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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

Leadership is a quality that one wants when leading a school or leading any group of people. The way to describe leadership would be strong, fair, and data driven. All leaders possess many different combinations of the above leadership qualities.

My values, beliefs and the critical elements will go a long way in helping me become the leader I want to become in the near future. They will give me direction and a place for me to come back to when I seem to be falling out of place. My beliefs will always be a part of the way I want to lead a school because they are the values by which I will lead my life. The elements of ethical decision making, creating positive climate, preparing for change, and communication will always be important because they encompasses so much of my beliefs. In each area of the elements, a common theme appears like treating people with respect and doing what is right for students. When I am able to carry out the beliefs, elements, and common themes in my reflective research paper then I will be a great leader!

This Research Paper by: Brian M. Moretz

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Master of Arts in Education.

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Dr. David Else

Personal Characteristics

Leadership is a quality that one wants when leading a school or leading any group of people. The way to describe leadership would be strong, fair, and data driven. All leaders possess many different combinations of the above leadership qualities.

Values

I actually found teaching by accident. I was in college and needed to declare a major. I had experimented with other majors, but I didn't get a good feel for anything. I finally realized I wanted to help kids and I wanted to stay involved with athletics. My advisor said it sounds like you should be a physical education teacher. I wasn't real keen on the idea, but said I would give it a try. I went through school studying to become a teacher and fighting it all the way. Then in my final semester, I was off to complete my student teaching experience. Student teaching convinced me to teach, and from that experience I knew I wanted to be a teacher.

I enjoy trying to help students in every aspect of their lives, whether as a role model or a facilitator of dream making. Also, I believe I can help in teaching them new and useful skills and knowledge to use for the rest of their lives. I will be able to use my life experiences as a guide to help students that are in trouble or on the straight and narrow. The students are the reason teachers teach!

After college, I thought I could change the whole system of education. As I become a veteran teacher, I realize I can't change anything without running to the principal for approval. The only thing I can change is what I do in my physical education classes. I can develop a better curriculum and model positive attitudes to students. Basically, I can only do a small part in the educational system, and my part is teaching classes to the best of my ability. I realize that the principal has more opportunities to help all students and to make the school a better place.

Beliefs

A school needs to have teachers and administrators that understand what should be going on in school for students to be successful. Basically, the school system needs great teachers, great administrators, and great stakeholders. The rest will take care of itself if these three fall into place.

A major part of a school is the teachers. Teachers need to understand their job, and they need to do their job to the best of their ability. Teachers need to be knowledgeable in their content area. They need to know how to utilize different teaching strategies to reach all children. Also, a great teacher needs to set classroom expectations for students which include behavior guidelines, grading guidelines, classroom guidelines, and student work guidelines. All teachers need to have these expectations set to be successful in a classroom.

In order for student learning to be maximized, the administrator needs to lead the school by motivating students and staff, creating a positive learning

environment, and making sound decisions. While these three sound like different roles for a principal, they are actually all intertwined to the job of instructional leader. The administrator must positively influence the workplace in order to make it an enjoyable place of work. When it is an enjoyable atmosphere then the students and staff will benefit academically and socially.

One of the ways an administrator can influence his or her school is by having integrity. Integrity is the ability to do the right thing no matter if it is popular or unpopular. The ability to do the right thing in the principal's office will create a positive outlook in the building. When people are being treated with honesty and integrity, the school will be conducive for learning and teaching. Integrity must be part of all things a principal does during the day or year.

Listening is a form of communication that administrators must possess in order to lead schools. If a principal is a good listener then a lot of the problems in a day can be avoided. With listening, a principal will hear the entire story and will not jump to the wrong conclusions and decision. A principal will hear both sides to a story and then make decisions based on facts and precedents set in similar situations. Listening is a vital role in being an effective leader.

In conclusion, my beliefs seem to be simple but difficult to follow. As a principal, these beliefs will be an important piece of the administrative position. My beliefs can be translated into critical elements for school leadership, and those elements are ethical decision-making, creating a positive school climate,

preparing for change, and improving all forms of communication. When I follow these elements, I will be a successful principal.

Ethical Decision Making

There are words such as integrity, honesty, respect, and trustworthiness. The main theme of these words is ethics. The term ethics means “the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with a moral duty and obligation” (Mish, 1984, p. 426). In the role of leadership, ethics should be demonstrated in every aspect of being the leader. (Daft) notes as a leader it is important to set the example you want followers to live by. Establish an ethical climate by putting moral values into action.

