professionally, we are charged with promoting “the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 80). Without ethics, the school community is undermined, trust is eroded, and vision is unable to withstand the constant battering of everyday life. Where ethical behavior is absent, nothing good can be accomplished.

As an educational leader, we are charged with leading by example, and this example, good or bad, is perceived by faculty, staff, students, parents, and a host of others who walk through our doors. Consequently, it becomes imperative that educational leaders develop a framework of values and most importantly, that they always act with integrity. According to Breeden (2001):
Integrity has a utilitarian component: Decisions are made that will benefit the greatest number of people. This is a hard distinction for most people to make, as we live in a pluralistic society where it seems everyone—including prominent political leaders—is out to serve his or her own best interests. It takes a strong sense of ethics to break the cycle and act in a benevolent way toward others (What Would You Do When No One Is Looking section, para. 2).

The apparent difficulty is that it is much easier to talk about integrity and ethics than it is to live by those concepts. As stated by Donald and Davis (1998):

Schools are incubators for learning about and practicing principles of democracy. Therefore, education requires leaders who are committed to the principals of democracy, individuals who can balance equity and excellence, freedom and compliance to learning, diversity and limits. Schools require leaders who understand, appreciate, respect, teach, and abide by a set of political principles that distinguish the United States of America from all other nations (Legal Limits Section, para. 1).

As school leaders, we must do right by all with whom we work. We need to make decisions based upon what will result in the most good. There are times where ethical decision-making may initially undermine our reputation, but once people come to learn and respect our motivation and realize we are guided by something much higher than our personal agenda, we will flourish and so will our
schools. If we strive to be ethical and always act with integrity, even in difficult times, we will never lose sight of the ultimate goal—an efficient and effective school community.

Once educational leaders develop and seek guidance through a framework of values, they can begin to ask tough questions, seek clarity, and become consistent in all that they do. As leaders, we must be willing to seek out answers even when the popular vote would designate otherwise. Situations will not be easy, people will be angry, decisions have to be made, and leaders will constantly be faced with wavering popularity. However, if leaders strive to operate ethically, in all circumstances, they will prevail. Administrators must be willing to work outside of their comfort zones in order to meet their goals, and most importantly, they must strive to compel others to follow their lead because an ethical framework must be consistent within our school community.

One of the most troubling problems within any institution is living by one standard and guiding by another. Leaders create problems by allowing others within their organization to undermine and trivialize rules and expectations. Ultimately, it is the leader that must hold everyone, regardless of personal favor, to the highest possible standards. According to Brown and Townsend (1997), "violations of ethical standards must be confronted. If the leader looks the other way, the message is clear that what is written or stated is not valued. Consistency in maintaining a strong ethical standard requires vigilance and care" (Perfect
equality section, para 4). If our school community realizes that we not only value ethics, but we will also work relentlessly to ensure that they are present in our schools, we as leaders can surely make a positive impact on a greater number of lives. According to Brown and Townsend (1997), “developing an ethical framework in which people work and students learn may be our most important responsibility” (Perfect equality section, para. 5). Our ethical framework allows us to ask tough questions, seek clarity, and to always be consistent—when it comes to making our school exceptional; this is at the heart of our potential success.

One major way to get our school community to accept and abide by a leader’s ethical framework is through quality professional development and the utilization of best practice. Faculty and staff have been inundated by pointless inservices and meetings, and pushed to the brink of insanity by foolproof techniques and theories to make their students and schools more successful. As discussed by Donald and Davis (1998):

Educational leadership requires that individuals keep current with research, field studies, and education experiments. Leaders must understand ‘best practices’ and be able to implement them. However, identification of best practices should not be based on a single study or one experiment (Best professional practices section, para. 1).
We owe it to our students to implement quality, research-driven theories proven to work, and we owe it to our faculty and staff to facilitate programming that will not waste their time nor generate false hope. Once programming and professional development activities are introduced, principals must be willing to relentlessly donate their time and energy to facilitate success. In urban schools, the importance of quality programming and effective support is magnified.

According to Sparks (2000):

An individual's sense of ethical conduct influences his or her professional behavior, so effective school leaders consider ethical issues in their day-to-day work. Because resources are often scarce and the effects of powerful professional development so profound, ethical considerations in the leadership of high poverty schools take on an even greater importance (Ethical conduct section, para. 1).

