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Snapshots of educational experience and leadership : a reflective essay on core beliefs and critical elements

Rick A. Miller
University of Northern Iowa

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Snapshots of educational experience and leadership : a reflective essay on core beliefs and critical elements

Abstract

The best interest of the child is a foundation of all my beliefs and actions. As I reflect, I will be describing (as if taking an actual picture of the experience) snapshots in time related to my personal and professional growth as a person and educator.

In developing myself personally and professionally, I identified six critical elements of educational leadership including displaying effective communication skills, using assessment and problem-solving skills, modeling and supporting teaching and learning, collaborating by providing established structures and processes, having knowledge to influence stakeholders in political and legal systems, and being a reflective practitioner as a change agent. These critical elements are essential aspects found in the Iowa Standards for School Leaders. By applying this knowledge and skill as an educational leader, I pledge to take into account the best interest of the child at any given moment of time. You have my solemn oath.

Snapshots of Educational Experience and Leadership:
A Reflective Essay on Core Beliefs and Critical Elements

A Research Paper

Presented to

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Rick A. Miller

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Robert H. Decker

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Date Approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Victoria L. Robinson

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Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

W. P. Callahan

1-28-04

Date Received

Head, Department of Educational Leadership
Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

My passion for becoming a school leader is woven into the many positive experiences in education throughout the years. These positive experiences have helped to compile my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in education and leadership. The best interest of the child is a foundation of all my beliefs and actions. As I reflect, I will be describing (as if I am taking an actual picture of the experience) snapshots in time related to my personal and professional growth as a person and educator.

Snapshots of Experiences

My first snapshot of education begins with my own school experience. Memories emerge as I contemplate my understanding of why I went into education in the first place. In fourth grade, the teacher allowed me to grade all the other students' art projects made out of soap. In seventh grade, the teacher encouraged a shy student, better known as me, to try out for the school play. I received a lead role. In tenth grade, the teachers told me how creative I had become. I decided to compete against thirty students to be the radio announcer for my high school. I used my creativity. I became the radio announcer. I took the risks necessary to be a successful student. I found my place in the world in each and every school with those talented and caring teachers. It was my home away from home—my comfort zone. And from the first time I was able to grade those projects in fourth grade I knew I wanted to become a teacher, an educator.

From those memories and experiences, my second snapshot evolved and became imprinted internally to who I am. It is a collage of happy, colorful times where I see myself standing up in a classroom reciting my beliefs like saying the pledge of allegiance. My pledge starts with I believe that: a) all students, no matter who they are or where they came from, are worthwhile human beings; b) education is about people and

knowing how to relate to others is extremely important; c) every child should be taken as he/she is and every child is doing the best he/ she can with what he/she has to bring to the situation or experience; d) education is about relationships—that is, forming trusting relationships with each and every member of our school community; e) education is a partnership among many stakeholders; f) we need to empower others to become more than they are through a variety of experiences (i.e., professional growth activities, feedback, evaluations, etc.); g) an educator needs to keep up on the latest research, trends, legislation, political and contextual issues to be effective; h) we all make mistakes and can learn from them. Besides, school is a place to practice concepts and skills and generalize those in the real world; and i) vision and management are interrelated ideas that are crucial to a school's success. I pledge to take into account the best interest of the child at any given moment of time. You have my solemn oath.

In my third snapshot, I am sitting in a porch swing outside my house on a hot summer day thinking to myself that I need a change personally and professionally. Just the day before, the principal asked me to be the assistant principal for the coming school year. I told him that I would ponder this idea. Then I picked up a book entitled, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (Covey, 1989). I scanned, skimmed, and read a few pages. Then the light bulb came on. I realized that the place I have been the most comfortable and successful was in education as far back as I can remember. Using my self-talk and emotional tenacity, I came to the conclusion that taking more risk in my career was what I needed. My decision was clear. Embarking upon the journey of becoming an educational leader would not be easy, but it is one that I was willing to take on to become a more effective person and educator.

My fourth snapshot is a man named Jack Cavanagh. He epitomized the ideal principal. In working with him for seven years, I learned firsthand what it meant to be a special human being and a successful leader all combined in one person. One day, three years ago in the month of October, Jack called me into his office. In his own conversational style, he told me that the district had transferred him to another elementary school. He would be leaving in two weeks. We both started crying. I was shocked and greatly saddened. It was a day I will always remember. We had a connection between the two of us that rarely happens in education. The connection involved trust, mutual respect, communication, validation, support, feedback, empowerment, caring, character and ethics. The best interest of the child was always paramount in making any decision.

