A vision for leading schools: a reflective essay

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A vision for leading schools: a reflective essay

Abstract
The role of a leader is comparable to a circle. There are so many sides, they seem to run together with no definition of where one ends and another begins. What I believe about leadership and the roles of being a reflective practitioner, a leader in educational change, a leader in improvement of learning for students and adults, and a leader of service all share importance in a well-rounded, successful, educational leader.

In order to lead a school with success the leader must be able to play many roles at the same time. Not only do leaders need to be managers of the building, they must also, more importantly, be educational leaders. Educational leaders must be reflective practitioners, leaders in educational change, leaders in improvement of learning for students and adults, and leaders of service.
A VISION FOR LEADING SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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I have learned about the many factors that contribute to successful school leadership. The role of a leader is comparable to a circle. There are so many sides, they seem to run together with no definition of where one ends and another begins. What I believe about leadership and the roles of being a reflective practitioner, a leader in educational change, a leader in improvement of learning for students and adults, and a leader of service all share importance in a well-rounded, successful, educational leader.

What I Believe about Leadership and Education

There are many reasons why I became an educator. First, I grew up with education in my family. Both of my parents and a couple of grandparents were teachers, so this has influenced me a great deal. I have heard all sorts of stories about education: some great success, and others horror about something gone wrong. I had to think a lot about whether or not education was something I wanted to do. It was not pushed on me by any means, but I have been known to say that teaching is in my blood.

After I decided to go into education, it was not until I was in the classroom student teaching that I knew education was the right place for me. As I was sitting by myself correcting quizzes, I was talking aloud to each student, asking why they made a particular mistake or telling them they did a great job remembering something specific. I felt I had the ability to help make them successful and was bound and determined to do so.
I did not choose education just because I like kids. I want students to learn. There is nothing more satisfying than the look on a student's face when something makes sense to them. When a student has learned something new, and can apply it, we both have overwhelming joy. These reasons coincide with Standard Two of the Educational Leadership Constituent Council Standards (success of all students) and are the reasons I am in education (Wilmore, 2002).

I believe education is the most important asset in a person's life and is responsible for all aspects of it. If a quality education is present, it will improve one's life. And if education is not present, or is not of good quality, it will have a negative impact on one's life. Education is partially what is learned in school, but it is also what is learned at home. Events that go on at home are of great importance and have a strong impact on a child.

The book entitled, *Top 10 Myths in Education* shares ten somewhat controversial issues, or myths in education, and presents the reader with both sides of the issue. The authors share their beliefs and give a solution they believe will solve the issue. Myth Seven explains the concerns with morals in schools and the reality is, "71 percent of Americans today say it is more important to teach their kids values than academics" (Frase & Streshly, 2000, p. 84). I agree that schools should encourage positive moral behaviors, and I also agree that values are extremely important. However, the focus of education at school should be academics. The majority of moral education should take place at home, yet
parents are not willing to take this responsibility, which is now placed on schools. Therefore, schools are being held accountable for both academic and moral education.

Morals, along with self-esteem, have become such a part of education at school, there are now issues concerning self-esteem and its relationship to success in school. Myth five tries to decide which of these has a greater influence on the other (Frase & Streshly, 2000). Personally, I have mixed emotions on this topic.

I decided to enter the educational leadership program because I have a positive impact on other people. In the past I have been a leader in various ways and would like to improve my leadership skills. I have the ability to encourage others to challenge themselves and become more successful. I want to use these qualities, along with those I will learn, to improve a school and create a better learning environment. A school needs to have a positive atmosphere that students enjoy and succeed in learning academics and life long skills. A school also needs to be a place where all staff members are excited. Enthusiasm and motivation are contagious and if the leader of the building has these qualities, everyone else will gain them. I want to help make that happen. These are the ways I view school culture as discussed in Standard Two of Wilmore’s book (Wilmore, 2002).

