

2005

A preferred vision for leading an exemplary school : a reflective essay

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Recommended Citation

Libolt, Robert S., "A preferred vision for leading an exemplary school : a reflective essay" (2005). *Graduate Research Papers*. 1109.

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A preferred vision for leading an exemplary school : a reflective essay

Abstract

Education is a cornerstone in a person's life. Education is vital in today's society. Without it you miss out on many opportunities. As a student moves through the grades of a school district that student is being enriched in many ways.

High school is the beginning of something so much more than classes, athletics, social organizations, and fun: it is the start of your future. Many students don't understand their own potential, and education allows the chance to discover it. Getting an education is the best thing any person can do. From family to money to how you live and what you do, the bottom line is that education is a must.

APPROVAL PAGE

This Research Paper by: Robert Libolt (Cedar Rapids Cohort)

A PERFERRED VISION FOR LEADING AN EXEMPLARY SCHOOL

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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4/27/05

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4-27-05

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Education

A VISION OF LEADERSHIP IN ALL SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

University Of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts in Education

by

Robert S. Libolt

May 2005

Dr. Reed

Why I became an Educator

Children are exceptional little people who someday will be the future of this great world. This belief is why I became an educator. My knowledge came from various experiences as a teenager. My mother ran a day care while I was growing up and I enjoyed coming home to read with them or going outside to play ball. I also remember helping out with the little league baseball program in Cherokee. Teaching teamwork and positive competition was something I enjoyed getting across to these young ball players. This was also about the same time that I wanted to become a coach as well.

While I was in High School I really had the fortunate pleasure of being surrounded by great teachers. Mr. Woods, my Government and Economics teacher, he was always tough on me. He pushed me to achieve my best, even if it was a "C" grade. I always asked myself, why is Mr. Woods so demanding? Now that I am on the other side of the desk, I know the answer to my question. He saw my potential and he knew I was not using it. I see that so much today in my classroom that I think of Mr. Woods often. As I push I push my students to be their best.

I also had two coaches who made a great impression on my life. Mr. Leng was my varsity football coach and was a great one at that. He taught me to leave everything out on the field and always give 100%. He was an outstanding motivator as well as a classy guy and one of the main reasons I wanted to get into the coaching field. Coach Reynolds was also a big reason I wanted to get into teaching and coaching. He teaches 3rd grade and is the varsity wrestling coach at Cherokee, Iowa. He believes in a positive and structured classroom, and I utilize much of what I learned from him in my own classroom. Coach Reynolds was a classic MOTIVATOR! I remember times at practice that I would have nothing left in my tank. He would say something, or should I say yell something and all of that tiredness and fatigue would leave my body. I owe a

great deal to Mr. Woods, Mr. Leng, and Mr. Reynolds. It is because of these people pointing me in the right direction that I began a career in education.

What I Believe About Education

Education is a cornerstone in a person's life. Education is vital in today's society. Without it you miss out on many opportunities. Let's face it, without education you are limiting yourself. Look at the jobs of today in the world; without some type of educational background, you are going to be looking at some type of job that is going to be paying minimum wage. In today's economy it is hard to raise a family on minimum wage and live comfortably doing it.

As a student moves through the grades of a school district that student is being enriched in many ways. The student is introduced to many ideas he/she may never see otherwise. This opportunity gives the student a taste of what he or she may be interested in doing in the future. From Industrial Technology to Advanced Biology, a student is allowed to try different things. That is why education is so unique! It gives students opportunities! If a student wants to try something in computers, they will have an opportunity to do so. Based on this chance you never know if the student may make a career out of doing it or something similar to it.

High school is the beginning of something so much more than classes, athletics, social organizations, and fun it is the start of your future. Many students don't understand their own potential, and education allows the chance to discover it. Getting an education is the best thing any person can do. From family to money to how you live and what you do, the bottom line is that education is a must.

Why I entered the Educational Leadership Program

I wanted to broaden my educational opportunities. I want to see what else is out there for me to do that deals with education and this cohort was right for me. I am working on my Masters

for a number of reasons. One is that I have the time to do it. The second is the easy access to this program. The bottom line for me is that I enjoy the educational field and want to move up through the process of being an administrator in an educational field. I have been teaching for six years and would not change or do anything else. Being in education is the only thing I have ever wanted to do, and I enjoy doing it each and everyday. An opportunity like being involved in this cohort doesn't come around all of the time, so I took the chance and now I am glad that I did. So far, it has been one of the best decisions to which I have committed. I can't wait for all of the new experiences I will encounter in this cohort.

