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What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

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Abstract

Educational leadership means doing the right thing for the people we serve. It means being committed to the education of all the students. An educational leader needs to be a committed soul, passionate about creating success in the lives of every student. This is not an 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. or August to May commitment, it is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 365 days a year position.

As an educator, this should be a career-long commitment. To help stay committed, an educational leader needs to develop core values that help one stay focused on the task at hand and guide one through troubled waters. To paraphrase Dr. G. Reed (public presentation, Fall, 2005), we either get better or worse, we never stay the same. We should seek to get better.

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

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by

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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I believe educational leadership means doing the right thing for the people we serve. It means being committed to the education of all the students. An educational leader needs to be a committed soul, passionate about creating success in the lives of every student. This is not an 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. or August to May commitment, it is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 365 days a year position. As an educator, this should be a career-long commitment. To help stay committed, I believe an educational leader needs to develop core values that help one stay focused on the task at hand and guide one through troubled waters. To paraphrase Dr. G. Reed (public presentation, Fall, 2005), we either get better or worse, we never stay the same. We should seek to get better.

What I know at the end of this journey for the PK-12 Principal/PK-12 Supervisor of Special Education is more than I knew when I started this journey in September of 2005. I was filled with some doubt about becoming an administrator. However, Dunklee (2000) points out several characteristics that some teachers possess which are prerequisites for an administrative appointment. Those prerequisites, which were helpful to me, are as follows:

- Astutely observed the way the school functions beyond the confines of their particular classroom.
- Studied their principals and observed how their fellow teachers react to the multitude of events that take place during a typical day.

- Tried to understand the rationale behind administrative decisions and examined the effects of politics on their school and school district.
- Attempted to move their sphere of practical knowledge from the classroom to the principal's office and beyond.
- Developed a strong resume that gives any reader a picture of them as a potential professional manager/leader who demonstrates, on paper, the kinds of experiences that merit consideration for principalship (p.9).

After examining some of Dunklee's criteria, I believe I made the right choice to seek training as an educational leader. I am a firm believer the world will be a better place because I chose education as a career. Educators need to assure their place in history because they are a big part, if not the biggest part, of the solution for this world and not the problem. I chose to teach because I needed to give back to those whose shoulders I had to stand on to make it where I am today. Some of the names I know—Hayes and Estelle Nelson, who made sacrifices so I could be a child and develop into a caring adult. Some of those names I do not know. It was those individuals who believed that the education of all children in America was a freedom, not a right of a few, and were willing to put their lives on the line for this freedom. What better way of celebrating one's existence on earth than by helping others to reach their potential in life by being an educator.

Educational Leader

Could I become an effective educational leader? Again, I cite Dunklee (2000), “An effective principal leads a school and the profession forward—always keeping a primary focus on mission, improvement, and distinction” (p. 5). At the end of the day, I do a self-assessment to determine if the decisions made that are helping students.

I have learned over the last two years that one of the most important jobs an educational leader (principal) will do is to hire the right people. An effective educational leader needs to make sure the individual coming aboard will work for and have the same visions because everyone needs to know where the school is headed. “What is the vision? Where is the campus headed? There cannot be talk about school organization, operations or resources if no one knows where the campus is headed. Working with the entire school community to help determined the vision” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 21). Without a vision, it would be akin to planning a trip and not letting anyone know the destination.

I have learned that an educational leader has to use collaborative strategies to solve problems. Being inclusive by involving all staff is necessary to obtain various points of views or ways to complete a task. Human beings react better when they know they are part of a solution.

An educational leader has to have integrity. Being honest with yourself and others is paramount for success. An educational leader needs to learn how to

budget time and set priorities. There will be occasions when everyone will want everything at the same time.

Educational leaders should be committed to making a difference in the lives of the students, faculty, staff, families, and entire learning community we serve. “Collaborative development, implementation, nurturance, and stewardship of the school as a ‘community’ are essential to the overall success of students, families, and society” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 24). We have the capability to develop leaders who are tolerant and concerned for the development and betterment of society we find ourselves in today. As children grow up, the habits they bring to both the workplace and the polling place will determine our common fate.

It is quite possible that American society can develop a viable economy that ignores the fate of a vast number of its citizens, one not dependent upon a universally well-educated public, but only at a cost to democracy itself.

