

2006


## What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

Brian J. Meaney  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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### Recommended Citation

Meaney, Brian J., "What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay" (2006). *Graduate Research Papers*. 1168.

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## What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

### Abstract

Being in a position of leadership is a great responsibility. Administrators are asked to fill many roles within the school culture. They make decisions that affect a large number of people, and each decision comes with its criticism. It is important for an administrator to gain the trust and respect of the staff by not asking them to do things that you would not do. Show the staff that that you want to become the best, and they will follow.

What I Believe about Leadership and Education:

A Reflective Essay

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership,

Counseling and Post Secondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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By

Brian James Meaney

May 2006

Dr. Robinson

This Research Paper by: BJ Meaney

Entitled: WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION AND EDUCATION  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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

Victoria L. Robinson

\_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

4-27-06  
Date Approved

Robert H. Decker

\_\_\_\_\_  
Second Reader of Research Paper

5-1-06  
Date Approved

John K. Smith

\_\_\_\_\_  
Head, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,  
and Postsecondary Education

5/3/06  
Date Received

As I have reflected on the experiences of my life, I found myself in a position of leadership from a very young age. My leadership experiences were mostly athletic in nature, but I did have several other experiences during my undergraduate experience. I was fortunate enough to be team captains in football and baseball, but my most significant leadership experience growing up was my opportunity to serve as a resident hall assistant in college. I was responsible for the safety and culture of a coed building for a year. We organized pizza parties, dances, basketball pools, Playstation tournaments, and other exciting activities to help create a community of friendship and trust. Working with that group of students as well as the resident hall director taught me a great deal about effective leadership. Effective leadership meant that I had to hold myself to a very high moral standards and expect great things from my students. A good leader never asks for something that they are not willing to do themselves.

Education is more than just what is in the textbook. My students might not remember what the five themes of geography are, but hopefully they remember the behaviors they learned and have a much better grasp of the world around them. Students need to feel safe and comfortable in my classroom, and have their eyes opened to events occurring outside of the school building.

As I pursue my education, I believe that I need to become a more effective and positive role model for kids. I am working with some students who do not have many positive role models at home, so I need to help fill that void. I believe that I can take the sum of the ideals that we are currently studying and use them to effectively lead a school.

I believe that I have the necessary attributes of a building leader and look forward to serving as a mentor, budget officer, and communicator.

The Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards have to be a baseline for any administrator. They provide a rough guideline of what is expected of the position. Standard One states, "a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment." This standard speaks to the need for clear leadership qualities. Standard Three addresses the traditional ideas of a manager but puts the emphasis on managing these tasks with true leadership in mind. I think that it is important that I as a leader assist the staff in taking ownership of the building and the people that serve it. It is important to establish a true school improvement team that will assist the administration in the direction of the school. The teachers and the other staff members need to have a voice in the creation of an environment that allows all opinions to be heard and the consensus to be followed whenever possible.

Standard Five states "a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness and in an ethical manner." This standard reminds leaders of the real importance of being a leader. I will try to establish an environment where everyone is treated with respect and dignity. I think that it is important to allow for disagreements and look for opportunities to challenge the status quo.

The last standard that I am going to quote is Standard Six. "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding,

responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal and cultural context.” This standard reminds all building leaders of the importance of seeing the world as a whole and not viewing all matters from your building perspective. Understanding and reacting to community needs will enhance not only my reputation but will allow you to advocate for new ideas, and for my staff.

By using the four standards mentioned above, I have tried to demonstrate what I believe makes a person an effective leader, and what I plan on doing as I become an administrator. Not only will following the standards allow me to be an effective leader, but also to serve as a building leader in a very challenging manner. It is important to the school, the stakeholders, and to the community that the administrator is a positive and solid leader to ensure that the promotion and success of all students is obtained.

The first critical element is a principal being the schools leader for learning. Principals can oversee the entire school because of their interest in the building as a whole, and not just the sum of its parts. Principals no longer have to focus on looking out for what is best for their own department, but rather what is best for all stakeholders. The research makes the job of principal sound daunting. “The principal leads the school--managerially, instructionally, and motivationally.” (Shellard, 2003) In order to be a successful administrator I must become proficient in all of these areas and not neglect any as unimportant. I believe that one of the most important aspects of being a principal is instructional leadership.