What I believe about Leadership

My belief is that leadership consists of four F's: friendly, fair, fun, and firm. These four aspects are very important in my day-to-day teachings in the classroom. These four basic skills will also be important when I become an administrator. Friendliness to faculty, students, community and other staff members is a trait that will become incorporated in my school climate. Fairness is one of the most important qualities you need to have as an administrator. You can't have any gray areas dealing with certain issues. The faculty, students, community, and other staff members need to know where you stand on all issues and that you will stand by them. Fun is something that comes natural for me. I love to have fun and the staff and students like to have fun as well. This too will be one of my qualities I bring is to have fun. If the students as well as the staff don't have fun at school you will eventually have some problems. School needs to be fun for everyone. Educational activities that involve everyone are always going to be part of my school climate. Firmness will also be a quality of mine. I know it isn't going to win me any popularity contests but it needs to be done. You need to stand by all of your decisions and make

sure that you don't sway on any decision issues. That doesn't mean you can't listen to ideas from other people, or take questioning. It just means you can't walk the fence.

Critical Element 1: Collaboration between Learning Communities

The first critical element I would establish in my school would be collaboration between learning communities. If a school is to truly be a learning community you need to work together to build a learning organization.

I envision the school where I will serve as the administrator to be a place where the staff works on teams to design curriculum, plan instruction, develop assessments specific to the content, agree on standards, write goals, problem solve together, counsel students, support each other, and, at the very least be a great teacher. I also would like to see some collaboration going on in the classroom as well. I should see students working together, problem solving together and working towards common goals.

The preceding information on collaboration in the schools is a little unrealistic. My research concluded that most teachers teach in their classroom like it is their own building. Isolation from everyone is the common factor. The only communication that usually happens between staff and principal tends to be about a supervisory visit or communication about a particular student (Maeroff, 1993). A teacher may inquire the principal about a curriculum issues or something that relates to an absence.

Moving my staff towards collaboration will be important and a priority. I will provide in-service that will provide us with the development of collaboration. We will create norms for practice, and find time when we can practice. I understand that I may have some resistance but I will continue to lead by example and hopefully the staff will join the team in positive way. I will not put up with any teacher trying to sabotage our hard work. If a teacher does not want to be

involved that will be fine but they need to realize they will have to go a long with any decisions that are made and do it with no complaining or negative comments.

When looking at a school that has a learning community we need to look at the learning process. We need to continue to improve each day as a school whether it would be by the staff or the students (Barth, pg.27, 1990). Each individual needs to work on the following:

- Acknowledge areas in need of improvement
- Pose the Problems
- Take some risks
- Use some humor
- Collaborate with other learners
- Demonstrate some compassion
- Model Learning
- Maintain Focus on learning.

Yes, All of the above needs will be discussed in in-services and team meetings. Each school differs in how it evolves from the process of collaboration. "The bottom line will be the effectiveness of each teacher and on how hard they work together" (Hargreaves and Dawes). Time is another major issue that I as an a school administrator I will need to find time for my teachers to do the above training to be better educators for our children and to comply with our learning community.

Critical Element 2: A Positive Culture and Climate

The second critical element I would establish in my school would be a positive culture and climate. They are essential to achieve success in a school. If as a school is trying to be positive, the student body, and staff will enjoy being at school, and if the school is being negative

in some way will not enjoy being at school. Enjoying something is have the battle in being successful. A common definition of culture and climate is vital to a school's successful.

"The culture includes deep patterns of values, beliefs and traditions that have formed over the course of a school's history" (Deal and Peterson, 1990). "Culture is a schools essence, composed of its traditions, beliefs, policies and norms" (Willower 1984).

I look at this as the schools vision written on paper, but the culture is what they really do. Climate is more the day-to-day operational culture. Climate is defined in matters of comfort and consideration, leader-subordinate relations, how the staff interacts and approaches their work, the overall atmosphere in the school workplace. Climate is, as it suggests, cold vs. warm, collegial vs. independent, friendly vs. unfriendly, personal vs. impersonal, and sunny vs. stormy. Climate can be the teachers view of the students, the repressive ness of the student disciplinary system, the support system of the teachers, the flexibility of the staff, the leadership style of the principal, the quality of the staff development, the "us vs. them" mind set, the pressure from the district office, or even the pressures from state mandates.

