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## A vision for school leadership : a reflective essay

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## A vision for school leadership : a reflective essay

### Abstract

The intent of this essay is to develop a broader perspective of the impact that leadership has on the bottom line, student achievement. It is the responsibility of educational leaders to enable stakeholders to clarify priorities and develop plans to achieve that ultimate goal, an upward trend in achievement for all students. As members of the administrative and school leadership teams, the principals will continue to develop an ongoing process of looking around the corner, asking if what is happening in the educational environment is making a difference, and remember that perception is reality.

**A VISION FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

**A REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

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**and Postsecondary Education**

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**by**

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The leadership program at the University of Northern Iowa and independent readings of professional literature provide future principals with a vast amount of knowledge about educational leadership. Researchers such as Lezotte, Marzano, Collins, DuFour, and Daggett guide the thoughts relative to leadership for the five critical elements included in this essay. The introduction to this paper outlines the beliefs regarding what aspiring principals should believe about leadership and education. The next four components include views of reflective practitioners as leaders of learning, the leaders' role in educational change, leadership for the improvement of learning, as well as leaders of service.

Personal values and belief systems about education align with the following two principles, working together, we will achieve success and accomplishments happen with the right mindset. The Serenity Prayer written by Niebuhr, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference", serves as an inspirational guide for educational leaders. In Miller's (2001) work, he adapts Niebuhr's prayer to read, "God grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can, the wisdom to know...*it's me!*" (p. 79). With this growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and an understanding of the mission, if everyone in education lived by the above sentiments we would be well on our way to serving the educational needs of all students.

When students learn in an environment that models and practices positive behaviors, utilizes collaborative decision-making, and consistently follows policy and procedures; students are more apt to perform at higher levels of achievement. Progress happens when proactive leadership works toward continuous school improvement through a commitment to professional growth and development.

Leaders in education model the model, talk the talk, walk the walk, and are held accountable for their actions as they develop a culture of trust. In working toward the school's vision, leaders must blend educational passions with the district's expectations to prevent leaving no child behind. Instructional leaders must set goals to monitor and assess the overall expectations for student achievement and make adaptations for the benefit of the individual student and the organization.

Principals must have high expectations for themselves and those with whom they interact. They must positively develop their leadership abilities and be encouraged to continue developing their leadership capacities. Being actively involved in many leadership roles they must be acutely aware of the challenges that an administrative position entails. School administrators have an impact on what happens in schools and yes, it is hard work. They must set goals to develop and employ effective educational leadership skills as an avenue to effect change in public schools and provide excellence in education.

As the manager of the school campus, the use of organizational skills to balance tasks and meet expectations of all those who are involved in the school community is extremely important. With the innate ability to multitask and employ strong interpersonal skills leaders utilize a variety of techniques to problem solve and make decisions. Setting goals, planning for results, following through, and when making mistakes, figuring out how to correct them is the foundation that the leadership role builds on.

When shaping the school culture, collaboration can empower others to believe in themselves and the school community. School administrators build connections by becoming actively involved in community organizations and developing partnerships that are mutually beneficial. Without support from stakeholders, the school campus cannot succeed. Through daily conversations, school, and community meetings the media and parent communications are the central focus that aligns with the vision of designing an environment that differentiates for each child. Leaders must stay active in the community to advocate for all students regardless of race, socioeconomic, ethnicity, gender, or learning style.

Administrators must lead others to be creative problem solvers and go beyond the easy answer to solve tasks. They must be flexible, able to adapt on the run, and adjust their ways of thinking and processing as situations dictate. Their responsibility is to enable all life-long learners to meet their personal and

professional goals. Developing clear and compelling purpose and direction by aligning mission, vision, and core values helps create a culture, climate, and a community for learning.

Utilizing strong interpersonal skills leaders reach, teach, and motivate adults to be interactive communicators, to be listeners, and to be respectful of others. They use effective communication skills when collaborating with teachers to articulate and implement a vision of learning to ensure student achievement. Building leaders effectively use negotiation skills in building a partnership between the school, family, and community.

Administrators must promote equitable learning opportunities for all students, working toward developing a system that meets the educational challenges of national legislation, Iowa Department of Education requirements, and local district expectations. Being tactful and sensitive and utilizing true “people skills” when promoting and advocating for all students enrolled in our educational system are skills administrators must utilize.