If we strive to implement high quality programming that has stood the test of time and if we develop ethically sound schools, we can work to raise the bar for teachers and staff. As the quality of our school personnel increases, the success of our students should do the same. Complacency in education is not due to a lack of committed and caring individuals; it is the result of years of leadership without integrity.

Quality leaders must strive for a positive school culture and remain directly connected to the learning environment. With these ideas as a foundation,
leaders will be able to create a vision for their schools that is unsurpassed by any other vision, but without ethics, there will be no foundation on which to build this future. The need for ethical leadership becomes ever more apparent when considering the thoughts of Gardner (as cited in Donald and Davis, 1998): “We say that we want effective leadership; but Hitler was effective. Criteria beyond effectiveness are needed. Ultimately we judge our leaders in a framework of values” (Introduction, para. 1). If that does not set the ethical bar for leaders, nothing will.

Visionary Leadership

In light of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), school personnel are faced with more demands for accountability for student learning than ever before. School reform is becoming commonplace in many schools. School leaders are challenged to “promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 19). School communities must be built upon integrity and ethics; the school climate must be welcoming and motivating, teachers and administrators must be life-long learners that never lose touch with their students; and when all of these things are in place, a functional and effective vision must be the guide to continual success. As administrators, “it is our responsibility to facilitate the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district
vision of learning’” (Wilmore, 2002. p. 24). We must never lose sight of our role in creating and realizing a vision, but we must also understand our limits. It is our job to facilitate the vision. However, “facilitate does not mean dictate. Facilitate means to provide for and enable others to be able to attain their goals” (Wilmore, 2002. p. 24). In the end, the vision is the lifeblood of a school community.

In order to effectively develop a vision, we must first disseminate it from a mission in order to clarify our final goal. According to Scoolis (1998):

The terms ‘vision’ and ‘mission’ are often used interchangeably. While it may be a matter of pure semantics, it is important to define their differences. While a mission is abstract, a vision is concrete. An example of a mission is ‘advancing man’s capability to explore the heavens,’ whereas a vision is ‘a man on the moon by the end of the decade.’ A mission is ‘providing an education for the 21st century,’ but a vision is ‘involving students in active, project-based learning activities.’ (A Vision is Concrete section, para. 1).

School administrators must fully understand that a vision should not only be practical, but it must entail a specific time framework or goals that can be achieved. If a vision is never specific enough to attain it, what will be the motivation for our school community to achieve it?

In developing a vision, the end result must inspire enthusiasm, motivation, and sheer determination. If one cannot become energized by just reading or
hearing the vision, then it has already failed. The underlying element here is the need for all members of the school community to feel a sense of ownership in the vision. In the past, the vision of many schools has become nothing more than writing on the wall and personal agendas have made it a very low priority. Often many administrators do little more with their vision than use it on their letterhead, and what results is a dangerous complacency that works to undermine the intended focus of the school community. “If your staff can’t state your compelling purpose in their own words from memory and with enthusiasm, you don’t have one. It’s that simple. If you must go to your file or look at the document behind glass in the school lobby to state your district’s compelling purpose, you can bet it is not influencing your day-to-day and minute-to-minute teaching or leading decisions” (Schwahn and Spady, 1998, Five Reasons and Five Rules section, para. 3). If a school’s vision is failing, we must look to our administrators because it is they who have failed to keep the vision alive. It is the principal who must set the tone for the vision. It is the principal who must generate the excitement for their school’s vision based upon what they hold to be crucial to the success of the learning environment. Furthermore, it is the principal who must ensure a collaborative learning community where the vision is constantly being pursued. According to Terry (1999):

Anyone who serves as principal and cannot articulate and act upon a set of internally consistent beliefs and principles does not deserve to have the
Building administrators must be strong-willed, and they must set the bar high. “By focusing on relationships, the leader is able to help people work through the ‘how’ questions of life. The goals and vision for the school become more than a saying on a plaque. The vision becomes part of the school community and its being” (Stueber, 2000, Visionary Leadership section, para. 6).

