A vision for leading: a reflective essay

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A vision for leading: a reflective essay

Abstract
Being a leader has many important aspects. Education added to the leadership adds many new dimensions. Principals take the hopes and dreams of students and adults into their care. The leadership role taken on by principals has to incorporate many qualities. Principals must be leaders of learning, leaders of change, leaders of improvement for students and adults, and leaders of service. Principals have a lot on their plates. They are leaders of everything from learning to change. They have to be managers of time and money, and they have to be leaders of curriculum and data analysis.
A VISION FOR LEADING:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Being a leader has many important aspects. Education added to the leadership adds many new dimensions. Principals take the hopes and dreams of students and adults into their care. The leadership role taken on by principals has to incorporate many qualities. Principals must be leaders of learning, leaders of change, leaders of improvement for students and adults, and leaders of service. Principals have a lot on their plates. I have my own personal beliefs about education and the leadership role principals take.

My Beliefs about Leadership and Education

Few people have a dream and actually get to see it lived out. I am one of those lucky people. For as long as I can remember I have wanted to be a teacher. Whenever anyone asked the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The answer was always the same; I want to be a teacher. I have always worked with children. The first place I taught children was at the church I go to. I taught Sunday school and helped with the junior choir. During my senior year at Waterloo West High School, I took half days and went to Lowell Elementary where I worked in a fifth grade classroom every afternoon. This only solidified my desire to be a teacher. I had a love for learning, education, and children that could only be met through teaching.

I believe education is the single most important job in the world. Without teachers, how would we have doctors, lawyers, veterinarians, accountants, or secretaries? Teachers are responsible for teaching students not only the basics of
education, but for challenging each student to be their best. Because of teachers, people can read, write, compute numbers, and get along with others. I know that parents are the child's first teacher, and those that take on the role actively deserve applause. These are the students that come already knowing much of what they need to know. However, if a child comes to us and cannot do the simple things, we do not say to the parents take your child back home and teach her the basics then bring her back next year. Parents give us the best they have.

The idea of becoming an educational leader had not entered my mind until Rose Bowser planted a little seed in my head. Rose was a para-educator I worked with at Logan Middle School. One day, after a particularly tough day teaching, Rose told me that I would make a great principal some day. I remember thinking that being a principal was a job I would never want to do. I sloughed off the remark that day, but I must have kept the comment somewhere in my thoughts. Here I am now, six years later, ready to embark on the journey of a principalship. I believe that a little at a time the seed planted by Rose sprouted into a new dream for me. I now think about how many more people I can effect being a principal.

Being a principal means many different things to me. First, it means being an educational leader. I know I will need to be in charge of curriculum and learning in the building. I am willing to take a pie in the face, sleep on the rooftop in a tent, or conference with students one on one to help motivate them to do well.
It is imperative students know how important learning is. If I can inspire students
to do well, then I have done my job. I am also ready to facilitate the learning of
teachers as well. I want to plant little seeds in people’s minds like someone did
for me. Wilmore (2002) says, “Plant the seeds of professional development in
others. You never know which ones will take root” (p. 38). That little seed can
change dreams and help people see more in themselves than they ever saw before.

As a building and the surrounding community, we will need to have a
vision that leads our school in the right direction. Without a vision there is no
focus. We will need goals to be set. I believe these goals need to be set at every
level. From the building, to the grade levels, to individual teachers, it is important
to have something to work toward. Wilmore (2002) states “what gets measured
gets done” (p. 22). I also think it is important to share these goals with the
stakeholders. This includes parents, staff, students, and community members.
After all, if people do not know what we are working toward, how can they help
us get there?

The second thing being a principal means to me is being an organizational
leader. This includes all of the daily matters that take place in a building. From
scheduling and evaluations, to janitorial work and lunch, all of these items need
taken care of. Although I believe it is most important to be in the educational
role, if I did not take care of these matters, I would have mass chaos in my
building. As a leader I have to make sure the managerial jobs are done as well.
Being a principal really means having a balance between the educational role and the organizational role. Wilmore (2002) states “what we are looking for are great managers with magnificent vision and loads of passion and commitment to the school community” (p. 52). I have the balance needed to be a great principal. I am organized with paperwork and making sure I meet deadlines. I also have the passion Wilmore talks about to have a great vision and make sure it is achieved. When I am a principal, I will lead my building into the best years it has ever seen.