Principals endorse high productivity utilizing the appropriate tools, especially technology, to get the job successfully completed. They use resources to their best advantage, employ inventive thinking, and encourage and assist others as they utilize informational resources. Keeping current with technological advances is one of the top priorities needed in managing the organization, operations, and resources of the school campus.

Principals have a duty is to obtain, organize, use, and interpret information and encourage others to do the same. Using data as a basis for creating a rich and engaging instructional program, they function as the coach and mentor working toward peak performance by utilizing research to inform teaching, learning, and leading. They manage their time to ensure effectiveness, accountability, and efficiency of operations as they lead others to make appropriate systemic adjustments to the system. Principals must create a performance culture, lead others to close the achievement gaps and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic success.

In an era of high accountability, administrators must balance the competing demands of parent and community groups with student needs. They must be versed in curriculum and instruction, while at the same time, manage the day-to-day functions of the school. Leaders must be responsive to, and have an appreciation and respect for a variety of cultures, values, and beliefs. They require an awareness of current and past climates and the interrelationships of those to the social, economic, and political influences.

Principals believe that all students, regardless of diversity, should have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and the skills necessary for whatever the future holds. Developing a vision involves all campus members looking at where the campus is today and where it hopes to be in the future. As a steward of this mission, they demonstrate to their school community that perseverance guides

them as they work toward an alignment of the vision with excellence in education for all learners. Providing a differentiated educational experience for every student through efficient management and an alignment of curriculum, teaching and assessment, they must accept the responsibility for intellectual, emotional, and social growth for all students.

### Reflective Practitioner as a Leader of Learning

Professional development research and materials identify reflective practices as one of most valued components in developing the skills necessary to be a proactive leader of learning. Dewey wrote about reflective thinking as early as 1933 (Robertson, 1992). Daniels cited several works in which she studied reflective thinking.

Reflection can occur in different modes: Hillocks, (1995)

recommended that teachers engage in written reflections through journals, Costa & Garmston, (1994) found that coaching can guide reflection through communication with a peer, and McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead (1996) concluded that action research can provide a more formalized reflective process (Daniels, 2002).

Downey and associates (2004) wrote about the reflective culture established in walk-through supervision. Throughout the history of educational research, the many forms of reflective practices have been one of the principle methods to create change.

Administrators must reflect on their values and beliefs as they work toward establishing their personal and professional leadership style to adopt their professional position and voice. Initiating reflective questioning techniques by encouraging others to reflect on their professional practices creates a healthy learning atmosphere.

When educators learn to clarify their priorities, to assess the current reality of their situation, to work together, and to build continuous improvement into the very fabric of their collective work, they create conditions for the ongoing learning and self-efficacy essential to solving whatever problems they confront (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006, p. 207).

As an educational leader, modeling reflective practices and providing opportunities for others to reflect are vital to successful transformation. These reflections become the basis for collecting data on how well we are doing and what we can do to make improvements. Lambert (2003) writes about how reflection enables educators to reconsider how they do things, which can lead them to new and better approaches to their work. The ultimate outcome is for reflection to be the focal point in the collaborative conversations held to improve teaching practices and learning for all students.

As a change agent, the principal engages others in a cycle of thought and action based on professional practice (D. Else, personal communication,

September 8, 2004). One goal is to develop and ask reflective questions, moving the staff away from seeking their approval to their own self-affirmations (Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, & Poston, 2004).

Promoting lifelong learning through the reflective process, administrators seek continual improvement. Studying the reflective data, it is their job to empower the staff to ask questions about past practices and future possibilities. Providing direct feedback assists the teacher in engaging in reflective practices (Downey, et. al., 2004). As progress and growth happen, educators work toward building on strengths, looking at areas of difficulty, and learning how they can make improvements

Through professional development opportunities, exemplary educational leaders provide reflective strategies to include writing about practices, discussions held in learning teams, and by dialoguing about articles or books with peers. As leaders of learning, principals want to move their teachers beyond “reflection on action, to reflection for action” (Downey, et al., 2004, p. 62). Visionary leadership involves the alignment of the school’s mission and vision with the community’s shared values, accomplished through the reflective process. Asking fitting reflective questions educators describe and analyze what they are currently doing, seek meaning about what caused them to be that way, and come to conclusions about how they might do things in the future. Providing relevance in learning through reflective processes, leaders create a climate and a culture for

change and improved student achievement. “Only this deep reflective analysis will help the leader become a true steward of the campus vision” (Wilmore, 2002). As a leader of learning, principals are involved in modeling the reflective process and enabling others to reflect and implement transformational change.