As an administrator I would focus on the following aspects in order to shape a more positive school culture:

- Community involvement
- Values of the staff.
- Expectations of staff and administration
- Work time for implementation.
- Public acknowledgement of successes
- Training of procedures for tragedies and disasters
- Celebrations

- Appropriate placement for staff and faculty.
- Knowledge of political influences

These are the people who would influence and shape a school's climate:

- The Principal
- The Staff
- The central Office
- The Board of Education
- Attitudes of staff towards each other.
- Attitudes of staff towards students
- Attitudes of staff toward their responsibility of learning.

In doing all of the above research it supports the premise that strong, positive school cultures correlate strongly with increased student achievement and motivation as well as teacher productivity and satisfaction. I am going to share with you some of the researcher I have found that relates to a productive school:

Research supports the remise that strong, positive school cultures (that is to say those valuing and believing in the "right" things) correlate strongly with increased student achievement and motivation as well as teacher productivity and satisfaction.

Students are more motivated to learn in schools with strong cultures. Researchers analyzed the cultures of schools using five criteria: (Maehr, 1990): 1) academic challenge, 2) comparative achievement, 3) recognition of achievement, 4) sense of school community, and 5) perception of goals.

"We believe that the differences in school climate explain much of the differences in academic achievement between schools that is normally attributed to composition" (Brookover, 1978).

In discussing collegiality cites as a study in which the result indicated a negative correlation between student achievement and "friendship" interactions among teachers-the more friendship and interactions documented, the lower students academic achievement (Marzano 2003). He allows that this study used some small samples and may not be enough for generalization of the finding, but it does indicate that, while profession collegiality is important to students achievement, personal, or social friendship is not.

"Every organization develops distinctive beliefs and patterns over time. Many of these patterns and assumptions are unconscious or taken for granted. They are reflected in myths, fairy tales, stories, rituals, ceremonies, and other symbolic forms (Bolman,1991). Managers who understand the power of symbols have a better chance of influencing organizations than do those who focus only on other frames.

In studying sit-based management four imperatives for successful schools (which should be part of the culture) included: (Beck 1996) 1) a consistent and powerful focus on learning, 2) strong, facilitative leadership, 3) a commitment to nurturing a sense of internal and external community, and 4) resources aimed at building the capacity of people within the community to lead, learn and teach.

As you can see having a positive school climate and culture are keys to having a productive school. It has bases that are sometimes not revealed by the eye but by the way things turn out and handled. You can really tell how a school is run in the first 15 minutes of being

there. What I have to ask myself is it going to be my school that has a positive Climate and Culture.

Critical Element 3: Discipline in the School

The third critical element that I would establish in my school would be discipline. Discipline is a necessary part of school life. An effective discipline policy is based on an agreement between the school and parents about what is expected of the students. Parents are always encouraged to work with the school to try and solve any problems that may arise Canter (1989). There are specific, legal requirements related to the handling of discipline. Three major issues that I will face everyday as administrator are as follows:

- School discipline in general
- Detention
- Bullying, racial and sexual harassment

I will be responsible for promoting good behavior and discipline. I will draw up the school's discipline policy, using the board policy and school policy as a framework. By law, I must publicise the discipline policy. By implementing these rules it will be known within the school and to the parents, and by bringing it to the attention of students, parents and staff at least once a year in the student handbook.

The policy will be regularly reviewed, taking into account the views of students, parents and staff. As a school district we will tackle strategies on bullying, detention policy, and racial and sexual harassment Goldring (1993). came up with the following to be dealt with as a school:

- Promoting self-discipline and proper regard for authority among students;
- Encouraging good behavior and respects for others;
- Ensuring students' standard of behaviors are acceptable;

- Encouraging good students conduct

Although a school will never exist that doesn't have to deal with discipline but some days can come pretty close. When dealing with discipline, you need to have some type of consequences. One of my consequences will be detention. When used correctly it can be effective Senge (1990). Detention can be used on disciplinary grounds. The Education Act 1997 gives schools legal backing to detain students after the end of a school session. However, before a school uses detention, as the Principal I must:

- Make all parents, students and staff aware that detention will be used as a sanction
- Tell parents of students admitted part way through the school year about the policy

Detention will not be a running joke in my school. If a student has a detention it is for good reason and will be served when told to do so. As an administrator, I will back my staff 100% if they choose to give a detention to a student for bad behavior.

The next question I have to ask myself is what am I going to do to prevent behavior problems. I know a range of preventative actions exist that schools can take to maintain good behavior. These can range from classroom behavior management to recognition of pupil achievement. The school's discipline policy needs to be fairly and consistently applied by teachers in handling disruptive behaviour. Effective systems of support for teachers, especially those with less experience need to be agreed upon by the Principal.

