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A preferred vision for leading K-12 schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading K-12 schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Every child deserves the learning/development and opportunities to earn a diploma. Since education is the primary building block in becoming a successful citizen, as teachers we should make every attempt for student achievement and the development of citizenship. Every child has the ability to learn if given the correct tools to do so and is given a chance. Educators must be honest and trustworthy individuals to earn students' respect. As educators, we all need to encourage children to enjoy education and to understand that life is about life long learning.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING K-12 SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

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Masters of Arts in Education

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by

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My origination is from a loving family of eight. I grew up on a small farm five miles north of Dyersville. Our family consists of my two older brothers, my twin sisters, and my youngest sister. My parents farmed and cultivated a 100-acre farm while milking about 50 head of dairy cattle and raising pigs. Every night when we returned from the parochial school, each of us had certain chores to complete. Our chores rotated every Sunday. My sisters and I took turns, two would stay in the house to do the housework and make supper while the other girl had to fill the water tanks for the cattle, collect the eggs, and then help in the barn changing cows around and carrying milk to the bulk tank. All the farm and household chores were divided up among the siblings resulting in working together many times to get them done. Teamwork is a value I believe in deeply because I learned first hand that many hands make light work.

As my mother and father started to work away from our farm when I was a high school senior, the responsibilities for my siblings and me grew substantially. Due to the increased workload, I became a more responsible person. I developed the values of hard work and time management. For example, I became responsible by taking care of my baby sister, yet I managed my time so I could complete my homework and manage a job in town. I know my family had some rough times financially when farming, but my parents worked hard together to make ends meet. I am so proud of my parents for teaching me how to work

hard because now I believe that hard work results in personal rewards and growth in the end.

An unforgettable memory I have about my family is when we would have family meals and go to church together on Sunday mornings. When we would eat our daily meals, we would always pray together before and after meals. I will never forget what my mom would always say, "A family that prays together stays together." I value the power of prayer since I know that is how my mom and dad said they had the strength to overcome farming difficulties. Consequently, prayer has always been a deep belief in my upbringing and I still deeply value prayer today.

Family is a major influence in my life. My maternal grandfather lived with my family for about ten years, which was a blessing. I learned about his lifestyle, and how lifestyles have changed, and yet how they revert back to previous years. My father's parents were out at the farm every day to help care for my siblings and me as my parents went to town to work. My grandparents taught me how to care for others and to help others out in times of need without compensation. However, the best compensation I learned to appreciate was self-gratitude. Therefore, family is an enormous attribute that I value because a family with good morals has constantly surrounded me.

Other adults also helped to influence me in the past. The reason I am a teacher is because my high school math teacher influenced me. I admired the way

he treated his students with compassion and fairness. I truly enjoy watching how young children's minds work because it fascinates me to see them develop skills and personalities. The main reason for teaching is because I love to be with children to teach them the values of life. My parents have instilled in me excellent beliefs and values that I know I can demonstrate to my students. These values include trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Through my positive attitude and great characteristics as a positive role model, I have a tremendous impact on developing young individuals. My most important characteristic is that I am a teacher who insists that every child deserves a chance and is capable of learning if I, as a teacher, work hard to make a difference in the child's life. I have the patience it takes to see that all levels of students succeed. A second important reason why I became a teacher is because I wanted to instill sportsmanship in young athletes through my role as a coach. I wanted to be a contagious positive role model for all students.

Every child deserves the learning/development and opportunities to earn a diploma. Since education is the primary building block in becoming a successful citizen, as teachers we should make every attempt for student achievement and the development of citizenship. Every child has the ability to learn if given the correct tools to do so and is given a chance. Educators must be honest and trustworthy individuals to earn students' respect. As educators, we all need to

encourage children to enjoy education and to understand that life is about life long learning.

