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Leading an elementary school to excellence : a reflective essay

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Abstract

The educational leaders of today have the potential to be a vital part of some of the greatest transformations of education in history. The new information that we are learning about the brain and how we learn, combined with ever-changing technological advances and political mandates, will cause us to reconsider all of our school structures and methods. That reform will not occur by initiating any single program, strategy or mandate. Instead, we must extend our picture of reality by finding powerful and all-embracing ways to perceive and describe trends and patterns over time.

LEADING AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TO EXCELLENCE: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Personal Reflections: The Roots of My Leadership

Becoming an educator was never really a conscious decision. As long as I can remember, I just knew that I would be a teacher. For me, the decision to teach was more of an undeniable calling than a well thought-out plan. Being a teacher described and continues to describe who I am and my mission in life.

While growing up, school was always a high priority. Achieving good grades was a personal expectation, and I was willing to put forth whatever effort it took to achieve success. In my sophomore year in high school, I was a straight "A" student and was elected the sophomore class president. It seemed as though nothing would get in my way. My future seemed secure.

Everything suddenly changed later that year when I discovered I was pregnant. I quietly resigned from the position of class president so that, in the words of the school guidance counselor, I "would not bring embarrassment upon myself or the school". Still later that same year, I again followed the advice of that well-meaning counselor and dropped out of high school because I certainly wanted to "get my priorities straight, and do the right thing for my child".

As I packed my belongings from my locker, a very dear teacher came up to me and told me how sorry she was that I would be leaving school. She told me that she knew that this would just be a detour in life and pleaded with me to get a general education diploma. At the time, I did not even know what a general

education diploma was. In fact, at that point, I did not know much of anything. I was numb and without direction. However, the very day after leaving school, I again robotically followed the advice of a teacher. I initiated the process of earning my diploma. I had no idea that this teacher's words of advice would serve as a lifeline for my future.

I took all of the exams to complete my general education diploma within a few weeks of quitting school. Even though I passed all of the exams, I could not be granted a diploma because protocol demanded that diplomas be granted only when one's class in high school received its diploma. Initially, I did not understand the impact of that wait. However, it was not long before I learned what it meant to be a high school dropout without a diploma.

With bills rapidly accumulating, the need to earn an income became a necessity. After the rejection of multiple job interviews, I truly begin to understand the power of that one piece of paper. A diploma was the entry ticket into the world of work. Finally, after searching for a job for weeks, I stumbled upon a job that did not require a diploma, any specific training or skills, and had no age requirements. Ironically, the job that I was qualified to obtain was working in education. I began working as a teacher associate for the Dubuque Community School District. My career in education had begun!

At age seventeen, I began as an educational associate in a classroom for students with severe and profound multiple disabilities. The students in my class

were older than I was; their ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-one. All of the students were individuals who had been returned to the public schools from a variety of institutions. The parents of these students were skeptical about whether public education could meet the needs of their children. After all, it was public education that had originally turned them away and labeled them as "unteachable" and "unwanted".

Personal Beliefs and Philosophy About Education

During those first years as an associate, I formulated my personal belief and philosophy about education. I witnessed the power of individuals working together as a team with a single vision overcome unbelievable obstacles and literally make miracles occur. The principal, teachers, associates, and Area Education Agency staff all believed that every child, regardless of the abilities he/she possessed, was capable of learning. Their dedication to their collective vision made achievement a reality for individuals that the world had predetermined to be incapable of learning.

The belief that every child possesses gifts is a foundational educational belief that few educators would dare to dispute. Unfortunately, for some educators, this belief is little more than a theoretical philosophical statement. They are unable to translate words into action. Having been a teacher of students with severe disabilities, with autism, of low socio-economic backgrounds, and

now working with students with strong behavioral and academic challenges, I know the reality for these students does not always match theory. Instead of embracing and building upon the gifts these children have to offer, the children's gifts are often left undiscovered. Uncovering the gifts in every child, regardless of the child's intellect, physical abilities, culture, religion, or economic background has become my personal mission.

Even though becoming an educator was never a conscious choice, deciding to enter into the educational leadership program was a very deliberate, carefully analyzed career choice. During the past fifteen years of teaching, there have been many times when others have encouraged me to become a principal. I always responded by saying that my love was teaching, and I could not imagine leaving the classroom.