Reflective Practitioner as the Leader of Learning

Being a reflective practitioner means being aware of all emotions. Additionally, it means understanding how one feels about a situation and expressing those feelings when the time is right. I believe being reflective is very important to being an effective leader today.

Research

The research on being reflective shows the importance of reflection. Patti and Tobin (2003) noted, “How effective you are as a leader is determined to a great extent by how aware you are of what lies within you” (p. 13). Leaders need to use all of their emotions to make decisions. Patti and Tobin (2003) also stated,

Imagine how impaired your leadership would be if you relied only on written reports to make tough decisions. Imagine if you did not actively
seek out additional information by walking through a school, speaking to key people and "getting a feel" of what is going on in the building (p. 15). Leaders are constantly using their emotions to make decisions that are best for the population they serve.

Having core values and sticking to them is another way leaders can be effective. Patti and Tobin note, "Becoming aware of your current core values is particularly important for school leaders because the best schools are moral communities in which core values and educational practices are in alignment" (p. 16). Leaders often use their core values to help in decision making. Whether that decision is about curriculum or discipline, one needs to be aware of what their core values are and reflect upon them to help make important decisions.

Self awareness is another reflective strategy leaders should use. When leaders use self awareness, they are able to identify when they are being over- or under-confident and can change their own thinking to have the best outcome possible. Patti and Tobin write, "If the leader is reflective, however, self-awareness that one is too over- or under-confident about being able to accomplish a task can lead to effective courses of action" (p. 17). Leaders want to be the best leaders they can be and being reflective in all ways can help them to be the very best.
My Beliefs

This research shows me how important it is to be reflective in many ways. I will need to have emotional awareness, set core values, and self-confidence. I already have emotional awareness. I have been reflective about my emotions since my third or fourth year of teaching. I started writing about the events that were happening in the course of a day and how I reacted. It was interesting how aware I became of my interactions with students and colleagues and how my lessons went in class. I would always ask myself how did it go and what could I have done differently to make it better? Over time I no longer needed to write these things down and could immediately reflect by answering those questions. The best part of being reflective was how much I learned about myself in the process.

One’s core values really tell a lot about that person. My top three core values are my family comes first, treat everyone with respect, and every student can learn. Knowing that I will be working with other parents, it is important for me to realize that their family comes first as well. When only two staff members volunteer to help at the chili supper, it may be because they need to be with their families. Treating everyone with respect is a core value I have had followed for a very long time. I believe if a person wants respect he or she has to give respect. Whitaker (2003) says, “Now it’s not difficult to treat some people with respect. It’s even possible to treat all people with respect quite a bit of the time. The real
challenge is to treat everyone with respect everyday and great principals do” (p. 21). My third core value that every student can learn has also been a belief of mine for a long time. I taught special education for six years. Some students need to be taught in a different way or at a slower pace, but all students can learn. I also think if teachers don’t believe this they should reconsider their profession. My core beliefs will help me to be a great leader. I will use these beliefs in my decision making and will continue to live by them in my daily life.

I think the last element, self confidence, is where some professional improvement could be made. I have confidence, but because of my reflective practices, many times I worry about the decision being the best one possible. Sometimes I over analyze about what could have been done differently. Learning to trust my initial judgment would be a positive growth. That does not mean reflection is not necessary, but I should not dwell on the decision made.

