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What I believe about leadership and education

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What I believe about leadership and education

Abstract

The leader's role is spelled out very well in Iowa's Standards for School Leaders (ISSL, 2007). The Standards specifically describe a visionary leader (Standard one), an instructional leader (Standard two), an organizational leader (Standard three), a collaborative leader (Standard four), an ethical leader (Standard five), and a political leader (Standard six). These six standards set the tone for what is expected from a principal in a leadership role.

What I Believe About Leadership and Education

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I remember my father telling me not to be a teacher because there is “no money in it.” I listened at first and went into the business world, but there was always a calling to education. It was not long before I realized that business was not for me and decided to head back to school to become a teacher. It was the best decision I ever made.

Teaching provides something for me that another job could not possibly do. It allows me to be a leader and I make a difference in the lives of my students. Not just differences in the knowledge that I help students find, but in their personal lives as well. The self-actualization I feel on a daily basis from those interactions is far better than any feeling I could get from a number on a check.

As I get further into education I realize that there are ways teachers can make a difference that I never thought possible. The small things, such as showing up to students’ activities, saying hello to them in the halls or just telling them you are proud of them. These are things you learn with experience about how to lead a school. They are types of motivation align with Alderman (2003) when she speaks of teachers fostering a way for students to learn and become motivated (p13-16). The same thing can said for principals. They need to find a way to motivate staff to help them motivate students which will build a positive school climate and result in students becoming more involved in their school. It did not take me long to realize that for these students I am a positive role model

and for some their only role model. That is a huge responsibility but one that I am ready for and feel honored to be that type of individual. These are things you learn with experience about how to lead a school.

It is easy to make the connection between leadership and teaching, because everyday the teacher leads a class. However, there are multiple aspects to leadership, some of which come naturally to teachers and some that do not. It is the idea of leadership and the opportunity to reach more students that led me to the educational leadership program. I feel the more students I can reach, the greater impact I can have. I love being a teacher and being a part of students' lives on a daily basis. However, I feel I can make a greater contribution by using my leadership skills in the role of a principal. As an educational leader I will be able to use my abilities as a leader to impact a greater number of students and influence their lives in a positive way. To accomplish this I will have to employ the multiple aspects of leadership.

Visionary Leadership

Visionary leadership is the first type of leadership an administrator must employ and the first type of leadership described in Iowa's standards for school leadership. The administrator needs a vision for what they want the school to become a plan for how to get here. According to Wilmore (2002),

We are not here only to promote the education of those who are easy to teach, who speak English fluently, who fit school in between before-

school athletic and after-school fine arts, who are clean and well fed, or behave nicely everyday (p. 19).

Wilmore is stating that the administrator must create a vision that works for all students and not just a glorified few. This vision that must be created is not easy, but is essential if a school is going to have success on a large scale.

The vision is the most important part of being a leader in the school setting, because without the vision nothing else can happen. The vision includes the culture and climate of the school and according to Wilmore (2002), "Together the culture and climate of an organization create a powerful conception of what the organization values, of what its expectations are and of the image that it projects" (p. 33). The conception and the values are not just apparent to those on the outside looking in, but to the people on the inside as well. One approach, as outlined in Gunter, Estes & Schwab is that state and federal agencies, along with school boards, outline broad goals or "macro goals" for schools and teachers to achieve. The teachers are expected, through instruction to achieve these goals (p. 9). It is the principal's job to make sure these objectives are passed on to the staff. When the vision is clear to faculty, students and staff, it becomes much easier to work as a team. If no one knows what it is they are supposed to be doing then there is virtually no way that they can accomplish the goal.

After the vision has been clearly defined and input has been given from everyone, affective change can truly begin. The more an administrator works

with the families of its students and the public, the more outside support they will receive. According to Wilmore (2002), "No longer can schools operate within the confines of their own facilities. Schools and communities must work together in collaborative partnerships for the benefit of society as a whole" (p. 66). An administrator must welcome outside help and embrace non-school organizations into the school environment. The collaborative partnerships that a school develops not only help the school as a whole, but will help the outside organizations and the individual students in the school as well. The outside organizations, through their positive interactions with the school, will become advocates for the school in other situations; which will help the school continue to grow. It is the administrator's job to facilitate these relationships and to continue communication to provide as many opportunities for students as possible.

