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A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Making every effort to improve student learning is a collaborative effort that includes schools, parents, and the community as a whole. As the pressure to raise test scores continues to mount, schools must see parents and the community as strong allies with a vested interest in schools. Schools have had a tremendous impact on student learning. If we bridge the gap to include parents and the broader community, we will enter into an era of unprecedented effectiveness in promoting student learning.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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47
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My years within the public school setting were very positive. Aside from the fact that I had a difficult time becoming an effective reader, all of the academic and extracurricular activities served as a melting pot of values and beliefs. Coming from a small community, there were ample opportunities to become involved in sports, community service, church, and other activities that can be directly linked to what I view as important in education and leadership.

I remember very few instances, which I would term as negative, involving my school years. I have fond memories of all my teachers and the friends and classmates with whom I had the opportunity to interact with. School was a place I enjoyed. I have two older sisters who never complained about going to school. Going to school was just something you did. It was not something that was questioned or discussed. Basically, it was our job to go to school and to do our best. Looking back, it is hard to understand the impact that it now plays out on a daily basis as an adult. The values were subtly tied into things that were done within the classroom. It amazed you when you began to realize that you had become effective at using a specific skill. These skills developed over a course of several years, and started to intertwine themselves into other areas within the school and other settings.

The most profound values and beliefs I have can be traced to my involvement in athletics. Each coach seemed to not only train their team to have the best opportunity for success, but also used the athletic realm to teach life skills. Being on time, doing your best, being a team player, showing commitment to improvement, are still things that are demonstrated in my daily activities. My high school basketball coach was a very organized, intense man. His practices were scripted with every detail he wanted to cover

and the goal he was after for each particular drill. He was a big proponent of the thinking that “you get out of it what you are willing to put into it.” This type of thinking was “beat” into his players through his actions. He saw beyond the basketball court. He envisioned his players growing up to be outstanding people with great character and self-worth. I advocate this ideal for each child whom I have the opportunity to work with. I want kids to understand that they alone can determine how great of an asset they can be for them self, their community, their state, the nation, and the world, that they can choose to be. I want them to realize that people will not measure them on “wins and losses,” but rather, on the impact of what they can do and the goals that they set out to accomplish.

I consider myself a Christian person. I was involved in a lot of activities within the church. My family had a strong belief in religion and its importance in our lives. It was something that was never forced upon us, but again, was just something we did without question or discussion. The church to which we belonged had a lot of my friends as members as well. It made it easier to go and do things knowing your friends would be there. I learned to be more giving of myself, to stand up for things I believed in, even if they were viewed as different, and to understand that people can have differing views about the same things and still remain civil towards one another. Most of these aspects are things I portray on an outward basis, but never directly teach to others. Forcing your personal beliefs has a tendency to be counterproductive. Instead, I want to act in a way that others will see me as being democratic in exhibiting high morals and values.

The defining moment of why I went into education, came from an interaction I had with a 4th grade boy during my senior year of high school. My high guidance counselor asked if I would be interested in being a big brother to an elementary student.

This was not something our school typically did. This boy's teacher asked the guidance counselor if it would be possible to pair this particular boy up with someone who could be a good role model for him. His home life, to say the least, was not good. He felt if he could have some contact with a positive role model, that it might help him gain a sense of control and importance within his own life. I reluctantly agreed. I wasn't quite sure how to interact with a 4th grader. In addition, I was sort of the "sacrificial lamb" for the school district to try this. My guidance counselor wasn't quite sure how to guide me with some of my questions. He simply said, "This boy needs a good role model, and I think you fit the bill." Needless to say, the first visits were not very productive. Once the introductions were over, we had little in common. For the longest time, he hid from me the fact that he liked sports. His teacher brought this to my attention. This single fact dramatically changed our relationship. Before this information was known, we did homework together, played some board games, and did some computer activities. He was rather quiet and withdrawn. When our time together was over, we gave high fives and I would tell him that I would see him next week. After I learned he enjoyed sports, he grew into a more outgoing and happier child. We shot baskets, played catch with the football, and played outdoors together. Our work time grew more productive and it grew less in volume because he would get it done in class, so that he could be rewarded with more playtime with me. By this time, when our meeting time was over, we no longer gave high fives. But rather, he would hug me and hold on for dear life. Graduation at year's end limited our time together. Our last meeting was very emotional. He thanked me for being a good friend and told me that he would miss me a lot. We both ended up crying. The

