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A vision for educational leadership : a reflective essay

Melissa M. O'Brien
University of Northern Iowa

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A vision for educational leadership : a reflective essay

Abstract

The decision to pursue a master's degree in Educational Leadership was not decided without a great deal of reflection and contemplation. It was necessary when pondering this decision to consider many issues, such as the complexity of the educational system, the students, and the potential impact—both positive and negative—that a person working in a school setting might have over the course of a career in educational leadership. This paper is an attempt to articulate how some of my experiences, skills, knowledge, and values have formed and how these attributes contributed to the formation of my philosophy of educational leadership.

A VISION FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper Presented to
The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by

Melissa M. O'Brien

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Dave Else

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Date Approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

3-24-04

Date Approved

Victoria L. Robinson

Second Reader of Research Paper

3-29-04

Date Approved

W. P. Callahan

Department Head

The decision to pursue a master's degree in Educational Leadership was not decided without a great deal of reflection and contemplation. In terms of the monumental tasks that face school administrators everyday, and the ever increasing demands of federal legislation, it was necessary when pondering this decision to consider many issues. Issues such as the complexity of the educational system, the students, and the potential impact-both positive and negative-that a person working in a school setting might have over the course of a career in educational leadership were factored into making this decision. I ultimately decided that a career in educational leadership is a goal I wish to achieve. This paper is an attempt to articulate how some of my experiences, skills, knowledge, and values have formed and how these attributes contributed to the formation of my philosophy of educational leadership.

My name is Melissa O'Brien. I was born and raised in the small town of Epworth in eastern Iowa. I was the fourth of six daughters born to Irwin and Joyce Horsfield. Lastly, and certainly not least in our family came my one and only brother. Over the years, many people have expressed sympathy for the only boy living in a household with six older sisters. Whenever we had the chance, my sisters and I made it our mission to assure others that Todd's life wasn't so bad considering the fact that he had six maids catering to his each and every whim! There were only ten years separating my oldest sibling from the youngest, my little brother. The extreme closeness in age was matched only to our emotional

closeness as siblings. I feel this emotional connectedness was a major factor in my future in education and is why I have always felt a close connection to kids. My siblings were my first support network from which I have always found great strength. We grew up in a sometimes tumultuous household due to the far reaching effects of my father's drinking. In many ways, we appeared the typical family-we were clean and well dressed, went to church every Sunday, and played with friends all over the neighborhood. My father was a very verbally abusive alcoholic. His behavior was very unpredictable when he was drinking (which was almost every night). My siblings and I tried very hard to please our dad in any way that we could-keeping our rooms clean, having the house spotless, or mowing the lawn without being asked. We quickly realized that even if all of these chores were completed, he would find something wrong, anything, right down to a minute detail such as ketchup dripping on the outside of the ketchup bottle. This would lead to a "formation" (he also an army veteran) in the kitchen for 20-30 minutes to tell us how messy and lazy we all were. My siblings and I would discuss his irrationality later. The ability to sort out what was "normal" and what was "not normal" about his disease was an invaluable tool for me to surviving as a child of an alcoholic.

Knowing that whatever I did would not be good enough for my dad made school an especially wonderful source of solace to me. I have been blessed to have teachers who have made such a positive difference in my life. I can

remember feeling so safe and accepted in school. If I did well (which to me was nothing less than 100%) my teachers told me so, encouraged me, and were genuinely thrilled with my accomplishments. I thrived in this environment. I learned very early on in my education that it was definitely the teachers who make or break a child's spirit at school. As Bullough (2001) states, "There is no higher moral challenge than to hold on to the promise and goodness of a child when others, even the child, do not recognize that promise, and to see the potential that awaits awakening that lies beneath the labels" (p. xiv). I was so fortunate that my teachers focused on me and not my home life all of the time. I also remember feeling such empathy for others. I would literally lose sleep at night over the girl in class whose family was so dreadfully poor. I wondered when her birthday came around on February 8th if she would even get a birthday present. I remember using my pocket change to buy her a small trinket that was sold at the local grocery store and giving it to her in hopes that she would not be offended by my gesture. I realized very early on that for many children, school served the same purpose for others as it did for me. All children thrive in a school where they feel safe and encouraged to grow to be the best they can be. Ladson-Billings (1994), calls this culturally relevant teaching,