Lingfelter (2007) agrees:

Ultimately, of course, learning and the advancement of knowledge depend on students, faculty, and the institutional context in which they do their work. 'Reforms' that fail to touch what students and faculty do and how they do it won't change the results of the system (p. 15).

The leadership role is the most important role of the administrator.

Whether it is to promote safety of an organization within the school, the administrator must be the person to facilitate and promote achievement with all students and staff.

Socrates may have started the process of reflective learning when he said, “The unexamined life is not worth living” (Paquette, 2007). Socrates and many of the Greek philosophers used logic and reason to solve the problems of their day. Part of their process included reflection upon actions and results of those actions. This is where reflection comes in. It is a logical part of the decision making process. If a decision is going to be made using logic, it is logical to reflect on it to ensure that the change process has been done correctly and the change is as successful as possible. Socrates would agree with examining not only one’s life but the change process at all of its stages.

Being a leader is more than just making decisions and getting the faculty, staff, and students to go along with them. It starts with a vision, but the vision is not based solely on the leader’s point of view; research is involved as well. Research in leadership is important not just in the planning stages of change but in all the stages. The change facilitator must always have their eyes and ears open and research in many different ways.

Reflections

The research will not likely come from a library or a book. The basic principles will come from those places but most of the research will come from communications with the people inside the school. Hall and Hord (2006) name these types of processes in their book Implementing Change. One type of reflection done by leaders in the school setting is the “one-legged interview” (p.

9). This is a very informal way of reflecting, and possibly more importantly, letting others involved in the change process reflect on change. The idea of a one-legged interview is that a person cannot stand on one leg for very long, so the interview is short. These often take place in the school environment as many teachers do not have a lot of time to stand and talk about theory. As a leader of learning, it is a great idea to get information in this way as teachers do not feel as threatened as they would in a formal process. Miller (1997) stresses leaders to get information in both formal and informal ways to be highly effective (p. 78). The one-legged interview can provide excellent reflection for teachers and administrators of the learning process.

When a principal needs more quantitative information, a questionnaire or formal survey may be a better way to reflect. The more information a principal can receive from their faculty and staff the better. Everyone in life has different experiences and sees things from a different point of view. Because of this reality, receiving these different points of view can help a principal see the problem or solution from a different angle and can help push along the process.

The idea of communicating with staff and reflecting on it has other benefits as well. First, when the staff feels that their opinions are being listened to and have value, staff will tend to be more open to the change process, thus making the change process easier and more applicable. Second, when communication is initiated in its various forms, it becomes easier for the change

facilitator to see potential problems or people that are not willing to change.

When these potential problems or mushrooms as Hall and Hord (2006) refer to them as, the change facilitator can have a follow-up conversation and get those people's ideas for what would make the change process more applicable to them and how the principal can get them on board with the plan.

In the article, "Computer Conferencing with Access to a 'Guest Expert' in the Professional Development of Special Education Needs Coordinators" (Wearmouth, 2004), "Findings from the study indicate that computer conferencing has the potential to facilitate the professional development of teachers as reflective practitioners and researchers" (p. 81). This has very practical implications not for just this study but for all change processes. This study is unique in that it brings technology into the picture which is often times a barrier for many teachers and students. While the study may not have set out to find out such things, it only did so through reflection. This gives merit to the idea of reflection, in that, if the reflection is not done valuable information may not be uncovered by the practitioner and thus the study or the change process may not be as valuable as it could have been.

Wearmouth, (2004) states:

However, they also point to a number of barriers to student participation that must be addressed. These include access issues related to time constraints, unfamiliarity with the medium, and lack of confidence in

expressing personal views in a public arena. A major conclusion drawn from this study is that it may be appropriate to consider future developments which incorporate the assumption that, in computer conferences of large professional development courses, students are much more likely to participate through reading rather than making personal contributions to conference discussions (p. 81).