“Leadership depends on trust, and trust is grounded in a shared understanding about what is working and what isn’t” (Johnson, 1998, p.14). A leader with ethics is someone who is trustworthy, honest and genuinely concerned for the people around him or her. Leaders with ethics have a conscience in their bodies, and they feel ill when they are making a bad choice or decision. This may be a great indicator of making the right decision. A leader must possess these moral qualities to reflect positives on the staff. These reflections are in everyday conversations or in a problem-solving atmosphere. Ethical decisions are the backbone of every leadership position in this world, and a leader must remember this at all times. It reminds me of a line from the movie Remember the Titans, “attitude is a reflection of leadership”. If a leader can remember that actions and

attitude are closely watched, then the whole educational community can be a better place.

How does an educational leader ethically treat people in a day at the office? As Wilmore (2002) states “A principal demonstrates respect for stakeholders through honesty; holds confidences and treats everyone with dignity”(p. 81). The principal might have to deal with a problem with a child, a teacher, a parent, or the superintendent. In all these situations, the principal needs to treat each just like the others are treated in similar situations. In being an ethical administrator, the principal has to set a standard in which he or she will handle each situation in school. I would set the standard as all have the right to be heard, but they might not get the answers that they want to hear. It is important to be honest and blatantly truthful with people so there are no misunderstandings. “Be fair to everyone and the best will come for you in the school and community” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 82).

My Process of Ethics

Being ethical, I want to be able to make decisions I can stand behind. In making a good decision, it is important for a principal to hear both sides of the story. The decisions I make will have an impact on multiple lives, the person who is in my office and myself. It will be important to follow my instincts and experiences in making decisions. The first objective in making decisions is to get the facts. Secondly, I will research similar situations that have happened in our

school or other schools. Based on all the information gathered over a short time, I will weigh my options for clearing up the difficulty. It would be a time of reflection on the whole process before it goes to setting a standard or precedent in the school. Once the reflection is over, then I must clearly communicate the decision to the parties involved in the outcome. It is important to remember each and every situation is different so outcomes may be different!

Being visibly fair and consistent with students, teachers and parents is how I will get the ethics ball rolling. Role modeling will play a major part in leading the school in becoming aware of how to treat each other. I would want them to see me treating each of them with the respect and courtesy they deserve. I am aware this will be a long and demanding process, and I will have to do more than this to ensure an ethical group of people in the school.

Establishing an ethics committee would expand the awareness of the school. This committee would include students, teachers, parents from our district, and the principal. We would have regular meetings to discuss what we can do at school to keep the community aware of the importance of ethics. For instance, the committee might help bring in speakers or we might have a community wide project dealing with ethics. Ethics needs to be a community wide effort or it will never happen as a whole. We can teach it all we want, but if the students do not see it from every teacher and every community member, it will not be reinforced for later use. Hernandez & Seem (2004) note, "Adults need

to be able to model the behavior they expect from students, and the students need to see that respectful and courteous behavior is expected of the adults as well as them” (p. 259).

The first major role for the committee would be to develop a code of ethics for the school system. This code would be the law of the school. This law would become the expectations of our students. Students are actually taught for the first two days of school: behavioral expectations. The program is designed to incorporate strategies associated with positive behavioral interventions and supports (Taylor-Greene & Kartub). These expectations would be displayed on walls and implemented by everybody involved in school. With students understanding what is expected from them in school and in the community, then we can concentrate on staying consistent and making good choices.

Involving all in the community would make our code a community shared code of ethics. When people have ownership, they are much more committed to its success. Even though the community will be helping with the code, it will be difficult to have all agree on every part of the code. In developing the code, the most important aspect is to have all of the people come to a consensus about what is in the code of ethics. Consensus means all the stakeholders are ready to support the code without sabotage. With the code of ethics developed, then the members of the school community must put it in place.

After putting the code in place, members of the school community need to do a consistent job of enforcing the code. A code of ethics board would enforce the code. This board would include student leaders, community leaders, teachers, and the principal. The board would be the ruling agent of the school. For example, if a student were caught cheating on a science test, the board would act as a jury. The person caught cheating would have an opportunity to defend himself or herself. The board would hear the case and make a decision. This could be done for all facets of education: fine arts, athletics, and academics. This system calls for consistency, and the students who test the system would know they are being judged not only by the principal but also by their peers. The goal is better student choices.