Culturally relevant teaching honors the students' sense of humanity and dignity. Their complete personhood is never doubted. Self-worth and self-concept is promoted in a very basic way, by acknowledging the individual's worthiness to be a part of a supportive and loving group.
(p. 76)

I knew how powerful it was for me to feel like I was taught by teachers within a school that valued my humanity and dignity. By the time I was ten years old, I knew I wanted to impact children in this positive way so I would work to help children one day – hopefully as a teacher.

I became the teacher I always thought I would be in 1992. During my first two years as an educator, I taught special education in a school that was in a very low socioeconomic area. I am thankful to this day for the invaluable experience this educational setting offered me. I was surrounded by children whose stories made my life look like a fairy tale. In so many cases, the teaching of reading and writing were put on the back burner until some of their basic needs were met. Meeting their basic needs required many different things. Necessary elements of my job became anything from stocking Cheerios in my desk to visiting a family to figure out how I could help with the insect problem in their home so their daughter in my class would be able to concentrate on her schoolwork and not the numerous bites on her body. For many, abuses of all kinds were commonplace. This is when I learned first hand that the teacher learns just as much, if not more, from the students as the students learn from the teacher. I learned about resiliency from them. It was from their ability to come to school day-after-day, ready and even willing to learn, that I gained valuable insight into the power of knowledge and self-motivation. Teaching became healing for me as well. The students I

taught were not dwelling on the tragedy of their lives. It was not productive for me to dwell on the disappointments in my own childhood, nor should I be giving more attention than was absolutely necessary to their dismal home lives. It was my responsibility to them to make sure that school provided them a safe, effective learning environment; a place where they might learn about a different set of possibilities for themselves and their future. I truly felt passion and immense satisfaction in giving students my best and in working to be the catalyst for positive change in their lives!

In a quest to give students the best possible school experience, it seemed only natural that I became increasingly interested in “best practices” within the field of education. Eventually I took a job with a neighboring district teaching third grade. This district was in a blue-collar area of Eastern Iowa. Although the instances of abuse were not as pervasive, I realized that in every class, every year, there would be a wide range in the needs among the students within the class. Factors such as quality of home life, intellectual abilities, social skills, and emotional maturity to name a few, would have educational implications on the teaching and learning within my classroom. In order to address these issues, I felt it was necessary to constantly search for and read about, what the research had to say about how to best teach kids. I have been a voracious reader most of my life. I take pleasure in gaining knowledge and understanding how to do my job better. Of all the things I have come across that have been research-based and have been

shown to work well with students, none have turned out to be the panacea, or cure all, to the numerous challenges that teachers face daily in the classroom. None have been able to explicitly show how to get all kids to read, write, problem-solve, and to transition from student to lifelong learning, productive, citizen effortlessly. It is in this very challenge that I have drawn some significant conclusions. No one formula works for success in every educational setting. Instead, it is the pursuit of continuous improvement that drives us in education for another day, another year, another decade. I am enthusiastic about my desire for continuous improvement.

The task of working successfully as a school administrator involves the skillful blending of all aspects of school leadership and moving the school forward. In order to do this successfully one must formulate just what exactly it takes to make a school extraordinary. Throughout this program, there has been significant attention given to the requirement of school leaders to lead effectively. Through various readings, coursework, collegial exchange, and practicum experiences, I have come to the conclusion that effective school leadership can be organized into four categories. They include school culture, continuous improvement, high student achievement, and community involvement. None of these individual topics can totally be segregated from the other in practice but for the purpose of this paper, they will be addressed individually. I plan to outline

my beliefs about each of these categories and also will attempt to demonstrate how I plan to put my beliefs about each into practice.

