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## **A vision for administering schools : a reflective essay**

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## A vision for administering schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

I have experienced many things in two years as a high school principal. I have been yelled at by parents and praised by others. I have mourned the death of a board president, a teacher, and a little girl in the seventh grade. I have hired teachers who are making a difference in the lives of children every time they walk into the classroom, and I have dealt with the stress that comes with terminating a teacher. I have had the opportunity to address the community in an effort to persuade them to vote "yes" on a bond issue and I have experienced the thrill of seeing that bond issue pass with 75% approval. I have seen the excitement of graduating seniors when they open up their diploma for the first time and see it is signed and realize a long journey has come to an end and I have felt the disappointment when "one" did not make it.

Besides instructional leader, we serve as counselors and parents, engineers and supervisors, players and referees, and talkers as well as listeners. The roles I have learned, and will continue to learn, are challenging and the reason I chose to become an educational leader.

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A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY  
SCHOOLS:  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,  
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by

Kevin R. Litterer

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As I reflect upon becoming an educational leader, many of my educational values and beliefs have been influenced by the past 35 years of my life. As a result of these life experiences, I became a high school teacher and continued my education to become a high school administrator. In April, 2000, while I was still earning my administrative degree, I was hired by Glidden-Ralston Community School to serve as the High School Principal. This opportunity has served as one of the greatest learning experiences of my educational career. As I progressed through the various administrative classes, I had the unique opportunity to experience the theoretical side of administration through the University of Northern Iowa, and the practical side of administration through Glidden-Ralston Community School.

I have been fortunate to be surrounded by people whose experience and wisdom have helped me along my educational path. My parents taught me the value of an honest days work. They helped put four children through college and provided all the love and support a child could want. They also taught me the importance of family. Since becoming a principal, I have learned that being a principal can be a very time consuming profession. My parents taught me the importance of taking time out of a busy schedule to enjoy "family time". My sister has shown me the value of books. Through her support and guidance I learned that a book is not just a method of collecting information. Reading a book is also a way to relieve stress, get away from the job, or get my three year old son

to settle down and take his nap. Bob Saathoff, a teacher at Clarksville Community School, cultivated my love of history and the opportunities being a teacher can provide. He showed me that history does not have to be some boring trip back into time. Mr. Saathoff could take a rather mundane topic, such as the Industrial Revolution, and turn it into an educational adventure filled with the stories of the people who made the Industrial Revolution a significant era in our American history. Lastly, my wife has taught me the importance of taking risks. To say I am a person who resists change is an understatement. It was my wife who encouraged me to earn my Master's Degree in administration. I was hesitant and filled with self doubt when I was considering leaving a successful job as a social studies teacher at Manning High school, and taking the job as principal at Glidden-Ralston High School. It was my wife's support that helped me to accept the position as secondary principal, and get through those very stressful times of learning a new position, continuing to earn my Master's Degree, and attempting to strike a balance between my academic life, my career, and my role as a husband and father. All of these people, and many more, have contributed to my development as a school leader. My educational philosophy, vision, and leadership style are a product of these people.

### Philosophy of Education

“In a world of unpredictable change and speed, our schools must become centers, not of information, but of knowledge and understanding” (Blegen &

Kennedy, 2000, p. 1 ). This quote really epitomizes my philosophy on education as schools prepare for the twenty-first century. Schools can no longer be isolated institutions with teachers performing their day to day functions of dispensing information to students. As we prepare students to enter the global community, we as educational leaders must insure that schools are preparing their students for a different world. When the 1900's began we were preparing most of our students for work in a factory. We placed students in rows, lectured while students took notes, and generally prepared students for the monotony associated with factory work. The new century is drastically different. A diverse global community that is technology driven will be the world students enter when they leave the high schools of the United States. It will be the responsibility of the nation's high school principals to create the appropriate school climate that will insure the success of all students (Stratton, 2000).

How does a school leader create such a climate? I believe it begins with defining four essential learning goals that students need in order to be successful. Students need to be critical thinkers, life long learners, collaborative workers, and effective communicators. These learning goals are the cornerstone of my educational philosophy. The programs I support as a principal will be in line with my philosophy towards education of all students.