As a principal, I will use my ability to reflect to be the best principal possible. Being a new principal may mean longer reflection time is needed to see if I really did make the best decision possible. I would also be checking to see if my core beliefs were used to drive my decision making. Principals make as many decisions as a teacher. Reflection is needed for those decisions and I am able to do that.
ISLLC Standards

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) standards also show how important reflection is. In order to meet the six standards, a leader has to be able to reflect on the decisions he or she has made. Every ISSLC standard starts in the same way. Martin, Wright, Danzig, Flanary, and Brown state, “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students ...” (p. 21). This means school leaders need to constantly reflect on whether or not they are promoting the success of all students. Any decision being made needs to be based on students. This goes back to the core values, emotional awareness, and self confidence one has to fulfill these standards.

Closing

A reflective practitioner thinks about all of the decisions he or she has made. Once a person is in a leadership role, he or she should learn from actions taken and mistakes to become an expert in leadership. Martin et al. writes, “Learning from one’s prior actions (and mistakes) is basic to the development of expertise” (p. 104). If the leader has been reflective, he or she will probably not make the same mistake twice. As I said before, being reflective is very important to being an effective leader.
Leaders' Role in Educational Change

Change occurs constantly, in many different ways, and for many different reasons. Sometimes we have control over the change and sometimes we do not. Change will occur in every school, business, and family whether we like it or not.

Research

Educational change refers to the changes that occur in a school setting. This may include pre-school, elementary, middle school, high school or even college. The change might include staff, curriculum, the schedule, or a whole new innovation. Regardless of the type of change, the leader has many roles to play to ensure success of the change at hand.

Principals need to ensure that they have a professional learning community. This means teachers are supporting each other with new innovations. The principal plays a huge role by ensuring that staff members have time to collaborate. Hall and Hord (2006) state “…teachers who felt supported in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice were more committed and effective than those who were not supported” (p. 25). Teachers can be supported by their colleagues in many ways. One I find most helpful is observing the teaching of another staff member. Whitaker (2003) says, “When we use our most effective teachers as positive role models, we multiply their productivity and help maximize their talents” (p. 41). A new teacher or a teacher new to the innovation
may get some ideas of how to make the change work for them. Having teachers work together can alleviate many problems that would otherwise occur.

School leaders need to be sure they have planned interventions in place for those who need them. Hall and Hord (2006) write, “An Intervention is an Action or Event that is typically Planned or Unplanned and that influences individuals (either positively or negatively) in the process of change” (p. 187). As Hall and Hord stated interventions can be planned or unplanned, and positive or negative. As leaders we need to plan positive interventions. Ideas like giving teachers the opportunity to discuss the change at hand and how it is being worked out are meant to give teachers some time to get used to the idea of whatever the change may be. This is intended to be positive, but if the teachers get together and all they do is complain, the intervention may take a negative turn. Leaders need to know how to handle the negative side of change. As a leader, I need to be ready for all situations whether they are positive or negative.

School leaders also need to check in with their staff members to see how the innovation is working. As a leader, if I am asking about particular innovations, the staff members will know what is important to me, and what will be looked for when I come to visit their rooms. I want to believe all teachers do their jobs the way they are supposed to, but in my experience, there are some teachers that may need a little prodding. If teachers know when the principal comes in that he or she will look at their lesson plans, the lesson plans will
probably be complete. What leaders ask for will get done because the staff knows they will be asking for it or looking for it in their rooms.

My Beliefs

I will definitely plan to provide time for staff members to collaborate. I know from the reading I have done that giving staff time together to exchange ideas is a great intervention. They can discuss what is going well and what may not be going so well. Protheroe (2005) says, “It is the responsibility of the principal as a change agent to help foster a cooperative spirit among staff members” (p.55). I would make sure when the schedule was made that it included time for certain grade levels or departments to get together at least once a week. This would give them time to look at data and discuss the innovation.

As a principal, I would have positive interventions in place for the changes my staff was going through. Some interventions might include having other teachers share their experience with the innovation or bring in someone from outside the district to work with the staff on the change. An innovation for the staff in my current building has been off-site visits. Many teachers were apprehensive about this. They did not feel comfortable or safe doing them. Our principal asked the staff if anyone was willing to go and report back to the staff. Many staff members did go and came back with great results. This definitely helped to get more of the staff members on board with off-site visits. This is the
kind of intervention I would like to do. Interventions will be in place to help staff members feel more comfortable about whatever the change may be.