Leadership can be defined many ways and I believe it is very complicated. As Patti and Tobin discuss leadership, the importance they stress on self-assessment and awareness of one’s own personal values and beliefs is clear.
This combination is directly related to one’s leadership style. This is why the styles of leadership differ so greatly among various leaders. Some examples of leadership styles Patti and Tobin give are: collaborative and participatory, facilitative, organizational manager, and visionary. I believe my leadership style is a mixture of organizational manager and visionary because I prefer to get input from others before making a decision. I also hold some qualities of collaborative and facilitative leadership, as I can be direct or defer to others and their strengths.

Another part of leadership that I believe is very important is the knowledge and awareness of one’s conflict style. Leaders can be competitive, accommodative, avoiding, compromising, or collaborative. Again, I believe I am a mixture of these, however, my style is more of compromising and collaborative. I do not like to avoid situations, nor rush into a decision. I would rather do my best to discuss issues with others and come to a conclusion that best fits everyone involved (Patti & Tobin, 2003).

Leaders also have common values and beliefs. I agree with many ideas that are presented in Wilmore’s book, the most significant being Standards One, Four, and Five (2002). The components of a vision, development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship, all have equal importance. I have the ability and drive needed in reference to all of these aspects. The morals of the leader and the collaborative partnerships are also of great importance. Leaders are also seen by many more people than one would realize. This is why leaders must possess
quality morals and maintain positive relationships with those around them (Wilmore 2002). I believe I possess these characteristics.

Reflective Practitioner as a Leader of Learning

Leaders must be reflective practitioners in every aspect of their job. Research supports the practice of reflection and many leaders that I know reflect daily. Decisions that need to be made to ensure the success of all learners are based on data. That data must be researched and reflected upon by school leaders.

According to Todd Whitaker in his book, *What Great Principals Do Differently*, "... effective principals know that positive change in their schools is up to them," and "The difference between average and great principals lies in what they expect of themselves" (Whitaker, 2003, p. 16,17). In order to be an effective, great principal, one must reflect. Every aspect of a principal, or any great leader’s job requires a good deal of reflecting. This reflection is then be used to create positive change.

In, *Smart School Leaders*, Patti and Tobin donate an entire chapter of their book to *The Art of Reflection*. In this chapter the authors explain that effective leaders are determined by how well they are aware of what lies within them, including their own values. Knowing their values will assist in self-awareness, and self-control, in turn, easily adapting to changes and trusting and leading others (Patti & Tobin, 2003).
Although I believe reflection must address every aspect of a leader’s job, there are a few specifics that I believe are a little more relevant than others. These include the vision, culture, and ethics.

**Vision**

When leaders develop, articulate, implement, and steward their vision, reflection is a crucial part of this process. Without reflection, leaders are unaware of the progress of the vision. Reflection must occur after discussions and collaboration with faculty to make an informed decision about the vision. To articulate the vision, leaders must communicate with faculty and all involved. In order to do this, leaders must reflect on the processes and means of their communication. Implementation and stewardship of the vision also requires much reflection. If the communication breaks down at any point, or the momentum of the vision starts to weaken, leaders will be aware through reflection. This makes reflection crucial (Wilmore, 2002). The vision is a part of Standard 1 of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL).

Wilmore discusses these ideas in Chapter 3, and goes on to say, “The real solutions for moving our schools forward only come with deep reflections, insight, study and analysis of multiple sources of data .... Only this deep reflective analysis will help the leader become a true steward of the campus vision” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 23).
Culture

The culture of the school is very important, as stated in Standard 2 of the ISSL Standards. Creating a strong, positive culture is a challenge, but projects the image of what the school’s values and expectations are. Wilmore again states, “It is up to everyone to nurture and support each other, sustain, the vision, enrich the culture, and see to it that all students have every opportunity to grow, learn, and succeed” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 34). However, it is the principal that sets the level of expectations and encourages others to continue growing and succeeding. The need for the principal to look at improvement plans and action research projects are important, and needs to be done with reflection so appropriate expectations for a school can be set.