### Personal Characteristics, Values and Beliefs

In order to be an effective administrator I think a person needs to have a clear and concise understanding of his/her leadership style. I have always been a people oriented person. I enjoy the day to day challenges of working with people. This was one of the main reasons I chose to become a high school principal. The opportunity to work with teachers and students is something I truly enjoy. My leadership style has centered around the premise of helping others succeed. As a principal at Glidden-Ralston Community School, I was instrumental in implementing student-led conferences. The idea of student-led conferences made many teachers uneasy. I took an approach of listening to their concerns, giving them time to practice student-led conferences, and applauded their efforts when over 90% of our students and parents attended a student-led conference. The research supports this effective leadership style. Teachers who felt the building principal was concerned about them as individuals were more apt to support new programs initiated by the district (Marshall, 1995).

Besides the importance of understanding one's leadership style, I also believe effective principals must possess an attitude that they can make a difference in lives of teachers and students. I think all too often, a principal gets caught up in the quagmire of parents' concerns, state mandates, and his/her own self doubt and loses this attitude. Researchers studying leadership indicate that effective school leaders have an internal locus of control. These successful leaders

tend to view their successes and failures as reflections of their ability, degree of effort put forth, and level of motivation. In other words, effective leaders possessing an internal locus of control saw themselves as controlling the situation, not the situation controlling them (Davis, 1998a).

Besides leadership style and attitude towards leadership, I also believe effective administrators must serve as a source of support for staff members. It has been projected that United States schools will need 2.2 million new teachers during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Payne & Wolfson, 2000). This severe teacher shortage will require school administrators to have the ability to retain and remediate teachers. Effective methods of retaining and remediating teachers will require the school leader to develop an effective teacher mentoring system and to serve as a source of support new or struggling teachers.

As a principal in a small, rural school district, we often hire teachers who have just earned their teaching license. Many of these young teachers have a tremendous amount of potential, but lack the classroom experiences that make them good teachers. In fact, it has been estimated that 5 to 15 percent of the 2.7 million teachers in public schools perform at incompetent levels (Tucker, 2001). I believe an effective administrator must know what good teaching is, and be able to communicate and model that to struggling teachers. During the 2000-2001 school year we had a young teacher who was having difficulty maintaining discipline in his classroom. I took a caring approach in an attempt to get to the

source of the problem. I allowed him to discuss his observations and frustrations that he was having in the classroom. He said a lot of his discipline problems occurred at the beginning of class. I suggested he try using some beginning activities the students should do as soon as the students entered the room. This advice proved to be very effective and there have been fewer and fewer reports of discipline problems in the classroom. I believe the ability to assist and mentor struggling teachers will take on added importance as the pool of quality teachers continues to lessen. Principals in one study reported that approximately half of teachers identified as incompetent improved after participating in a remediation process (Tucker, 2001).

I believe the ability to think “outside the box” is another component of effective school leadership. At Glidden-Ralston we are facing the fact that we are going to lose our upper level science teacher. We also realize that it is going to be difficult to hire a teacher who is certified to teach chemistry, biology, and physics. We have begun to lay the foundation for a cooperative sharing agreement among seven area schools. Our goal of this “league of schools” is to take advantage of the resources of other member schools. The basic premise is busing students to a neighboring school with an upper level science teacher to pick up their science credits. In essence, we are creating an academy concept where schools take advantage of each others’ resources. I believe innovations like this are going to be key components to the survival of rural schools.

## Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes

As I began my research on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that I have gained from my administrative course work and administrative experiences there are three components that seem to reflect the trends in education today: collaboration, developing leaders within public schools, and traits that make for an effective principal. These three areas all work together to create a school in which high achievement is not an aberration, but an expectation.

According to Richard L. Daft(2001), there are two types of leadership styles-transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Transactional leaders operate using a reward-punishment system. Followers receive rewards for job performance, while leaders benefit from having the task completed in an efficient and competent manner. The transactional leaders are often good managers. They excel in completing managerial duties such as budgeting, scheduling, and planning. However, because transactional leaders operate from a managerial position they maintain stability within the organization rather than creating change within the organization.

In contrast to transactional leadership, transformational leadership inspires members of the organization towards collaboration and interdependence as they work towards a commonly held goal. A goal in which all members have a stake in its final conclusion. The teacher is not merely a laborer, but an artisan whose abilities and opinions are valued within the organization (Hughes, Norris, &

Ubben, 1983). I have tried to blend the two leadership styles into one. There are situations in school that require a transactional leadership approach. For example, I require all teachers to place comments on report cards. If they complete this task they can turn in their grades and move on to other things. If the teacher fails to write comments on the report card they get back their grades and must complete the comments before they go home that night. There are also circumstances that require the transformational leader. Creating a committee of teachers to discuss and revise the student handbook would be a good example that I have used as a principal. I have found that the teachers complete the task in a very competent manner.