Alignment with Standard

The ethical decision making of an educational leader is directly aligned with Standard Five. "An administrator must promote success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and with ethical manner"(Wilmore, 2002, p. 80). The standard says it all because if a school doesn't have a fair person for a leader, the school and the community will be in for a long and trying time. For example, there will always be controversy concerning the conduct of the principal. An educational leader can make mistakes, but the one mistake he or she can't make is being unethical. The reputation of being unethical will always follow a person as they travel down the road of life. Being fair, having integrity, and following

Standard Five could avoid it all. It is essential for a school to have a strong ethical leader.

Creating School Climate

The principal has to create a school climate that is conducive to learning and student success. Welsh (2000) professes school climate is the unwritten beliefs, values, and attitudes that become the style of interaction between students, teachers and administrators. School climate sets the parameters of acceptable behavior among all actors, and it assigns individual and institutional responsibility for school safety. When I can create this type of attitude with the stakeholders, then the climate for learning and succeeding will be in our school.

Community Interest

As I start my quest for positive school climate, I must start in the community in which I am working. I must realize the strengths of the community to develop positive school climate. As Peterson and Deal (1998) state "A principal needs to check the history and facts around the school before they try to reshape it" (p. 30). For example, if I were to go into a school with a tradition of being successful in athletics and wanted to change the school's tradition to being strong in fine arts, then this would not be the way to develop positive school climate. The principal will be battling the community, and he or she will not create the atmosphere that students need to succeed. "Instead a principal should develop and honor positive school traditions" (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p. 29).

As a new principal, I will be visible in the community to help create positive school climate. The way being visible will help school climate will be when people see my family take an active roll in the community in which you live. "This will exemplify your willingness to make the school a welcome place" (Uchyima & Wolf, 2002, p. 81). The way you portray yourself in the public will go a long way in contributing to the climate at your school.

Plans for Involvement

I will have to be an advocate for the school so people will start to talk and gain interest in what is being done in school. There are many ways to get people into your building, but the way I would go about it is to have a "meet the principal night". All community members will be invited and the plan is to meet my family and me. I relate this to having a meeting with parents for a sport you are coaching. I believe relationships can start from a meeting of this sort. These relationships in turn can help create a positive school climate and a better school in general.

Involvement with Teachers

Teachers are essential in creating positive school climate. The teachers are important because they are the climate control and the climate messengers to every home in the district. Individual meetings with teachers will enable me to know each teacher as a person as well as a professional. Azzara (2000) states, "People are the heart of our profession" (p. 64). The idea is to get to know the

staff and to know what the staff is thinking about our school. Then I can use the information from the teachers meetings to support the idea of a positive school climate.

The next step with the teachers would be to set goals for creating a positive learning environment. In order to create this environment, the principal needs to have a plan for reaching this goal. "In a principal's plan, he should create a team of teachers to get new ideas. Then have another group decide if it is worthwhile for the rest of the staff to hear. This allows teachers to make decisions on what's going to be done at school" (Uchyima & Wolf, 2002, p. 81). The first part of the plan would be to have the teaching staff involved in creating the ideas and suggestions on what is going to happen in school. When the teachers have this ownership, then they will make a greater investment in developing the goal of positive school climate.

Principal's Impact

The other important factor in developing a positive school climate is being visible at extra-curricular events. It is important for the students, staff, and community members to see you take interest in what is going on in their lives. When an administrator does take this approach in leading, then the leader will be effective. Griffith (1999) notes that effective principal leadership was characterized as a dichotomy of instructional leader versus manager of school operations, interpersonal relations, and competing demands.

Another important part of the leader developing a positive school climate would be influencing the day. The principal must be the person who sheds light on a good day and finds the positive in a bad day. Basically, the principal is the one who controls the mood of the climate in school. Wilmore (2002) states “It is up to the principal to encourage others when they are down and to help pick them up again” (p. 34). This is a very important part of creating a positive school climate!

Student Involvement

The next group I will have to get on board for positive school climate is the students. The students are very important because they are the ones who will benefit the most because of positive school climate. They will be able to come to a safe and secure place to learn and interact socially. Having a safe place like school will enable the students to express their thoughts and feelings about outside issues or school issues. The principal and staff need to know how the students feel and think about issues in their school. It is important to use students to find out information because they are the ones living their life at school. “A few ways to get feedback from students is to use student concern surveys, entrance and exit interviews, and ambient noise checklists” (Freiberg, 1998, p. 22). All these methods can be done in a confidential manner so a true picture can be formulated from the surveys. The students deserve a safe place to come and learn without being hassled or hazed, and it is up to the principal and staff to make sure this happens for all students.

