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What I believe about leadership and education: a reflective essay

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Abstract
As a leader of change, an administrator looks to the future, plans appropriately, sustains flexibility and continues the cycle of consistent reflection and evaluation of the change process and actual change. A successful administrator understands that change is not easy for everyone and assists stakeholders throughout the process. Administrators are responsible for a supportive learning environment. The most critical element for the principal in setting the tone is to be a positive role model. The school, faculty and staff often take on the qualities of the administrator. When taking action of large proportions, a successful administrator communicates clearly and involves stakeholders along the way. A successful administrator makes decisions that will positively impact children.
WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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I became a teacher for the same reason I am still in the education field today. I like to see the smiles on faces of children when they understand something for the first time. Young children are eager to learn. Some want to learn how to conquer the bad guy in a video game, while others want to figure out how many miles it is to the moon. *They all want to learn.* As an educator, my job is to figure out how they each learn best and teach them the curriculum using their strengths.

Teaching children sounds simple and direct. It may have been simple and direct, 100 years ago. Today educators are faced with so much more than teaching reading, writing and arithmetic. Children arrive at the doors of the school 45 minutes early because parents need to get to work and cannot afford before school childcare, so counselors help parents locate programs that help pay for childcare. Parents send their children to school without breakfast, so the schools serve breakfast. High school girls get pregnant and drop out of school, so schools intensify the sex education curriculum and provide day care at the schools. School nurses calculate body mass index and work diligently to inform students and parents on the risks of obesity. All children come to school with different experiences. Teachers use those experiences and build on the foundation. I believe education must continue to change with the changes in society. We must acknowledge the advances and challenges before us.
Currently the accountability falls on the educators. There are few, if any, accountability measures for parents or society when it comes to education of our youth.

I am pursuing my degree in educational administration for three main reasons. The first reason I'm in this program reflects my desire to make a difference in the lives of children and their families. I love collaboration and the results that come from a few groups or organizations that want to help others. I want to be part of a group that commits support to the education of children. With the changes in our economy and the struggles that families face, there is always a need for communities to work together to help others. The second reason I am pursuing my degree focuses on life-long development of my leadership skills. Some leadership experiences came my way over the last 13 years, and I genuinely enjoyed the opportunities. This degree is the next step to improve myself, personally and professionally. The third reason for continuing my education is to reach my career goals. I love working with children, but I also want to expand my horizons and assist other adults who share my love for teaching.

Leadership has many components. A good leader strives for success in each of the components, yet understands one's strengths and weaknesses. Leadership skills can be learned, but some develop these skills naturally. An educational leader needs to take some risks, knowing that responsibility needs to
be taken if the result is unpleasant. Consistency and clarity are two characteristics of a respected administrator. When presenting information, it is imperative to be prepared and able to answer questions or know who to refer the question to for an answer.

Leadership positions should be held by people who are willing to look outside the box, be innovative and make decisions. Leadership today involves proactive thinking and problem solving. Leadership also involves energy. It takes energy and motivation to maintain a positive working environment for staff and students. State and Federal mandates continue to be placed in front of teachers who are told to “raise those test scores,” and “research those strategies.” No matter how much internal motivation a teacher has, some external motivation should be supplied. Leaders would throw a party for improved spelling test scores. Leaders present successful ideas at workshops and submit recognition articles and pictures to the local newspapers. Teachers appreciate validation that their efforts and dedication to the students and district are noticed and appreciated.

Leaders are visionaries who involve all stakeholders in creating a common goal. Leaders collaborate with other groups. Successful collaboration is when both sides help each other and create winning situations for all involved. An ethical leader applies fairness to all decisions and also models characteristics of a professional. As an instructional leader, one keeps moving toward higher levels
of academics and improvements. Providing meaningful, opportunities for staff to be productive in professional development activities is essential for an instructional leader. An administrator must also engage in professional development and keep current with all education issues. Organizational leaders must focus on the learning environment. Again, proactive planning works toward a safe and efficient school. The political leader needs to be aware of the local, state and national politics that affect the families, students, teachers and communities. The history of education reminds us that the federal government is a national concern, yet a state and local school district responsibility (Kearns and Doyle 1989). A leader must stay current on the legislative issues affecting the families, communities and schools.

