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## Educational excellence for administrating schools : a reflective essay

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## Educational excellence for administrating schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

A visionary leader must look at what the organization should be like to achieve educational excellence, and then be willing to undertake the necessary steps to achieve the vision. Educational excellence will take a strong-hold only when it evolves from a community commitment for excellence. This community consisting of students and teachers, as well as parents and the public, led by a visionary administrator, will develop a commonly held vision to achieve educational excellence for their school district.

**EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE FOR ADMINISTRATING SCHOOLS**

**A REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

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**A Research Paper**

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**Counseling, and Postsecondary Education**

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**Master of Arts in Education**

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**by**

**Cynthia J. Lapel**

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My goal for taking this graduate program for educational administration stemmed from feelings of frustration with the district in which I work. I felt there was a lack of commitment for educational excellence from the teachers and the administration, plus a lack of respect in the public for the school district. I felt that I was adhering to effective teaching practices and committed to my students by giving and expecting excellence, but felt unable to implement significant change because of my teaching position. I felt I needed to hold an administrative position to demand educational excellence.

My position supporting educational excellence has not changed. Walnut, as other school districts, still needs to evaluate how well they are preparing children for the 21st Century. However, my feelings on what parties are key enablers of educational excellence have changed.

Successful reformation efforts will **not** include administrators' demands for change. Change will occur when a leader has a vision consistent with educational excellence. Green (1987) stated that leaders without a vision, without rootedness, and without imagination are dangerous, or at best, inept.

I believe that as a visionary leader I must look at what the organization should be like to achieve educational excellence, and then be willing to undertake the necessary steps to achieve the vision. I will become a component of the organization, building a shared vision in the pursuit for educational excellence.

I believe educational excellence will take a strong-hold only when it evolves from a community commitment for excellence. This community consisting of students and teachers, as well as parents and the public, led by a visionary administrator, will develop a commonly held vision to achieve educational

excellence for their school district. It will be no replication of some other school district's visions, but a distinct, viable plan for their school district's improvement. School improvement involves defining a vision, building that vision, and making the vision a reality. The vision will be based on the perceived needs of the community with adherence to roles of major stakeholders. The community's needs and roles will serve as guidelines for this visionary leader to help the school district achieve educational excellence.

### Students

I believe students are the reason for schools. They have both needs and roles in the search for educational excellence. Their needs should be the guiding light in achieving educational excellence. Their roles are often times misgiven or misunderstood by not only themselves, but also school personnel. Unfortunately, students often times feel neither their basic emotional needs nor their individual educational needs are being met. I believe schools should provide all students the opportunity to succeed through the development of their unique talents, skills, hopes, dreams and ambitions. I feel this can only be accomplished through a student-centered value system. This system acknowledges students' roles within a school district. A student-centered value system is one that sets and achieves all goals in accordance with students' needs. These needs can range from basic emotional needs to curricular needs pertaining to success in the workplace. Black and English (1986) stated schools based on a student-centered value system maximize the system's effectiveness. This effectiveness allows for educational excellence within a visionary school system.

## Student Needs

Human needs. Some students do not feel they are being respected as individuals. They feel little attention is paid to their individual needs and learning styles. They feel their basic human needs of belonging, affection, achievement, power, and fun are being superseded by a multitude of policies handed down from various outside factions.

I believe, in student-centered school systems, individual human needs are met. This becomes evident when parents, teachers, administrators, and public members collectively converse and consensualize that all students need to be given an opportunity to succeed in school. Students realize major stakeholders are concerned that they receive as good an education as possible because the stakeholders have taken the time to converse with and listen to the students.

Curricular needs. Students also feel neglected in that they are often times not offered interesting and challenging courses. Not only are courses not challenging, but they also are not related to the skills necessary to be successful in a service oriented society.