School Culture

Dufour and Eaker (1998) state,

The structure of an organization is founded upon its policies, procedures, rules, and relationships. The culture of an organization is founded upon the assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norms for that organization – norms that shape how its people think, feel, and act. (p. 131)

School culture is associated with the overall atmosphere and conditions in which people work within a school building. The culture is influenced positively or negatively by the actions and methods of behavior that are deemed “acceptable” by the people within the work environment. If a person has ever been in a school where the culture is toxic, they will more than likely see the same type of vision and mission statements proudly displayed on the walls as you would find in any other typical school. These vision statements include proclamations about doing what is best for kids, developing lifelong learners, and the development of productive citizens. In the halls of these schools too, you will find disgruntled teachers complaining incessantly about the frustrations of working in a toxic environment. These teachers are – for the most part – giving little effort beyond what is required, and students are getting less than what they deserve. In the end, the mission and vision statements are only effective if they are being fulfilled in an environment that is healthy and productive for the

members of the staff. This, in turn, provides a healthy atmosphere for the students. Barth (2001) states,

Among adult relationships in schools, that between teacher and principal is decisive. I have found no characteristic of a good school more pervasive than healthy teacher-principal relationships – and no characteristic of a troubled school more common than troubled, embattled, or antiseptic administrator-teacher relationships. The relationship between teacher and principal seems to have an extraordinary amplifying effect. For better or for worse, it models what all relationships in the school will be.....It follows, then, that the teacher-principal relationship is at the heart of shared leadership in school. The nature and quality of this relationship is absolutely central to the capacity of a school to become a community of learners-and leaders. (p. 105)

In his comments Barth (2001) so eloquently points out how the relationship between the principal and teacher is a key to the development of leaders in the school. The idea of developing teachers as leaders is important in creating a positive, productive school culture. It is important, then, in cultivating a productive school culture that the principal must focus on the development of positive relationships with staff members. In the day to day functioning as a principal, the actions taken and behavior of the school principal will determine whether or not the culture in the school is one in which the development of leadership potential is promoted or curtailed. This is not easy or straight forward.

The building of positive relationships between principal and teacher involves much more than an occasional tray of doughnuts or “social nights” once a month. The relationship is one that is based on trust, commitment, and mutual respect. Hunter (1998) points out, “The leader is responsible to hold people

accountable. However, there are several ways to point out deficiencies while allowing people to keep their dignity” (p. 177). Maintaining a person’s dignity is important in all contacts with staff and should be considered at all times. It is a requirement of the job as school leader to sometimes deliver information or input to a teacher that would be considered by all as unpleasant. It is in these moments that maintaining personal dignity is essential. It isn’t very difficult for a principal to be cordial and pleasant when all is going well. It is in the difficult moments when a school leader will be truly tested in this area.

In order to foster a school culture that is positive and productive, it is my vision to address school culture immediately upon my arrival as building administrator. It will be important for me to develop a high performing culture. I will first attempt to do all that I can to learn about the school’s current culture. This will be a multifaceted task. It will be important to become visible in the community and to become familiar with the unique characteristics that make up that community. Joining community groups will be an important way to get a pulse for what the larger community is thinking and feeling about the school community. I think that it is important to communicate with the public often and regularly to model the use of positive communication in building strong relationships. Newsletters, phone calls, and community involvement will be important components of this goal.