To be an effective leader, one needs to be the kind human being like Jack was to me. Who you are is more important than any other aspect in being an effective administrator, as well as expecting the best from yourself and others. One needs to work with all kinds of people. One needs to be able to communicate clearly and concisely. One needs to be ethical and fair in all facets of leadership. One needs to be a problem-solver and help others be part of a team. One needs a vision and the implementation of that vision by making data-driven goals and objectives. Of course, one person cannot embody all the traits of an effective leader. But, one thing is for sure; if there is no relationship with an individual, interactions are usually meaningless and progress towards becoming more than we are will be minimal at best.

My snapshots in time are just that---a few vivid pictures of how I perceive education and leadership. The snapshots to come are on the yellow brick road to Oz. There is no place like home, and my home is in education—a place I can call my own!

In calling education a place of my own, I have identified six critical elements of educational leadership, all of which relate directly to the Iowa Standards for School Leaders. These elements are: displaying communication skills with self and others; using assessment and problem-solving skills; modeling and supporting teaching and learning; collaborating by providing established structures and processes; having knowledge to influence stakeholders in legal and political systems; and being a reflective practitioner as change agent.

Visionary Leadership

Standard one indicates that an educational leader promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. This directly relates to the aspect of effective communication, although all the other standards call for the need of such communication as well.

In focusing on communication as my first critical element, on the average leaders are engaged in one form or another of communication for about 70 percent of their waking moments (Irmsher, 1996). In order for others to establish and maintain a relationship with us, we must have effective communication skills. According to Covey (1989), "in the field of interpersonal relations," we need to "seek first to understand, then to be understood" (p.237). We need first to understand where the person is coming from whether it is a teacher, student, community member and even family member. And even before we understand where they are coming from, we must understand our own intrapersonal communications; in other words, what is our self-talk and/or perceptions about the situation, person, problem and/or crisis. Watson and Thorp (1985) state that

“self-directed messages and thoughts are among the most powerful influences on subsequent behaviors” (p.115). With this in mind, I analyze my own thought processes when dealing with all people. In fact, in situations that are more intense or conflict-based, I communicate with myself about my internal communication. An example would be when a child is having extreme behavior concerns and no interventions attempted are solving the problem. Usually, at first, my internal communication focuses on the need to do something right away, as well as how others are contributing to the problem (i.e., family). However, this kind of thinking creates more reactivity. Instead, it would be more productive to see the problem differently so one can come up with appropriate and effective interventions. (Of course, it would be important to calm myself down to be more responsive to the child, teacher, and family.)

On a personal note, I need to be careful to not take other people’s actions personally. Again, having a negative internal dialogue produces a negative interaction or one that is not focused on what the child needs.

Batton (1989) describes communication as “shared meaning, shared understanding” (p.60). He specifies this definition by stating that certain communication elements are found in effective relationships such as “vulnerability, openness, positive listening, kinetics, high expectations, avoiding judgements, reinforcement, caring and integrity.” Gordon (1978) also indicates that communicating empathy and acceptance is “conductive to a person’s overall psychological health and personal growth” (p.58) in the context of a relationship. By making this the basis of our interactions with others, a leader must demonstrate the skills of an effective communicator. For example, last summer, I arranged for a group of teachers to be part of a training on dealing with oppositional

behavior (Crisis Prevention Institute, 2002). During the training, illustrations of how and when to communicate with a defiant child were demonstrated and taught. Based on this crisis prevention institute model, we must have an open, physical stance, communicate (before the behavior escalates) in a neutral, calm manner giving clearly defined choices and consequences. I have used these techniques naturally; however, practicing them again was helpful to my communications with students, staff and parents. Maintaining a calm, confident demeanor with appropriate nonverbals and clearly stating what you want is the key to successful communication and action.

To go a little further, Covey (1989) identifies the need to “diagnosis before prescribing” (p.242) in relation to communication. As the facilitator of the level two problem-solving team, all team members understand that they must gather information about the child’s concern before coming up with goals and/or interventions. After their information is gathered it is put in a written report. Then during the formal problem-solving meeting with the teacher, parents, and team members, it is my job to facilitate the communication necessary to produce interventions that will help the child be more successful. I must listen carefully to all points of view (or their “take” on the concerns). I also need to respect and reach a consensus as to what we will focus on in helping the child. Near the end of the meeting, a brainstorming session takes place where all team members, as well as parents, contribute ideas. This meeting process epitomizes all the necessary ingredients of successful communications, verbally and nonverbally.

Hopefully, you can see that communication exists first with ourselves—our thoughts, beliefs, and values—and then with others. Interpersonally, communication always takes place in the context of a relationship. I have attempted to allude to this in my paper, as I

believe relationships and our communication style establish, maintain, and enhance our effectiveness as a leader if done in an appropriate manner.