Schools need reflection to set and meet their own goals through curriculum instruction, programs, products, and personnel. Again, reflection is a critical part of this process, not only for the faculty, but also for the principal as the leader of the faculty. The various resources used to create these goals need to be analyzed in order to be used in an effective way (Wilmore, 2002, p. 35).

“Effective principals know that sometimes what really matters is not beliefs, but behavior. A change in behavior naturally leads to a change in beliefs. Therefore, effective principals focus on behaviors, then on beliefs” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 57). Clearly, leaders need time for reflection in order to know and stay aware of the behaviors of others and of themselves. When comfortable with the
behaviors, the beliefs, if needed, can be changed. Again, the ability to change the beliefs will need reflection to stay aware that the correct changes are being made. Constant reflection will assist in making the progress one wishes to make.

Ethics

The changing of behaviors and beliefs lends itself into the morals of integrity, fairness, and ethics in Standard 5. Leaders are unaware if they are being fair or ethical unless they are doing some reflection on their own behaviors. School leaders must act with integrity, as that relates to the trust and effectiveness they have with others. Reflection of consistency with equality and fairness in mind also aids in decision-making. These decisions must also be made with good judgment based on moral and ethical standards. Constant reflection to be sure these types of decisions are implemented is one of the more important qualities leaders possess.

I believe all of these ideas involving reflection will affect me as a leader. The ability to know myself and to be sure I am making the right decisions will take constant reflection.

School leaders must make the best decisions for the school and ensure the quality of education for all students. Reflection will help keep track of progress and needs for changes and improvements, which will allow leaders to make good decisions.
Leaders' Role in Educational Change

Leaders of schools are often expected to initiate and follow though with change. However, change can only occur when everyone involved is in agreement of the change and is willing to support the change. As the saying goes, one bad apple spoils the bunch. It is the role of school leaders to facilitate, not demand, the change. I believe a process must be followed in order for change to take place. If anything is missing in this process, the likely outcome of the change will not be successful.

In *Implementing Change* (2001), Hall and Hord share twelve principles of change. Though all of these principles are important in effective change, I believe five of the principles are more important in the initial process of change; I will focus on these principles as a school leader.

The first change principle states “Change is a process, not an event” (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 4). I understand this to mean change is not a one-time event; however it is an ongoing progress that requires everyone involved to continue working with the change over a period of time. This process includes planning, communication, and review. Without one of these aspects, the intended change may not occur, or may be more difficult than anticipated. The process of change will also be beneficial in getting everyone involved with the change, particularly in agreement and support of the change. Leaders’ influences in this process are
critical. Leaders alone are unable to create change; however, the role of leaders is to facilitate this process (Hall & Hord, 2001).

Change principle three, according to *Implementing Change*, is “An organization does not change until the individuals within it change” (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 7). One of the hardest aspects in change may be getting everyone in agreement of the change. As stated in this principle, the individuals within the organization must change first. The people that are going to be involved with the change need to believe that the change is in their best interest. In the case that the individuals in the organization do not believe in the change, leaders must re-examine the change. Positive changes are usually agreed upon by some, if not most, of the individuals in the organization. If those individuals do not agree with the positive change, they are at least able to see the intent of the change. When the people involved are unwilling to make the change, the initial reason for change may not be in the best interest of the organization (Hall & Hord, 2001).

There are two types of teachers leaders will have to focus on when initiating change: the superstars and the resisters. Whitaker states the following about superstars, “The key for implementing change and growth in a building is to work with the superstar teachers. If the superstar teachers move forward, then the entire building has the opportunity to go with them” (Whitaker, 2002, p. 17). Fullan shares why the leader must also focus on resisters, “They sometimes have ideas that we might have missed...they may see alternatives we never dreamed
of," and "In all organizations, respecting resistance is essential, because if you ignore it, it is only a matter of time before it takes its toll" (Fullan, 2001, p. 42).