School’s dependent upon private clienteles—schools that can get rid of unwanted kids of troublemaker families, exclude on the basis of this or that set of beliefs, and toss aside the ‘losers’—not only can avoid the democratic arts of compromise and tolerance but also implicitly foster lessons about the power of money and privilege, a lesson already only too well known by every adolescent in America. In schools that are public, citizens are joined by rights, not by privilege (Patti & Tobin, 2003, p. 47).

Again, educational leadership must have school administrators who promote the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources. Inviting members of the community to be part of the school community is a vital step in the right direction to help in responding to diverse community interest. Family members of students can be powerful advocates for mobilizing community resources. It is important that the educational leader understands this concept and seeks to cultivate relationships with parents. If the only time the families of the students are contacted is for negative reasons such as discipline, absentee or academic problems, it will be difficult to seek collaboration; hence, response to the diverse community interest will not be achieved. Schools teach middle class values and, in some cases, cause disjuncture. What is being taught at home is different from what is being taught in school and can cause problems that could lead to total failure. We have to develop more avenues for the administrator, the family, and teachers to work collaboratively on goals so home and school reinforce each other.

Reflective Leadership

Being a reflective practitioner is another important aspect of educational leadership. Being reflective practitioners, by definition, means to examine what is being done and how it is being done, to make sure all students receive a meaningful education. Use action research projects and other assessment material

to determine that all students' needs are being equally met, because appearances can be deceiving.

To better understand deceiving appearances in education, I will make the analogy of an archer practicing for mastery competition. The archer releases several arrows in the direction of the target. No thought has been given to external forces on the arrow. From past practices, visuals from a distance lead the archer to believe that he has been successful; as it appears he struck the center of the target. Again, he continues to aim and release each arrow, not taking into consideration any of the outside forces acting upon the arrow. He continues to aim and shoot until all of the arrows have been shot toward the target. The archer is now ready to examine his results. Again, from a distance, he is sure he has been very successful. He pumps out his chest, waves or raises his hands as a gesture of success. As he slowly reaches the target, the results are somewhat different. Some of his arrows have hit the targets; however, the majority missed badly not coming close to the bull's eye. Some missed the target all together.

As in the case of the archer, the same techniques we have used in our building for years have worked in the past. Ten years ago, test scores indicated that the majority of our students were being taught well and the majority of the students were very successful. The superintendent and several board members visited this building and commented how engaged the students were in learning.

For the last couple of years, however, test scores have slowly declined. Students are becoming more disruptive in class. Fights are becoming all too commonplace. Teachers are complaining more about attendance issues. As in the case of the archer, a closer examination shows that we are missing the target.

A closer examination of our school community indicates that our clientele has been slowly changing. We are serving a more diverse population. A larger percentage of our students have been labeled as special needs. Students are coming from non-traditional households. Global demands dictate that our students need to learn more than traditional reading, writing, and math. Teachers need additional training to address all of the students' academic, emotional, and social needs. This is the responsibility of the school administrator. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional programming conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

Successful administrators understand that there is no such thing as status quo regarding education. The school is getting better or getting worse. Curriculum has to be examined for appropriateness. If necessary changes are needed, they should be based on data-driven information. School administrators can no longer rely on individual action and short-term thinking to be successful. A school administrator must be able to make decisions based on data-driven decisions, which are based on facts and equity instead of presumption, biased

wrong information, or emotions. “The principal becomes a nurturer of the entire school community, the shepherd of the flock, the person who provides the sustaining life blood and passion to the school” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 34).

Additionally, good school administrators are all reflective practitioners, because being an educator means dealing with the most fragile, yet most resilient creatures on this earth—the school age student. Being a good educator means being aware of constantly changing trends, yet the goals of providing a quality education remain the same, forever seeking answers for some questions that have not been formulated.

Reflective leaders have to consider how the decisions they make affect the entire school. Reflective administrators have to be receptive to feedback, both positive and negative. Educators must use state-of-the-art ideas and thinking to remain current. I have and will continue to use research in the role as an educational leader.

A Leader of Change

With special needs students, understanding and working with parents or guardians can sometimes be challenging. Everyone wants the best for the students.