The main reason I am in the educational leadership program is because it creates various career possibilities by having an administration degree. I am a continuous learner and love to gain insights about the education system. Also, I thought if I have to continue my education I might as well make it worthwhile instead of simply taking miscellaneous classes to maintain my teaching certificate. Currently, my short-term goal is to be a part-time athletic director and part-time teacher. At this time I am not ready to give up the teaching aspect of my career because I would miss the students tremendously. However, my ultimate goal is to become an athletic director at the college level. This will be possible because of my administrative degree. Presently, I have no burning desire to be a secondary principal; but as I go through the graduate program my decision may be reversed.

However, throughout the graduate program I learned that leadership consists of many qualities and characteristics. Good leaders must have good listening skills and the openness to listen to other's opinions and ideas. A good leader has excellent communication skills. As a result this leads to building relationships so consensus building can take place. Leadership requires a leader to have a strong backbone and to lead through example or experience. Leadership requires time because in time a leader can make a difference. In the process of

making a difference plenty of time, energy and experience is needed. Leadership is a "balancing act" of moving several different groups or activities and keeping them going all at one time. This occurs by motivating individuals through having organized plans and a vision for success. Leadership is a learned ability and is not a natural ability because values and beliefs are learned behaviors through life experiences.

My beliefs and values are ever present in my work as well as in my personal life. The high standards I hold myself to not only make me a better person but a better educator as well. My life experiences allow me to reflect and understand when dealing with tough situations that involve my students.

Principals must demonstrate four key characteristics to be an exemplary leader. These four critical elements include (but are not limited to) the following: 1) consensus building, 2) positive culture, 3) ethics for decision-making, and 4) effective communication. For the purpose of this paper I will share my beliefs, connect the research, explain how I will infuse them into practice, and relate the Iowa Standards of School Leaders to each of the four critical elements.

Consensus Building

How is it possible for a mediator to get a group to agree and implement a common goal? The essence in getting a group to achieve a common goal is accomplished through teamwork and good team chemistry. This is the reason I chose consensus building as a critical element essential for exemplary educational

leadership. As a coach and a teacher, consensus building plays an enormous role in being a commendable leader.

Consensus building towards a common goal is the result of a diverse group of individuals deciding and working collaboratively as a whole. When first setting a group goal, the leader should make sure every member is heard and included. If members remain quiet, it is most likely that they do not agree. As a mediator, the leader should ask them for their input. Working as a group may generate additional and more diverse ideas. When the final decision is made, every member of the group should be on the same page and have a similar process to help the entire group successfully implement the idea. At no given time will any group member try to sabotage the group goal. In consensus building keep in mind what is best for all individuals alike, don't worry about individualizing the common goal.

In 1998, Allen stated, "Americans value their independence. Yet, no one will accomplish much alone" (Allen, ¶ 1). I agree with him because the most success is accomplished when various individuals have the same idea and work together to accomplish a common goal. When individuals work collectively, effectiveness grows because more ideas are generated resulting in enhanced judgment. Therefore teamwork is a major piece in consensus building.

Consensus building also occurs when all group members work together to make a group decision and all participants contribute and implement the final

decision. No specific decision will be made until every member agrees with the decision or is willing to implement it. Research states that all people must be represented and at no time will there be an individual decision. As a group decision, the individual decisions are often diluted; thus the final decision is not the result of a majority vote. The main reason voting is a bad way to make a decision is because those who do not agree may sabotage the decision.

The mediator or principal must lead the group decision by gathering alternatives from all members. The reason for collecting various alternatives is to create diverse perspectives of an issue. When participating individuals have an impact or input on the decision, they are more apt to implement or follow through with the decision. Advantages of using a consensus building process according to Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs are the following:

- Implementing more representative decisions
- Bridge of differences
- Education of constituencies
- Shared power in the decision-making process
- Inclusiveness
- Fast implementation of solution
- Creation of new networks

(Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, March 17, 2003). The list above basically summarizes consensus building in a nutshell.

How would I implement consensus building as an exemplary educational leader? As a mediator I would implement consensus building by first getting a very diverse and equally representative group of individuals. After collecting group members I would explain the task to be completed. Once the group knows the task and what is to be expected, the group would make a list in small groups. Each small group would present two ideas and justify its response. After every small group is heard, I would then ask if any additions or adjustments must be made. The group would discuss each idea and make changes to the initial ideas by either combining two ideas together or deleting others. As the list is condensed to three options, I would ask if every representative could agree to implement one of the three ideas listed.