I believe educational leadership is only for those who care about children and families. These leaders do everything they can to make schools safe, stimulating, learning environments. Educational administrators empower others to continue learning for themselves and the students they teach. Goals are set, plans are implemented and maintained, and continual evaluations and reflections happen. The underlying goal of administration is to do what is best for children.

As a school leader today, it will be vital to demonstrate teacher learning. Communicating this learning to the Department of Education, school board, parents, community members, teachers and students is an ongoing process. This process again involves those stakeholders for a community of learners.
Professional Development

A high priority for educational leaders is student learning and staff professional development. School mission statements and visions which support increasing student and staff learning funnel all the way through successful schools. Stakeholders and the entire community hold administrators to very high expectations. As an administrator, one is expected to make timely, valid decisions. Community members, staff members and students judge administrators by the decisions they make. One vital factor when making decisions is how the results will affect student and staff learning. Instructional leadership is a key characteristic in a successful administration.

The Iowa Professional Development Model (IPDM) addresses student learning and staff development. Collecting and analyzing student data is the first step. Setting goals and student learning is the second step followed by selecting content and providers. Designing processes for professional development is the fourth step of the process. Training/learning opportunities, collaboration/implementation and ongoing data collection are part of an ongoing cycle followed by program evaluation. While evaluation is usually the last step of a process, in this model it precedes step one and the cycle continues again, (Iowa Department of Education, 2006).
To be a successful administrator, one must see the benefits of the IPDM and support teachers in every step of the process. The recent focus on scientifically research based programs and strategies renew attention to the core curriculum. Community education of IPDM is imperative.

School culture and climate are directly and indirectly set by the principal. Relationships between the principal and all others will be judged by how she speaks, looks, responds, plans, and reflects. Within the culture of the school; respect and high expectations are valued and modeled. Culture and climate encompass many aspects of the day to day functions of the school community. The neatness of the school grounds, the cleanliness of the restrooms, the artwork in the hallways, the friendliness of the employees, the sounds from the classrooms and even the condition of the buses lead to ones' opinion of the school. As an administrator, she will seek internal and external evaluations to improve and change the culture and climate as necessary. (Wilmore, 2002).

Distractions are high for teachers and students. A supportive administrator works to remove the daily barriers for both teachers and students. Some barriers are obvious, such as the custodian mowing lawn next to the building while the windows are open and teachers are teaching. Other barriers are not so obvious, such as the school board that does not understand why teachers need time to learn new strategies to teach math. Jennings and Stahl-Wert (2004) refer to removing obstacles that will then allow others to thrive. Informing the
custodian that there may be a better time to mow the lawn removed that
distraction for both the students and teachers. Teaching the school board about
the need for a new math curriculum supports the teachers in their professional
development.

Relationships are at the core of any goal to increase student achievement. Administrators believe in staff and faculty. Staff and faculty believe in the administration. Everyone supports the students. Teachers demonstrate the willingness to reach beyond their comfort zones and do what is best for the students. The community and stakeholders recognize the need for increasing student scores and providing stimulating, appropriate curriculum. Honesty and respect are demonstrated daily in all buildings and at all school sponsored events.

Instructional leadership is the guidance which drives student success. Producing students who become productive members of society is necessary for our communities and basically for our country to grow and prosper. Principals use available resources to facilitate proven instructional models, while involving teachers in the process. Ownership of the instruction also strengthens the relationship between the principal and staff members. As a school administrator, one evaluates and researches to make schools safe places where learning is valued. Learning is what kids do best, administrators do everything they can to make sure that learning is the number one priority of the school.
Change

There will always be change in education. Throughout the study of education, the element of change is a reoccurring thread. Change occurs in all areas of schools, in everything from personnel changes to curriculum changes to district restructuring.

The leadership behind the change process will determine the outcome. According to Hall and Hord (2006), there are twelve change principals to follow. Four ideas within those principles are highlighted in this paper. A successful leader of change sees the big picture, plans effectively, maintains flexibility, and continues to evaluate and reflect. Including stakeholders in the process is also a key to success.

An effective leader deals with change while continually keeping the big picture in mind. A leader proposing change will need to validate the need for such change with facts, data and proven approaches to remedy the issue at hand. Stakeholders are a key ingredient in the change process. Stakeholders from diverse backgrounds with various experiences will add necessary dimensions to the team that will be required throughout the process. As a visionary, a leader understands the need to stick with proposed changes. Complete and true implementation takes anywhere from three to five years. (M. Hall, personal communication, November 3, 2006). During this time, it is common for leaders
to lose the focal point of the change process. Things are happening, but other issues arrive and may take precedence at the time. It is critical for an educational leader to stay involved and demonstrate support for the change that is taking place.