Being the instructional leader of a school means that I am the “teachers teacher.”(Costa 2001) I will have to be there to assist teachers with instructional goals,

standards, and curriculum. Currently I am working with my assistant principal in re-writing our curriculum, which can be a very complicated activity, especially when we have very little in terms of past curriculum, new texts and other material. I have first-hand experience of what bad curriculum and supporting material looks like and am gaining a better understanding of how to change it. Instructional leadership also means that I am going to be in the classroom to observe and make sure that the staff is carrying out the instructional goals that are set forth, as well as evaluating teachers and helping them with stumbling blocks in the curriculum.

In my first year as an administrator I hope to be able to communicate the need for a school characterized by high standards and expectations (Standard 3). A school and classrooms that are efficiently run will guarantee a healthy starting point for a successful school. Creating a safe environment that values all stakeholders and creates an appreciation of the abilities of all students is my chief priority. The inclusion of faculty, parents, and outside stakeholders in the schools operation is the key to creating a successful foundation for success during my tenure as building leader.

The key to leading an effective and successful school is the confidence that all students can learn. This philosophy is especially true as it applies to special education students or special needs students. The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is confounding, bulky and duplicitous. While not much can be done about the federal requirements, careful planning and implementation of a fully inclusive policy for educating all students in collaborative classrooms with two well-trained and eager teachers can help teachers, parents and students feel appreciated, valued, and heard. (Standard 4)



Successfully implementing a climate of co-teaching cannot be overlooked. Special education teachers can sometimes be looked down upon by core teachers. Co-teaching can have many benefits if run correctly. It can create a wonderfully enriching classroom for a wide variety of learners. (DeBoer, 1995) Many current special education teachers burn out due to the lack of appreciation by the building leaders for the difficult nature of their jobs and a lack of true understanding of the complexities of special education law. IEP's coupled with 504 plans and IDEA laws leave many administrators with a sour outlook toward educating all types of learners.

An effective instructional leader also must have a framework on which he or she hopes to obtain success. Students will learn and will have success if they are determined or have parents who push them, but the school also has to provide some of the motivation. Principals need a mission statement to include all learners. They must set very high expectations to reflect the goals of the faculty and staff and outline the direction of the school. Students also need to be monitored on an assessment-to-assessment basis. Non-instructional activities need to be limited. For example, field trips, museums, and plays are great, but when a student is failing math, changes need to be made. Lastly, there needs to be a strong home and school relationship. Having the support and understanding of parents is essential in maintaining the success of the student body. Parents can either turn a child on to an idea or they can turn them off, especially at a younger age. (Ubben, Hughs, and Norris, 2004)

Finally, I know that being an instructional leader will be very difficult. To supervise and assist with the curriculum of 10 or more departments will be a difficult task.

I need to remember that I will be the “teachers’ teacher” and support teachers with curriculum, instruction, and time. Providing feedback and taking the staff in the direction of success will be my instructional priority.

Instructional leadership is a very demanding task, but without the team members in place the proper instruction may never take place. Another demand of the principal is teacher evaluations. Assigning the correct people to the correct position can be a thankless job.

The second critical element to being a successful principal is administering to educational change. Principals are currently the school leaders, school managers, key decision makers, facilitators, problem solvers, chief executive officers, chief learners, marketers, team leaders (Gamage, 2004). However, one thing that has changed on the list in the last thirty years has been the added role of principal as teacher evaluator and curriculum director. Currently in the Davenport district teachers are evaluated three times per year until they are off their probation period. The teachers must also show competence in the Eight Iowa Teaching Standards. This has not always been the case, as the teacher evaluation system has changed.

The 1970’s saw a movement toward the Hunter style, a teacher centered classroom. (Danielson, 2000). The model was very structured and did not allow a lot of imagination. Hunter was a pioneer at the time for teacher evaluation, and school districts adopted her style. Teachers had a system to use and were essentially easy to evaluate, but we soon learned that the Hunter style was focused on lower level thinking.

Today we have seen a shift away from the Hunter model. I am currently evaluated by my administration not on my ability to create routine lesson plans, but on my ability as an engaging teacher and translation of my teaching into student understanding. Principals want to know that students are learning and comprehending the content of their classes, as well as forming opinions and beliefs about certain issues based on experiences and understandings from class content. This is a big shift, but hopefully one that creates higher student learning.

The Davenport district has seen a large change in the teacher evaluation process in the last 7 years. Before the 2003 school year, teachers were evaluated at the end of the school year. They were given a progress report, and were not responsible to turn in portfolios to their principal. Currently, teachers and principals conference six times per year, and teachers are evaluated three times during the year by one of the building administrators. At the end of the second year of teaching, the teachers need to present a portfolio of how classroom content and instruction aligns with the Iowa Teachers Standards. The principal then determines whether the teacher is ready to be granted his or her standard license by the state of Iowa.