### Leader’s Role in Educational Change

Analyzing the leader’s role in educational change, the school principal is a liaison of resources. Leadership plans to allocate resources, monitor progress, and provide organizational infrastructure need to be set in place. As an educational leader, one must develop an organizational direction that enables movement toward an effective, high performing organization.

In the leadership role, principals are involved in making data-driven decisions based on the obligation to take into account the “equity of all stakeholders on every issue, resulting in a safe, effective and efficient school” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 55). Directing organizational management, they must be convinced that all school operations focus on setting appropriate priorities to achieve collaboratively developed long-and short-term goals.

As the liaison of resources, school leaders need to develop an ongoing plan to assess every aspect of the school. They must accept responsibility for operational procedures at the district level and legal issues affecting school operations. As school funding decreases, they will need to react proactively to create the necessary resources to solicit funds to supplement basic programs.

Through group processing and consensus building, the leader's position is to be sure that the system is monitored, modified, and aligned with the provisions available. They need to create a broad based understanding of why their school needs to make fundamental changes and provide the necessary commitment of resources to make the most gains (Daggett, 2004).

Coordinating human resources is one of the most critical elements of leadership management. Encouraging staff efforts, trusting people and their judgments, and involving stakeholders are all vital in creating a performance culture. Utilizing staff members, AEA personnel, and other experts is an essential task in coordinating efforts toward change. Building a network of people including local resources such as the Department of Human Services and the juvenile court system to state and federal sources are all vitally important in establishing that set of connections that can be referenced. Developing a linkage of faculty, community, students, and resources creates the backbone for developing a high performing school that challenges all students with rigorous and relevant tasks.

In the role of principal, it is crucial to "establish structures, groups and roles to serve as the infrastructure for the self-renewing process for a culture of inquiry" (Lambert, 2003, p. 83). Making management decisions that enhance learning and teaching must be a top priority. Also enabling staff members to develop a rigorous core curriculum that reflects high quality standards,

expectations, and performances that prepare students for higher levels of academia and achievement is important. As a voice of knowledge and experience in improving curriculum, delivery, learning, and achievement, teachers see principals as valuable resources for improving their teaching and learning. They provide the staff with the tools to design a curriculum framework that moves beyond content to instructional strategies. They must make a substantial effort to provide resources to improve instruction as a way to bring rigor and relevance to academic subjects.

Working within the administrative team, the principal needs to help create an effective school that has a safe, positive, purposeful, and businesslike environment. This environment must nurture interactions that are collaborative, cooperative, and student centered. Consistently articulating desirable student and teacher behaviors and making sure expectations are clear formulates an environment of confidentiality and privacy.

In operational planning, principals must utilize the leadership team's input to think ahead to potential needs, possibilities, and problems that may arise. They must align resource management decisions with visionary thinking, and keep the lines of communication open. Developing that cadre of resources aligned with district goals, they must be confident that they are meeting the needs of students today and for the future. Scientific and technological advances require a different educational system than the one in which has been in existence therefore

emerging trends need to be recognized, studied, and managed. As leaders “modify and transform the system’s culture” (Downey, et al., 2004, p. 123), they must envision a system that is focused on the future (Daggett, 2004). They must constantly analyze how they are doing and revamp, refine, and where necessary redirect the decisions and plans stakeholders have in place keeping a focus on educational change and the future.

### Leader’s Role for the Improvement of Learning

In the leader of learners’ role in improving learning for students and adults, the principal is the architect (Whitaker, 2003). One who builds the learning community serving as the facilitator and an agent of change focused on enhancing performance. Effective school’s practices recognize the principal as the “leader of leaders” not the “leader of followers” (Center for Effective Schools, 2006). The principal focuses on sustained improvement efforts by becoming a teacher of teachers and demonstrating the instructional leadership skills of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders adopted by the School Administrators of Iowa.

With a focus on learning, it is vital for all those involved to maintain high standards based on clear goals and a vision for systematic change. Shared beliefs and values must be strong enough to hold all district staff, programs, and operations focused on learning. School leaders need to “keep those goals in the forefront of the school’s attention” (Marzano, Mcnulty & Waters, 2005, p. 50), as they are involved in data driven leadership.