Wolin and Wolin (1993) summarize how parents should effectively communicate with their children as follows:

Competent parents regulate what they say and how they speak to meet their children's needs. Their conversations are clear, flexible, open and responsive. They say what they mean and they encourage their children to speak up and use the phrase I do not understand. Healthy parents also permit children to disagree with them and not feel like traitors. (p.35)

I say that healthy school leaders do the same with students, staff, community and family. Then meaningful relationships will grow and last.

Organizational Leadership

Standard three indicates that the educational leader promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient and effective learning environment. This standard relates to problem solving, although, again, all standards could be included in the critical element of using assessment and problem-solving skills.

School leaders use problem-solving skills every day in order to make sound decisions for the whole school community. In some cases, problem-solving does not require a lot of input on the part of others. Schumaker and Sommers (2001) indicate that there are times in which the principal "does not have time to get input and must make the decision himself or herself" (p.21), even though shared decisions are desirable. On the other hand, some problems, depending on the nature, scope and intensity do require more input

from staff and sometimes parents and students. In that, the administrator needs to determine what problems need input and which ones do not. The uses of problem solving strategies are varied and pertain to all facets of the leader's responsibilities. Villani (1999) states that it is the "leader's role to facilitate joint problem-solving" (p.48).

Whatever the strategy being used, the school administrator must demonstrate the ability to reach consensus or have a win/win perspective in solving problems as described by Covey (1989).

To process this critical element in school leadership, some questions came to mind that I have thought about before when assessing and solving problems. Does the problem need more input? Does the problem need to be focused on right now? Is the problem a safety concern? Is there a problem? Can others handle the problem instead of the school leader or can the school leader coach others to eventually solve the problem in order to empower them? To answer this last question, Hughes (1999) identifies two questions that will help with determining if we should seek input from others. The two questions are: "Is the issue relevant to others in the organization? Do others in the organization have expertise to solve the issue?" (p.9) He then states that if both answers are no, then involvement in decision making is not required. If either answer is yes, then we need to engage others in some way to look at alternatives. However, there are times, even though it is relevant to others and expertise is obvious, that the principal needs to remediate the problem on his/her own. For instance, in late October, the principal and other staff noted a concern with students before school. Students were standing outside the building and in the corridor area during this time. It was somewhat common that the safety of students was diminished due to fights, being in unsupervised areas, and not

doing something useful. The principal did not seek much input about this problem before making a change. He decided to structure the before school time differently right away. He had all students come inside and sit in the hallways and instructed them to read or do homework. As a result, students were safe and were able to do school-related tasks. This just illustrates that due to time and the nature of the problem, the principal acted swiftly to solve the concern before escalation occurred for the safety of students.

As we can see somewhat already, the school leader needs to assess the concern first.

According to Mc Kay & Ralston (1999):

The hardest part of solving any problem is defining the problem. Every good administrator knows that in most situations there are two parallel issues at work.

What is happening and what is really going on. The secret is to be able to look at the situation from several perspectives and weigh the pros and cons of the available solution. (p.69)

To cite a case in point related to defining the problem first and assessing all viewpoints, a fifth grade student comes to mind. At the beginning of this school year, this student started having behavioral issues, unlike year's past. These behavioral concerns were significant. They included refusing to follow directions, especially in special classes (i.e., Art, P.E., and music) and at recess. He would also get into teachers' faces, "test" them consistently, call students inappropriate names, and not respond to the principal when given a direction. In fact, one day the student decided to not follow directions and wanted some materials back the teacher had taken from him. He then ran out of class and outside the school building. He finally came back into the school raging. Three staff members

had to restrain him and the police were called to take him to the hospital for a mental health evaluation.

When we first saw hints of his behavior, we thought it was only related to his parents fighting at home. However, after gaining more information and seeing the problem from different perspectives, we found out that his parents were getting a divorce. His dad was moving out. (His dad was a person our student looked up to.) We also found out that dad had abused mom emotionally and physically and the child had witnessed these encounters for years. It appeared that the child had taken on the behaviors of his father. He had learned to act, feel, and think as an abuser. Further, based on the hospital's evaluation, we learned that he had attention deficit disorder, had a language processing problem and his mother could not control his behaviors as a result of the father leaving the home and having all of the control over his son. In not looking at all parts of this problem, we were unable to define what the problem was, let alone come up with appropriate interventions. After all these pieces of the puzzle were put on the table, the school was able to design and implement appropriate interventions for this very special child.