The consensus system (Hirsh, Delehant & Sparks, 1994, p. 203-204) I would set up would be on a rating scale of one to five; with a five representing total agreement, and a one signifying total disagreement. I would rate the ideas as follows:

#5--- Total agreement, I will do anything and everything to make it work.

#4--- Agreement, I think it is a good idea.

#3--- OK with me, I am willing to go along with the idea.

#2--- Don't agree, I think we should have more discussion.

#1--- Totally disagree, I will not participate.

If a 1 or 2 rating were given it would automatically be sent back to negotiate on or the drawing board. I would not stop negotiating until everyone in the group was willing to implement the task and understood what was expected of them in order to carry out the task successfully.

Consensus building is a critical element for a principal or educational leader. In the Iowa Standards of School Leadership, consensus building aligns the best with the first standard, the visionary leader. This standard promotes facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning shared and is supported by the school community. As a result it is related to consensus building due to sharing the same common vision with the school's largest support group, the community. Inclusion of all members of the community allows them to feel like part of the negotiating team and gives them some control of being part of the final decision. The vision of the school must be agreed upon by the stakeholders/community in order for them to support it. If any barriers arise in achieving the school's vision the problems must be identified, clarified, and addressed immediately so there is no gap or division in the school community. If the community is divided, then no consensus is being implemented; carrying out the vision may fail. The principal's job is to facilitate consensus building by getting the community to work together towards the common school vision to develop a good education.

In addition, as the mediator of consensus building, one must communicate effectively the vision and mission of the school to the staff, parents, students, and community members. Therefore, after the group involved in the consensus building process makes a decision about the vision or mission of the school, the mediator must make sure group members are implementing it for the entire school community. Once implementation is completed the mediator should study the effectiveness of the results.

Consensus building is a lot like democracy. For example, the president makes a decision in the political realm as a result of listening to the majority of the senate/house members. Therefore, what affects consensus and makes it convincing is not the agreement itself, but the participation by those who arrived at it. This is why I believe consensus building is a critical element for exemplary educational leadership.

Positive Culture

Culture is the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that have built up over time. As people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges, culture is being built in the school system. "A school's culture is a structure, process, and climate of values and norms that channel staff and students in the direction of successful teaching and learning" (McEwan, 2003, p. 87). Since culture has a large impact on learning, I chose it as a critical element exemplary for educational leaders.

In order to be an exemplary educational leader, the principal must be a culture builder. "A culture builder is an individual who communicates (talks) and models (walks) a strong viable vision based on achievement, character, personal responsibility, and accountability" (McEwan, 2003, p. 89). The principal sets the tone and standards of positive culture of a school. As McEwan (2003) states, "the principal is always on stage, serving as a role model for manners, decorum, and civility" (p.87). The principal is constantly in the spotlight in the school as well as in the community. As a leader, a principal must demonstrate to staff members the characteristic of team building. The principal must build quality professional relationships that lead to a positive work environment for students and staff. As a culture builder, remember it's the little actions or positive comments done regularly that build culture, such as a handshake, handing out KUDOS at staff meetings, being visible in the hallways, greeting students, parents, and teachers in the hallways, etc. (McEwan, 2003, p.91). The little things principals do for others are the most memorable. This is why they have such an impact on building a positive culture.

It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of culture and its relationship to improved student learning. The structures, a curriculum, and appropriate assessments all help build a school, but if there is an absence of a strong and healthy school culture, none of the rest will matter. Teachers share responsibility among themselves for improved practice and for improved student

achievement. They demonstrate this by developing together shared student goals, standards for students and themselves, and classroom culture expectations. As a result, culture has an impact on school improvement. Wilmore (2003) suggests the "twelve norms from Saphier and King that impact school improvement: collegiality; experimentation; high expectation; trust and confidence; tangible support; reaching out to the knowledge base; appreciation and recognition; caring; celebration, and humor; shared decision making; protection of what's important; traditions: and honest, open communication" (p. 98).