An intervention I want to be sure to use is a one-legged interview. Hall and Hord (2006) state,

"One of the major findings has been that schools that are most successful in change have statistically significantly more of the very small, almost unnoticed interventions that we call incidents. Most of these take the form of a brief conversation between a change facilitator and an implementer about use of the innovation, which we call one-legged interviews (OLIs)" (p. 145).

Using one-legged interviews will give me a good idea of how teachers are feeling about the innovation. I could strategically ask certain people about the change, like the ones that are having problems or the ones that are trying it. The one-legged interviews will help me put together a plan for staff development on the new innovation.

ISSLC Standards

Change is closely connected to the ISSLC standards and could come in many different areas. The vision and mission statement need to change as the school changes. When data is collected and analyzed, it may call for a change in the curriculum or how it is taught. Under instructional leadership, skill number
13 is the change process. Change is something all educational leaders will have to deal with. The changes will probably occur weekly if not more frequently.

Change occurs at every level of leadership. We can help the change along by being positive and having interventions in place. Change is going to happen whether we like it or not, so we better be ready for it when it occurs.

Leader of Learning for Students and Adults

Continuous learning is important for students and adults. The principal’s role in the learning of both adults and students is tremendous. The educational leader may make the difference between someone being great at what they are doing or just being mediocre.

Research

Teachers have a great responsibility in keeping their educational practices current. The better the education teachers have, the better chance they have at being great teachers. Knowing more than is needed will not hurt anyone. Taking classes is also necessary to renew one’s teaching license. Going back to school is a great opportunity for any teacher.

Para-educators also have a responsibility to stay trained at their job. With No Child Left Behind Legislation, all para-educators have to be qualified for the job they perform. According to the website of The US Department of Education (2002),
All Title I paraprofessionals must have a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent. Additionally, professionals hired after January 8, 2002, must have completed two years of study at an institution of higher education; or obtained an associate’s (or higher) degree; or met a rigorous standard of quality and be able to demonstrate, through a formal State or local academic assessment, knowledge of and the ability to assist in instructing, reading, writing, and mathematics... Paraprofessionals hired before January 8, 2002, and working in a program supported with Title I, Part A funds must meet these requirements by January 8, 2006 (p. 2).

With all of these standards set forth by the government, it is essential that paraprofessionals are well educated for the job they are performing.

Principals play a major role in the decisions paraprofessionals and teachers make when it comes to their schooling. Planting a little seed in someone’s head can get their mind started thinking about going back to school. As stated by Wilmore (2002), “Sometimes other people see something in us that we cannot see. Plant the seeds of professional development in others. You never know which ones will take root” (p. 38). As leaders in the buildings, principals have the opportunity to plant the seeds of hope in their staff members. Whether it is teachers becoming principals, or paraprofessionals becoming teachers, continued learning by staff members will only improve the school.
As teachers and paraprofessionals improve at their jobs, it only ensures the students will improve at their job as well. Teachers who may need to improve their management skills might take a class on management styles. If they do a better job managing, the students will do a better job learning. If a teacher needs some help with organization, perhaps the principal would plant the seed of taking a class where organization is the subject. This will make the teacher better at his or her job. Dunklee (2000) states, “The principal acts as a people manager who: Identifies the professional development needs of individuals and groups; plans, organizes, and implements programs to improve faculty and staff effectiveness” (p. 114). This means that sometimes the professional development needs to be mandatory for staff members that are not effective in their teaching style. Sometimes principals have to say this is where you need some help and here is a class you can take to get the help you need. There are certain times when adults need to be directed as well.

I, as a leader, will plant the seeds of professional development in the staff members at my building. The more knowledge staff members have, the more the students will learn. If I can lead staff members to be the best they can be through furthering their education, classes, or professional development at the building, I will have the best staff in the district. Sewell (2003) says, “There are no “weakest links,” only challenges and opportunities to make struggling teachers and students better; good teachers and students great; and great teachers and students masters
in their fields” (p.55). When a school has the best teachers and students, the school will certainly be the best in the district.