This may be the most relevant issue that faces reflecting about a change process. This study came to the conclusion that not all students or faculty were ready for the change and before the change process could be implemented successfully that more base training needed to be done for certain people. Had this information not been discovered, the change process could not be successful. A computer is a wonderful thing, but if the person who is supposed to use it does not know how to turn it on, it becomes a very expensive desk ornament.

Reflective Leadership

The idea is simple; reflect on what has been done. However, the process is not finished at that point. The information gathered through reflection must be acted on. If the information is not acted on, then the change process stops and will not be as successful as it possibly could have been. This is why reflection and implementation are both on-going processes. If one stops, then the overall progress of the change process stops as well. The change facilitator must be

prepared to use the information gathered in reflection to continue to implement change and make their building, a better place.

Standards

Being a reflective practitioner is an integral part of every standard set forth by the State of Iowa for a principal. The standards of the state all require the leader of a building to reflect on the things they have done through the change processes and how they deal with their staff, the students and the community.

The first standard deals with being a visionary leader. A principal must first have a vision, but that does not mean the vision does not change over time. As the principal reflects and gathers new information, the vision may change and probably should change based on the needs of the people involved.

The second standard is broad, in that, it encompasses all of instructional leadership. It means the instructional leader is responsible for creating an atmosphere for students to learn in multiple ways. The instructional leader must be well versed in the foundations of instruction.

Organizational leadership, the third standard, is imperative to the success of a school. The educational leader needs to be capable of leading all the small organizations inside the school and be able to make them all come together into a cohesive large organization. This is much easier said than done, as there are many different types of organizations and all deserve attention to help students and staff be successful.

The fourth standard is collaborative leadership and is vital to the reflective process. Without the help of the staff, students, parents, and the community the change process cannot be successful. As a leader one must be careful not to exclude these important groups in the reflective process or mushrooms will arise.

While the leader's role includes reflection, there are many other important roles. First, the leader must be visible to the rest of the staff in the school. Behind the scenes leadership occurs in high schools, but the leader must be in front of the school and willing to be open to questioning and feedback during the process. If the leader is not available to people that are being affected by change, the change will likely fail.

The leader must have a vision for the change to take form. At the same time, the leader must be able to communicate the vision to the rest of the staff and give them an idea of what the vision is going to look like. This takes the leader into the role of collaborator. The leader should be willing to listen and even change their vision in order to achieve change for the school that will allow everyone involved to reach their potential.

To be an effective collaborator the leader must have an understanding of how the school works. They must realize how information flows in their school and through what sources the information is filtered. Being familiar with staff is imperative in this process. According to Hall and Hord's (2006) book, Implementing Change there are five different categories that people fall into

when it comes to change: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards. How information in the change process is given to them must be different because they will react differently to said information. The innovators cannot wait to change and are generally happy to help with the process. On the other end of the spectrum, there are the laggards who do not wish to change or even care about change. The people in these two groups provide the bookends to the rest of what a staff will generally look like. To say that the two groups must be handled differently is an understatement.

Because the laggards do not really wish to change and will generally not change unless prodded, they may need a different method of introduction to change. Explanation of why the change is needed and what it can do for the laggards could be a possible method. If the laggards are treated like everyone else there is a good chance that they will not initiate the change on their own resulting in potential failure of the change. In the case of the laggards, the principal must take on the role of being a master communicator and a problem solver to get them involved in the change process.

In contrast, there are the innovators who are ready to change at the drop of a hat. They present their own set of potential issues that can help or harm the change process. Sometimes the innovators go into the change process at full speed with their head down blind to how the change is affecting those around them. It is in this situation that the principal must be the eyes and ears for the

innovators to help them understand the entire change process. Again, the principal must be a master communicator to present the same change process to not only both of these groups that see things very differently, but adjust the message to the three groups that fall into the middle ground and can see the issue from all sides.