What skills do students need to be successful in today's society? Wagner (1995) provided a common framework in which being an educated adult is defined. He stated that high school graduates need to be educated for a changing economy. They need to be able to: learn on their own, work effectively in teams, and learn how to innovatively solve problems. Wagner continued to explain that schools need to educate students for continued learning. I believe visionary schools will not view their purpose as one in which students memorize knowledge about major

subject areas. Rather, visionary schools will focus on students' abilities to find, use, and make sense of information. Wagner also stated:

"Educators must help adolescents understand and respect people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This acceptance of others must be communicated as a core value in school and taught as an essential skill -- not just for citizenship but also for working in teams and doing business in an increasingly global marketplace" (p. 395).

Wagner finished his framework with a call for education based on student personal growth and health. I believe a leader of a visionary district will center the curriculum on helping students develop capabilities and motivation to be productive in the workplace while providing opportunities for students to creatively look at healthy ways to entertain themselves.

I feel Wagner outlines curricular basics that are student-centered in that they provide students with skills that are pertinent to successful lifelong learning. A student-centered value system must be in place in order for students to regain their sense of control. I believe visionary school districts must be attentive to students' curricular needs by listening to students. To build a vision, all stakeholders must be involved, including students. Students, as stakeholders, are able to participate in decisions based upon their futures. The feeling of ownership encourages students to stick with the vision as they seek educational excellence. Students who possess the feeling of ownership are then able to share in the responsibility for their own excellence in their educational experience.

### Students Roles in Educational Excellence

As objectives are related to goals, so too are students' needs related to student roles. Students can be a negative or positive power group, and they can provide problems or solutions related to school excellence. I believe students will play a more positive role if their emotional and curricular needs are being met.

Black and English (1986) stated in order for schools to run reasonably well students must be willing to come to school, go to class, and do other civil things. How is it that visionary school districts can positively influence this wanted behavior from students?

Power group. I believe students will participate as a positive power group when they perceive the community is concerned that all students receive a quality education. Students will have evidence the community is concerned with their education when they have been actively involved with district discussions and decisions about visions and goals. Joyce, Wolff & Calhoun (1993) reported successful school programs require the participation of all, or nearly all, of the people involved. I believe students who are directly involved with efforts for educational excellence will not only understand the goals and visions more fully, but will also feel compelled to carry through with district philosophies.

Student roles. I asked a high school senior what he perceived his role to be within the school district. This student is what I consider a knowledgeable young man with excellent grades. He commented that his role was to keep the freshmen in line and do what the teachers asked of him. This states to me not only is this student unaware of his role, but he is also uninvolved within the system. His feelings of uninvolvedness will be prevalent in my mind as I search for educational

excellence. As a visionary leader, I will remember to tap all my resources for educational excellence, especially the primary faucet, students. I will encourage students to be solutions rather than problems within my district.

Black and English (1986) stated if an administrator has optimistic assumptions about kids, that they are basically decent, want to contribute to make their school better, and will respond to an honest request for help, they can be among an administrator's greatest assets. Students can be encouraged to be solutions rather than problems within any school district. That is, any school district whose philosophy has optimistic assumptions about students and views them as the primary reason for the school's existence.

### Teachers

While students are the reasons for schools, I believe teachers are the crux of the educational system. Donmoyer (1990) stated that what matters most in terms of student learning is the competence and commitment of the classroom teacher and the relationship that a teacher develops with his or her students. I whole-heartedly agree. Teachers' abilities or inabilities to instruct effectively, directly affect the amount of efficiency and excellence a visionary school system experiences. Teachers' effectiveness is directly related to how well their needs are being met and how well their roles are defined within their school district.

### Teachers' Needs

Human needs. Teachers, like students, need to have their basic, human rights as individuals met. They need to be provided with nurturing environments so they too can reach their highest educational potentials. Patterson (1993)

suggested that nurturing environments value differences in individual philosophies and practices. He further suggested that nurturing environments go as far as valuing differences in perspectives. I believe that teachers, like students, feel their basic human needs are being met when they are respected as individuals.