feeling inside me from that last meeting with him was euphoric, in that I now knew I wanted to become a teacher.

My beliefs stem from a vast amount of life experiences that have developed some strong principles in me. All of them convinced me that with any situation, I will have the determination and the resources to be able to handle any difficulty. I am smart enough to know that I do not have all the answers. However, I do have enough foresight to be able to seek out the necessary resources to be able to form an opinion about any issue before I act on it. I hold expectations for myself that are high, but well within the scope of my ability to reach. It is a matter of moving forward and believing that nothing is so good that it can never be improved.

Collaboration

Collaboration has reinvented decision making for anyone in a position to lead. The traditional role of leadership has given way to a system that relies heavily on the input of others. A few decades ago, those involved in classroom teaching were told what to do. Decisions were made somewhere above them, typically by the principal, superintendent, or the school board. This traditional model has been monumentally shifted. The shift is now one that sees input from classroom teachers, support staff, and community agencies, as necessary to student improvement.

Our shift in society has left most people strongly influenced by a multitude of perceptions and beliefs. It is a mix of these perceptions and beliefs, which enables us to make a personal decision. Our perception of who can be a member of a group has to be one that reinforces the idea that all members are welcomed. Different groups address issues from divergent perspectives due to various factors such as race, gender, religion,

culture, and politics. As long as each group is determined to hold onto its perspective without thinking about how the other groups feel, it will be difficult to develop respectful collaborative relationships (Wilmore, 2002, p. 67). Leaders must become knowledgeable about current trends and issues, in order for people to be willing to commit to work in a group, towards a specific goal. There has to become a point where different perspectives are encouraged and welcomed. As each person is able to voice their view, common ground and tidbits of information that appear to go together, can be used to build a respectful discussion. This discussion will then move the group away from their individual perspectives, to one single action that will have a profound effect on the students it is intended to help.

After taking the time to allow all stakeholders an opportunity to share their views, those involved in this process have to take some ownership in their role within the group. Decisions from the group are successful when they are reached after everyone has had an opportunity to influence the decision and are ready to support it without sabotage. This is a very simple way to explain how a consensus can be reached. There will be no winners or losers with this approach. Most importantly, all of the people involved have a more committed “ownership” in the decision. As central as the mission of the collaboration becomes in our lives, we can never count on another to care as much for the success of the collaboration as we do (Rubin, 1998). Therefore, committee members must become advocates for the decision and be able to “sell it” to whomever may have doubts about its impact on students. Leaders themselves play a larger role in this because ultimately, the final decision rests with them. They need to spend time going to community agencies and community meetings. When leaders can become voices for decisions, and are able to

show enthusiasm for a group's decision, they create a better sense of commitment to the decision. They also encourage those outside the structure of the school, that the school is doing everything within its control to work together to ensure a quality education for all children.

Leaders are aware that learning how to improve instruction requires time.

Educators are at work while teaching. Unfortunately, this time spent instructing lessons does not offer them time to learn to teach better. To become better teachers, leaders have to offer educators the opportunity to have time to meet with other peer professionals, who have expertise, and can help them assess and implement new plans. This new insight has the potential to motivate teachers to redefine their role within the classroom.

Administrators who support innovation and provide resources necessary to turn innovation into daily practice, including time for team members to work together and opportunities for continued professional development in areas of interest and need, make enduring change possible (Stump, 2001). Instruction of the curriculum must evolve continually to ensure that we are meeting the needs of all children. This process can be achieved through collaborative efforts of educators.