Change principle five is "Interventions are the actions and events that are key to the success of the change process" (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 9). Leaders of the organization must use all types of interventions to keep the change process moving in the right direction. Small conversations with teachers about the change, for example, may be more important to the change process than the training workshops. School leaders need to continue with interventions throughout the length of the change, not just in the first phases. Keeping in mind change is a process, will help leaders generate continuous interventions and continue to implement effective change.

"Administrator leadership is essential to long-term change success," is change principle seven (Hall & Hord, 2001, p.13). The role of leaders in change is to facilitate the change. The other individuals involved will implement the change. "... while the ‘bottom’ may be able to launch and sustain and innovative effort for several years, if administrators do not engage in ongoing active support, it is more than likely that the change effort will die" (Hall & Hord, 2001, p.13). Support of administrative leaders includes the interventions mentioned in change principle five. Again, change is a process, and without the continuous support of leaders, the process of change will not be completed and the change will not take effect.
Change principle twelve states, "The context of the school influences the process of change" (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 15). The culture of a school is influenced both by physical features and personal factors. This culture is directly related to the ability for change to take place. In an accepting, positive environment, changes will thrive. The role of leaders is again to create and maintain a positive environment, or culture, for the school. By doing this, leaders encourage and support the change (Hall & Hord, 2001).

Again, all twelve principles Hall and Hord share important aspects of change and it is important for leaders to be aware of them all. However, the principles shared deal with leaders' role in the change process the most. Leaders must remember change is a process and be able to construct a positive environment and maintain that environment for change to be effective (Hall & Hord, 2001).

Before leaders think about initiating change, they must revert back to the Iowa Standards for School Leaders. These standards help guide school administrators in decisions they make, including the change process. Also, reviewing these standards periodically throughout the change process will support leaders and change. The standards that are most influential are explained.

Similarly to the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of the vision in ISSL Standard 1, leaders must follow this pattern in the change process. Before implementing the vision, leaders must carefully
develop and articulate the vision to the organization. These steps are identical to
the change process. The change must be thought through and developed to fit the
school environment. Articulating, or communicating with the staff about the
change is essential. The staff must be in agreement with the change or the change
will not thrive. Stewardship fits into the change process as well. The change
cannot be made and then forgotten. Leaders must make a conscientious effort to
continue working with the change, even after the change has taken place, as stated
in Hall and Hord’s change principle seven.

Standard 2, advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture, is
directly related to the change process. As stated earlier, the culture, or the
environment of the school, including both physical and personnel, must be
conducive to the change process. Leaders must look at the change process the
same way they create the school culture. The change must be advocated,
nurtured, and sustained, by all individuals involved in order for the change to be a
success. Leaders are the ones who facilitate this process.

ISSL Standard 3 is the management of the organization, operations, and
resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. Before leaders
are able to manage change, they must be able to manage the organization itself.
The school must not have any major issues with its operations, or the individuals
involved will not be willing, or able, to create change. Once the management of
the school is established, the change process can begin. Leaders will again need
to manage the change similar to the way they manage the learning environment.

The change and its process will need to be organized, the operations of the change need to run smoothly, and there must be resources available to support the change for the change to be implemented (Wilmore, 2002).

The role of leaders in change is very important, yet needs to be viewed as facilitating rather than demanding. Leaders must keep in mind change is a process, not an event. When thinking about this process, it is easier to remember that the development, implementation, continuous communication, and support are essential for the change to occur.

Using Hall and Hord’s six functions of interventions will assist me in remembering the *process* of change. The six functions are developing, articulating, and communicating a shared vision of change, planning and providing resources, investing in professional learning, checking on progress, providing continuous assistance, and creating a context supportive of change (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 109).

Leader of Learners’ Role For The Improvement Of Learning For Both Students And Adults

The community has a major impact on the ability for both students and adults to learn. Therefore, a duty of school leaders is to maintain positive relationships with the community. I believe this starts with the relationships
between the school and the parents. The culture within the school must also be nurturing to students to allow for maximized learning.