Planning effectively brings stakeholders together with a purpose. Change is likely to create conflict. Thinking systematically allows one to focus on understanding the whole issue (Gerzon, 2006). Stakeholders take ownership in the plans as involvement demonstrates personal success. Involve the team of stakeholders in the plans and the goals. Team members facilitate initiatives that go hand in hand with change. An educational leader delegates responsibilities to team members and thus exhibits confidence in those team members. Supporting team members in successes and failures is crucial to the success of the plan.

Maintaining flexibility reminds an educational leader that plans may need to be adjusted in the middle of implementation. While implementing something new, ongoing informal evaluation takes place. All team members are responsible for evaluation, and information is gathered from everyone the change is affecting. Team members analyze the data. Discussions are held, with everyone having the opportunity to speak freely. Decisions are made by the group. However, there are aspects that can not be changed. Mandates from the federal and state level do not have much wiggle room, and all members need to be aware of those issues at the beginning of the implementation.
During the long process of change, a leader reflects on the process and evaluates along the way. It is important to look at all aspects of the process, again, keeping the big picture in mind. Also critical is looking behind the scenes at the effort of the team members and all those involved. Are things really as good or bad as it appears? Are the implementations working? Where are the trouble areas? Are there issues with staff that are affecting the implementation? Is time valued? Are stakeholders genuine in their beliefs? Will our goals be reached, if not, do we need to make adjustments? In self reflecting, a leader looks at the growth of oneself in relationship to the school community. Is the goal clear? Are expectations achievable? Does the community support and value the change? Continual questioning will strengthen the process and perhaps avoid possible problems.

A change is a change, no matter how big or small. Many initiatives fail before getting started due to confusion created during the presentation. The presentation of the change is a decisive element to the success of the plan. A systematic approach to the change and presentation is one way to begin the process. All pieces of the puzzle need to be addressed. One usually begins a question such as; why are math scores dropping? What can we do to save money? This question is followed by discussions, and brainstorming sessions. Once generated, ideas are prioritized, pros and cons may be listed, and a focus is chosen. It is necessary for stakeholders to be involved in these orderly steps, to
establish ownership in the idea. Stakeholders should be chosen purposefully. Include the movers and shakers, but also include a skeptic or two. Individuals who are often negative towards change perceive the idea differently once personally involved. When presenting the change; state the vision and goal, have as much information ready as possible, emphasize change as a process and be ready to answer questions.

Information received by someone within your system will be received appreciatively. Change is often feared. A familiar face, someone who is viewed as “knowing what really happens here” will ease tension, understand the dynamics of the audience and prepare accordingly.

Changes that are implemented due to mandates, usually receive more opposition than change ideas generated from within the system. Involving stakeholders from all areas of your population from the very beginning will help sell the idea. With mandated changes, there may be some flexibility with implementation, take advantage of the opportunity to include those who will be participating in the implementation.

Change, growth, or transformation the label does not matter, it happens at every educational institution. An effective leader deals with change by maintaining the vision and using systematic thinking to develop and implement the plan. Evaluation and reflection will then guide the next steps. As the components of change continue through an ongoing cycle, be ready to make
adjustments to the plan. Stakeholders with a purpose and sense of belonging will take ownership in the process and support the initiative. Build from support to infuse the power to all team members involved and remember to smile along the way.

As changes are taking place daily, one is obligated to keep the school environment as a main concern. Proactive leaders keep the long range goal in mind at all times, while reflecting on the issues.

Learning Culture

The school learning environment is equal to the feel of the school. Every decision made by the administration impacts the learning environment. Administrators demonstrate integrity by complying with mandates and board policies. Administrators prioritize high quality instruction and protect instructional/learning time. Addressing current and potential problems in a timely manner is also an encouraging quality of an effective administrator. School leaders manage the budget and physical resources and effectively communicate inside and outside the school building. Mission statements reflect the focus of student achievement, thus the direct and indirect link to the behaviors and actions of the administration.
Mandates to be implemented by the school district present an excellent means for administrators to be role models. Administrators approach mandates with thoughts of improvements and lead by example. Working with staff to comply with mandates confirms a team approach to the learning environment. Reviewing the different careers in our society, teachers top the list for surrounding themselves with knowledge to help do their job better. Teachers have at least four years of college preparation, attend regular professional development sessions and surround themselves with academic support. Add personal life experiences and possible experiences from other jobs, and the presenter, a building teacher now carries a great deal of clout with the audience (Zepeda, 2004, p. 53). An administrator utilizing his resources from within is victorious.