I will also direct the staff members that have particular weaknesses to take the classes they need to improve. In my opinion, classroom management seems to be the biggest problem beginning teachers have. I would check on these teachers more often at the beginning of the year. If they were having difficulties, I would strongly suggest they take a class on management styles to help them get better. Another wonderful asset at any school is the strong teachers. I would have teachers that were weak in a particular area watch other teachers that were stronger in that particular area.

ISSLC Standards

Standard two of the ISSLC standards is specifically about instruction and learning. Martin, Wright, Danzig, Flanary, and Brown (2005) state, “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth” (p. 28). Some of the skill areas under this standard are analyzing curriculum, scheduling, instructional strategies, learning theory, and staff development/adult learning. Having teachers take classes directly ties into the standard. This would include planting the seeds so staff members continue their learning. Learning about the curriculum and strategies through staff development is also essential to this standard. When an
educational leader asks an employee to better themselves through particular classes or when an entire staff is trained on new curriculum, these are also covered under this standard.

Principals influence the learning of others everyday. Through planting seeds of professional development or asking veteran teachers to mentor a new teacher, educational leaders are changing staff members to be the best they can be. Students’ learning is also affected through this staff development. Principals believe the better the staff, the better the students, the better the school. I want the best staff, students, and school, so I will make sure learning is continuous for all members of my building.

Leader of Service

Principals need to be leaders of service. Some of the services that need leadership in the building walls are custodial staff, guidance counselors, staff from the Area Education Agency, and secretaries. Services from outside of the building need lead as well. Some of these might be doing service projects, partners in education, parent involvement, and off site visits. Principals need to lead these services in many different ways.

Research

The custodial staff is one department that the principal needs to lead. Knoop (2005) states, “Education administrators always are trying to get better performance from their custodial services department” (p. 24). He then goes on
to list several methods administrators can take in getting better performance including, staff recognitions, regulatory compliance, and departmental cooperation to name a few. Principals must make sure the buildings are clean and appealing to the eye. When visitors come to the school, a principal wants them to notice the great educational opportunities that are going on, not the build up of dirt and cobwebs in the corners and on the stairs. Principals need to work with their custodial staff to see that the building is cleaned and maintained for all who work there and visit.

Another service the principal needs to monitor is transportation. This can be a huge issue. According to Andy Forsyth (2005), “Student transportation is an important and complex school-support activity that typically consumes 4 to 5 percent of a school district’s budget” (p. 55). Quite a bit of money is spent on the transportation of our students to and from school. Forsyth (2005) also states, “Generally speaking, two broad operational categories warrant evaluation in a transportation operation: routing and busing operations (logistics); and fleet maintenance and support operations” (p.56). On top of keeping track of the buses themselves, principals also need to think about student safety and discipline on the bus. Principals need to be ready to give the bus drivers a helping hand when needed.
As leaders of service, principals need to think about secretaries. Secretaries have an enormous amount of responsibility. GreatSchools.net (2003) says the following to parents,

"The secretary is an important person to know at your child’s school. He or she takes care of administrative details, schedules appointments and handles school communication. The school secretary is aware of what’s going on at the school on a day-to-day basis. This makes him or her an excellent source of information for parents" (p. 1).

Principals would probably agree that secretaries are not only an excellent source of information to parents, but also to teachers, staff, visitors, and district administrators as well.

Other service personnel in the building need guidance too. Examples include nurses, guidance counselors, food service workers, and Area Education Agency personnel. Principals need to work closely with this group of people to make sure all of their jobs are being done. Principals would lead this group very much the same way teachers are lead. Principals would offer assistance to them as necessary, make sure job performance is in good standing, and evaluate when necessary. It takes a village to raise a child and each of these people is part of that village. Richardson (2005) confirms this by saying, “To facilitate academic success, schools must find a way to support students in all the ways they require….Educators need to be the “village” for every student” (p. 33).
Another area of service leadership is outside of the building. Schools need to take part in service projects. An internet site called Students in Service to America states, "American schools have also long encouraged students to participate service in many forms — ranging from individual volunteer activities, to service projects organized by student groups or faculty members, to formal service projects that link to academic lessons" (introduction). Students need to see how working for the common good of the community can change the future. Principals can lead this effort by supporting faculty in their endeavors to create service projects for their students, keeping up with partners in education, and possibly doing a school wide project to pull the school community together.