The editors of *Rethinking Schools* argue that “parents should be encouraged to help govern schools and act as advocates for all the children in the school,” and “challenge schools to see parents as valued resources who can help strengthen teaching and learning” (Levine, Lowe, Peterson, & Tenorio, 1995, p. 233). School leaders must allow parents to become involved. Many parents seem to be unsure of what they are able to do. When leaders encourage parents, and show them how they can be helpful, the community becomes stronger and creates an environment conducive to student learning. In turn, adults in the community will have the opportunity to become more involved and take part in their own learning experiences.

The Comer Process for Reforming Education has completed research and collaborated with parents, school staff, and community members to create the School Development Program (SDP). “The SDP’s approach, with parents and families at the center of change, is a critical missing link in education reform. It permits schools to transform and improve their programs to achieve high levels of student performance” (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996, p. 9). This approach has been used to “sustain a learning and caring community in which all adults feel respected and all children feel valued and motivated to learn and achieve” (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996, p. 9).
The School Development Program created by the Comer Process, may not work in every situation. Many other factors, including staffing and curriculum, will have an impact on a school. However, this program shows that community involvement can have many positive impacts on the school and student learning. Programs, like this one mentioned, all begin with school leaders. Leaders must do research on types of programs will work with their particular school and community and add these plans to their vision.

Les Omotani shares in “As the Community goes, so goes the school,” a portion of *Schools that Learn*, a couple of examples of why community support is important to school leaders. When you understand the role of families in early child development, the importance of schools providing early childhood parent education becomes evident. When you understand shared vision, and the idea of commitment versus compliance, and you want community people to support the schools, it makes sense to have them participate in learning about schools (Omotani, 2000, p. 478).

Standard 4 of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders encourages collaborative partnerships with families and community members. According to Wilmore in *Principal Leadership*, in discussion of schools as the integral part of
the community, "It is up to us to be leaders in reaching out to other entities to develop collaborative partnerships for the benefit of students and families" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 66).

School leaders need to take the first step in community relationships. Schools thrive on the support of the community. When the community is aware of the vision of the school, or has even been involved with the development of the vision, the community takes more ownership in the school. With this ownership, the values and unity of the community will be stronger. Each group involved with the school needs to feel its perspective has been understood. Again, the role of school leaders is to facilitate open discussions and verify that each perspective has been acknowledged.

Families, as part of the community, must also be recognized. Wilmore again states,

We must solicit and welcome [families], encourage them to become and integral part of our school community; use their talents and skills, particularly in the areas of appreciating and responding to diversity; and recognize that they usually have the best interests of their children in their hearts, just was we [schools] do (Wilmore, 2002, p. 67).

Just as the relationships with families and the community need to be built, so do relationships within the school. ISSL Standard 2 indicates the leaders of
learning must promote the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

The climate of a school can have a major impact on its students and their learning. When students have a sense of belonging and importance, they will naturally perform better. The culture of a school also includes the instructional programs and professional growth. School leaders are responsible for appropriate curriculum, instruction, programs, products and personnel. Professional growth starts with school leaders and must be modeled to show its importance (Wilmore, 2002).

I believe it is very important to be seen in the community and show my support. The community must know and feel comfortable with the leaders of the school. The ability for the community to trust the school leaders has an impact on their future relationships with the school. Once a relationship is built, leaders are then responsible for initiating a partnership and encouraging the community to be involved with improving the school and student learning.

The culture of a school is also very important to me, and I will show that by including it in my vision. I will also model the behaviors I feel will most benefit the school and student and staff learning. By learning who the other leaders in the school are, I will be able to encourage them to also model appropriate behaviors and influence others.
School leaders must initiate community relationships and allow families to feel they are an important and valuable part of the school. The culture of the school will also have an impact on these relationships. Both of these will in turn encourage both student and adult learning.

**Learners' Role Of Service**

Educational leaders must provide many services to their organization. I believe the most important service leaders can provide is being instructional leaders. Many times leaders get caught up in the management of the organization, which is important for success and is largely considered service. However, instructional leadership deals with leaders' ability to provide support and resources to their teachers, students, and school as a whole.