Motivation. Along with needing respect as individuals, teachers need to be motivated. Several management theories ranging from Herzberg in his maintenance and motivation theory to Morse and Lorsch in their contingency theory state methods in which to motivate workers. The theory that best suits my vision for educational excellence is the expectancy theory. Plunkett (1983) provided that the expectancy theory will work in an organization that spells out, in specific terms, what behaviors it expects from people and what the rewards or outcomes will be for those who exhibit those behaviors. I believe when a teacher knows what is expected and has the necessary resources to perform as expected, the teacher is motivated to perform. Teachers will know what is expected from me because I will share my educational philosophy with them. Not only will I share my philosophy, but teachers will also know what is expected because they will be actively involved in discussions and decisions based on our district's philosophy.

Trust. Along with motivation comes trust. I believe, without the element of trust, it is difficult to motivate others. Visionary leaders continually work on establishing a trusting environment by communicating regularly, listening, and clarifying to discover who their teachers really are, and what they are about. Not only do visionary leaders know who their teachers are, they also know themselves very well. They know what their own beliefs, values, and visions are and act consistently in accordance to those beliefs, values, and visions. I believe as a

visionary leader I will be able to generate a climate of trust through sharing my educational philosophy with teachers and consistently acting within that philosophy.

Feedback and evaluation. Teachers also need effective feedback and evaluation methods that encourage professional growth and provide an essence of excellence in teaching practices.

McReal (1988) stated while perspectives of teacher evaluation may vary, the major purpose of an evaluation is to provide a process that allows and encourages supervisors and teachers to work together to improve and enhance classroom instructional practices. Evaluation processes also bring structured assistance to marginal teachers and allow for rational decision making in dealing with the retention, transfer, or dismissal of staff members (McReal).

Formative teacher evaluation should be improvement focused. This type of evaluation is centered on teachers' skills so they can perform their jobs more effectively. Spencer (1992) suggested that this type of evaluation is pro-active because it occurs before a final analysis. Formative evaluation, providing the opportunity for teachers to receive feedback and support, allows for changes in teaching strategies, activities, and philosophies. Hunter (1988) felt that such formative evaluation should occur early enough so teachers could benefit from it during the school year.

Teacher evaluation is also summative centering on such decisions as whether to dismiss a teacher, whether to grant tenure to a teacher, whether to place a teacher on probation, or how much merit pay to give a teacher. This type of evaluation is typically called summative because it deals with more final,

summary decisions about teachers. Popham (1988) stated summative teacher evaluation is not improvement-oriented except in the sense that a school's instructional program is ultimately improved when an incompetent teacher is removed.

I believe evaluation techniques should enhance rather than threaten teacher efficacy, because efficacious teachers feel they have the ability to bring about student achievement aside the factors beyond the teacher's control, such as home environment, family background, and parental influence. I feel these evaluation systems should be: based on known criteria and clear standards, focused on personal reflection and supportive coaching for growth, and ongoing in nature. In contrast, traditional one-shot evaluations performed by a building or district-level supervisor tend to disengage rather than engage the teacher and therefore reduces efficacy. I feel teachers who believe they can make a difference do make a difference. Thus, I feel it is imperative to utilize an evaluative tool that provides teachers with the opportunity to enhance their efficacious feelings.

Although I have been speaking of enhancing teachers' efficacious feelings thus encouraging growth in effective instruction, I realize I will also be responsible for conducting summative evaluations. I believe that ineffective teachers need to be released when possible and reduced when necessary. I know that incompetence and insubordination are the most common grounds for teacher dismissal. When dismissing a staff member, I will remember the courts view opinions of principals, curricular supervisors, and other supervisory personnel as expert testimony. I will also keep in mind that testimony of parents and students may also be seen as

pertinent. Long-lasting in my mind will be the fact that actual observations, by me, are the most significant sources for the dismissal of ineffective teachers.