In addition to acclimating myself to the community's perception of culture within our school, valuable information can be gained from the staff. It will be very important for me to talk personally and individually with every staff member about their current reality. In addition to discussing topics that are pertinent to the instruction within the school it will also be beneficial to address the nondiscussables. Nondiscussables, according to Barth (2001), are "subjects sufficiently important that they get talked about frequently but are so laden with anxiety and taboos that these conversations take place only at the parking lot, the men's room, the playground, the car pool, or the dinner table at home" (p. 9). Getting teachers to open up about the nondiscussables will not be an easy or simple task. Some may open up right away. Others will reserve sharing until it is witnessed that the instructional leader is trustworthy and fair. I plan to demonstrate these traits to them in how I conduct myself as principal. I will be a model for the teachers in maintaining trustworthiness by following through on what I commit to, maintaining confidentiality at all times, and giving teachers support with parents. In discussing the power of nondiscussables, Barth (2001), goes on to state,

The health of a school is inversely proportional to the number of its nondiscussables: the fewer the nondiscussables, the healthier the school; the more the nondiscussables, the more pathology in the school culture. And of course, to change the culture of the school, its residents must name, openly acknowledge the existence of, and address the nondiscussables – especially the nondiscussables that impede learning.
(p. 9)

The development of shared values and a shared vision is essential to a positive school culture. The first step in making progress toward positive school culture will be in the development of shared values. The principal plays a critical role in shaping values and whether or not people live consistently with the values. The next step is the development of a shared vision which grows out of values. Short and Greer (1997) state the importance of the principal as facilitator in the creation of a vision,

Embedded in a school's vision is a collection of values and beliefs. Often such values remain unspoken and unexamined unless a skillful group facilitator helps the group to explore the subtleties of a particular set of values. The process of revealing the undergirding beliefs of a proposed course of action helps participants to build a high level of commitment to the new program or effort, though this process may be personally painful. (p. 39)

In order for the vision to truly be carried out, the whole staff must be included in its creation. This is an ongoing process that includes careful conversations about what exactly it is that the school is attempting to do. Subsequently, every program or instructional strategy should be aligned with the vision of the school. If, in the careful creation of a school's vision it is determined that the vision of the school includes all students achieving a high level of success, then the school probably would not include ability grouping as a way of delivering instruction. It is important for the vision to be at the forefront of every staff meeting, curriculum decisions should be made according to the

vision, and students should be considered at every turn. It will be a priority of mine to keep the vision in the high profile status that it deserves in a high performing school.

Realizing that the nondiscussables hold considerable power and impede learning indeed, it will be necessary to deal with them continually. It may not be possible to ever rid a school completely of the nondiscussables, but it could be potentially fatal as an administrator to attempt to control or squelch the discussion of topics that are considered by many to be controversial. Nondiscussables that have the biggest negative impact on the school must be dealt with straightforward. In order to limit the negative consequences nondiscussables can have on the school culture, I plan to be direct, fair, and firm. I will communicate expectations clearly, always leaving lines of communication open. I plan to make it acceptable for nondiscussables to be addressed openly in staff meetings and in individual meetings. By addressing these issues openly and without threat, the number of nondiscussables will go down. It will also be part of my plan to have the teachers evaluate my progress on a yearly basis to determine if there are discrepancies between my perceptions and theirs. In this manner, areas where improvement is needed on my part can and will be addressed. School culture represents the day to day efforts made by all staff to work toward a positive work climate. A positive school culture can be cultivated in an atmosphere of trust, honesty, and

understanding. However, the culture is impacted by how other aspects of the learning community are handled.

Continuous Improvement

Show me a school where the accepted norm is the pursuit of continuous improvement and I will show you a school with a positive, healthy culture. It is not possible to have a positive school culture without a good faith effort made toward continuous improvement. In the words of James Hunter, when speaking about the need for continuous growth among individuals and organizations, “We’re either green and growing or we’re ripe and rotting!” (James Hunter, personal communication, November 3, 2002). Mr. Hunter’s words very colorfully illustrate the need for continuous improvement. It is within organizations that the accepted norm is dissatisfaction with the status quo, that an atmosphere of true growth and progress can blossom. Dufour and Eaker (1998) state, “To build professional learning communities, meaningful collaboration must be systematically embedded into the daily life of the school.” (p. 118)

Professional Development

It must be the accepted norm that all teachers incorporate professional growth and continual improvement into their existence as professionals. This is an ongoing, regular part of the school day and starts with the hiring of new

teachers. The commitment to continuous improvement also includes rigorous hiring practices, staff development, and action research.