Most educators—principals and classroom teachers—were not trained to work with students with disabilities and did not expect to. Then, in 1977, the situation changed dramatically with the implementation of the

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) and the mandate to teach those children in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Regular class teachers found children with disabilities assigned to their classrooms; special educators had to give up ownership of 'their' students and routines; new systems had to be set up; parents' doubts had to be quelled; a myriad of smaller changes had to be made; and principals, it often seemed, were given the responsibility to make it all happen (Bartlett, Weisenstein & Etscheidt, 2002, p. 6).

Understanding what the law requires for education of special needs children is a must for today's educational leader. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act establishes education as an entitlement for those children with disabilities who are in need of special education and related services. By setting the tone of cooperation, empathy and respect for parents, and by providing committed leadership in meeting the practical needs of students with disabilities, an educational leader can truly address the needs of all students.

I recently read a teacher's work sample (TWS) (The Renaissance Partnership for Improving Teacher Quality, 2004). This teacher was part of the Renaissance Partnership, which is a national consortium of colleges and universities with a major commitment to the preparation of the educational professional, the classroom teacher. The TWS that I read was from a high school located in Charlotte County, Virginia, which is in the ninth poorest county in the

Commonwealth of Virginia with a population of 12,477. The median family income is \$26,029 per year, compared to the state's average of \$57,050 per year. The school is located in Piedmont County, which has the highest rate of infant mortality in the state. Of the live births, 35% are to single mothers and 14% to teenage mothers. The residents of Charlotte are 55% Caucasian, 44% African American, and 2% other minorities. Fifteen percent of the county's population has no more than an elementary education. Eighty percent of the kindergarteners entering the school system are economically deprived. Of the 2,300 students enrolled, 60% of these students are labeled "at risk". The classroom ratio is 17 students to 1 teacher in elementary school, 16:1 in middle school and 14:1 in high school. The diversity in the classroom pretty much mirrors that of the county.

Reviewing the instructional goals, the assessment measures are a direct result of the learning goals. What was being taught was what students were being assessed on. The teachers knew who they were teaching. They were trainable.

All students should have the right to receive the type of education that teaches them to think well and independently. Students using what they have learned will produce high quality work, take initiative, and work effectively together. "So we need principals who aren't afraid to talk about what's good in education and who will forcefully counteract those who seek notoriety through inventing and re-inventing what's not good about education" (Dunklee, 2000, p. 148).

The leaders of change need to make sure that teachers teach to understand and teach all students, not just a few. The roles of leaders in professional development are designed to improve learning for students and adults. Teaching for diversity means teaching in a way that helps different kinds of learners find a productive path to knowledge as they live constructively together. The aforementioned TWS demonstrated that teachers are being trained to educate all students.

A Leader of Assessment

Teachers must understand assessments in order to teach. Teachers must also understand whom they are teaching and what knowledge the students have acquired. District curriculum mandates are a starting point for all courses, suggesting that all students have acquired certain knowledge of the subject matter. Prior knowledge of the student's ability should help the teacher plan what to teach. The teacher needs to know all of their students' strengths and weaknesses to prepare a tailored individual lesson plan. Students work in cooperative learning groups. Each group's goals should be linked to their individual assessment goals. Goals can be accomplished within the groups by solving problems related to the curriculum in real life scenarios.

Assessment leaders of schools in Iowa can readily understand what is being taught by adhering to the Iowa Standards for School Leadership (ISSL) (Iowa Department of Education, 2007). The principal's job is to prepare teachers.

This is what assessments should be about. Are students being prepared to be successful for today's diverse society? Yes, if educational assessments are designed for the end result.

The role of the leaders of assessment should begin with understanding the subject, doing activities that reflect the actual subject, not something unrelated. The curriculum should be like a rehearsal for the play of life. Assessments need to consist of tasks that are good representation of higher-order thinking as well as basic skills, plus provide insight into how students are thinking and learning as well as what they know and can do.

“Standardized tests measure only a part of what schools should be doing. Effective leaders focused on behavior that leads to success, not the beliefs that stand in the way of each” (Whitaker, 2003, p.155). What factors determine if students will be successful? For years, educators have wrestled with this subject.

One conclusion a number of effective educators agree on are to make sure all teachers are trained and meet certain standards. Having all teachers adhere to the same standards enhances student achievement. It is very important that educational leaders are trained and understand how to evaluate quality teaching in the classroom, because “the primary responsibility of the school leader is to oversee the operation of educational institutions to ensure that teachers teach and students learn” (Hanson, 2005, p.1).