However, gradually over the past three years, I have assumed a variety of special teaching assignments that have taken me away from having my own classroom. I now help teachers meet the needs of students in many classrooms and schools across the entire district. I continually strive to assist other teachers in discovering the gifts in the children with whom they work. These children are often the very children whose gifts are not readily apparent, but remain dormant waiting to be awakened.

My recent experiences have proven to me that there are many ways to be a teacher. I finally realized that moving into educational leadership does not

decrease my opportunity to teach, but rather redefines how I teach. I now influence not only specific students, but by helping teachers to grow in their skills, knowledge and understandings, I empower teachers to improve the education of all of the students whom they currently teach as well as their future students.

I believe that the educational leaders of today have the potential to be a vital part of some of the greatest transformations of education in history. Our fast-changing world will no longer settle for minor changes or status quo; it will continue to mandate a transformed educational delivery system. The new information that we are learning about the brain and how we learn combined with ever-changing technological advances and political mandates will cause us to reconsider all of our school structures and methods for delivering instruction. Renate Nummela Caine and Geoffrey Caine (1997) describe the kind of transformation that needs to occur within education in their book, *Education on the Edge of Possibility*. These authors describe a new paradigm and new science. Instead of believing that teaching and learning is a sum of its discrete parts, a linear, mechanical metaphor, they instead view education as more a fluid and turbulent process. They suggest that reform will not occur by initiating any single program, strategy or mandate. Instead, we must extend our picture of reality by finding powerful and all-embracing ways to perceive and describe trends and patterns over time. By examining those patterns, we will create new ways of

acting and interacting with our world. As our actions change, the patterns will again change. When education is viewed through the lenses described by Caine and Caine, the process of change is unending, dynamic and vibrant rather than a combination of discrete parts. (Caine and Caine, 1997). Because of this constant changing world, the possibilities that exist for education cannot yet be imagined. I believe that each day in our schools, there are miracles waiting to occur. As an educational leader, I hope to play a critical role in the discovery of those miracles.

Critical Elements Essential for Exemplary Educational Leadership

Discovering and developing the gifts of each child will not occur in any school without a deliberate, clearly articulated plan that serves as the guide for all decisions made within the school community. To become an elementary principal who can lead a school to excellence, I must be a leader who not only speaks the vision, but who lives it. I must be a leader who not only leads with isolated skills and knowledge, but also one who combines that knowledge with heart, soul and passion. I cannot do all of this alone. It will be necessary for me to empower and nurture those around me to grow in their own skills and competency in order to share the leadership role. Finally, and most importantly, I must be a leader who continually maintains the focus of the entire school community on the achievement of each child. Only when these critical elements of leadership are evident in my everyday practice, will I be able to lead a school toward excellence.

Creating and Living the Vision

In my role as a principal, I will continually demonstrate my unswerving belief that each child has gifts and talents waiting to be discovered and developed. However, I know that the success of my ability to empower a school community to reach each child and to nurture the development of those gifts is not dependent upon my own beliefs, but rather on my ability to be the catalyst through which the entire school community creates and sustains a common vision. A critical element of success for any educational leader is not just simply the ability to capture a school vision on paper, but more importantly, to bring that vision to life in such a way that all members of the school community consider it a driving force in every decision that is made. Sustaining a vision from its conception through to its actualization is a hallmark of a gifted leader.

When the state of Iowa adopted the Iowa Standards for School Leaders, ISSL it was no coincidence that the first standard focused on vision. Vision is foundational to all of the remaining leadership standards. The first standard states:

> A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning

that is shared and supported by the school community (ISSL, Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

I believe the key points of standard one are the four distinct roles of visionary leadership. Theses roles are described as the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of the vision. In addition, this standard does not simply purport that the vision is shared and supported by the staff, but rather by the entire school community. This directive compels a school leader to expand the commitment to the school vision beyond the walls of the school building into the community at-large.

Within each school community, every student, teacher, support staff member, parent, guardian, and neighborhood member possesses her/his own vision for the school. If time, energy and resources are not allocated for these individuals and groups to share their vision with each other, they operate in isolation. In this isolation, they not only are unable to benefit from the power that can be achieved when their forces unite; but often, they work or compete against one another.

"Change throughout the system will not come about through a thousand points of light, but from the steadily increasing, concentrated light and heat of one sun" (Donahoe, 1993, p.707). It is the role of the leader to bring these separate points of light together into a concentrated effort. "The kind of significant, sustained improvement that we need in schools will not occur in an isolated, free-

lance culture, where no one knows what anyone else is doing or what each other's operative goals are" (Schmoker, 1999, p. 110). The development of a shared vision is foundational to any school moving forward.