The hiring practices of school committed to continuous improvement are distinctly different from those that are not. As an administrator committed to this notion, it will be evident in how teachers are hired and in how candidates are viewed by the school. In the hiring process among schools committed to continuous improvement, new teachers are viewed not as complete and polished, but rather as individuals with potential to grow and learn in a collaborative work setting. The growth and development of new teachers will, in turn, improve the overall organization. The questions asked of potential candidates will be highly focused on their professional behaviors and responses to situations rather than questions that require little more than the regurgitation of educational jargon. Interviews must be a two way street in terms of communication. A major goal when searching for a teacher to fill a position will be to find out if the candidate is a good fit for the school and its commitment to continuous improvement. Throughout this process, the existence of our vision will be clearly communicated to potential teachers. Examples of our vision and how it impacts day to day operations and working relationships among teachers will be emphasized. The idea that the teacher should fit the school is true to some extent but the quality and hiring of the candidate must transcend this notion. Whitaker (2003) addresses the issue of how principals should hire great teachers.

Some principals look for candidates who are a good match-teachers who will fit in and become like their school. Great principals have a different goal: to have a school become more like the new teacher. If this is not our goal and our outcome, then we are hiring the wrong people. It's simply impossible to improve a school by hiring people who fit right in with its average teachers. (p. 43)

Whitaker's (2003) point is well taken and should be considered throughout the hiring process. Hiring and keeping good teachers is the cornerstone of a school committed to continuous improvement. I will make it my mission to hire teachers who are concerned and committed to all of the students in the school and understand that their job includes leadership responsibilities that work in conjunction with classroom responsibilities. The purpose of interviews then becomes identifying leadership potential, the ability to work with others, and the desire for continuous improvement.

A phrase used by Dr. Else, (Dave Else, personal communication, June 20, 2002) will forever stick in my mind and will be considered in the determination of whether or not to hire a candidate. Dr. Else stated, "Look for the seeds of greatness." His point in making this statement was to demonstrate the importance of having high expectations for teachers instead of merely settling for a good teacher.

Our students, our school, and our communities deserve the best and we should work tirelessly to give them what they deserve! It is also important to make it attractive to teachers to be part of an organization that strives to develop

the leadership potential within individuals. To fulfill this expectation, it will be my intention to work diligently to recognize and acknowledge the strengths of individual teachers. I will be working continually to encourage them to use their strengths and talents for the greater good. Much of the identification of leadership potential and expertise will be developed through ongoing communication and observation within the classroom setting.

Once a new teacher is hired, the beginning of an ongoing process of staff development begins for that teacher. It is a process that includes the individual development of each teacher, as well as the development and growth of the whole organization. A school must be committed from day one to the development and retention of great teachers. Conversely, a teacher who is determined to be poor in overall performance must be let go in order for the organization to remain viable and prosperous. The old saying is true that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. The idea that poor teachers be allowed to remain in positions that harm the progress of students is a practice that should be stopped altogether. The fact remains that with strong unions and binding contracts, this task will be a difficult challenge for an administrator. It is a worthwhile task when the potential harm to students is considered.

One of the biggest complaints from teachers for years and years has been that professional development has not been based on the needs of the teachers within a particular setting. Professional development has been too often a way of

filling in-service time, or a way of providing a one shot crash course in an extensive research based instructional strategy that is then expected to be implemented with proficiency at the end of the two hour session. Professional development sessions have been looked upon with dread for many teachers, who find themselves secretly correcting spelling tests throughout the presentation. The fact that there would be no follow up or additional work with the particular topic of the day fueled these passive aggressive behaviors on the part of teachers.