One of the glaring issues in principal evaluation is how frequent they are taking place and the question of whether or not the evaluations are time-effective. According to 1994 survey by Douglas Reeves, only 60 percent of principals found that the evaluation process provided motivation for improvement, and only 47 percent found that the evaluation was specific enough to know what changes needed to be made (Lashway, 2003).

The evaluation for principals is a difficult task. The question becomes who and how must the evaluation be done. Is there a checklist? Do we bring in parents? How important should the student achievement be? Is student achievement entirely the principal's fault, especially if the principal is only in his first or second year? Reeves suggests that the principal be a part of the evaluation process. Schools should allow the principal to ask for feedback in certain areas in order to eliminate an evaluation consisting of checklists with little to no feedback. By allowing principals to self-assess, and prove that they know and can follow the standards given to them, principals will be more motivated to make effective changes in their approach (Lashway, 2003).

Davenport Community Schools have seen a great shift in how their administrators are evaluated. Last year principals were evaluated on a 360-degree process. Evaluations were completed by surveying a number of stakeholders including parents, peers, teachers, students, and Central Office. A weakness in the 360-degree model was that often times the administrator could choose which members of the staff would sit in on the evaluation. Davenport has gone through many changes in trying to effectively evaluate their administrators. In times past Central Office employed a policy of success unless there are complains. Principals were evaluated on how well the building was perceived by the community, not on what he or she was actually doing.

As I have shown, the principal's role in educational change is taking place with better evaluations of both teachers and principals themselves. Principals need to become better evaluated to eliminate those who are ineffective instead of simply reassigning to different districts or positions. Also, the principal has been forced to take a much more

active role in evaluating their teachers who are being held to higher standards than in the past. Hopefully the new evaluation process and higher standards will produce more effective leadership and a more positive learning environment.

One of the primary effects of higher standards and better teacher evaluation is the improvement of learning for both students and teachers in Iowa schools. According to Standard Two, a school administrator is a person who promotes success by sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and the professional growth of staff. The Davenport Community School District has seen encouraging changes in these areas over the last three years. The state of Iowa adopted the Eight Iowa Teacher's Standards and 42 model criteria in May of 2002. These standards were adopted to help teachers take accountability for what they are doing in the classroom, as well as to assist Iowa teachers in becoming better compensated for the work that they do. The standards also provided administrators with a tool to fairly evaluate teachers. Before these standards were adopted, evaluations were very subjective and principals did not have any guidelines ([www.davenport.k12.ia.us](http://www.davenport.k12.ia.us)).

According to the state of Iowa's educational web site, as of July 1, 2005, all teachers will be evaluated on three-year cycles using the same eight standards (<http://www.state.ia.us/educate/ecese/tqt/tc/doc/itsmc030122.html>). According to the standards, and effective teacher is one who:

1. Demonstrates ability to enhance academic performance and support for implementation of the school district's student achievement goals.
2. Demonstrates competence in content knowledge appropriate to the teaching position.
3. Demonstrates competence in planning and preparing for instruction

4. Uses strategies to deliver instruction that meets the multiple learning needs of students
5. Uses a variety of methods to monitor student learning
6. Demonstrates competence in classroom management
7. Engages in professional growth.
8. Fulfills professional responsibilities established by the school district

The new standards and programs that the state has implemented are intended to improve the quality of learning for both teachers and students. The teachers are being asked to evaluate what they are doing in the classrooms, and make improvements to meet the standards. The new standards have also given the school district a better way to evaluate the teachers they employ. By having all teachers on the same playing field, comparing teachers and evaluating them becomes an easier task.

Students are the ones who really benefit from the new standards. Teachers who were once strict lecturers are being asked to examine their practice and make changes. They are being asked to use different teaching methods to meet the needs of more diverse learners. More hands-on, student-led activities are being required. Those teachers who were lecture style teachers are being asked to change their ways, and lead a class that can encompass more students, not only the auditory learners.

There has been some cause for concern to how the new evaluations evaluate standard license, or Tier 2 teachers. Under the new system of evaluations, standard teachers are evaluated on a three-year cycle. Tier 2 year 1 teachers are asked to write a career development plan and match that career development plan to their school CSIP. That entire year is spent on writing that plan, and while they are writing that plan they are not evaluated. Tier 2 year 2 teachers are then asked to carry out the career development

plan. Some districts will evaluate that teacher during year 2, but not all. Finally, Tier 2 year 3 teachers are asked to defend their career development plans. During that year they are going to be evaluated against the career development that they developed. The evaluation also asks that you show that you are using the Iowa Teaching Standards to guide in instruction. Following the third year, a teacher begins again at Tier 2 year 1 and the process repeats itself.