Collaboration has become the buzz word for effective schools. I have found that collaborating with teachers, students, and parents gives everyone a stake in the final product. Preliminary research seems to indicate that schools which allow collaboration between administration, teachers, parents, and students may have higher student achievement (Bulach & Lunenberg, 1995). I can see the importance of collaboration in public schools, but I have a concern about the level of collaboration and frequency of collaboration. I have found there are times when a principal needs to make a quick decision and collaboration is impractical. According to Stanley Williams (1983), there are three states of decisional participation among teachers: (a) decisional deprivation (participation in fewer decisions than preferred), (b) decisional equilibrium (participation in as many

decisions as desired), and (c) decisional saturation (participation in more decisions than desired).

As a high school principal, I have dealt first hand with collaboration. When I was hired at Glidden-Ralston, the students had the privilege of an open noon hour. This policy had been in effect for over 20 years. I felt it was dangerous, unhealthy, and expensive to allow students to go to the local convenience store to buy their lunch instead of taking advantage of the hot lunch program. I conveyed my concerns to the Superintendent and the Board of Education. They also agreed that it was time for a change and asked me to lead the school towards changing the open noon hour policy. I assembled representatives of the stakeholders and conducted a meeting. I discussed the issue with the teachers, students, cooks, and parents and conveyed my concerns to them. I then asked them to help develop a new policy that would remedy the situation and satisfy most of the stakeholders. During this collaboration time, students (the primary stakeholders) were given the opportunity to express their viewpoints and help develop a plan. In the end, the collaboration team developed a policy in which all students would eat hot lunch. In return we installed healthy snack machines for those students who did not want to eat lunch. We also expanded our salad bar to include sandwiches, pudding, and cheese and crackers. Overall this collaborating session took about 3 weeks but resulted in a majority of the student body, staff, and community approving of the policy.

I think it is important to allow collaboration. I also believe collaboration can only be truly beneficial if teachers are allowed to take leadership roles.

So how do schools develop leaders? First of all, the principal must reflect on his/her own style of leadership. Is the principal comfortable in shared leadership, open and honest communication, trust building, and the use of personal power to influence others in achieving the vision of their school? According to the Childs, Moller, and Scrivner(2000) for those principals who truly desire a collaborative setting, four strategies have proven successful in the transition:

1. Create opportunities for teachers to lead.
2. Build professional learning communities.
3. Provide quality, results-driven professional development.
4. Celebrate innovation and teacher expertise.(p. 30)

At Glidden-Ralston we have provided opportunities for our teachers to lead. Recently, we empowered our social studies teachers to change the curriculum to fit the ever increasing needs of students. We challenged them to review what was being taught, how it was being taught, and when it was being taught. We then challenged them to find overlap and weaknesses in the social studies curriculum. The final result was a reorganization of the curriculum. Two new classes were added to meet student needs and project based assessment

was emphasized and implemented. The results of this change has been apparent. Teachers are excited about the opportunity to lead the change. The change was teacher driven and thus they owned the final product.

One of the first things I noticed when I arrived at Glidden-Ralston was the total commitment to education. I would like to say I developed a learning community at Glidden-Ralston, but that was in place before I arrived. Glidden-Ralston developed a mentoring system before the Iowa State Legislature advocated such a policy. This mentoring system allowed teachers to develop peer coaches who would help them develop lesson plans, evaluate student performance, and serve as a support group for teachers. This learning community created an educational dialogue that allows teachers to share successes, failures, and frustrations.

If we are truly going to create leaders in our teachers we must give them the opportunity to develop the framework for their professional development. As a principal, I have allowed staff members to discuss what they need for professional development, encouraged teachers to use their professional leave and attend a conference, and encouraged teachers to take the opportunity to observe another teacher in his/her classroom.

The power of praise is one of the most important attributes to developing teachers as leaders. According to teachers, praise from the building principal helped boost confidence and pride. The use of praise increased the teachers sense

of belonging. Because principals took the time to recognize their contributions, teachers felt that they were “important members of the team” (Blase & Kirby, 1992, p. 12). I believe if schools are going to transform teachers into educational leaders, building principals will need to recognize good teaching practices.