Keeping a focus on the vision and mission the school leader must look around the corner demonstrating visionary leadership. In his keynote address at a recent high school summit Daggett (2006) spoke about the why, what, and how of preparing our Iowa students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He talked about a future shaped by globalization, demographics, technology, and changing values and attitudes. These trends influence what our students will have to know and be able to do and places demands on schools to change.

As a leader of learners, administrators have “the responsibility as the change agent, referring to the leader’s disposition to challenge the status quo” (Marzano, et. al. 2005, p. 44). This transformational leadership guided by what Marzano refers to as first order change or incremental and second order change, is a departure from the expected, and helps principals find solutions to issues.

Building small learning communities based on a climate of shared accountability is a priority as a building principal. Creating a community of collaboration and professionalism which “expects teachers to collectively assume responsibility for making sure all students learn” (Hollins, 2006, p. 48). Encouraging the staff to find leadership in one another enables them to initiate actions. Through this distributed leadership process, working through an advisement program, and learning teams they will unite in purpose and be vision driven.

The building principal strives to move beyond the attitudes of growing professionally because it is required, to moving the learner toward developing that internal instinct. They must examine the learning processes and data and facilitate the staff to develop a mindset that they want to do better for students and for themselves as professionals (King, 2004). Intrator and Kunzman (2006) wrote that instruction happens because that is what the teachers do, but developing that focus on a deeper purpose for learning has to come from the learner themselves. Internalizing that gut and heart feeling can help sustain the learning by building ongoing commitments from students and teachers.

When managing the instructional program, the principal must provide structured support to improve teacher quality by encouraging teachers to make applications of new learning based on current research. They utilize data driven decision-making and promote the discussion about the relevance of instruction and learning outcomes. They must be knowledgeable enough to provide input regarding classroom practices including curricular mapping, addressing assessment issues, focusing on instructional issues, and being aware of best practices. Focusing on the right work is a critical aspect of effective leadership. A principal is responsible to assist the staff in identifying the critical content to master in the allotted time, ensuring that the staff addresses this content, and they protect instructional time (Marzano, et. al, 2005).

As the evaluator, the principal engages the staff in professional dialogue recognizing skillful work and reinforcing the use of effective teaching strategies that enhance performance in a rigorous learning environment. Their responsibility is to conduct classroom visits frequently to verify consistent implementation and provide additional materials or training. King (2004) identifies the five top learning activities to include discussion, journals, reflection, readings, and class activities that influence perspective transformation. Under effective leadership, these activities will play a vital role in all learning processes.

Leaders need to realize that educators in the role of learner are all at different stages and in order for them to advance in new learning; they must take into account where they are today. They must differentiate the learning to accommodate their needs. Educators must have “high quality curriculum and instruction that work for each learner” (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2005, p. 172). Assisting all learners in developing personal learning plans, they will take all learners to a new level as they prepare their path for life-long learning.

The ultimate goal as a principal is sustained improvement efforts. It is about viewing educational improvement as a long-term commitment. Leadership for lasting reform is to know “what it believes in and where it is going” (Rooney, 2006, p. 86). As a leader of learners, a goal is to be actively involved in authentic school reform with a vision of a futuristic school in mind. They must continually

remind all learners that “yesterday is never good enough for tomorrow” (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 172).

### Leader’s Role of the Leader of Service

In the leader’s role of the leader of service, the principal is the filter (Whittaker, 2003). The daily behavior of the principal sets the tone for what happens in the school. As communications occur throughout the building, the overall climate is established. Reactions to those communications are determined based on the tone of the culture. The administration “determines what gets through the filters and what does not” (Whittaker, 2003, p. 28). Through the service leader’s filter communications, relationships, ethical practices, politics, and environmental atmosphere are the foundation for shaping the reality of the school.

Communications plays a key role in the success of a principal as a leader of service. Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell and Valentine (1999) explained that effective communication is the glue that holds together all the other responsibilities of leadership. How the principal responds affects the school and perceptions are reality (R. Decker, personal communication, summer, 2006). Avoiding negative communications creates a more productive environment. Being visible and accessible and engaging in daily interactions during frequent classroom visits with students, teachers, and parents are key components of successful communications.