In order to effectively create a vision, the school leader must adhere to a set of rules. According to Schwahn and Spady (1998), there are five rules to developing and realizing a vision:

Rule one: People don’t change unless they share a compelling reason to change; Rule two: People don’t change unless they have ownership in the change; Rule three: People don’t change unless their leaders model that they are serious about the change; Rule four: People are unlikely to change unless they have a concrete picture of what the change will look like for them personally; and Rule five: People can’t make a change—or make it last—unless they receive organizational support for the change (Five Reasons and Five Rules section, para. 4).

With these essential elements in mind, leaders can make their vision come to life and create dramatic results, but only if the creation of the vision is approached correctly. According to Scoolis (1998):
No matter how well formulated, a vision can fail if it is inappropriate or if it is poorly communicated or implemented. An effective vision is rarely devised in a vacuum by the organizational leader. In most cases, visions that reflect only one organization member’s view, even if that individual is in a leadership position, are bound to fail. Most unilateral visions lack a motivational appeal with which people can identify. Likewise, even if a vision has emotional appeal, if it is poorly communicated or implemented, it’s bound to fail because the stakeholders cannot identify with it (Defining Vision section, para. 3).

Power sharing—the importance of involving the entire school community in the implementation and maintenance of the vision—becomes critical because in a school setting, top down decisions that are this encompassing will only be met with resentment and animosity. This is not to say that all dissenting opinions are bad or undermining. Dissent can often strengthen a vision because it tends to address weaknesses in the original model. Accordingly, Buell states that:

Principals cannot simply dismiss anyone on the staff who does not share his or her vision. Dissent is needed. It sharpens the vision to hone it against dissonance, to a degree. It is important to remember that the core of the vision must be held in common, or the staff members are not a team, and the mixed messages will be conveyed to all. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the leader to actually work at altering the values of those
who do not share the vision (Terry, 1999, Values and Visions section, para. 3).

In the end, it is the principal’s duty to facilitate a vision in which all can support and nurture.

According to Wendel (1996), “successful administrators made the learner their number one priority. They embraced the concept of service to others. They created a positive school climate and worked collaboratively” (Stueber, 2000, Visionary Leadership section, para. 1). The focus of our schools should be to motivate students, to promote a positive climate, to instill the importance of ethics and integrity, and to make learning the number one priority. Using these as guidelines, one will never lose sight of a school’s most important commodity—students.

“Planning, compelling purposes, and inspiring visions mean nothing until something different and better happens for children” (Schwahn and Spady, 1998, Different, Not More, Work section, para. 2). We can talk all that we want, we can aspire to how wonderful and different our school will be, and we can expect greatness from everyone, but until every single action reflects our vision, and until our students become successful and our staff are energized, we have not succeeded at creating, inspiring, or realizing our vision. As stated by Chance (1989). “A visionary administrator is not afraid of stating ‘This is what I believe; this is what the school can accomplish; and this is where we are going to be in one
year, five years, and ten years” (Stueber, 2000, Conclusion section, para. 3). A leader must be willing to put their reputation on the line for the sake of their vision. Stephen Covey states it perfectly; we must “begin with the end in mind” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 20). Without a doubt, it is the leader—both in what they say and what they do—whom determines the success of a school.

Conclusion

Intrinsically, I want to create a school that maintains a vital focus on the individual. I want to provide teachers with the resources and the know-how that they need to be their very best, and ultimately, I want to empower students to overcome their own personal obstacles to reach the pinnacle of their potential for learning. Extrinsically, I want to be an educational administrator because children mean the world to me, and I would do anything to make their lives better. I will make sure that the other adults who work within my school community share my philosophy and passion.

I have a vision to create a school based on collaborative efforts between students, faculty, and community leaders. In addition to achieving high levels of learning, I want students to take an active role in their education and community through service projects and school-to-work opportunities because students need to be empowered to take responsibility for their choices and subsequent actions.

Having passion and focusing upon school climate, maintenance of a direct connection to the learning environment, ethical management, and vision does not
guarantee the effectiveness of a leader because there are so many factors that contribute to successful schools. However, without these critical elements and without a passion for education, it is certain that a school community would suffer tremendously. The face of education has changed dramatically over the past few decades and the next few years should prove to be nothing short of phenomenal. School leaders must be willing and committed to meet the challenges—especially in light of *No Child Left Behind*. The tasks facing administrators are daunting, but they rewards should be exceptional. For those who are wanting to make a difference and who are willing to make a commitment, there is no better time than now to lead a school community.
References