This recognition creates a “safety net” that allows a teacher to be a risk taker and try something new. During our administrative classes, I recall Dr. Decker (personal communication, 2000) emphasizing to the group of future administrators to praise in public, and criticize in private. I have practiced this philosophy and found it to be very effective. When I evaluate a teacher, I tell them I am there to catch them doing something right. This philosophy relaxes the teacher and allows them to try something new, with no guarantee of success.

At Glidden-Ralston I have attempted to incorporate a) opportunities for teachers to lead, b) professional learning communities, c) quality, results-driven professional development, and d) innovation and teacher expertise into the daily school routine. The results have been an upbeat culture and a collaborative working relationship. This collaborative relationship, coupled with allowing teachers to be leaders, has created a school that is willing to try new things, and a commitment to its student body.

Many studies of effective leadership indicate that without commitment from the front-line leader (the principal, in the case of a school) it is impossible to achieve lasting change. It is the principal’s passionate commitment to the students’ academic achievement that will make the difference between

a highly successful school and one that is content with status quo. (Cross & Rice, 2000)

What makes for an effective school leader? The characteristics of effective school leaders are varied and difficult to assess. In a study of high achieving schools it was discovered that 86% of the principals of these schools had been in their current principal position for five or more years. Many of these principals commented how comparatively unproductive their first year or two on the job was in producing noticeable change in the school's instructional program (Petersen, 2001). In large part during their first years the new principals were acquainting themselves with the district and were hesitant to make major instructional changes.

As a second year principal I agree with this conclusion. Since I have been at Glidden-Ralston, most of my time is consumed with managerial tasks such as supervision of activities and scheduling. These are tasks that a principal must deal with immediately when entering into the principalship.

As a beginning high school principal, I think your first two years are spent learning about the school district, and the day-to-day routine of a high school principal. Once you understand your district you can begin to broaden your horizons and take on more leadership roles.

Besides longevity in a particular district, successful school leaders also possess people skills. In a recent study, 200 California superintendents were

asked to rank the reasons why principals fail. The overriding reason given by the superintendents was lack of people skills (Davis, 1998a). No other factor, including low achievement scores, lack of discipline, or poor management skills came close to the importance of relating well to people.

I have discovered through my experiences that ability to relate to teachers, students, and community is one of the most critical aspects of educational leadership. According to my colleagues, my predecessor at Glidden-Ralston had many skills. She was very organized, had a sound educational vision, and worked hard at her profession. Her downfall was lack of people skills. She had a difficult time conveying her message to students and staff and often created conflict situations when she attempted to change a policy or institute a new idea.

I feel people skills are one of my strongest attributes. I enjoy talking with people and leading teachers and students through meetings and assemblies. I have also learned that communication skills are only half of the equation for possessing people skills. The ability to be an active listener is another facet of sound people skills. In my tenure as principal, I have had parents screaming at me for something that happened in school. I listen sympathetically and allow them to communicate their frustration. After they have calmed down, I create positive dialogue and usually the parents leave my office satisfied. They may not always get their way, but at least they feel like I share their concern.

A final attribute that researchers have indicated is essential to effective leadership is the role he/she plays in guiding instruction. The role of instructional leader must first start with the creation of a shared vision for the future of students and the school. As an instructional leader, it is vitally important the principal and his/her staff develop a vision of academic success for the school in terms all stakeholders can understand. Secondly, the principal must create an environment in which teachers can carry out the shared vision. They must be given the opportunities, the tools, and the time to provide the learning activities that enable all students to achieve at higher academic levels (Cross & Rice, 2000).

As a principal, my weakest area and biggest frustration is setting aside managerial duties in order to accomplish my duties as instructional leader. Due to lack of time, I find I am not the instructional leader I would like to be at this point. I located a piece of research that helped beginning principals find the time for instructional leadership (Chavez, Hall, Long, Pritchard, Randolph, Shahid, Sullivan, & Wildman, 2001). Among their suggestions was to track where you spend your time as a principal. I found that I spend over 50% of my time in managerial circumstances. Another suggestion was to limit the number of meetings you attend. I am constantly going to meetings, staffings, or school activities. I have learned that there are some meetings I can skip, and others that require my attendance. A third suggestion was to set aside specific time for instructional leadership.