The kinks seem obvious. Why are teachers evaluated every other or every third year? What is the harm in yearly evaluations? What is the harm in quarterly evaluations like so many in other professions have? What if the school CSIP changes during the three years? Hopefully administrators are using this evaluation as a guideline, because it seems that the program is too infrequent.

Although both teaching and evaluation methods are changing, professional and academic ethics remain fundamental in the development of principals. Above everything else that a principal must do, the most important characteristic they must possess is the ability to lead with a high standard of ethics. A person in authority must be ethical above all other things. I believe that Principal Lockett, of Oakes Elementary, in Okemah, Oklahoma stated it best in her article in *Education World*: "If credibility and trust are not established, nothing the principal sets out to do can be achieved. As a principal, trust and credibility are the foundation for my goals and objectives" (Hopkins, 2002).

A building can quickly become a hostile place to be if trust is not established. Trust between the students and teachers and trust between the teachers and administrators. Trust is the key ingredient to any relationship, and administrators have the difficult job of

ensuring that they have the trust of the students, staff, and community. As a teacher I have to fully trust my administrators to support my teaching decisions to be an effective teacher. I have approached my administrators on numerous occasions with requests for materials to enhance the learning environment in my room. They have brought in new desks, helped adopt new textbooks, a projector, schedule changes, and numerous other things to help make my room as conducive to learning as possible. They have also drawn a line. When asked to have a schedule change to allow me to leave early during basketball season so I could coach, they drew a line. They said that by allowing me that luxury, then any coach in the building would expect the same treatment. I was upset, but they gave me a great reason and so I respected their decision.

I cannot say enough great things about the administration that I am working for now, but that has not always been the case. I once had a student in class who was so disruptive that I was forced to send her out of the classroom. She was throwing paper, calling names, and disrupting the entire classroom structure. When I got down to the office with the student the administration took this case very seriously. They knew it was serious because I very rarely send a student out. I was full of anger at the time because the student had negatively affected my ability to carry out the lesson plan for that day. I felt that I had exhausted all of my options as a teacher. I made an ignorant statement in front of the student and principal that she was not allowed back in my room until I received an apology and met with her mother. I had overstepped my boundaries and knew it, but the administration did not undermine me, and thankfully supported my two demands. I knew I



was wrong, and later admitted it, but I gained a lot respect for my administration because they supported me, and I know they support the teachers in our building.

A web article entitled “Being Trustworthy Shows Character” says that one benefit of being trustworthy is that, “people like to deal with those they can trust” (Kurtus,2003). I have been in a building where trust did not exist between the teachers and the administration. The situation involved one administrator who was moving on to a new building the next year, and the assistant principal who was retiring at the end of the year. The assistant principal would not deal with referrals in a timely manner, if at all. On days when he was absent, the graduate students doing their internship would try deal with all the back referrals that had not yet been addressed. It got to a point where teachers would not send students to the office because they new that nothing would be done. Trust was missing and tempers began to flare. Staff meetings became uncomfortable and the school morale was very low. Students began to understand that they could get away with just about anything because of the administration’s lack of concern. Teachers were fighting battles in classrooms that they should not have had to. It was a true case of survival for some. Luckily, this was a one-year blunder and things quickly changed the next year. But for that one year, there was little harmony between the staff and the administration.

In the book *Principal Leadership*, Elaine Wilmore points to a Four Way Test and modifies it to be used when faced with difficult issues. They are:

Is it the truth?

Is it fair to all concerned?

Will it build goodwill and facilitate greater learning and success?

Will it be beneficial to all concerned? (Wilmore 83)

What a great test, and imagine how easy things would be if this test could be used for all ethical situations.

### Conclusion

Being in a position of leadership is a great responsibility. Administrators are asked to fill many roles within the school culture. They make decisions that affect a large number of people, and each decision comes with its criticism. It is important for an administrator to gain the trust and respect of the staff by not asking them to do things that you would not do. Show the staff that that you want to become the best, and they will follow.

As a principal I know that I can have a positive effect of the educational environment. Working to make the school community a place that is safe, and conducive to learning is a responsibility that I am willing to accept. Teaching students coping skills to help them achieve their life's goals is a responsibility that I accept. I believe that I have the drive and vision to help our students toward the ultimate goal in education, to become educated, and to lead successful lives within our society.

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