Conley (1987) provided eight critical attributes effective evaluation systems possess. First, all participants must accept the validity of the evaluation system. This happens when the purposes of the evaluation system matches the values, goals, and culture of the school community. Second, all participants must thoroughly understand the mechanics of the system. The understanding of the system will be enhanced through annual meetings centered around the procedures and priorities of the system for the coming year. The meetings will include the methods of data collection being used, the expectations the administration has of the staff, and the legitimacy of the performance criteria. Third, the evaluatees need to know that the performance criteria have a clear, consistent rationale. Teachers become more cognitive of the system's rationale when they are involved and when it is consistent with the district goals. Fourth, evaluators need proper training in the procedural and substantive use of the system. Fifth, effective evaluation systems contain levels, each with different goals. This means top-notch teachers will have goals that validate growth and excellence. It also means teachers who need remediation will have goals that attempt improvement. Sixth, the evaluation system needs to possess distinctions between the formative and summative dimensions. This is more easily accomplished through the inclusion of differentiating goals. Seventh, a variety of evaluation techniques should be used. These techniques can vary from clinical supervision to administrative monitoring. The variety in evaluation techniques allows for teacher needs to be matched more closely with specific evaluation techniques. Finally, evaluation must be a district

priority. Evaluators must have time to evaluate after they have received adequate training opportunities for evaluative techniques. The evaluation process must be tied to the school system's educational goals. I believe these attributes provide a guideline for me to follow as an effective evaluator in search of educational excellence.

### Parents and the Public

Parents and the public constitute a heterogeneous group casting a multitude of characteristics. They can be apathetic, uninvolved with the school district, until provoked by a highly personal emotional issue. On the other hand, parents and other members of the public can become overinvolved, interfering with the operation and administration of the school system. I know as a teacher myself, educating children apart from the support of parents and the community makes life rough for all involved. I believe when people are involved and know what is going on, they tend to support their local school systems more.

General educational research supports the fact that if parents become the schools' partners, everyone benefits. Grant (1995) stated that when parents are involved in the school, their children actually do better academically and have a better relationship with their parents. Although most educators recognize that involving parents and other public members in children's education is an important way to improve student academic performance, schools do not always provide a hospitable climate for community members. The public can become actively involved and be positive factors in the quest for educational excellence.

Community groups present positive characteristics when their needs are being met and their roles are clearly defined.

## Parents' Needs

Joyce, Wolff, & Calhoun (1993) stated that parents enroll their children in the organization (the school) to ensure cultural participation at the highest level. With this cultural participation, parents also need to know their children are receiving their education in a safe, caring environment. Within this safe, caring environment, parents need assurance their children are receiving a quality education with their individual needs being met. I feel the previously mentioned parental needs will only be met when schools and parents participate in active communication.

Safe, caring environment. Parents need to know they are sending their children to a system that is proactive in securing a safe, caring environment. Without a safe, caring environment, educational excellence is insurmountable, lacking the basis for meeting children's individual educational needs. One way to ensure parents and other public members a safe, caring environment is in place is to involve them in committee work to establish goals conducive to proper school conduct. People with a strong sense of ownership and control are more motivated, in general, than those who feel they lack control. This motivation will enhance not only the understanding of the effects of a safe, caring environment, but also the development and enforcement of policies conducive to such an environment.

Individualized needs. Parents need to know their children are receiving a quality education based on their individual needs. Parents of gifted and talented, behavioral disordered, average, and academically challenged students want to know their children are given the opportunity to succeed and experience growth.

So, if community involvement is such a catalyst in achieving educational excellence, why don't schools systems and parents have a better relationship?

Active and consistent communication. Aronson (1996) stated teachers and other staff members may have not learned how to communicate and work effectively with parents and families, particularly those who have different cultural, socioeconomic, or language background. The first time many parents hear from the school is when there is a problem. This is not conducive to positive parental relations with the school district. Parents need to feel they are important players in public education. I believe visionary leaders will encourage educational excellence by reaching out to parents, enlisting their help and advice in the education of their children.

#### Parental and Public Roles

Budlong (1994) stated parental involvement in the schools is an essential ingredient in the education of children. I feel when parents and other community members are involved with schools in positive ways not only does the public's attitude toward education become more emphatic, but so do the children's. To ensure positive parental and community member involvement, the purposes of community involvement, and the possible types of involvement must be clearly defined in adherence to the districts goals and visions.