Tying in to the administrator as a role model for working with mandates is the role of supporting quality education. Administrators continually encourage faculty and staff to improve education by learning scientifically research based (SRB) strategies and implementing the strategies. When presenting to staff, an administrator should also use strategies that support multiple modalities to meet the needs of the audience (Tate, pp. xxiv-xxv). Administrators also understand the value of collaboration time and provide opportunities for team collaboration directly related to student achievement. Creativity and flexibility is utilized when setting up collaborations.
As scientifically research based practices are implemented, certain criteria need to be upheld to meet the guidelines of the practices. A time commitment is often one of those criteria. Administrative guidance and support is imperative to protect academic time. Balance is required between the hard hitting push for test results and providing developmentally appropriate social, emotional and physical activities. School leaders can't forget the fun stuff that keeps some kids in school every day. Administrators make decisions that are based on what is good for kids.

Handling problems/challenges with a proactive approach, before issues arise helps focus on student learning. Marzano, Walters, and McNulty (2005) use the term situational awareness to explain how a principal addresses current and potential problems. Thinking ahead to what could go wrong on a day to day basis, and making adjustments demonstrates situational awareness. Maintain awareness of staff relationships and informal groups so that if something comes up, the school administration is ready to act. Know what issues are lurking around the corner and could cause problems at any time. Ask oneself what problems could arise for students and teachers, and how can those problems be avoided or changed for the benefit of all?

A school leader successfully manages the budget and physical resources. Community awareness of financial status is high. A leader who makes fiscally sound decisions demonstrates responsibility and efficiency. Staff and community members will notice the responsibility and extend those positive, supporting
thoughts beyond the budget and into all aspects of the administrator’s duties. Sound financial decisions demonstrate success for the learning community.

An educational leader is responsible for the day to day operations procedures for students, parents, and staff. The principal may not be the one working directly with the operations procedures; however, straightforward, innovative, clear procedures lead to less confusion. Less confusion leads to a feeling of focus, high standards and success. A community that sees operational procedures running smoothly will also see a commitment to success and attention to detail on the part of the administration. The little things all point toward a community that values learning.

“Communication that informs can help to support the overall efforts of the school…” (Zepeda, 2004, p. 87). Communication is a major factor to the success of just about everything. Leaders must use all resources available to get the word out. Internal communication may appear to be the simplest, yet often is the cause of failures. The inefficiency may be due to the informal nature of internal communications. External communication is more formal due to the audience one is trying to reach. Use all resource when communicating and be creative.

The learning environment of a school may be undetected by teachers and staff as they see the day to day happenings as normal and routine. A parent, grandparent, news reporter, delivery man, prospective teacher, superintendent, school board member, Area Education Agency consultant, Department of Human
Services counselor or Department of Education advisor notices the priorities of a school by just walking in the building doors. The smells, the sounds, the visuals all give an impression of the school. The impression of the school is directly and indirectly a product of the administrator's example. An administrator who values learning has a staff that values learning and students that value learning.

Action

While the learning environment may be a subtle element in the school district, anything that involves action taken by the school leaders will become a major issue. Actions are either responsive to events or long term actions of the mission.

Action takes planning, resources and time. It requires follow through, dedication and above all, a vision. Schools strive for improved student learning through school improvement and staff development.

Leaders take action using a variety of methods. Some situations require immediate actions, while other issues require research and months or years of preparation. Actions that require an immediate response are often the result of previous experiences and research relating to such issues. Actions such as these often require the administrator to be proactive and have plans in place. These plans are often practiced and have gone through many revisions becoming final.
Actions that require months and years of research have gone through steps and processes that involve collecting and analyzing information, goal setting, selection and designing of a plan, training and collaboration for implementing the plan, continual gathering of information and data, and evaluation of the plan and entire process. This process follows the Iowa Professional Development Model and can be adapted to meet the needs of any task that requires a movement or shift in educational methods and procedures (Iowa Department of Education).