The leader's role is spelled out very well in Iowa's Standards for School Leaders (ISSL, 2007). The standards list specifically a visionary leader (Standard one), an instructional leader (Standard two), an organizational leader (Standard three), a collaborative leader (Standard four), an ethical leader (Standard five), and a political leader (Standard six). These six standards set the tone for what is expected from a principal in a leadership role. It is possible that principals could be one of these types of leaders without fulfilling the role of another. Principals must find intrinsic motivation to make themselves into each of the types leaders to be effective in the change process. If a principal fails to meet the criteria in one of the standards or even appears to fall short in one of the categories to the staff or students, disaster could occur. Take standard five (Ethical leader), if the principal is not viewed as ethical, people will be more cautious. Especially, if they think the principal has ulterior motives for the change. This being said, a principal should strive to have the highest ethics and should go out of their way to make sure the staff views them in an ethical manner.

Political leadership (Standard Six) is not an easy type of leader to be. It means getting the message of the school out to the community. This involves the pulling of the administrator in many different directions. Dunklee (2000) says,

Because the principal has observable public responsibility and authority, because of the tenuous nature of the position, because of the certain status and the rewards that it brings, vested observers both inside and outside the school expect the accomplishment of specific objectives and hold certain expectations of you, regardless of who you are (p.12).

The principal will have different expectations from different people, including parents, students, teachers and community leaders and must learn to balance all of them.

The administrator has to look forward to the change process when they become a principal because of the challenge it will present. There will certainly be times when they feel differently about the process but they have to believe that change for the sake of the students is very important and not be afraid of conflicts that arise along the way. It will be very important for the administrator to keep an open mind to help direct a school through the process to make it the best school it can possibly be. The principal must keep their staff informed of the decisions being made but also why those decisions are being made. It is important to get the staff's opinion because the changes will affect them. For the change to be truly meaningful for everyone all must be involved, but in the end the decision

comes down to the principal. Failure to recognize how the staff is reacting to change could cause problems to develop. According to Hall and Hord (2006), problems occur when the staff interprets a meeting or message in a different way than intended and nothing is done to dispel the misconception. Hall and Hord (2006) talk about how perceptions can be positive or negative and can impede or speed up the change process. Issues with the staff will continue to grow as long as the correct information is not given to the teachers or feelings are not shared. Teachers will talk with each other about how they interpret the message making the conflict even greater. The teachers may have different ideas about what is said and may collaborate with each other and come up with a totally different interpretation of the message than either had on their own. This can become very problematic. The role of the principal as a leader in this case deals with communication with the staff. A principal who is not in touch with their staff will let valuable opportunities get away. A principal that communicates effectively with their staff will find out about concerns, probably from the people with questions, and thus be able to fix problems with less work, making the change process smoother for everyone.

Leader of Learners

Being the leader of learners is an interesting idea as it pertains to the differences between leading students and leading teachers. The underlining premise is the same. If the learners, whether they be children or adults, do not

find the material interesting or relevant they will not participate in the session and may wind up causing distractions. This idea was made clear based on my observations with students and staff members at East High School in Waterloo Iowa. The students were led everyday in classrooms by teachers. The teachers were led periodically by the administration in staff meetings or in departmental meetings. These meetings usually occurred on Wednesdays after school. The teachers were not kept passed contract hours.

Students in an Economics class (consisting of 28 seniors and one junior) were asked a series of questions about education and how their learning could be improved. "Make it more relevant to me," was the answer that came forth from three-of-four students interviewed. Nick Weber (Personal communication, May 10, 2006) went into more depth:

When I am in a class and the teacher tries to make the class interesting I can tell. I get that not everything is going to be fun, but it is nice when I feel like I am actually learning something and some time has gone into the idea. Some classes are movies, worksheet, movies and then another worksheet. That doesn't teach me anything and it is really boring. I get it done, but most kids copy.

It should be noted that this economics class was one of three offered at East High and commonly has students that achieve at a high level. According to Mary Zierke, (Personal communication, May 30, 2006) guidance counselor at

East High who helps students schedule, “The students that I direct into this class are those that have told me in the past that they are four year college bound.”