Alignment with Standard

The critical element of creating a positive school climate is in direct alignment with Standard Two. Climate is so important to student learning. If the students don't feel safe and secure coming to school, then they will not learn or show growth in any area of development. This is why it is extremely important for leaders and teachers of the school to recognize the importance of creating a safe climate for our students.

The school climate can define me as a leader, and it can be the difference in keeping my job. The way in which I go about achieving a positive school climate is being in the community, working with staff members, and having students express their thoughts about school. In creating a positive climate, "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school climate and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 32).

Preparing for Change

One of the most important parts in becoming an educational leader is being able to implement new programs, or a different way of doing things in the school you lead. A principal needs to have a plan and a procedure of how to initiate change.

Developing the team

The first stage of the change process is to involve all who will be directly affected by the change. The leader must get a group of people that he or she trusts to develop the action steps and plan for the school. Teachers must be involved in substantive decisions regarding changes that affect their day-to-day lives (Blase & Kirby, 2000). The fact that teachers, community members, and stakeholders are represented at change meetings will help in developing the change process. The representation develops the sense of ownership through out the whole group, and this ownership will help in getting the change to be successful. Breaking Ranks II (2004) notes, "Enabling others to shape and take ownership of a vision for change is fundamental to its success" (p. 21). This group of people will start the change process by following steps to success.

This group must remember that each other's thoughts and feeling are important when coming to a solution. The attitudes toward each other can go a long way in developing change. The group must have dialogue and come to a consensus. Consensus does not mean one hundred percent agreement, but it is a promise from all to give the new idea a try and not sabotage it. Marzano (2003) notes, "A team operates best when all views and concerns from a faculty are represented in deliberations" (p. 175). The principal has a strong role in developing this ownership and consensus building because in the long run it will mean the success or failure to the change being implemented for the school.

Reason for Change

This process must be thought out ahead of time and there must be an action plan to attain the change. The first thing a school must do is decide whether a change is necessary. Change should be incremental, meaning schools have the time, resources and energy to address change (Marzano, 2003). They must collect data and research in order to upset the norm of the school structure. With this data, the leaders and stakeholders of the school can decide based on the finding in the research if the school will implement a change. Breaking Ranks II (2004) agrees because with the collection of data the team can better understand the problem and the best practices to help reform the problem.

Once the data is there to back up the team, the next phase the team will enter is the action plan phase. In this action plan phase, the team must develop a plan on how they are going achieve the change. Daft (2005) notes "Leaders must recognize that change goes through stages and that each stage can be long and difficult" (p. 637). A leader must understand that an effective change will take time because there is no overnight way to change.

Monitoring Change

The real test of implementation occurs in the everyday actions in school. A principal can have great ideas on paper, but whether the change works depends totally on leadership and implementation skills by stakeholders. "Leaders need to

know how to transfer new information to an already existing system” (Calabrese, 2001, p. 71).

In implementing change at school, the first thing the principal should realize is it may not run smoothly right out of the gate. It will be a learning process for the students, teachers, and principal. In this process, all will make mistakes and all will have to learn from them. The main thing is that people accept mistakes made and that everything will be done to get the change process back on the right track for the school.

In the process of change, a principal needs to do certain things to make sure the action plan steps are being followed for the change. The principal is the leader so he or she is the one who needs to check in on the process and help the teachers along the way. The first part of the principal’s job is to constantly check the data coming in from the change process. In checking the data constantly, we can see if the implementation process is having a direct impact on our school. If changes are occurring, then it is worth the time spent on the change process. If changes are not occurring, then we need to refocus or look at the way we are implementing the change. Glatthorn (2000) has four reasons for monitoring implementation. The first is efficiency of the change. The school has spent a huge amount of time and money for a change. It is up to the principal to make sure the school doesn’t waste its resources. The second is consistency of change. The principal and others will make sure the change is getting the desired results. The

third is teacher alertness in the change process. The principal's presence will always have an affect on what the teacher is doing in the classroom. With the principal checking in on the teacher, the teacher is more apt to keep the change process going in his or her classroom. The last of the four is principal awareness of the change agent. With the principal aware of what is going on in the building, it can only help the change as a whole.