From a more global perspective, Seyfarth (1999) states that principals spend a good deal of their time with what are called disturbance problems (i.e., student fights, flu epidemic, crisis management, power outages, etc.) Additionally, principals spend their time on routine concerns such as attendance, fire drills, and school assemblies. However, Seyfarth goes on to say "solutions are more likely to be effective if they involve people throughout the school" (p.83).

At this time of year, we, as a school, look at how we will use our "allocation points" (i.e., number of regular education staff and associates) for the next year. These allocation

points were reduced by more than one point due to budget cuts. Therefore, we would have to reduce our staff by one teacher and then decide how to restructure our students and/or teachers to accommodate this change. In order to do this, the leadership team (consisting of two people from each of our five school improvement committees) met to come up with a process to seek input from all staff. We decided to explain the allocation point system to all staff and then have the staff divide up into four groups to brainstorm different allocation plans. From there, the leadership team would narrow the plans down to two and then the principal would decide upon the final plan. Upon completion of this process, staff felt as if they had a “voice” in deciding how our points were being used.

Problem-solving is an integral part of school leadership. I feel that without having skills in assessing and solving problems, a principal could not be successful. Conflicts will arise everyday. The leader needs to be ready to determine what, if anything, needs to be done about the concern whether it be predetermined or in process. Certainly, at times, the administrator will have to think “outside the box” to solve difficult problems. He/she can be a role model so others can do the same. And, as we all know, “with a win/win solution, all parties feel good about a decision and feel committed to the action plan” (Covey, 1989, p.207).

Instructional Leadership

Standard two indicates that the educational leader promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff development. This standard related directly to my next critical element of modeling and supporting teaching and learning.

Effective school leaders are always in the process of modeling appropriate behaviors

to others in the school environment, especially that of teaching and learning. In fact,

Cunningham & Cordiero (2003) indicate the following:

If learning is important in a school, the principal will model the behaviors of an active learner. Principals who read broadly and remain knowledgeable in their fields, who participate actively in professional development opportunities, and who see their professional work as modeling the beliefs and behaviors they espouse for others in schools. (p. 167)

In our modeling, we also need to support teaching and learning by other action-oriented activities such as participation in classroom instruction, providing training and development to staff, promoting a positive school climate and analyzing data to determine how we can make instruction the most effective. Moreover, principals are coaches and facilitators who help students, teachers, and other staff understand the mental models and basic assumptions of teaching and learning in particular schools and communities as stated by Hart & Bredson (1996).

First, the school administrator can demonstrate these behaviors by participating in professional development. In other words, “this is letting your walk match your talk and being a true role model” (Wilmore, 2002, p.38). In working with my current principal, I see many examples of engaging in professional development activities. To be more specific, when the principal and I were in the process of developing a schoolwide behavior plan, he and I attended workshops last summer on this very topic. We then researched information on the Internet and in other printed materials to gain more knowledge and expertise in implementing the behavior support process. Additionally, in February of this year, I, again, attended another workshop on positive behavior support to

help the staff fine-tune our existing behavior program. A well prepared and researched based effort made our endeavors successful with students, staff and parents and created a positive learning environment.

To progress a little further, this current principal decided to have all the staff participate in literacy training. (The principal also attends district literacy training throughout the whole school year on a weekly basis.) He made this training possible during collaboration in-service days so staff would not have to spend additional time after the regular school day. During the training, the principal would participate in all activities as if he was the learner just like the rest of the staff. He was modeling the process of learning. He would add comments from time to time to consistently promote his commitment to the improvement of teaching and learning. It was exciting to see how he allowed another staff member to lead the training while remaining an active participant. Seyfarth (1999) agrees with this approach. "Administering a school involves working with staff members with a broad range of specializations and principals cannot be experts in all these areas" (p.168).

In applying what the principal had learned, he and another district literacy trainer observed all staff members by conducting a sweep. A sweep is spending a brief time in each class during a literacy block to write down how the teacher is implementing the strategies they were taught during literacy training. Then the results were shared with the staff in general. We worked to improve areas of need in order for all classrooms to provide the best instruction possible (without making this activity something personal.)

Besides being a model in the area of teaching and learning, the school administrator needs to display the qualities of an instructional leader. "Improving the instructional

program constitutes the foremost function of the principal" (Lipman, Rankin, & Hoeh, 1985, p.29). Observed examples of this are, again, noted in the current principal. One example of great significance is supporting inclusion as a way to help all students receive the best education possible. After many years of what educators call "pull-out" programming for special education students, this principal, with buy-in from the staff, was able to implement a change that is supported by research and best practice. Although our building is not full inclusion, this structural change produced a growth in reading scores in our building, especially among the special education students. Most staff members felt more support from each other as collaboration occurred more at grade level meeting with special education and Title I teachers.