This idea of teaching to the brightest students and having others gravitate to that level is not a new concept. It goes along with setting expectations. If you set mediocre expectations and they are achieved you still have mediocre achieving students. The same is true for teachers, according to Whitaker (2003):

The best principals base every decision on their best teachers. This may seem counter-intuitive; after all, traditional thinking says ‘teach to the middle.’ But if we want our schools to work better, we will find ways to focus on our best teachers (p. 67).

If you set expectations high and they are achieved then you have high achieving people, while if those high expectations fall a little short, the people are still probably higher achieving than those who were given mediocre expectations. Once those expectations have been set, it is the leader of learner’s role to best convey how to get to those expectations. While the method may change between students and teachers, the underlying concept seems to remain the same; make it relevant.

Teachers at East High are required (or some would say forced) to attend meetings approximately once a month for staff development. The staffs’ experience was varied like most other high schools in the country. That being said, the idea of conducting staff development that reaches every person would be

a tremendous feat. The different types of learning styles, previous knowledge, and interest level vary greatly, much like it would in a classroom.

The argument could be made that teachers should be the best learners and the most willing to adapt to other styles because they want to give the same respect when they are in the learner role as they want to receive when they are in the leader of learner's role. In fact, Tate (2004) feels that leaders of learners need to be able to adapt their message to an adult brain rather than engage them. Leaders of learners must be aware that not all the teachers in their building learn the same way and must find innovative ways to engage them (p. xxii).

This argument does not hold up at East High School. At one meeting, teachers were commonly seen to be having side-bar conversations and not paying attention to the speaker at all. The speaker tried to talk over the non-compliant teachers, but the message appeared lost as a whole.

Following the meeting a few staff members were interviewed to see how they thought the meeting went and whether or not they paid attention. (Steve Moravec, Personal communications on May 24, 2006). "I have heard it all before and didn't need another person telling me the same thing," said one history teacher. He added, "I would have listened if I thought I was going to need any of this information in the future, but it will never be talked about again." This second comment lends directly to relevance. The information in the meeting was not deemed to be relevant to the faculty so they pursued other interests or

conversations. One department head commented on the lack of accountability by staff,

The staff knows that no matter how they act they aren't going to be held accountable. So if they choose to go to the meeting and not pay any attention to what is going on, no one is going to say anything to them or there won't be any consequences.

This comment leads me back to expectations. The expectation of accountability has been set and teachers are reacting to it. If the expectation had been changed, it is very likely that the behavior would have changed as well.

Rigor and Relevance

The International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) (Daggett, 2005) uses a Rigor/Relevance Framework to describe how the leader of learner's role should be. The ICLE describes base knowledge as acquisition of knowledge and involves such activities practicing vocabulary words or writing a history paper. The second level ICLE knowledge is application. This involves students applying knowledge such as participating in a debate on a current political issue or creating a class website. The third level is assimilation and involves comparing, contrasting, and relating literature to its historical context. The final level is adaptation, where students could write a letter to the editor or develop guidelines for publishing content on internet pages. There are two tiers to the final level, which is recognized by adapting the knowledge to unpredictable

situations instead of predictable ones. If you look at the activities given in each of the groups it is apparent that the higher levels are more challenging for students. At the same time, when given the choice of activities from the lists, the economics class chose to participate in fourth level activities. The reasons they gave for choosing those options followed the same pattern in that the students felt those activities were more interesting so they would rather do them.

The ideas of relevancy and rigor support how an educator should be, whether it is in the classroom or with teachers. Making lessons relevant to students and staff is how a leader builds a rapport with them. If either group feels that the leader is not putting forth effort that meets or exceeds their own, their behaviors will reflect it. The more you can lead them by example and through rigorous and relevant projects, the more credibility you will gain with them and the better results will be.