If care has been taken to truly engage all stakeholders in the development of the vision, the articulation of the vision becomes less of a task. When all members have been involved in the process of developing the school vision, their ownership is high. Through their active engagement, the entire school community understands the vision and is then able to share in the task of articulating the vision. The sole responsibility of articulation no longer resides with the principal; the responsibility is shared among all members of the school community. As a principal, I will utilize as many diverse groups of stakeholders as possible to join me in the articulation of the school's vision throughout the community.

I have been involved in many endeavors where a group spent a great deal of time and effort in the development and articulation of a vision or mission statement. Hours were spent with the precise selection of words, and endless meetings were held to share the vision with the stakeholders. Unfortunately, I have been involved with few endeavors where the implementation and the stewardship of the vision received the same level of effort and commitment. The vision resulting from a process that did not plan for purposeful implementation of the vision often resulted in a contrived statement for the

organization's letterhead. The vision remained only a hollow slogan rather than a way of life within the organization. This type of stagnant vision offers no hope of impacting the achievement of students within the school or of creating an avenue for reform. Rather, the stagnant vision remains a collection of meaningless words.

The principal who successfully attends to the implementation of the shared vision and who is a faithful steward of the vision truly demonstrates the artistry of the principalship. The power in the vision occurs when the entire school community unites not only in its theoretical purpose, but also in its daily efforts. There must be a clearly defined role for each member to play in the implementation of the vision. Through the principal's daily examples of living the vision, the community is able witness the vision in action. In addition, the principal instills in all members of the school community a sense that their own commitment to action is equally important to the attainment of the vision.

Through the principal's words and actions, there develops an understanding that nothing will impede the vision. Effective principals instill confidence within the entire community that, "We can learn whatever we need to learn in order to achieve the results that we truly desire" (Senge, 1990, p.399). Senge's statement is powerful because it implies that none of us has all of the answers, but rather that each of us is required to work individually as well as collectively to find the answers. In these turbulent times of change, we cannot

anticipate the barriers that might impede the realization of our collective vision. It will be increasingly important that the principal demonstrate through example, a daily commitment to the vision.

Neither the vision of a school nor the principal's commitment to the vision will guarantee that each child is empowered and nurtured to reach his/her potential. Rather, it is the cumulative effect of each member of the school community living the vision that will impact every child. When entire school community developments a shared vision, and every member is empowered to articulate the vision, the daily living of the vision becomes reality. Being an exemplary educational leader demands living the vision and empowering others to do the same.

Leading with Soul

Once our daily practice becomes the living of the vision, our effectiveness in our practice is only limited by the amount of soul with which we lead. Leading with soul is another critical element of the artistry of an educational leader. Soul enables the leader to weave individual leadership skills and qualities into a beautifully crafted tapestry rather than simply the performance of discrete and isolated skills. When the woven tapestry becomes the cloak that engulfs the daily operation and decision-making of a school, the staff, students, parents, and community members feel valued and empowered.

Defining the actions of an effective leader is often limited to those qualities that we can easily quantify and clearly articulate. Yet, as I reflect upon those teachers and administrators who have positively influenced me, I struggle to clearly define the discrete skills that made them effective leaders. Limiting the definition of effective leadership to what is easily articulated or measured leaves a gaping hole in a very complex definition. What makes these educators memorable is not just their tangible qualities, or even the student achievement results that they produce, but also the intangible qualities that are too challenging to capture in words. Effective leaders understand that what they do implicitly impacts student learning and needs to become explicit for the entire school community to witness on a daily basis. I believe that those exemplary leaders that can make the implicit explicit are those who lead with soul.

James Mahoney describes these teachers and leaders as having " a sense of calling about their work" (Mahoney, 2002, p. 40). I think that I have always had this "sense of calling". I know that becoming a teacher is what I was always meant to be. In fact, it was this very sense of being "called to teach" that kept me from seeking my administrative certification until now. I felt that becoming a principal would be turning my back upon what I thought I had been called to do. It was only when my definition of teaching broadened, that I really understood the teaching possibilities that are available as an administrator.

Individuals who are gifted leaders in education certainly could have chosen to use those same leadership qualities in a large variety of professions, many of which would likely elicit more money and prestige. However, few are tempted by the tangible reasons to seek other professions; instead, they remain committed to children and education. I believe these leaders consciously or unconsciously choose to remain loyal to education because of that unique "calling".