The authors suggested a principal select a certain amount of time each day that you will work on instructional leadership. Make this time a priority and stick to it. .

### Vision

Since I began the administrator preparation program at the University of Northern Iowa the question everyone asks is, "What is your vision"? According to Richard Daft (2001), a vision is "an attractive, ideal future that is credible yet not readily attainable" (p. 473). When I became a principal, I struggled with the idea of establishing a vision. I sometimes felt I was not going to be an effective school leader if I did not create a vision for myself and Glidden-Ralston. After eighteen months as a principal, I have come to the following conclusions about establishing a vision. Vision requires time, care, and collaboration. I may have a vision for Glidden-Ralston Community School, but if I do not allow others to share in the creation of that vision, then results will be few, and change nonexistent. Secondly, developing a vision is an evolutionary process. I remember Dr. Decker (personal communication, 2000) asking the students in the Orientation to Educational Leadership class what our vision was for the school we would eventually lead. I remember the answers were very general. Most of us had not thought about the importance of vision and what a critical role it plays in educational leadership. Now that I have experienced first hand the roles a principal must play my vision has become more clear. I also have realized that the

development of a sound educational vision helps to establish a path for the entire school to attain.

When I entered my first job as principal I had a general sense of what I expected to accomplish at Glidden-Ralston Community School. I knew I wanted to create a collaborative setting. I also knew I wanted to create an educational atmosphere that encouraged teachers to maintain high expectations for themselves and their students. I also wanted to create a school setting that was centered on the student's ability to be successful. Keeping those major points in mind the Glidden-Ralston team developed the following vision:

The Glidden-Ralston Community School will be a collaborative setting in which administrators, teachers, and students work together to insure the success of all students in a constantly changing world.

Keeping this vision in mind has helped me make decisions that concern the Glidden-Ralston Community School District. When administration, staff or community members desire to change something within the school district, I reflect on this vision. If the change coincides with the vision then most of the time I support the change. If the change seems to contradict the vision, I may ask more questions, ask them to modify their proposal to fit the vision, or refuse to support such a change.

An article by Stephen H. Davis (1998b) entitled "The Truth About Visionary Leadership" sums up the principals role in creating vision:

The mark of a visionary principal is not the capacity to lead mesmerized followers like a modern day Pied Piper in search of fanciful or obscure organizational schemes. Rather, the visionary principal is one who can filter out the extraneous “noise” of the organization and its attendant environments; who can set clear cut decision-making priorities strategically constructed around the goal of improving student learning; who can seek out the counsel and wisdom of those with the capacity to think and perform creatively and collaboratively; who can convert self-reflections of past successes and failures into creative images for personal and organizational growth.

The visionary principal is one who knows what needs to be done, how to go about doing it, and how the finished product ought to look. The visionary principal understands that the process of getting things done is ongoing, and that the school is part of an organizational landscape that is forever changing and evolving.

(p. 2)

### Summary

I have experienced many things in two years as a high school principal. I have been yelled at by parents and praised by others. I have mourned the death of a board president, a teacher, and a little girl in the seventh grade. I have hired teachers who are making a difference in the lives of children every time they walk into the classroom, and I have dealt with the stress that comes with terminating a teacher. I have had the opportunity to address the community in an effort to persuade them to vote “yes” on a bond issue and I have experienced the thrill of seeing that bond issue pass with 75% approval. I have seen the excitement of graduating seniors when they open up their diploma for the first time and see it is

signed and realize a long journey has come to an end and I have felt the disappointment when “one” did not make it.

I have learned a lot about myself. I have learned that I cannot do it all. At times I need help from our staff and students. I have learned the importance of balance in one’s life. To maintain balance time for family and friends must be found, leaving the office behind. I have also learned to reflect. Reflection gives me the opportunity to learn from a mistake, or justify my position on a controversial issue. I have also learned that principals can make mistakes. We are not superhuman creatures who have a cerebral advantage over the people we lead. We make mistakes, and are forced to admit our shortcomings. I have learned a principal is an instructional leader but his/her roles go far beyond that single role. Besides instructional leader, we serve as counselors and parents, engineers and supervisors, players and referees, and talkers as well as listeners. The roles I have learned, and will continue to learn, are challenging and the reason I choose to become an educational leader.

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