Leaders who allow their staff time to meet, signal their approval to the staff that their expertise will have an impact on the lives of the students they teach. Implementing new curriculum, instruction methods, and assessments, are the impetus of change. However, the likelihood of these new approaches becoming successful, rests with a group's ability to effectively reach a decision that infuses all perspectives. As teams develop a sense of openness and trust, they reach a point where all members of the group

can commit themselves to proactive measures. This commitment will then ensure, that as new trends appear, they will be addressed.

Those in a position to lead have to be cognizant that schools no longer function within its own walls. By taking some initiative, they can begin to grow relationships that exist beyond the school walls. As groups collaboratively work together, they will ensure that they are moving the mission of the school in a direction which will create an atmosphere that will spur student achievement. In the coming years, it will depend largely on how leaders are able to encourage multiple stakeholders, both inside and outside the school walls, to become better advocates for the enhancement of the school and the children the school serves.

School and Building Culture

The presence of a collectively shared vision fosters the development of a positive school culture. School leaders need to make a conscious effort to shape the culture of their school.

The school culture is the complex patterns of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization. The culture is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act (Barth, 2001, p. 8, 2001).

Growing and developing positive relationships between staff members and staff and students are the elements that will shape the culture of a school.

In order for the shared vision to become successful, all staff members must take time to make a careful examination of their personal qualities and beliefs. It is this

process of re-examining personal beliefs which will allow individuals to filter out negative thoughts that hinder the development of a positive building culture. School leaders can help their staff members understand their role in student learning by questioning their assumptions about their beliefs concerning student learning. The culture of the school does influence the way that individual people think, feel, and act. Enabling each staff member to better understand this, is the first step in defining the culture of the school in an effort to better promote staff and student learning.

After staff members have had time to examine their personal beliefs, the next aspect of creating a positive school culture is in the collegial relationship of the staff members. A staff that enjoys working with one another, and feels that they are working together to meet established goals, erases unproductive opportunities for negative pockets to erode the positive culture of the school. Acknowledging, celebrating, and exchanging craft knowledge are powerful means of building school culture hospitable to human learning (Barth, 2001, p. 65). Relationships of staff members have a purpose, in that, they make staff members more accessible to share their knowledge with one another in an effort to improve student learning and bolster the professional environment of the building.

The collaborative culture that grows out of the process of re-examining personal thoughts and the building of collegial relationships, reduces the amount of teacher isolation some staff members may feel. As teachers give up some of their autonomy in an effort to grow a collective authority between them, the group will be able to support one another and share strategies that will help them meet building or district goals. The important element in this complex process is that teachers are learning from each other.

Sharing ideas and craft knowledge is what makes the community one that will make a significant contribution towards the building or district goals. Every new goal has its focus on the vision or mission statement of the school. Perhaps the biggest difference between a traditional school and a professional learning community regarding the vision statement is the fact that in many schools the vision statement is generally ignored (Eaker, Dufour, Dufour, 2002, p. 15). The collectively agreed upon goals should produce some short-term successes and some long-term aspirations.

The direction of the school district relies on the teacher and the community they build in their classroom. Meeting the basic psychological needs is an important step in making each child feel safe and connected to the other kids in the room and in the school building. School leaders must then have professional development geared towards enabling their staff to foster the concept of community building. When a school meets students' basic psychological needs, students become increasingly committed to the school's norms, values, and goals. And by enlisting students in maintaining that sense of community, the school provides opportunities for students to learn skills and develop habits that will benefit them throughout their lives (Schaps, 2003). The effect of enlisting students in the process of community building, connects the staff and students together. This is important, because at times, these two groups seem to be at odds with one another in what will make the classroom be a productive place to work and learn.