Michael Fullan explores the types of leaders who will be needed to accomplish the kind of "powerful large-scale reform" that he believes is needed in education. He states that looking for leaders who are strong instructional leaders is too narrow. "We need to look for leaders who can create a fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and the teaching profession itself" (Fullan, 2002, p.16). As he reviewed a variety of studies on effective leadership, he identified common themes. One commonality of effective leaders that he noted throughout these studies, though described through different labels, was that all of the labels referred to what Fullan called the spiritual domain.

As Fullan discovered, the labels that are used to try to accurately describe this intangible leadership quality vary greatly. In this day of clearly articulated standards, measurable goals, and accountability, the words to describe the affective side of leadership make many educators uneasy. Regardless if we chose to talk of skills from a "spiritual domain," individuals being "called to their work"

or leading with soul, all of these characteristics imply that effective educational leaders bring to the profession certain traits that are not learned. Instead, these traits are simply part of the very character of these individuals. Thomas Sergiovanni (2000) in *The Lifeworld of Leadership: Creating Culture, Community and Personal Meaning in Our Schools*, discusses this aspect of character in relation to schools and teachers. I believe it is also applicable to educational leaders. He states:

> ...character and professionalism are intertwined. In schools with character, teachers make it a point to maintain and grow high levels of competence, and they also make it a point to pay attention to caring and community-building. Professionalism is about both. Competence alone is not enough. For a true profession to emerge, competence and caring need to be joined together into a seamless practice of teaching (p. 57).

The importance of the joining of the tangible with the intangible into the art of leadership is also evident in the fifth standard for school leaders identified by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). While many of the other standards for school leaders define specific tasks of the leader, standard five addresses the more intangible side of leadership. Standard five states: "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, with fairness, and in an ethical manner" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, p.94).

If effective leadership could easily be defined, quantified, and described in discrete skills and subskills, it is likely that an exemplary leader would run each our American public schools. However, we know that this is not the case; exemplary leaders are not that plentiful. In fact, they are a rare treasure. I believe what separates strong educational leaders from exemplary ones is not the skills that they perform or the knowledge that they possess, but rather the soul with which they lead.

Developing Leadership in Others

When the educational leader unites soul with the daily work of the vision, dramatic changes can occur. The leader, however, is only one individual in the larger school community. As a principal if I choose to concentrate on only my own leadership skills, I will make the impact of one. However, when I develop the skills and leadership traits in others, the impact that can be made in the lives of children is unlimited. As I move into the role of an educational leader, I believe that one of my most sacred responsibilities is to develop the skills and talents of others. Roland Barth describes the power of a community of leaders.

> School can be a place whose very mission is to ensure that everyone becomes a school leader in some ways and at some time in concert with others. A school can fulfill no higher purpose than to teach all of its members that they can make what they believe happen and to encourage

> them to contribute to and benefit from the leadership of others. A community of leaders is a vision of what might become a vital part of the school culture. Without shared leadership, it is impossible for a shared culture to exist in a school (Barth, 1990, p. 171-172).

When I reflect upon times of significant learning in my life, the success of my learning is always connected to the power of a teacher. Although I am sure there were many additional factors that undergirded this learning, it is the impact of the teacher that remains prominent within my memory. The powerful impact that a teacher can make is not only my personal reality, but also the reality for many students. In a large, longitudinal database that linked student achievement results to schools and individual teachers, Sanders and Rivers concluded that the single, most important determinant of student achievement is teacher effectiveness (Sanders & Rivers, 1996, p.6).

Fullan, in *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, also comments on the power of teachers. He suggests that the power of teachers can only be increased when teachers work in focused, supported teams. He addresses the role of teachers in the implementation of any new educational reform:

> Collegiality among teachers, as measured by the frequency of communication, mutual support, help, etc., was a strong indicator of implementation success. Virtually every research study on the topic has found this to be the case (Fullan, 1991, p.132).

Unfortunately, rather than working in collaborative, mutually supportive networks, teachers often work in isolation. My challenge as a principal will be to implement structures that will break the isolation that teachers experience and provide increased opportunities for them to share in the leadership of the school. In the book, *Building Shared Responsibility for Student Learning*, the authors, Conzemius and O'Neil, describe the challenge and reward of shared leadership:

> Building shared responsibility and leadership will require role changes, skill development, and participation at every level of the organization. We will see real lasting reform – and significant, sustained improvement in student results – only when individuals, guided by a clear moral purpose, come together to challenge the assumptions of the system as we have come to know it (Conzemius and O'Neil, 2001, p.124).