The other common complaint about professional development among teachers is the limited time that is currently allocated for it and how much time it would require if it were done correctly. In the typical professional development environment found in many schools today, new teachers feel isolated and overwhelmed. Veteran teachers feel disheartened and bitter. Neither teacher ends up feeling like a professional in a professional setting that is progressing and learning. An administrator must work to create a professional development model within the school that promotes growth and learning through the nature, organization, and time committed within the school day to professional development.

Induction

One of the primary ways to cultivate this commitment to staff development is to model it for the staff. The first step in developing this atmosphere is to be an ever present presence in the classrooms within the school.

The purpose for this presence is to be able to have working knowledge about the instructional atmosphere within the school. The best way to support teachers with professional growth is to be their partner in the process. It is important as an administrator to have a common vocabulary about what is going on in the “trenches.” Crucial in the professional development of any school in which I work will be a mentoring and induction process for new teachers. According to Wong (2002),

You don't wait until after school begins and new teachers are in trouble to start a professional development program. Instead, you create a culture of professional growth and lifelong learning before beginning teachers ever step in their classroom. The best way to support, develop, and cultivate an attitude of lifelong learning in beginning teachers is through a new teacher induction program focused on teacher training, support, and retention.
(p. 52)

Great induction programs start before the beginning of the school year and consist of regular administrative support that is structured and ongoing. It will be a priority of mine to set regular meetings on the calendar right away at the start of a new school year with the new teachers to keep them as a priority with my time commitments. The meetings will focus on the key elements to successful teaching which include, but are not limited to, classroom management techniques, routines, and instructional practices. It will also be important for me to familiarize the new teacher with the particular community in which the school exists and introduce them to the idea of teamwork within our setting. It will also be a focus of mine that throughout this process, I will search to identify and

develop the ways in which each particular teacher could use his/her own strengths to benefit our entire organization. The purpose and vision of such a focus will be on the development of leaders within the building.

Study Groups

For veteran teachers, the process of professional development looks a bit different from that of a new teacher induction process. It is important for the atmosphere in a school to be one in which collaboration and teamwork is the accepted norm. This will be an ongoing challenge in an administrative position in an educational system that has historically consisted of isolated teachers in individual classrooms teaching groups of students on their own with little or no assistance from other grade level teachers. This process continues in schools that progress children year after year into other similarly isolated classrooms. The transformation of a school's culture through the formation of a vision and an atmosphere of learning will help to combat the practice of isolation within the classroom. The modeling done by me will help to work on this goal as well. It will be important to genuinely seek input from teachers on a variety of topics and use the input given by the teachers to demonstrate the effectiveness of working as a team and that all teachers can be leaders. In order for veteran teachers to grow as true professionals they must be given opportunities to work and learn in teams, watch other professionals perform their jobs, and reflect upon their work.

To learn as teams, developing study groups will be essential. Study group participation will always be on a volunteer basis. However, through individual conferences with teachers and through the sharing of what is learned in the study group participation, it is expected that virtually all teachers will partake in some form of regular ongoing sharing and reflecting about the craft knowledge in teaching. It will start with many daily interactions and modeling for the teachers. It is my intention to continue to grow in my knowledge continuously about what current research is saying about the profession. The sharing of that knowledge is something that has long been a priority of mine and will continue to be as I work as an administrator. Staff will be strongly encouraged to participate in study groups on a regular basis. To facilitate this, it will be a priority of mine to find the financial resources and time for teachers to do so. I fully expect to write grants every year to help our school continue to grow and learn as professionals and to increase student achievement. The time issue is always a problem for staff development. In the creation of the staff development schedule, our school improvement plan, created with input from teachers, will determine the focus of the staff development efforts year to year. I would also work to arrange common planning times within the school day to allow teachers time to meet. This could be done through creative scheduling or in the use of instructional aides. One other consideration that I view as a very effective way to increase the amount of time teachers have to grow and learn together is to look at lengthening the school

day four days per week and shortening it one day a week to allow for early release time for teachers to work as teams of learners.