Intertwined in all instructional improvement is the importance of using data to enhance student performance. Leithwood, Aitken & Jantzi (2001) point out the need for the school to collect a "variety of types of data about individual student progress" (p.92). These would be anecdotal records, observations, surveys, inventories, district tests, other criterion-referenced tests, running records, ITBS scores, behavior rating scales and checklists, etc. Sometimes there might be a need to get additional ideas and data to support a student's academic and behavioral progress. Problem-solving and child study teams would be examples of this very process. Data would need to be collected systematically with baselines and summative information to ascertain the effectiveness of interventions and/or the need to have more specialized assessment, data, interventions, and service delivery (i.e., having a child study team evaluate the child and go through the staffing process). To emphasize my point further, Wilmore (2002) advocates that "one

must study every aspect of student data to individualize and focus on the individual rather than think how lucky the student is to get to come to school and spend the days with us” (p.37-38).

A prime example of using student data is illustrated in my working on some kindergarten cases this year through the problem-solving process. There were five or six kindergarten students that were not achieving up to kindergarten standards in the context of district and classrooms norms. I prepared formal reports with data including samples of work, pre and post kindergarten assessment information, observations, and letter, sound and shape recognition, reading levels, and behavior management plans with pre and post measures. Interventions (based on the data) were designed and implemented. In some cases, the interventions were not as successful as we had hoped. Therefore, we considered retention for one or two of the individual students. In advocating for what was in the best interest of the student, I helped the teachers complete a retention scale that would be used in the decision-making process to determine if retention was a possibility or were other options more appropriate. I also enlisted the help of the psychologist so he could give feedback to the parent and teacher on how to interpret the results of the retention scale and look at other data on the child. Taking into account individual student information and looking at all forms of data, we were able to make our decision based on objectivity and our professional background and experience.

Sergiovanni (2001) stated that “principals will need to emphasize professional and renewal improvement strategies” (p.246). I cannot emphasize this enough. Supporting staff members in becoming the best they can be in terms of teaching and learning (and as a person) is crucial to a successful school. Next year staff development and training is

planned and carefully thought out. We are ready to present workshops on functional behavior assessment and literacy. We conducted a survey to help decide how to meet the staff's needs for training. "In professional development models, the teacher's capacities, needs and interest are paramount" (Sergiovanni, 2001, p.249).

In the context of professional development, one must learn in a variety of ways. For example, in 2001, we had a student who was frequently in the office for not following directions. We decided to have an outside consultant come in and do a functional behavior assessment. I was part of that process as the counselor. I was interviewed by the consultant along with other staff members. After completing the assessment, the consultant gave her written and oral feedback to the child study team, some of which included the function of his behavior, the patterns in his behavior, how staff was reinforcing him in a negative way, and how mental models and systematic thinking are part of the assessment. Through this experience, I learned a great deal. This experience was not formal in nature but done informally to benefit a small group of staff and most importantly, the student. To this day I have her recommendations in my office and look at them often in helping other children to become more successful.

As an aside to the above, what comes to mind is a personal example of me developing as a professional. When I first started in education, I was somewhat reserved, yet motivated to be the best I could be and helping students to do the same. However, I did not think I had the capacity to lead. Another teacher wrote me a personal note and indicated I could do it. She complimented me over and over again for my leadership abilities at different stages in my career. With great pride, I have lead. I have progressed to a point that has surprised me to do this day! Now it is my opportunity to help others do

what she did for me. As Covey (1989) nicely summarizes my point, “to keep progressing, we must learn, commit and do- learn, commit and do-learn, commit and do again” (p.306). I hope I have an opportunity to make this vision of instructional leadership a reality in the near future.

Collaborative Leadership

Standard four indicates that a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interest and needs, and mobilizing community resources. This standard relates to all facets of a school community and most notably focuses on my next critical element of utilizing various structures and processes to access resources internally and externally for the enhancement of school achievement.

Giuliani (2003) cites a favorite quotation by anthropologist Margaret Mead: “A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has” (p.103). Collaboration is just that— a small group of thoughtful educators who can make a difference. As an educational leader, one of our most important duties is to “create an environment where teamwork can thrive” (Harvey, 2002, p.36). In such an environment, teamwork divides the effort and increases the effect twofold. In fact, “leaders who are able team players generate an atmosphere of friendly collegiality and are themselves models of respect, helpfulness, and cooperation” (Goleman, 2002, p.256).