Carl Glickman describes four different approaches that educational leaders can use to develop the leadership potential of teachers. He states that "fostering intellectual and self-motivated growth on the part of teachers means that the instructional leader, whenever possible, uses an approach that demands greater choice and thought on the part of the teacher" (Glickman, 2002, p. 82). Glickman proposes that the amount and kind of support that is provided to each teacher should vary according to the need presented by the teacher.

If the teacher is overwhelmed or very ineffective in his/her practice, the directive-control approach, in which the source of thoughts and actions comes

from the instructional leader, is used. In this approach, the instructional leader provides clear direction and assistance to the struggling teacher. The teacher is dependent upon the instructional leader for his/her growth.

When the teacher needs minimal prompting to reflect upon and evaluate his/her own practice, the second approach, the directive-informational approach, is used. In this approach, the instructional leader provides a variety of alternatives from which the teacher selects his/her best option.

The third approach, the collaborative approach, promotes learning as both cooperative and collegial. Both the leader and the teacher approach the tasks of improvement as equals. Each participant contributes to and is nourished by the collaborative process.

The final approach described by Glickman is reserved for master teachers. The nondirective approach enables the instructional leader to facilitate the teacher's own reflection of practice. Through this reflection, the teacher creates his/her own plan for improvement, and the instructional leader simply provides support to the teacher's plan (Glickman, 2002).

When I become a principal, adjusting my level of support to the needs of the teachers will enable me to foster continual growth for *all* teachers, not just a select few. It does not matter where on the continuum of leadership potential any individual teacher begins, but rather that each teacher is provided the support necessary to advance along the continuum. My success as an instructional leader

will be determined by my ability to foster leadership in others. Phillip Schlechty eloquently captures this intertwined relationship:

> It is true that those who occupy positions of authority determine, in the long run, the prospects of school reform. They make this determination, not so much because they are leaders, but because they are in a position to determine, within limits, who among their subordinates will be empowered to lead. And the more powerful the leader, the more likely it is that the subordinates have been empowered to lead. It is in this sense that the concept of "every leader a teacher and every teacher a leader" makes sense. And when every teacher is a leader, every child can be a success (Schlechty, 1991, p.154).

Every student deserves to be surrounded by effective adult leadership. That leadership cannot be limited to the principal alone, but must include every school staff member. It is the power of this collective force that will enable schools to make the reform necessary to meet the challenge of preparing children for a world that we cannot yet even imagine.

Focus on Student Achievement

Preparing children for the future will remain a nebulous desire unless it becomes the very essence of the vision for the entire school community. Increased student achievement must become the core from which the vision for a

school is developed. If the vision does not center on student achievement, there is little assurance that each child's gifts will be developed to his/her fullest potential.

In the words of Richard Elmore, " Leadership tends to be romanticized in American culture, especially in the culture of schooling." He suggests that we fail to make the improvement of instruction our clear priority and offers a simple, direct definition of educational leadership. "The purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance" (Elmore, 2000, p.13). Regardless of the complexity involved in defining exemplary leadership, I believe that the ultimate measure of the success of my educational leadership will be my ability to effect change in instructional practices that yield an increase in student performance.

As a principal, it is my responsibility to assure that the vision of increased student performance for every child becomes reality and not simple rhetoric. Each of the six standards of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) begins with the words, " A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students." Regardless of how the standards further define the route to obtaining success for all students, the imperative for increasing student success is clearly articulated. The role of the administrator in this process cannot be ignored.

Moving from the mandate for student achievement to the actual increase in student performance requires more than words articulated in a vision; it

necessitates a very specific, calculated plan of action. Rick DuFour suggests that using data facilitates the movement of vision into a plan of action. He describes this relationship between data and vision:

> Developing a collective sense of what the school might become is an essential step on the journey to becoming a learning community but it is not sufficient. Schools must also be willing to assess their current reality with total candor and honesty and then describe the specific measurable results that they expect to see as a result of achieving their vision. Using data is the most effective strategy for translating the good intentions described in a vision statement into meaningful improvement targets (DuFour, 2000, p. 71).