Building a strong sense of community is a priority for the kids that comprise the classrooms in your school building. Getting kids to feel like the classroom is a second family is a daunting task. The teacher and the students in the classroom must be willing to put learning before anything else. All too often, teachers want students to conform to

meet their ideal of what the room should be like. At this day and age, staff members must be willing to ask the kids what would make the room a more functional place for them to be. The benefit that comes with this approach is one that will allow the students of the room to feel like each person is a valuable asset to the classroom. Having a say in establishing the agenda and climate for the classroom is intrinsically satisfying and helps prepare students for the complexities of citizenship in a democracy (Schaps, 2003).

Once the foundation has been laid, and the effects of your efforts to build a positive school culture are moving the district in the appropriate direction, as the school leader, it is your job to screen potential candidates to fill vacancies cautiously. As teachers leave the district or retire, the staff you hire to fill vacancies is at the heart of maintaining and growing a positive building culture. With each interview, those on the interview team should have clearly defined criteria for their ideal candidate. Not only should the new staff person be a competent, qualified teacher, they should have personal qualities that will fit with the culture that you have created and is now established in your building. Part of state policy, is that all new teachers go through a mentoring and induction program. This program has been very effective in elevating the feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount of time that new teachers spend learning things on their own. Effective induction provides the support that new teachers need in order to “become part of the family-part of the cohesive group of people who are adding something of value to the world” (Pardini, 2002). The people that have been part of the district for a number of years must weave new teachers into the fabric of the school. The principal must select potential mentors based on their ability to provide the necessary support that will be needed to help a new teacher thrive in the school district.

Getting the culture of the school district moving in a positive direction should precede the effort put into programs to raise student achievement. School districts that are sensitive to their school culture are the districts that are promoting higher levels of professional collaboration and collegiality, have teachers engaging in community building within their classroom, and have staff members seeking potential candidates to fill vacancies. With these elements in place, the school district has a culture that is designed with every intention to improve student learning.

The task of building and sustaining a positive school culture is an all-encompassing task. At no time, is it a task that is taken on alone by the school leader or a few select teachers. Without the effort to bring all staff members on board, you continue the process of isolating teachers into surviving on their own. Change of this magnitude, one that promotes a positive building culture, starts with a school leader striving to enable their staff members to develop their full potential collectively to effectively meet the needs of the children in the district.

Data-Driven Decision Making

Education has become a reflection of the business world. Not from the standpoint that schools are out to make money, rather, schools have begun to utilize data as a more effective tool in showing student achievement, driving student instruction, and creating effective school improvement plans.

Uses of data can be traced back to the earliest days of public schools. One of the main reasons why schools used data was to assign students' grades. The effectiveness of the data was that it gave teachers a set of conditions to assign grades to the students.

Unfortunately, that is where the usefulness of the data stopped. Careful analysis of the

data would have informed and guided teachers in their assessment to see if students were meeting the necessary requirements of the course. Effective educators make effective decisions based on accurate information. If knowledge is power, then studying the current abilities, skills, attitudes, and learning styles of students empowers educators to adjust the curriculum to achieve whatever goals the school and district have chosen (Johnson, 1997). Data that is collected can have more of an impact than merely assigning a grade. It can give a teacher better insight into how a particular student, or group of students, is fairing in understanding the materials covered.

Data driven decision-making should not become a substitute for good judgment from an experienced teacher. As educators assume the role of a front line researcher, the impact of their findings will enable them to discover what works best in their classroom. The intangible is how an educator interprets the data to pinpoint how best to change the curriculum to maximize the results achieved by the students.

“Educators are increasingly being asked to collect, analyze and report data to demonstrate that their efforts are resulting in increased student learning, “ said Irene Spero, project director. “The question many educators now face is no longer why to use data, but rather how it be used to improve student learning. With the passage of No Child Left Behind, data collection, analysis and reporting have become even more imperative” (The Consortium, 2003).

We should look for valid outcomes that produce results, and tie these results into our decision-making process.