Collaboration consists of a variety of structures and processes. For example, these structures may include formal and informal meetings (i.e., staff and grade level meetings), hallway conversations or “one-legged” interviews, study groups, evaluation processes,

and peer coaching. "Schools wanting to institute effective collaboration should also examine their established structures for working together" (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001, p.74). In this examination, educators need to ascertain what structures will improve instruction and increase student achievement.

One such structure to improve instruction and student achievement is inclusion. Inclusion is a prime example of collaboration at its best. As indicated earlier in this paper, inclusion entails the work of many individuals to make it happen effectively. Mayrowetz & Weinstein (1999) indicate that their research illustrates that "a variety of individuals in multiple roles, including people outside the school, have unique contributions to make in creating schools for all children" (p. 445). In the inclusion process at my school, we include the principal, parents, staff, students, consultants, and therapists to make the educational process, for any child that receives special education services, a successful one. A case in point would be a fifth grade special education student with many needs (i.e., academic, social, and medical). The regular education teacher and the special education teacher spend time working on how to support this particular student on a daily basis. These dedicated professionals accommodate his skill deficits in handwriting by having him do less written work, having him give answers orally, having him utilize appropriate pencil grips and by having him take frequent breaks if he gets tired of writing. He comes into the regular classroom for subjects that he will be successful in academically, yet benefit from socially. I, frequently, monitor how he doing in this inclusionary model of collaborative education by consulting with his teachers, parents, and other staff providing services (i.e., nurse, occupational therapist). In addition, to meet his social/emotional needs, I have formed a student group of six to

support him in having friendships in the common areas of the school such as the lunch room and playground. These efforts truly take all of us to make his education a successful one.

Not only is inclusion an example of a school wide effort of collaboration, but an all encompassing program at our school called the tools for success is an exemplary collaborative endeavor. These tools for success include dependability, compatibility, social skills and good attendance. This successful programming involved all stakeholders in the process. For instance, two students from each classroom participate in a success council once a month. I teach the success council representatives about one of the tools of success each month and then they take the information and skills back to their respective classrooms to empower other students to use that tool as well. In addition, members from the community talk at an assembly once a month on how they use the tools for success in their careers. Parents sign a tools for success compact at the beginning of the year to indicate their responsibility and commitment in reinforcing these life long characteristics. Tools for success is integrated in all daily activities and routines. In fact, the tools for success code is recited daily in each classroom to teach students the importance of using the tools to be a successful student. Moreover, students that display the tools for success behavior consistently will demonstrate their skills each month at Hy-Vee, our business partner, in the various departments in the store (i.e., flower shop, bakery, customer service).

To elaborate on our partnerships, the community plays a part in collaboration by volunteering their time, energy and commitment to those students who may need extra support. Wilmore (2000) states that “many schools have developed creative partnerships

with unique community groups by thinking outside the box to help students have they need to succeed or simply have a better existence” (p.69). We have such programs at my school including Hy-Vee and the Big Brothers, Big Sisters organization. The people in these organizations read to our students, tutor them in academic areas of need, as well as mentor our students to become productive members of society.

Other resources these organizations provide are food baskets and gifts for the holidays, participation on career days, and a thousand dollar saving bond for the fifth grade student that has demonstrated the tools for success consistently throughout his/her elementary school years. Wilmore (2000) summarizes this point by indicating that “what others may not be able to supply in money, they may be able to supply in time, talents, expertise or other resources” (p.70).

In supplying my time, the other day I was in the lunch room and I noticed that the lunch line was very long. I decided to be part of the team and help the lunch room personnel by putting food on the students’ trays to move the line along faster. The students asked me why I was helping. I responded to them by saying that I am part of the team. We all need to help each other. I felt so good inside for modeling what I truly value—teamwork and helpfulness. “It is a collaborative process that should be the product of an effective work culture. Members of a dynamic organization internalize and live the vision” (McKay & Ralston, 1999, p.20).

Political Leadership

Standard six indicates that 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 relates to the critical element of having knowledge of the legal and political system and advocating therein.

As an educational leader, one must have the knowledge to be able to influence those in a larger context in arenas such as the political and legal system in order to meet the needs of our children. According to Wilmore (2000), "it is impossible to advocate for these needs if you do not have the appropriate knowledge of political, social, economic, legal, and cultural issues" (p.94). Hughes(1999) reinforces this concept by stating that one should "lead the instructional program effectively while administrating a plethora of policies, regulations, state statues and federal law controlling various facets of behavior exhibited by students and professional staff" (p.292). In effect, without knowledge and skill, the school leader will not be able to effectively make decisions that will directly and indirectly impact the school community.