The emphasis of student learning has stressed that effective educational leaders ensure success for students. Understanding assessments means getting the results and doing something about them.

In addition, principals need to know how to help employ assessments so that those assessments benefit instructions. Effective principals “must be able to help their colleagues use tests that yield instructionally useful information” (Popham, 2006, p. 18). Effective principals who are good leaders “must be able to help their colleagues construct or select assessments that illuminate a teacher’s instructional decision making” (Popham, 2006, p. 18). In short, a principal “must become really well versed regarding the *instructional* applications of educational measurement” (Popham, 2006, p. 18).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) legislation mandates all students be tested in science and math. This legislation also mandated all students must be proficient in both subjects by 2014. Because NCLB does not define proficiency, it is predictable that some states will reduce standards to make it easier for students to meet their state’s standard. Why would states lower standards? One reason is the achievement gap that exists among different racial groups. Black and Latino students, on the average, have much lower scores than White students.

In a recent Harvard Education Letter (November/December 2006) interview, Ron Ferguson cites huge progress since 1970, not much

progress since 1990. Sixty-two percent of the overall black-white reading-score gap for 17-year-olds disappeared between 1971 and 1988. About one-third of the math-score gap disappeared during the same period. Over the last several years, the gap has narrowed significantly for both 9- and 13-year olds, but there's been a bit of backsliding for the older teens.

There has been enough progress to establish firmly that these gaps are not written in stone. Even IQ gaps are narrowing. Measurements of the intelligence of kids' less than one year old show virtually no racial or social-class differences, yet racial and social class achievement gaps are firmly established by the time students start kindergarten. Something happens before kindergarten that produces differences in proficiency.

If effective educational leaders seek to ensure quality education for all students, the achievement gap must be addressed. From *Brown versus the Board of Education* (Supreme Court, 1954) to NCLB, it has been apparent that schools do not serve all students. This nation can no longer afford to ignore multicultural education.

A Leader of Service

To lead is to serve. 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. A principal as the service leader must take a proactive stand with representatives

from diverse groups as an advocate for all children, regardless of socioeconomic background, race, ethnicity, gender, learning style or other differences. A leader of service must have the knowledge and understanding of the legal and political system and implications of what that system has on shaping schools and the school community. The principal can designate individuals to work with organizations to help provide services to the school community but it is the principal's responsibility to ensure all are included.

Service leaders high in the service competence foster an emotional climate so the people directly in touch with the customer or client will keep the relationship on the right track. Such leaders monitor customer or client satisfaction carefully to ensure they are getting what they need. They also make themselves available as needed (Patti & Tobin, 2003, p.370).

Most communities have service organizations that are willing to provide outreach services to students and their families. Developing a list of those agencies and organizations that can help to the school community is a necessity.

Every principal feels the pressure of outside influences. Everyone in the community has a vested interest in schooling and everyone who ever went to school can claim to be an expert. However, as service leaders we must adhere to our core values no matter what others want us to do, we must focus on what is right for our students.

In summary, I believe students, teachers, and school districts need individuals who are committed to improving the education environment. All teachers must be challenged to give what it takes for all students to be successful in the classroom. All administrators must be willing to help develop teachers to make sure their primary goal is to educate all students in their classroom. All teachers need to be held to the same standard, not just probationary teachers. Career teachers need to be honestly assessed on their effectiveness and not their longevity. Putting students first should be the goal of the school district, administrator, and teachers. Schools should exist to make students better: if this is not happening, the school should be closed. Good leadership means taking responsibility for your actions. In the world of business, if a product is not profitable it is discontinued. Why should schools that turn out individuals who cannot function in society be any different?

Schools must foster . . . a will to learn and to relearn . . . students must be encouraged to believe in themselves and in the validity of their own thought processes . . . they must develop a sense of personal effectiveness . . . teachers must foster both confidence and high achievement in their students . . . confidence and competence must increase together for either to prosper (Covington and Beery, 1976, p. 4-5) (Alderman, 2004, p 66).

Leadership is a process rather than a personal attribute. The leadership process begins with an understanding of the nature of human behavior. To be

effective, the administrator must have an understanding of the social environment in which they seek to lead.

My Degree of Master in Arts in Education and my work at the University of Northern Iowa have prepared me to be an effective educational leader. I believe I have the tools to be successful in a position of assistant principal, principal or supervisor of special education.

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