An important partner in using the data to drive our instruction is the presentation of the data. Once data has been collected, it can be used to show how a student, a class, or

a school, is progressing towards a goal. Businesses have long used graphs as a way to present the data they have. It gives their stakeholders a representation of how the business is doing. Simple graphs can be used in education to create the same effect. They give us a tool that we can use to communicate about how students, and the school, are progressing towards an established goal. They also take the guesswork out of defining student, or school, achievement. Definitions of how a student, or school, are doing will be articulated by the graph. The key to using graphs is that anyone who views the graphs, should understand the graphs and what they represent. Therefore, how we interpret the data is critical in how we present the graph. Varying perspectives will appear, even from the same graph. Clearly communicating what the graph shows cannot be understated.

Schools must make decisions based on current available data. Schools can no longer make improvement plans based on intuition, or a good guess, about what lies around the corner next for the field of education. If we continue to utilize this haphazard approach, we will surely be convinced any new fad is the answer to all of our troubles. As each new fad appears, we create a cycle of ill-advised attempts at making education better without any data to back up our decision to proceed down a new path. Teachers need to see the relevance of this new approach in order to be motivated to see that it succeeds. Sharing the data that was used to make the decision to use a new approach, will give teachers a clearer sense of why the decision was made and how it can improve student achievement.

In creating school improvement plans, we must commit to looking at our existing data. If our data does not allow our district to get a clear picture of where the district currently stands, an effort must be made to collect and analyze this data. When we have

the necessary data to make an informed decision, we need to be sure that it can be connected to the vision of our school. If we establish goals that fail to move us towards our vision, we will have multiple arrows missing the intended target. The concept of continuous improvement should be stressed.

“Each data-collection cycle and its results should not be thought of as an activity with a grade...it should be thought of as information on the progress being made toward attaining the collective goal and to assist all members of the organization as they make decisions for current and future action, “ states Calhoun (Johnson, 1997).

The longer that data is collected, the more apparent trends and unseen patterns will reveal themselves.

As schools respond to the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), we have to realize that data is going to be one of our biggest allies. The basic tenets of this wave of reform-hold all students to explicit high standards, test the results and use those data to inform further decisions, rewards or sanctions-do hold promise for significantly improving the quality of public education (Monson, 2002). The downfall of where we are at with the use of data, is that it not done on a year-to-year basis with the same students. Each new year brings new data results that we are responsible for to the state and federal government. How can we be sure that this year's students are equivalent to last year's students? To truly understand how education is doing in enabling all students to continue to improve in education until no one gets left behind, we must follow each class, and every student, throughout their public school years. This will be a lot of work no doubt,

but nonetheless, the appropriate way to develop a better understanding of how students are doing.

Now more than ever, schools are being held accountable for student learning. The usefulness of data is not that it will make changes, it is merely the tool that defines status quo. Schools need to carefully monitor their data when addressing school improvement in order to ensure that it correlates to the vision of the school district. By closely examining their data, schools will ensure that they have evidence of what they are doing and the necessary work that still needs to be accomplished. In the years ahead, how innovative schools and educators are in using data will be the true measure of raising student standards.

Community and Parental Involvement

The time is right for schools to rebuild, reconnect, and refresh relationships with the parents of students and the community agencies that support schools. Increasing pressure from the media to raise test scores, coupled with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), makes it imperative to reach out to parents and the community for their insight into improving schools. There is a growing consensus that public schools and the broader community of parents, policymakers, school board members, and others need to be more closely connected (GLEF staff, 2001).

With school districts trying to find ways to improve, one of the missing links appears to be the input from the parents of the students that attend the school. Finding the answer to the question, "What do you want for your child while at school?" will go a long way to understanding the parents' perspective. Many answers will revolve around academics. The school leader will need to generate questions in response to how parents

answer the aforementioned question. Parents should be led to respond to the school atmosphere that they perceive in the classroom and the building. Getting the parents' insight on what a building should "feel" like, from their viewpoint, will lead to a better sense of mutual trust and respect.