In that same vein, I have been given the charge to facilitate the attendance team at our school. By facilitating such a team, I need to be aware of state regulations related to compulsory school attendance and how my school district adheres to those regulations. For instance, our attendance policy dictates that students may not have more than six unexcused absences per semester. Therefore, administrating this policy requires one to educate families and the community about such policies, as well as provide proactive and reactive remedies to attendance concerns. In a more remedial stance, if parents did not send their children to school due to unexcused reasons, they can be referred to a truancy court with the possibility of a monetary fine and/or jail time. Without this kind of

knowledge, the administrator would not be able to apply such sanctions to parents and students and properly make decisions that could impact that child's education now and in the future.

Turning to advocating for a child in the legal system, I had an opportunity to participate in a child welfare mediation. This type of mediation is used when the family has many needs—be that social, emotional, behavioral, familial, therapeutic—that are impacting the child's functioning at home and school. During this mediation last Spring, I advocated for the child to be seen by another medical doctor due to the inconsistencies in the taking of this child's medication. In fact, the child would not take the medication for his mother and sometimes would spit out the medication at school. Without the medication, the child's behavior was defiant and erratic. Additionally, I expressed by deepest empathy for this family, yet, at the same time, advocated for more therapeutic services in the home to help support the medication management. At the end of the mediation process, more services were put in place and the child was seen by another medical professional to assess his medication concerns. Wilmore (2000) clearly states that “you cannot just advocate for the easy-to-teach, the likeable, or the college bound. You must be the face and voice for all students regardless of their circumstances” (p.94).

In a larger scope, my principal had sent out an e-mail to our staff indicating a chance to participate in a public forum related to issues on education with Governor Vilsack. Although, I was not able to attend, the principal called on us to be more “political”, if you will, to voice our opinions on the latest budget cuts in our district as well as others throughout the state. He indicated that budget cuts were going to be much deeper next year if we did not advocate for the education of all children. This is an example of having

knowledge of a larger context and trying to assert influence and persuasion in order to vie for our most precious resource—the students we teach. Ramsey (1999) reaffirms that notion that “if you want to develop into an effective educational leader, it's okay to be political” (p.94).

Advocating politically may also include the knowledge of available resources and the means by which we can obtain those resources. Hughes (1999) indicates that “with limited resources, principals will either vie for the same resources or develop ways to collaborate and cooperate with those resources” (p.144). Those resources could mean applying for educational grants. An example of a grant would include the drug free school grant administered by the federal government. Such grant money has contributed to having six additional elementary counselors in our district, as well as numerous other educational endeavors (i.e., mentoring, conflict management programming, professional staff development and training). Whatever the resource may be, the principal needs to use knowledge, skill and influence to advocate for funding, services, and/or programs in a larger context that will enhance the education of all students regardless of background.

Ethical Leadership

Standard five indicates that the educational leader promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness and in an ethical manner. This, in part, relates to being a reflective practitioner in order to be a change agent whereas the change agent aspect relates to standard one stated on a previous page in this research paper.

Effective school leaders are reflective practitioners. Cunningham & Cordiero (2003) described reflective practice as “staying abreast of the latest research in practice, researching your own practice, experimenting with new approaches, reflecting on your

own approach, and sharing your insights” (p.168). Further, in my class on Leadership, Dr. Reed outlined some tenets of reflective practice. These tenets include engagement in a cycle of thought and action based on practice, portraying the leader as a creative artist rather than an engineer, and calling for personal/professional transformation due to action. It would be easy to keep busy performing tasks and solving problems and lose sight of our own personal development and the needs of the organization. A prime example of this very notion is my participation on the leadership team. In my reflections of that team, I realized that we were not working as a unit, but, instead, we were working as individuals in a group setting vying for what we wanted. The leader did not promote or enhance a cohesive group effort; the team was performing various tasks to create school improvement without considering the development of group processes and dynamics.

A reflective school leader creates opportunities for change. For example, in acting in role of assistant principal, I had an opportunity to help a child that had been sent to the office several times. Most of his misbehavior was noncompliance with teachers. When I worked with this child, I would try to discuss the inappropriate behavior with him. However, this proved unsuccessful. I also called his dad whenever he came to the office and explained the situation including what were the consequences. After awhile, I realized that all of these interactions with the child and his father were increasing the misbehavior. The principal and I discussed my insight into the situation. I thought it would be better if we did not interact with the child (or at least keep it to a minimum) and not call his dad. The thinking behind this was that these transactions were reinforcing to the child. We decided to take this approach. In a few weeks, the child’s behavior

decreased, and he was only sent to the office a few times after the implementation of that intervention. This reflective thinking produced a positive change in this child's life.

Gilbert (1992) reinforces the notion of reflective thinking by indicating that "only when one has a broader, more effective way of thinking about relationships is there a chance of improving one's functioning in them" (p.10).