Alignment with Standard

The power to implement change in school applies to Standard One. Standard One is about leading a school through visionary concepts. In implementing ideas into a school, I would be leading by being visionary for the future of students. I will make sure students have the ability to get the best of the best through implementation of ideas, which are good for students and their lives. I believe this is what leaders do for the students in the schools they lead.

I believe being a good leader is reflected in the way the principal facilitates change. It is about how leaders identify the need to change, include all affected by change, and how they monitor change. When a principal can be a part of the change process instead of the one forcing change, then the principal has developed into a leader.

Improving Communication

The element of communication is very important in all areas of school relations. Being able to communicate with all constituents is an important part of

the principal's job. Most people think of communication in terms of only speaking and writing, however body language is just as important when communicating to stakeholders. People can perceive your body language in an instant just by the way you stand or shake hands. A strong communicator will have the total package of writing, speaking, and body language in their repertoire.

Traditional Communication

An administrator must be highly skilled in speaking and writing to get points across to people and to maintain a positive relationship with stakeholders. How effective an administrator communicates will determine the way the school will run. "Communication inside and outside the school is imperative to accomplish the school's goals, and the way it is perceived in the public eye" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 56). Effective communication will cut down on the little fires that a principal must put out each day. The principal is the person that puts out information to the teacher and students each day. If the leader is not clear or open about the meaning of the information, then the principal will spend the rest of the day explaining his or her actions. Daft (as cited in Luthy, 1998) explains, "People need clear direction and understanding of how they can contribute" (p. 347). Without having to put out these fires, a principal will have more time to attend to the learning and teaching. This would be the goal for great communication!

Non-verbal Communication

Communication with stakeholders not only takes the form of written and spoken words, it also has to do with your actions and movements. This type of communication is body language. A person's body language can communicate a lot about a person's thoughts and feelings on certain subjects. It is important to understand how this could affect relationships with the stakeholders.

In order to have a successful relationship with stakeholders, a principal must be confident in the way he or she stands and carries himself or herself in public. It is important when standing that you have your arms hanging down to your side. This makes you appear approachable to the stakeholders without having to say a word. Also, when the community members come to talk to you at school or an event, a great leader will make them feel as though they are important by maintaining the conversation and keeping eye contact. It comes down to being respectful when talking to the public. Dr. Vickie Robinson covered this type of communication, and she was clear on how this can affect relationships before you even open your mouth (Personal Communication, Summer 2004).

Plans for Communicating

The way I will go about creating an effective communication system in school will be to have a meet the principal night, and then the next phase of communication I will try is using technology. I believe the technology we have in today's world is one of unlimited capability. I want parents to be able to use their

computers to find out what is going on at their child's school. For example, I want to have announcements, newsletters, activities, and the student handbook on the school's website. With this bit of technology the parents can see what is going on at anytime of the day or year. Of course, there will be families who don't have a computer available for them to use so I will have to find another way to reach those parents. The way to reach them is to use the mail or for the kids to take flyers home from school. Unfortunately, this may be the only way for a school to reach these parents. "It is the school's responsibility to initiate communication and provide an atmosphere in which parents desire such communication" (Marzano, 2003, p. 48).

After technology, the next form of communication will be the student handbook. It is important that the handbook is easy to read and that it is not too long. It needs to be a place for parents to find out information about rules and regulations for their kids. It is a good idea to have it ready for all parents and students to read. Parents then will not be able to come back and say, "I didn't know any of this". It clearly communicates expectations and gives the administrator concrete evidence in policies and procedures.

Alignment with Standard

The critical element of communication is in alignment with Standard Four. "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 interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 66). Communication is a never-ending saga for a principal. Stakeholders will have to be informed and communicated with in every aspect of the school. I will give the parent meeting, website, and handbook a great effort to start things off on the correct foot. The other important concept will be the non-verbal body language to parents, students, and staff. All areas of communication go hand in hand. I will use all of them to better myself in the public eye because the way I handle parent communication will determine how successful I am as a principal.

Conclusion

My values, beliefs and the critical elements will go a long way in helping me become the leader I want to become in the near future. They will give me direction and a place for me to come back to when I seem to be falling out of place. My beliefs will always be a part of the way I want to lead a school because they are the values by which I will lead my life. The elements of ethical decision making, creating positive climate, preparing for change, and communication will always be important because they encompasses so much of my beliefs. In each area of the elements, a common theme appears like treating people with respect and doing what is right for students. When I am able to carry out the beliefs, elements, and common themes in my reflective research paper then I will be a great leader!

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