Purpose of involvement. Gorton and Schneider (1991) reported that advocates of involvement hope to achieve four main objectives:

- "1. Through involvement, parents and other citizens become more knowledgeable about school affairs, and as a result, they become better informed about what students are learning in school, more

understanding of the problems that the school faces, and more supportive of efforts by the school to improve the educational program.

2. Through involvement teachers and school administrators, parents become better equipped to provide learning activities at home, including developing students' social and personal skills, enhancing basic skills education, and contributing to advanced skills and enrichment education.

3. Through participation by parents and other citizens, the school receives ideas, expertise, and human resources, all of which improve school decision making and the educational program of the school.

4. Through involvement, parents and other citizens are in a much better position to evaluate the school fairly and effectively "

(pg.521).

Aronson (1996) supported the previous textbook explanation by stating that parental confidence in and satisfaction with the school were direct results of parental involvement. Aronson added the more familiar parents became with curricular and instructional goals and activities, the more they supported teachers and administrators. Imagine the power emanating from the school systems that possess such characteristics! I believe when stakeholders realize they are after the same thing, quality education for children, the more they are able to set and achieve goals consistent with achieving a quality education for all children.

Types of involvement. Peterson (1995) indicated parents were more likely to come to the school if they were able to exercise genuine power in decisions that directly affect the future of the school and their children's lives. Parents and other community members need to be empowered to foster substantive and far-reaching involvement. As a visionary leader, I will encourage parents and other public members not only to be involved in the fund-raising and field trip follies, but also allocate resources to organize community involvement in issues such as curriculum, budget, facility renovation, and personnel.

To ensure educational excellence the community must be convinced that excellence is necessary and desirable. The lines of communication must be kept open at all times. Possessing knowledge of the values that lead school personnel and community members combined with empathetic listening allows for a common vision to be developed.

Knowledge of us and others. I believe it is critical to be aware of my own educational philosophy and value system in order to effectively communicate with the public. Knowing my values will permit me to consistently operate within the parameters of my values and philosophies, leading to building trust and respect within the public arena. Raising the level of trust within the school community will allow me the opportunity to empower the stakeholders to share their true feelings. I feel when true feelings are shared, the development of a vision for educational excellence is more probable.

When working with the public, I believe Covey (1989) stated it best when he said, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" (pg. 237). It is important to understand what others perceive and believe as individuals and as

groups. This can be accomplished through listening with empathy to all groups within the community.

Empathetic listening. A poem comes to mind when discussing listening:

### LISTEN

When I ask you to listen to me

and you start giving advice,  
you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me

and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way,  
you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me

and you feel you have to.....solve my problem,  
you have failed me, strange as that may seem....

When you do something for me

that I can and need to do for myself,  
you contribute to my fear and weakness.

But, when you accept as a simple fact

that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational,  
then I can quit trying to convince you...

Irrational feelings make sense

when we understand what's behind them.

So, please listen and hear me. If you want to talk,

wait a minute for your turn, and I'll listen to you.

Anonymous

I believe this poem describes how it feels when people listen without feeling or concern for the speaker. The public is speaking, and as educators we must empathetically listen. I will be an empathetic listener, seeking the involvement of parents and the public to work collectively toward a common vision for educational excellence.

#### Plan of Action

I am a visionary leader who knows myself well -- my strengths and weaknesses. I am aware of my educational philosophy and plan to consistently operate within that realm of values. I believe all children can learn and deserve to experience educational excellence through the collaborative efforts of the major stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members).

I believe the function of the educational process is to provide all students with opportunities for obtaining the knowledge, experiences, and skills which will best prepare them to assume a positive position in a global society. I believe each student has unique capabilities, aptitudes, personalities, and needs that should be recognized and expanded upon. I also believe students should be active participants in the learning process, not simply passive absorbers of knowledge.

I will empower stakeholders to formulate a set of shared values, beliefs, and visions for educational excellence. After this formulation occurs, I will guide stakeholders in making the vision a reality by establishing long and short term goals. I know when stakeholders develop a vision collaboratively, growth efforts are ensured.

I plan to make a positive difference in public education by providing leadership to students, teachers, parents, and community members in a common vision for educational excellence.

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