To align with this thinking, in mentoring other teachers informally, I have been asked to give them feedback on various topics. One teacher indicated that she did not know what to do with her students who were consistently misbehaving. I observed the classroom on many occasions and realized that she was waiting too long to discipline some of the at-risk children and thus, not giving them the consistency that they needed. I made reference to my observations, and after some trial and error, the teacher made some changes in the timeliness and consistency in her discipline procedures. Although, it was not perfect by any means, there were some substantial changes in the amount of student misbehavior. Students realized that she would act on their misbehavior more promptly and not accept certain behaviors that were interfering with their learning and the learning of others.

Similarly, another teacher asked if I would observe her classroom and give her some behavioral strategies to deal with those students who were consistently off task. In my observations, I noticed that she did not have enough structure in her classroom. Students were getting up during her presentation to do various things unrelated to the lesson at hand. In my feedback to the teacher, I indicated that students needed to know the expectations of how to behave before the presentation occurred to prevent off task behaviors instead of reacting to them. The teacher decided to integrate this strategy into

her classroom and students came to understand the importance of rules and what they meant. As a result, students felt more secure, had greater productivity with their on task behaviors because of the enhancement of functioning in an expective environment (Batton, 1989).

To look at a broader perspective in terms of a reflective practitioner creating opportunities for change, our staff indicated on many occasions that they were dissatisfied with the current behavior support process in the building the year before last. Due to this, the principal and I researched various discipline models and then presented this information to some staff members who volunteered to work on this behavior improvement initiative. These staff members were very instrumental in providing the credibility and support we needed to make changes in this area. In the fall, these staff members, along with myself, shared our behavior support processes with the entire staff. We also asked for feedback on all parts of the process. We modified some the aspects to the discipline plan and then implemented this into our daily routines with students. Along the way, we asked for input as to how it was working and if other changes needed to be made.

The change indicated above was possible due to staff wanting the changes, as well as them taking ownership of the process. Wilmore (2002) describes this simply by saying that "people support what they help build" (p.24). In fact, the principal and I were only facilitating the means by which they could perform these tasks. Along the way, the staff members, who volunteered to work in this initiative, helped other teachers implement the strategies outlined in our plan. They were, in a sense, leaders themselves in making this plan a success. Leithwood (1992) contends also that a transformational leader is

sensitive to organization building, to developing shared vision, to creating productive work cultures, and to distributing leadership to others.

On the other hand, a reflective practitioner, as the change agent, has to understand that there are barriers to change. "A critical aspect of leading change is understanding why people resist change and how to overcome resistance" (Daft, 2002, p. 607). Additionally, "what leaders often fail to realize is that change, especially significant change, will force others to give up things they value greatly" (Silberman, 2003, p.325). An illustration of this process of change comes to mind when our school was told a couple years ago that the principal would be transferring to another school in mid-October and that we would be getting a new principal. This change was significant and most staff members perceived this as a "bad" situation instead of an opportunity for new possibilities. The staff really liked the principal who was leaving. He had excellent interpersonal skills and supported them in their endeavors to be the best that they could be. Obviously, the "new" principal was not the same. His style was quite different, and he did not seek a lot of input before making decisions at first. He was more assertive in his leadership and could verbalize his disagreements with staff members very easily. The staff was not used to this kind of interaction. That year most of the staff, that had been there for awhile, transferred to another building. They felt as if they had lost significant part of how they operated as educators and their philosophy how things should be done was in direct conflict with the new principal. Some could not get through the grieving process long enough to see that this, too, would pass and they could learn something from this change. I stayed and have learned a great deal from this principal. He has made some substantial changes in a short

time with a staff that understands and sees that change is needed and to stay in the status quo does not help them or the students we serve.

Covey (1989) describes change as a painful process, motivated by a higher purpose, by the willingness to subordinate what you think you want now for what you want later. I think this aptly sums up the need for change in the best interest of any organization, especially in education where students are our most valuable assets and a reflective leader, as change agent, facilitates the process of change by shared decision-making.

In conclusion, education is a place I can call my own. In this place, snapshots of my educational experiences laid the foundation for my pursuit of being a school leader. In developing myself personally and professionally, I identified six critical elements of educational leadership including displaying effective communication skills, using assessment and problem-solving skills, modeling and supporting teaching and learning, collaborating by providing established structures and processes, having knowledge to influence stakeholders in political and legal systems, and being a reflective practitioner as a change agent. These critical elements are essential aspects found in the Iowa Standards for School Leaders. By applying this knowledge and skill as an educational leader, I pledge to take into account the best interest of the child at any given moment of time. You have my solemn oath.

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