Positive climate and culture allows for high student achievement. A sense of community and belongingness must exits in order for teaching and learning to occur in school. This requires mutual respect between teachers and students respectively. "Respect, trust and caring are essential for teaching and learning" (Fitzhugh-Walker, P., Jefferies, P.T., & Thomas, C., 2000, p.68). A good classroom builds rapport with students so they feel comfortable and build the confidence to engage in high academic achievement. In addition, "good schools and family systems should strive to help all students feel included and of value" (Gibbs, 1995, p.25).

Positive culture aligns well with the second standard of the Iowa Standards of School Leaders. The instructional standard states that an educational leader 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. A key component of positive culture is to have celebrations of great things that go on at your school. For example, building a culture by celebrating the progress toward the vision. This shows that the principal noticed, recognized, reinforced and was pleased to see the progress. "In these ways, the principal encourages and nurtures appropriate strategies for creating a positive school culture" (Wilmore, 2002, p.33).

If I walked into a school where I had to build school culture from scratch, I would use the following steps from Gabe Flicker (McEwan, 2003, p.91).

1) Hire the best people I can find

2) Provide a warm, loving, secure environment

3) Be willing to serve my students, parents and teachers in any way I can

4) Bring parents and community into school as valued partner

5) Settle conflict before the sun set and definitely within 24 hours

6) Write newsletters (to inform the community)

7) "Have a vision that is bigger than the Idaho wilderness – one that makes people's jaw drop when they first hear it."

Also, I would try to do the little things that develop positive school culture. The two little things I would work on first are my communication skills and relationship building and then move onto greater tasks as identified by Gabe Flicker.

The principal becomes the nurturer of the entire community, the shepherd of the flock. I agree with Elaine Wilmore (2002), the author of Principal Leadership, that "the principal is the person who provides the sustaining life blood and passion to the school. As an administrator creating a close-knit, intimate environment will alleviate cultural difficulties, such as dropping out or lack of motivation in students" (p.40). Creating positive culture is not an easy task, but if a new principal can survive the numerous challenges in making the new structure work (from gaining student trust to meeting the expectations of central administration) positive culture will soon be developed.

Ethics For Decision Making

Ethics are perceived differently among individuals in the world. What one individual thinks is ethical may not be ethical to another. According to Johnson, ethical leadership begins with the way leaders perceive and conceptualize the world around them (October 22, 2003). "Real leaders concentrate on doing the right thing, not on doing things right" (Lashway, 1996, ¶ 6). Principals constantly face making ethical decisions that favor one moral decision over another. Therefore, "the principal must not only behave responsibly as an individual but must create an ethical institution" (Lashway, 1996, ¶ 2).

Ethics refers to how someone should behave. Ethics are not an innate behavior, but rather a behavior that is learned through watching others' actions. Ethical leadership is challenged as a result of a collision between two right values.

There are no exact recipes or easy solutions to ethical dilemmas but below are some suggested guidelines. First of all, have a definite sense of ethical standards and be ready to act. As Cordeiro and Cunningham (2000) refer to Starratt's model there are three components to developing an ethical school: caring, justice, and critique (p.210).

1) Ethics of caring- modeling or demonstrating to students that we care. (What do our relationships demand of us?) Confirming involves affirming and encouraging the best in others. As an educational leader ethics of caring involve building the skills and attitude of a caring environment.

2) Ethics of justice- equity and fairness. (How can we govern ourselves fairly?) This component requires administrators to implement rules equally with no favoritism. As a result administrators serve as advocates to students and embrace a habit of questioning and self-criticism.

3) Ethics of critique- ask questions that defy our status quo. (Where do we fall short of our own ideals?) Conflict may arise and should be handled in a civil manner.