Dr. Donald Fielder in his book, *Achievement Now! Assurance that No Child is Left Behind*, describes this shift of using data to become results-oriented as an essential step to increasing student achievement (Fielder, 2003, p.97). Becoming results-oriented dictates that school staff analyze data to clearly understand the strengths and weaknesses in addition to the failures and successes of current practices. This analysis is necessary in order to move student achievement forward.

As an educational leader, it will be my responsibility to provide the structures to support staff members as they venture into this new orientation. Historically, I think that the efforts of administrators have focused on the input

practices of education -- how time was used, the curriculum that was selected, and the instructional practices that were implemented. Moving to a results-oriented approach requires educators to shift to the output practices of education -- examining how time, curriculum and instructional practices actually impact student learning. This can be very threatening to many educators. As Schmoker notes:

> Education seems to maintain a tacit bargain among constituents at every level not to gather or use information that will reveal where we need to do better, where we need to make changes. Data almost always points to action -- they are the enemy of comfortable routines. By ignoring data, we promote inaction and inefficiency (Schmoker, 1999, p.39).

Placing data analysis at the core of the infrastructure of a school will take deliberate attention. The effort begins with developing a culture where questioning becomes the norm and answers that result from the questions form the foundation of all future decisions. "All learning organizations," writes DuFour and Eaker, " are driven by persistent questioning of the status quo. The focus of the driving questions must be enhanced student achievement." They state that successful schools "are in the habit of asking themselves tough questions that focus on the achievement of their students" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 109). As a principal I will not only need to ask the hard questions, but more importantly,

must create an environment where all staff, students and parents feel secure in asking the difficult, probing questions.

This secure environment only develops slowly over time. The development begins with regular, persistent conversations about student achievement. As conversations regarding student achievement begin to occur, it is imperative that I, as the instructional leader, keep the spotlight on the objectivity of data, modeling nonjudgmental acceptance of data. I must be certain to use the data not as an avenue to pass judgment, but rather as a guide for decision-making. Data becomes the roadmap for actions that lead to greater student achievement. One of the primary tasks in the development of a culture of continual improvement is the task of moving the analysis of data from the shadow of secrecy into the light of public scrutiny.

Data makes the invisible visible. It makes the vision concrete, creating a plan of action. Helping teachers to analyze data and to use data to increase the achievement of every child is at the heart of being an exemplary educational leader.

Conclusion

> Visionary school leaders in the twenty-first century will see that high stakes in schools are not about test scores but about the souls and characters of the students and what they will do with what they have

> learned. The greatest threat to communities, culture, and civilization is not poison from the outside but poison from the inside. If fundamental shared vision is that of caring for child, then their academic skill development follows without question. But academic skill development cannot exist as a sole value, or even predominate. It is part of a balance, the balance that is essential to healthy human functioning not only in students but also in the teachers, parents, and stakeholders who work to socialize them. (Bencivenga and Elias, 2003, p.70-71.)

As I embark on the role of principal, I will be charged with creating and maintaining the healthy balance that Bencivenga and Elias described. I realize that this balance is a result of a steady vision that focuses on caring for each child, but will not be accomplished if the caring does not extend to every staff member and the community as a whole. This focus must be evident in all of my actions from the simplest routines, such as the way in which I greet students when they enter the school building, to the most complex issues such as creating opportunities for teachers to work together in collaborative structures that ultimately increase student achievement. I must both "talk the talk" and "walk the talk"; clearly articulating the vision and the explicit steps to reaching the vision as well as living the vision on a daily basis. Keeping the focus on what is in the best interest of the child rather than what is most convenient or least controversial, must underpin all of my decisions.

As I begin this new chapter in my professional journey, I carry the wisdom of many great educators with me. Who I am, what I know, and what I am able to dream and envision are direct out-growths of the many mentors from whom I have been blessed to learn over the course of the last twenty-five years in education. These individuals have shared their knowledge, gifts and talents with me on a daily basis and serve as foundation for my beliefs about the power of education.

Some educational leaders dream of leading an elementary school toward excellence; others make it a reality! Those leaders who achieve excellence only do so when the gifts and talents of all children are developed to their fullest potential. No child is left behind. No child is excused. No child is forgotten. No child is overlooked. By developing and living a vision that is focused on student achievement, empowering an entire school community to help to actualize the vision, and leading with heart, soul and a sense of mission, I am certain that I can be among those educational leaders who will lead a school toward excellence. I anxiously await the opportunity to make the dream a reality.

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