All students need and want discipline, it is just a matter of how are you going to incorporate it effectively. As a Principal I need to stay firm but also fair. Students sometimes need a second

chance and sometimes they might just need some attention. This is one area that I look forward to working with in the coming years.

Critical Element 4: Time Management

The fourth and final critical element I would establish in my school would be the famous phrase of all educators, time management. Being a Principal takes time, teaching takes time, and being a student takes time, and in school, as everywhere, there's never enough of it. Like any executive responsible for the efforts of others, you will find that managing time like my own, staff's and the student's is one of your greatest challenges.

Time management is a major component running through almost all aspects of a school day for a principal: (Schein, 1985). Organizing the day, organizing the school, deciding how long and how often to evaluate teachers, recording teacher progress, or keeping time-consuming behavior problems to a minimum.

Effective use of school time begins with efficient classroom organization and management. It is my job to make sure that teachers are doing that (Wood, 1981). Much of the essentials of classroom life involve time management in some way: staring down paperwork, planning, establishing routines that eliminate wasted time and confusion, using learning centers, independent assignments, and seatwork to give you time to work with small groups, and classroom environments that allow students and activities to move smoothly from one activity to the next.

Teachers may have less time to teach than you think. Lunch, recess, breaks, down-time between lessons and activities, moving from one classroom to another, interruptions, and other

periods of non-instructional time account for at least 27 percent of an elementary school day. In many classrooms, that figure climbs beyond 40 percent (Little, 1993). Incredible as those statistics may sound, they have been confirmed by separate studies at the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, and the former Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University.

Sure, lunch, recess, and restroom breaks are important, but too much teaching time is lost. Add to that the time that slips away when students stare out the window or are otherwise disengaged during instruction.

I as the Principal will work on the following aspects with my beginner and veteran teachers alike to increase teaching time:

- Decreasing the time allotted for breaks and social activities. Contrary to popular belief, students do not need very much of break time to refresh themselves. In fact, research shows that long or frequent breaks may actually lower their involvement with academic work.
- Discovering controllable time. In some schools, teachers discover they can change the scheduling of class periods, pullout programs, lunch breaks, extracurricular activities planning time, and outside interruptions.
- Scheduling solid blocks of teaching time for each day. You might hang a "Do Not Disturb" sign outside your door during those times. I will also help in scheduling pullout programs around those blocks and ask parents not to schedule medical or dental appointments then during this time

- Planning for smooth transitions between lessons and always try to have materials ready for each lesson or activity.
- Assigning homework to extend practice time. Homework should allow students to practice skills they have already learned.
- Reconsidering how you schedule restroom breaks.
- Improving student attendance. Attendance has a big effect on teaching and learning time. I will impress upon parents the importance of good attendance and teach an actual lesson on how it hurts to miss school. At the end of each day, I want the teachers to tell kids what they will be doing the next day.

Also as the Principal I will teach my staff on how to delegate effectively. Good classroom managers know how to delegate. Aides, volunteers, and students can handle many classroom tasks and save you enormous amounts of time. Learn to use these valuable helpers. Another tool for time management is the ability to constructively use aides and volunteers.

If you are one of the lucky teachers that are assigned a full- or part-time aide, I will have the teachers draw on that person's special strengths and abilities. Aides can work with small groups or tutor individuals. They can make instructional games and resources, keep bulletin boards current, monitor seatwork and learning centers, read stories to the class, and assist you in testing. They can also help with clerical and housekeeping duties. Their assistance with field trips, special programs, and class parties is invaluable. Help your aide become increasingly responsible and involved in the classroom.

Volunteers are also a valuable asset to the school. Volunteers generally can do anything aides do with your supervision and guidance, of course. Volunteer programs not only give teacher's much-deserved help, they can also improve home-school relations. After a good volunteer experience, parents, grandparents, businesspersons, and other volunteers become sympathetic to the problems facing schools, and supportive of better budgets and improved opportunities. Also, they learn to play an active role in educating children. It's a winning proposition for everyone!

As you can see these four critical elements are important to my vision for a school. These elements will give the foundation it takes to be an effective leader. I also know that in time I will be experiencing more and more elements that will be beneficial to a successful school.

I hope that in the near future I will be able to use these elements and implement them into a vision for my school. I know there are several elements that I will also have to implement into my school but I think the four that I have listed and talked about are the ones that will make me better understand what it takes to be an administrator.

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