Secondly, examine ethical dilemmas from various perspectives. "As an administrator anticipate consequences of the decision or action taken, such as, who will be affected and how. This perspective goes back to the Golden Rule:

How would you like to be treated in a similar circumstance" (Lashway, 1996, ¶ 4)? Thirdly, negotiate the best solution by reframing the ethical dilemma. Lastly, reflect on the action taken. Reflection is an enormous asset of any thought process because it allows one time to think about the decision made and what improvements or changes can be made.

In order to survive and achieve success, leaders must have a sound set of beliefs on which it premises all its policies and actions (Josephson Institute of Ethics, October 22, 2003). Being an ethical leader means applying the right amount of authority in each situation. This means a leader is subtle about implementing authority in a decision making process and is a leader who doesn't overemphasize their ethics. "To be an ethical school leader, then, is not a matter of following a few simple rules. The leader's responsibility is complex and multi-dimensional, rooted less in technical expertise than in simple human integrity" (Lashway, 1996, ¶ 5). In this quote, ethical leadership is presented as being an individual of good character, not of individual with technical problem solving skills.

Ethical Leadership aligns with the fifth standard in Iowa Standard of School Leaders. Making ethical decisions as a school administrator is for the common good of the school. Educational leaders demonstrate values, beliefs and attitudes through their daily actions that inspire others to higher levels of performance. As a result, throughout the school they formulate a code of ethics

that work for both students and staff. As mentioned earlier, as a leader they must be responsible for the decisions made and for the school's operations. In order to be an ethical leader, one has to treat people fairly, equitably, and with dignity and respect in order to develop an ethical educational environment.

As an educational leader, I would incorporate ethics by being fair, showing integrity and justice to the staff, students, parents, and community. I would share my values but also value others' morals and beliefs, too. Most importantly, I would infuse my ethical beliefs and values to others through my actions. I will allow the staff, students, parents, and community to see me working in an ethical manner. For example, I will respect others views as I build consensus to help make decisions. In addition, I will show I care about the students by being present at most school events and communicate with students and staff in the hallways. Actions speak louder than words. In order to display and create an ethical environment, I can show it first through good character and moral judgment.

In summary, an ethical leader does not only teach ethical values through words but also most importantly present them through their actions. Some citizens can talk the talk about being an ethical human being, but cannot walk the walk when it comes to acting ethically. I agree with Cordiero & Cunningham (2000), "ethical leadership is a stewardship that preserves the aspirations and

culture of the organization because building an ethical environments leads to making good and confident decisions" (p.216).

Effective Communication

In order to be an exemplary educational leader the principal must be an effective communicator. Effective communication is a key component to being an exemplary educational leader because it allows all staff members to hear the same message. As an effective communicator one listens, understands and adapts to different audiences (wears multiple hats) in order to communicate effectively. Good communication is not only having the ability to deliver a public speech but more importantly being an active listener. In addition, body language is a key component to effective communication because this displays how others are feeling. Likewise, more emotion is shown and a better connection is made in a face-to-face conversion. An exemplary leader asks questions to clarify or gather additional information about the topic of discussion while they display effective communication because this shows interest.

McEwan (2003) conveys what Steven Covey says about communication, "communication is the most important skill in life. Successful principals are communicating virtually 100 percent of the time they are on the job through listening, speaking, writing or reading" (p.1). According to research, to be a principal with effective communication skills one must be a good listener, be aware of his or her body language, and ask questions.

The first step to effective communication is to understand where the person is coming from. Likewise, Irmsher (1996) advocates what Stephan Covey recommends, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" (¶ 5). "A good listener absorbs intellectually more feeling in a conversation than the actual context the speaker is presenting" (Messina & Messina, 2004, ¶ 4). In addition Irmsher (1996) says the following about good listener:

> Good listeners don't interrupt, especially to correct mistakes or make points; don't judge; think before answering; face the speaker; are close enough to hear; watch nonverbal behavior; are aware of biases or values that distort what they hear; look for the feelings and basic assumptions underlying remarks; concentrate on what is being said; avoid rehearsing answers while the other person is talking; and don't insist on having the last word (¶ 8).

As research indicates, good listening skills are paramount to effective communication as a principal communicates to various staff, students, parents, school board members and community members.