The idea of being a leader of service plays into the principal's role of being a leader of learners as well. This is similar to Popham's (2006) definition of "educational leader." "Educational leaders are those educators whose responsibilities call for them to make decisions that influence other educators' activities and, as a consequence, that have an impact on the students for whom those other educators are responsible" (P.18). As a principal it is an important job to be the leader of service and help create other leaders of service. If the principal

creates other leaders of service than more things will get done and the climate of the school will become more positive and thus benefit more students.

Service Leadership

The term “servant-leadership” was developed by Greenleaf (1970) in his essay, “The Servant as Leader.” His idea was originally presented for people in the business world but has translated well to fit the role as a servant leader in the school setting for students. Throughout the years many educators have expanded on Greenleaf’s ideas. Servant leadership was when the leader leads by example. By helping those involved see what can be done, the leader has success and ultimately the group has success.

As education has turned from content based to feeling based activities, the idea of service learning has gained more popularity. It has become widely accepted that for teachers and principals to have success with students they need to be service oriented rather than content oriented. This means that teachers must leave their comfort zone at times and teach in ways that reach a wide variety of learners. This may mean that teachers use different models when teaching rather than a straight lecture which many veteran teachers are accustomed. At the same time, it is important for teachers and administrators to realize that service for students, schools, and staff must have definite goals in mind or the service can be wasted.

This same idea can be seen with administrators in buildings. They must realize that their faculty have different strengths and weaknesses and they must adapt to them to help them have success. This type of service, adapting to others, goes along with Greenleaf's ideas of "servant-leadership." Being a servant leader is very important not only with teachers but with students as well. In a classroom, a teacher needs to show students, through their actions, how much they care about the student's future. If they do this, both the teacher and the student will have more success. As one steps into the administrator's role, the same is true. The principal needs to let their staff know, both through words and actions that they care about what happens to them. When words are reinforced with actions it builds credibility with staff and perpetuates the relationships between administrators and staff.

Grothaus (2004) came up with a leadership training model that was implemented over seven months with students. The following was the mission statement from the training course:

(Community) Youth Leadership believes that all youth are gifted and are capable of making a positive difference in their communities. Through this program, we hope to empower selected youth as leaders and trustees of our community. Leadership involves serving the common good and promoting the welfare of our local, national, and world communities and

empowering others to also make a lifelong commitment to this vital cause.

(p228)

The idea put forth in Grothaus' program was that through service, students can make a difference in their community. By making a difference and having outsiders see students make a difference they become leaders through their service.

The idea of service learning has found a home with many teachers and school districts throughout the country. Robert Dillon (personal communication, August 2005) is social studies teacher in Center Point, Iowa and has run a service-learning class for over five years in the district and has seen the results first hand. "Our students work for both the school and people in the community. They do everything from delivering meals on wheels every day, to painting, to lawn work for the elderly." The service being provided by Center-Point-Urbana students does not go unnoticed. According to Dillon the school receives a lot of support from the residents of the town because people see the good things students do.

We have a lot of senior citizens come to the sporting events and you can hear them talking about how the running back or point guard raked their lawn the day before. They really think it is fun and I think the kids like it too.

The success at Center Point-Urbana High School was a fantastic reason why service should be implemented by teachers and administrators in any district.

Being a service leader helps teachers and students in the building. A teacher will have more success when they ask students to do something to help rather than telling a student to do something. That respect given by the teacher and the service that goes along with it builds credibility and relationships between students and staff and makes the learning environment more productive. As the students see teachers serving others they begin to serve as well and pretty soon a cohesive classroom unit is born.

As a principal in a building the premise would stay the same. As teachers and staff see the principal announce goals and then see the principal actively work towards those goals they will join in serving as well. As in the classroom, you will always have people that are not going to join in no matter what the idea or method used. As a principal, the job is to find different ways to serve in order to get everyone involved. Then it becomes an issue of motivation. The principal needs to find what motivates people and work with them to get the best out of them. Greenleaf (1970) says:

It begins with natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead....The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant – first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served.

The quote by Greenleaf shows commitment to the people he was trying to serve and it is that commitment that is a must for any leader to have success. By not

just talking the talk, but walking the walk, a leader can have a powerful influence anywhere, but especially with young minds.

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