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty discuss instructional leadership in stating four dimensions of instructional leaders: resource provider, instructional resource, communicator, and visible leader. "As a communicator the principal has clear goals for the school and articulates those goals to faculty and staff" (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 18). I agree that leaders should communicate effectively, though not only with the vision and goals. All communication should be clear among all members of an organization. The principal should be able to model effective communication techniques. "As a visible presence the principal engages in frequent classroom observations and is highly accessible to faculty and staff" (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 18). Leaders need to have a visible
presence to show staff members they are accessible and willing to provide services to their staff members.

The principal is a resource provider by ensuring that teachers have the materials, equipment, budget, and time necessary to perform their duties. As an instructional resource, the principal is also providing teachers service by modeling desired behaviors, giving priority to instructional concerns, and ensuring the staff is given ample professional development opportunities (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

In addition to providing staff with professional development opportunities to directly enhance their teaching, educational leaders, such as principals, also need to encourage teacher leadership. The principal is providing teachers a service by allowing and encouraging them to become leaders. Zepeda states “Schools need teacher leaders to provide leadership and to sustain a strong instructional program for students... teacher leaders promote learning when they lead, and this is why principals must find opportunities for teachers to be involved in leadership” (Zepeda, 2004, p. 50).

John Gabriel (2005) agrees with Zepeda, “[Leadership] roles offer teachers a greater voice in shaping programs, supporting the mission, and guiding a team towards its goal, which will ultimately help the students and the school achieve” (Gabriel, 2005, p. 3).
Leaders must also realize success is brought by people rather than programs. Todd Whitaker (2003) and Perry Smith (1998) agree that it is the responsibility of leaders to hire the best. In order for an organization to be successful, the members of the organization need to be competent, talented, and enthusiastic. By hiring only the best, leaders are providing a vital service to the organization (Whitaker, 2003) (Smith, 1998).

Educational leaders need to keep in mind that “New teachers do not have the background when it comes to handling students, parents, classroom management, or conflicts with other teachers” (Gabriel, 2005, p. 41). The role of the principal is to provide the new teacher with resources to deal with these issues and provide a solid foundation to ensure success. Mentors are a good resource and can be beneficial for both the new and experienced teachers.

Whitaker goes on to say, “The quality of the teachers determines our perceptions of the quality of the school. There are really two ways to improve a school significantly: get better teachers and improve the teachers you have” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 7-8). In order to improve teachers, educational leaders must observe, evaluate, and provide feedback. The principal should not be the only one to observe, evaluate and provide feedback, but he should also allow observations and evaluations to be done by teachers themselves. Given these opportunities, teachers will collaborate and interact with each other in ways that will enhance their abilities and improve student learning. The principal then enables the
teachers to become more effective, which provides a service to teachers, students, the school, and the community.

In the role of educational leaders providing service, there are two Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) that stand out. ISSL Standard 2 deals with school culture and instructional programs being conducive to student learning and staff professional growth (Wilmore, 2002). Educational leaders provide services to the school by being instructional leaders. Instructional leaders allow for staff professional growth by ensuring teachers the opportunities for professional development and improving teaching thought observations, evaluations, and feedback.

ISSL Standard 3 is the management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment (Wilmore, 2002). Educational leaders need to provide resources for their teachers to allow the teachers to create and sustain an effective learning environment.

As an educational leader, I will strive to be an instructional leader. I believe the best service leaders can provide to their organization is the opportunity to grow professionally and take on leadership roles. By encouraging teacher leaders and facilitating rather than ruling, I believe the school will benefit beyond belief. In allowing for professional development and leadership opportunities, I believe I will be supporting and providing resources for my teachers.
My vision for leading schools includes thoughts I had before any formal education about leadership and administration, as well as, what I have learned in the past two years. In order to lead a school with success the leader must be able to play many roles at the same time. Not only do leaders need to be managers of the building, they must also, more importantly, be educational leaders. Educational leaders must be reflective practitioners, leaders in educational change, leaders in improvement of learning for students and adults, and leaders of service.
References