When action is needed, a successful leader will assemble a team of stakeholders. Involving stakeholders from all groups impacted in the proposed action is a good practice. Those generally supportive and those sometimes oppositional create a balance and alleviate the chances of accusations regarding a one sided group. Having stakeholders participate in the process lends ownership to the end product. Stakeholders will genuinely give time and effort to a project they created and contributed to. This form of shared decision making takes advantage of leaders within the school and community while fostering leadership skills in others. Barth (1990) writes, “School leadership can come from principals who transform adversaries into colleagues; from teachers who individually or collectively take responsibility for the well being of the school; from parents who translate a basic concern for their children into constructive actions; and from the students who guide tours or in other ways offer community service” (p. 144).
Once the team members are identified, members begin working on operating principles. What is the reason for the action group? Do test scores need drastic improvement? Is there an issue with facilities? Is there a high rate of absenteeism? Did the school not receive a favorable report from the latest Department of Education site visit? What is the focus of the group?

As the focus is identified, a leader guides the group toward the factual information relating to the identified focus. Look at figures, statistics, and records. Analyze the information while looking for trends in the data. The information will show what is happening or what is not happening. Graphs, charts, scatter grams and run charts are good tools for tasks such as these. While looking at the data, the group may decide more information needs to be gathered or different reports need to be produced.

After looking at the data, a goal is set. All stakeholders should have a voice in the goal however; the goal must match what the data shows. A system of prioritizing all ideas by each stakeholder can help narrow the goals and ultimately select one. Prioritizing and eliminating ideas will make it a team decision, with everyone participating. Specific goals have clear standards for accomplishment (Alderman, 2004). Now that the goal is set, the group is faced with finding the best way to reach that goal. Select and design how to implement a plan or method to reach the goal. In education today, finding the best way translates to Scientifically Research Based (SRB) programs, strategies and practices. Take
advantage of resources during this stage. If there are other school districts working on the same goal, what are those districts doing, and it is successful? If the goal is not specific to education, successful businesspeople may be helpful in this situation. Stakeholders use their connections to reach out for information, and possible paths to take.

Selecting the plan may be easier than designing the plan. To maintain validity of a SRB program, it must be followed as written and implemented. However, it may not be possible to implement every aspect of a SRB program. The specifics of each program should be matched up as closely as possible, yet remaining flexible enough to meet the need of each program.

The next steps involve training participants and providing time to work together, as the plan is implemented. Involve stakeholders as leaders in training sessions. Taking action means more than just doing something. The action in this step starts with the stakeholders informing participants, presenting the facts and helping the participants see the need for the action. The stakeholders provide direction and support to participants. Collaboration time is scheduled and protected.

While implementing the plan, participants are receiving training, and collaborating about the plan and the implementation. There is also ongoing collection of data happening through the implementation, which is analyzed. The
data collected relates to the goal. Changes to the implementation of the plan will be made when the ongoing data is analyzed.

Wrapping up the end of the cycle is the program evaluation. The evaluation looks at the process of the plan and if the plan worked and the goal was met. While analyzing the final data, and looking at the reports, the group will also start planning what, if any action needs to be taken next. The cycle can be implemented again to continue the goal or with a new goal.

Few schools truly sustain programs over a long enough period of time to know whether the action caused the goal and if the goal will be maintained or improved upon for years to come. Sustained effort involves the administrators, staff, and community members, especially the stakeholders (Keefe and Jenkins, 1997).

At the heart of any action remains the relationship among the people involved. Mutual respect and a high degree of trust must be established first, before any degree of action is put into place. A positive attitude and willingness for shared decision making will help the process start off on the right track to success.

When looking at the position of educational administrator, one looks at the expectations of the position in the years ahead. Research has become an integral element of instruction practices and school procedures. An administrator stays current on the latest research and best methods to involve teachers in the
presentation of information. As a leader of change, an administrator looks to the future, plans appropriately, sustains flexibility and continues the cycle of consistent reflection and evaluation of the change process and actual change. A successful administrator understands that change is not easy for everyone and assists stakeholders throughout the process. Administrators are responsible for a supportive learning environment. The most critical element for the principal in setting the tone is to be a positive role model. The school, faculty and staff often take on the qualities of the administrator. When taking action of large proportions, a successful administrator communicates clearly and involves stakeholders along the way. A successful administrator makes decisions that will positively impact children.
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