Throughout the school environment, dialogue must be encouraged in all aspects of daily operations, building that collaborative atmosphere. Johnson (2005) writes that a lack of communication is a factor in failed change attempts, it is important to create a culture in which everyone feels heard. The principal must utilize communication as the basis for creating partnerships throughout the school and community.

Collaborative leadership and building relationships are two building blocks in establishing a supportive network that treats everyone with respect and dignity. Credibility creates an atmosphere that encourages all involved to work for the betterment of the school. The principal must demonstrate characteristics of the “maven, the one who accumulates the knowledge” (Gladwell, 2002, p. 60) and wants to help to provide the message for building a collaborative environment. As a salesperson, the principal must also persuade others to believe in the vision and be optimistic that the vision will lead the school to preparing students for the future (Gladwell, 2002).

When building relationships, the principal must develop an awareness of the personal lives of staff and students. Face-to-face contacts and emotional bonds are necessary when building a unity approach (Marzano, et al., 2005). A shift in attitudes from seeing differences as competing values to seeing them as significant pieces of what can become a quality collaborative school must occur (Johnson, 2005). The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

As the leader in the school, the principal has a “foot in many different worlds” (Gladwell, 2001, p. 51) and provides connections that link the staff to necessary resources. Those connections, based on the power of collective efficacy (Marzano, et al., 2005), build the relationships needed to create an effective educational environment based on shared leadership.

In the leader of service role, the principal is accountable to all stakeholders and must always have the goal of doing what is best for the students and the school at the forefront. People will disagree, and the school leader must move them toward agreeing to disagree. As an ethical leader, the principal must develop situational awareness by looking around the corner and gaining an understanding of both the negative and positive dynamics that occur between groups and individuals (Marzano, et al., 2005). This information will help the leader guide the school toward positive results and use that knowledge to head off problems before they occur.

One operating principle for school leaders entails that leaders “work and approach must reflect fair, just, and compassionate understanding and insight” (Marzano, et al., 2005, p. 105). An opportunity for all students to succeed regardless of socioeconomic status, culture, or race is vital. The principal must have an ambition to do whatever it takes to make the school great based on sound ethical practices that result in higher levels of student achievement, taking the school from good to great (Collins, 2001).

As the voice of the school, the principal must focus on political leadership. Attention must remain centered on issues that matter to student achievement and the principal must filter out the negative influences that have a detrimental effect on student success. Creating a collaborative atmosphere through shared decision-making provides the stakeholders with the clarification and support that they need to create change. The leader must map the political terrain, must mobilize both internal and external resources, and anticipate the strategies of key players (Bolman and Deal, 2003). The structure must involve the staff in day-to-day goal orientated efforts that matter to all community members (Marzano, 2005). Focusing on political leadership helps the principal to understand the facts of the current reality and allows them to make the right decisions that have become evident through the diligent effort to determine the truth (Collins, 2001).

Gladwell (2002) stated, "We are powerfully influenced by our surroundings, our immediate context and the personalities of those around us" (p. 259). In order for change to occur, schools must build an effective learning environment and there must be a sense of well-being amongst all stakeholders. Establishing effective communications in a collaborative atmosphere focusing on ethical practices and an awareness of political agendas are the mark of a progressive leader of service.

## Conclusion

A final analysis for creating a vision of school leadership takes the reader to a new level in the reflective thinking process. The intent of this essay is to develop a broader perspective of the impact that leadership has on the bottom line, student achievement. Setting each student up for success through increased achievement is the ultimate goal of all successful school systems. An effective principal will influence the instructional program's teaching and learning process.

"Schools clearly qualify as complex goal-oriented, resource limited, and people driven systems" (Lezotte, 1999, p. 151), leadership matters. Principals lead the school in aligning the rules, roles, goals, policies and environment with student achievement. They believe in the empowerment process and are advocates for each student. Valuing the articulation and communication of the vision, principals work with all stakeholders to develop a growth mindset and motivate them to take pride, catch the energy and release their potential.

It is the responsibility of educational leaders to enable stakeholders to clarify priorities and develop plans to achieve that ultimate goal, an upward trend in achievement for all students. As members of the administrative and school leadership teams, the principals will continue to develop an ongoing process of looking around the corner, asking if what is happening in the educational environment is making a difference, and remember that perception is reality.

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