My Beliefs

As a leader I plan to work closely with all of the members on staff. I want to know the names of all of the bus drivers, cafeteria workers, Area Education Agency personnel, and everyone else that works in the building I am principal of. I believe when you know people by name and take the time to get to know them, they will work harder for you. If a principal is just polite enough to say hello in passing, but doesn’t really get to know all of their staff, some may not work as hard for that principal. In addition, when staff members know the principal is watching them and monitoring progress, staff will have a better work ethic. When the custodian sees the principal looking at the floor and in the corners, chances are those places will get cleaned.
I know how important the secretary is to a building. I know that many times he or she knows more about daily happenings than the principal. Coffman (2003) writes,

"The school’s office is its heartbeat. The secretary and others who work there are expected to deal efficiently with a steady stream of requests for assistance or information from staff, parents, visitors, callers, and the principal—all efficiently and without losing their cool....How your office staff—and especially your secretary—do their jobs can affect the climate of the entire school" (p. 54).

This statement shows how significant the secretary is. He or she is usually the first person a visitor sees and therefore gives off the first impression of the building. I know I need to keep the secretary happy.

I love the idea of doing service projects. I would like to do building wide service projects for the community. For example, we could do a canned food drive in November or collect school supplies in April for the next school year. I could also support or help start service projects for our grade levels. These can be as simple as choosing a grade level each month to pick up trash around the school. For upper elementary students, a service project for the greater community or world might be more beneficial. I took part in a service project where fifth grade students collected used and new school supplies to send to Nicaragua. Students
were very excited about doing this. I would really like to continue being a leader of service in this way.

I would also continue working with partners in education. This is a great opportunity for both students and businesses to work together. The businesses provide money and services to schools and the schools do projects for the businesses in return. Students have made cards for business cafeteria tables, sang carols for their partners, played games with residents, and written thank you notes. Businesses have asked employees to be pen pals, bring birthday bags, take part in family fun nights, tutor students, and give their time in the classrooms. These partnerships are wonderful and I would make sure these were either started or continued in the building I lead.

ISSLC Standards

Standard three of the Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium is all about management and operations. Martin, Wright, Danzig, Flanary, and Brown (2005) state, “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment (p. 44). They discuss the skill areas of general office administration, school operations, facility and maintenance administration, student transportation, food services, and personnel procedures under this topic. I believe this includes the employees in the
building that are not teachers. As a principal, I know that I need to take care of the needs of all employees in my building.

The other standard covered under service leadership is ISLLC standard number four. Martin et al. (2005) states, "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources" (p. 52). Some skill areas under this standard include community/public relations and community/business involvement. This standard covers the partners in education, service projects, and getting volunteers to come into the buildings for tutoring or classroom help.

Closing

Being a leader of service is very important. It means leading all other services in the building. Whether talking about custodians and nurses or partners in education and parent involvement, principals need to make sure these things are happening in their buildings. I know as a future principal, I will ensure all of the employees at the building are ready for the challenge of being a part of something great. I will also make sure our building is part of the community by getting students and parents involved, and by inviting the community into our building. Being a leader of service is vital and I know with involvement from staff, parents, students, and the community, our building will be great.
Conclusion

Wow! Principals have an amazing job to do. They are leaders of everything from learning to change. They have to be managers of time and money, and they have to be leaders of curriculum and data analysis. I think the job principals have is a huge one. Principals really do have a lot on their plates. Fortunately, I am up for the challenge and look forward to meeting all of the demands that being a principal brings.
References