In order to be an active listener, one must give his or her undivided attention to the speaker. For example, there should be no multi-tasking while a leader is involved in a conversation. McEwan (2003) says "having face-to-face conversations allows for making a better connection with the speaker or listener" (p.2). She also talks about being barrier-free so people find you approachable.

While in the midst of a conversation, the leader should never sit behind a desk or around a table as doing so displays a power control and a feeling of inferiority. "When a principal is having a conversation with a teacher involving a problem, the principal should make a concerted effort to solve the problem and leave the conversation feeling it was not a waste of the teacher's time" (McEwan, 2003, p.3).

Asking questions shows that a leader is interested and attentive towards the speaker. Asking additional questions displays interest in the conversation. Also, summarizing what the speaker had said is another way of reassuring the speaker you were listening and a clarifying questions may evolve. When someone asks you a question, as a principal, take some time to think about the answer by repeating the question and then answering in a clear, concise manner. A principal will want to communicate effectively. "You want to say what you mean and mean what you say" (McEwan, 2003, p.6).

Verbal and nonverbal communication skills are important as an effective communicator. Actually one study found 93% of a message is sent non-verbally, and only 7% through oral language (Irmsher, 1996, ¶ 3). According to Irmsher, body orientation, posture, facial expressions, eye contact, use of space, and personal appearance are key components while demonstrating endearing body language. Body orientation deals with facing the person during interaction to indicate you like and respect them. Good posture indicates either the degree of

tenseness or relaxation. Good posture also demonstrates the level of enthusiasm one feels. Through facial expression some people may exaggerate expressions. Others will not use facial expressions at all. Good eye contact allows the speaker to know you are interested and engaged in the conversation. The use of space is key to effective communication. Allowing less distance between speaker and listener demonstrates approachability. "Lastly, it is suggested not to be overdressed. A leader wants to be well dressed because people seem to show more respect and respond more positively but don't over do it" (McEwan, 2003, p.1).

I will infuse and incorporate this as a principal by enhancing interpersonal relationships. First of all, I will improve on my delivery. This will include my tone of voice, timing and tempo by understanding where the speaker is coming from and then responding with the correct delivery. Then I will try to remove any barriers that could deplete team energy and isolate individuals (McEwan, 2003, p.5). I want to defuse barriers so as a staff we can use consensus building to make decisions. Finally, I want to make sure I disperse enough praise to the staff and students, so they know I notice their hard work and dedication. Irmsher (1996) states the following:

One especially important kind of feedback for administrators is letting staff members know how well they are doing their jobs. Effective school leaders give plenty of timely positive feedback. They give negative

feedback privately, without anger or personal attack, and they accept criticism without becoming defensive (¶ 2).

I know and will model that giving praise helps develop a more constructive and positive environment.

The standard presented throughout this paper is organizational leadership. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes success of all students by ensuring management of organizations, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. As a principal using effective communication demonstrates Standard Three immensely because a principal communicates 100% of the time with staff, students, board members, and parents. This allows the school to be an effective and efficient learning environment for students.

In order for principals to be exemplary leaders, they must be able to communicate effectively. When principals are on the job they are constantly listening, speaking, writing and reading which demonstrates effective communication. Irmsher (1996) states the following about school leaders.

School leaders who focus on communicating their own "rightness" become isolated and ineffectual; therefore communication as a team is more beneficial. When listening carefully to another person give that person "psychological air". Once that vital need is met, a leader can then focus on

influencing or problem solving. In all reality effective communication is a principal's password to survival as an exemplary leader (¶ 11).

In conclusion, the four critical elements discussed in this paper are very prominent in the toolbox of an exemplary leader. As a principal deep rooted ethical values will help build a school with positive culture. Likewise, the ability to communicate effectively to various audience displays versatility and the ability to wear multiple hats, which happens frequently as a principal. In addition, setting the tone of a positive culture will help staff, students, board members, parents and community members believe in and support the school. When a principal develops support from these individuals, consensus building will be effective. Each individual critical element plays an important role to developing a successful school.

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