As the bonds of trust and mutual respect are actively being cultivated, school districts can begin to coach parents on how they can play a more prominent role in their children's lives, both at school and at home.

Educators have a responsibility to keep parents informed about the instructional program and about the progress of their children, and parents can contribute to the conversation about the school's programs and goals; parents can play an active role in encouraging their children to engage in learning and make connections between school learning and life outside of school (Danielson, 2002, pp. 36).

The family makes vital contributions to student achievement from pre-school through their high school years and beyond. Home environments that place an emphasis on learning and the value that it holds add meaning to the content of knowledge that all children will be exposed to at school.

Ensuring opportunities for all parents to become an equal member of the school learning community requires that school leaders devote time to creating information nights that would most benefit parents. Topics should be relevant, understandable, and tied to improving student achievement. Areas to present are limitless. Some of the more essential ones to present would be curriculum taught at each grade level, report cards and grading procedures, and how to help their children at home. It is unfortunate, but not all parents will be able to provide the same involvement level. Encouraging them to be

consistent, and to stick with the things they do with their children, is necessary to cause sustained improvements in their learning. Special attention must be paid to parents that are unable to attend information nights at school. Alternative avenues to receive this information must be created, such as websites devoted to the information or daytime meetings.

The capacity of student learning has a broader purpose that resides outside the school walls. Dating back to the formation of schools, the essential purpose was to create better-educated citizens. Communities always exist, at least in part, because children need them as a place to learn to be adults (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000, pp. 460). Students that graduate from high schools and colleges assume work in communities that presume schools have prepared them with the necessary skills to perform their jobs adequately. Since schools play a large part in defining the nature of the community, there has been a growing effort to connect schools and the community. When schools learn to see the value of the other groups that affect children's lives, and other groups learn to see the value and connections of schools, then new possibilities emerge (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000, pp. 464).

As schools seek to broaden the role that parents play in the day-to-day activities of their children, they must also be cognizant of the positive affects community involvement will have in the school district. As much as parents are a part of the community, a broader definition of community includes civic organizations, business, churches, and any other entity that has a purpose in the community. As we begin to investigate how to tie the school district and the community as a whole more closely together, we need to signal out where learning takes place outside of the school. Many

community partners are more willing to help when they know that their investment contributes to student learning and success in school (Epstein & Salinas, 2004).

One of the more valuable assets that community agencies and members can contribute to their schools, is time. More now than ever, students are in need of people to serve as mentors or volunteers. The family structure has undergone some major shifts in their general framework. Parents are working longer hours. A growing number of households are single parent households. These two trends have made it difficult for some parents to be as involved as they would like. For this very reason, schools must innovate programs that assign students to mentors and utilize volunteers. Community members and agencies house an enormous array of varying talents that would benefit students. Special attention must be paid to the mentors and volunteers so they are prepared with the proper training to deal with the students.

Schools have to take the initiative to make the connections necessary for effective parent and community involvement to flourish. One of the key components necessary to make connections viable, meaningful, and sustainable, is good communication. One of the defining features of effective parent and community involvement appears to be good communication (...) from schools to parents and community and vice versa (Marzano, 2003, pp. 47-8). Committing the time to involve parents, community members, and agencies in the betterment of the school, necessitates quality communication skills throughout the school district. Staff members, all the way through the administration, must develop the necessary skills to effectively communicate with parents, community members, and agencies. Without this vital ability, the possibility of sustaining the efforts will fizzle in the long run.

Making every effort to improve student learning is a collaborative effort that includes schools, parents, and the community as a whole. As the pressure to raise test scores continues to mount, schools must see parents and the community as strong allies with a vested interest in schools. Schools have had a tremendous impact on student learning. If we bridge the gap to include parents and the broader community, we will enter into an era of unprecedented effectiveness in promoting student learning.

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