Peer Coaching

Another key element in a successful staff development model will be the ability of teachers to watch each other teach. According to Glickman (2002), "It's as simple as this: I cannot improve my craft in isolation from others. To improve, I must have formats, structures, and plans for reflecting on, changing, and assessing my practice" (p. 4). The formats, structures, and reflection will come in the form of peer coaching. Two heads truly are better than one. Teachers need to see others teach as a way to promote self-reflection. The intention will not be to judge other's teaching but to look at the practice of another as a way of looking at one's self. Teachers must be allowed time within the work day to watch each other teach. One of the best ways that I can work to ensure that this is possible is to provide the classroom coverage for a teacher to be able to do so. I will also follow up the observations with some communication that promotes self-reflection on the part of the teachers involved. Ongoing communication and supportive relationships with teachers will be a constant goal in the development of teachers as learners and leaders.

Commitment to High Student Achievement

Although the commitment to high student achievement seems to many as being a universal goal of every school in America, there is an intentional,

deliberate, and methodical effort made by schools in order to be able to claim success in the high achievement levels of students. According to Lambert (1998),

The central focus of any school must be on teaching and learning. Learning needs to be viewed as “authentic”—that is, based on real tasks that have a relationship to work and life in society or in the family. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment that are authentic involve performances and products that transfer into the actual world of citizenship as well as future scholarship. A comprehensive view of authentic relationships with children requires that teaching roles expand to include teacher as facilitator, mentor, coach, and advisor. (p. 23)

In a school committed to high student achievement, teachers look to educate each child, not merely teach the curriculum. It will require teachers to act as facilitators of learning and as mentors, coaches, and advisors for how to succeed in life (not just the classroom). In schools where high student achievement is truly the mission, schools not only examine and refine what is being taught, but they look at how to ensure the maximum potential for each and every child is reached. This is done by constantly attempting to close the achievement gaps across socioeconomic groups; improvement regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity.

Schools committed to high student achievement look at failure as something that occurs from within and not due to outside factors such as the home life of students, race, or economic status. Until the ends of time, there will always be potential scapegoats for failure in schools. When teachers and schools move beyond traditional excuses for student failure and accept the responsibility for

student achievement as a learning community, then a school can truly move forward by seeking the answers from within the organization. If a school believes that some of its students are doomed to failure due to external forces not under the school's control, failure is exactly what will be achieved. If a school organization is one that holds on to the belief that the answers lie within the organization, then a school can truly be committed to high student achievement.

Besides having a positive school culture and striving for continuous improvement to achieve high levels of student achievement, schools can have a significant impact on student learning when they use data effectively to make instructional decisions. It is simply not enough as a teacher to go on "hunches" about instruction, how to teach, and how to assess children. Data is one of the most, if not the most, important tool in developing instructional practices with high student achievement in mind. The use of data will be an integral part within the school organization where I serve as educational leader. Data used in achieving high levels of student success cannot be limited to scores on standardized tests. Standardized tests have a rightful place in education and in telling a school about overall trends regarding curriculum and broad achievement information. However, schools committed to high student achievement data use data to know each and every learner thoroughly and to make adjustments to practices and teaching on a regular basis due to information gleaned from the data.

As an educational leader within a school, it will be a priority of mine to support teachers in their efforts to effectively collect pertinent data, interpret it correctly, and to disaggregate data for the purpose of interpreting results to make instructional decisions. Much of the use of data will be incorporated into the components of our professional development model, and through the collective efforts of teachers within the school learning and growing together. It will be necessary to use a cycle of inquiry in incorporating data into day to day teaching. This process enables teachers to use baseline data, knowledge of current research, and best practices knowledge in education to determine whether or not the modification in their teaching has an impact on student learning. As leader, my role in this will be to model the use of data.

Sharing school-wide information about proposing changes in how day to day operations of the school are carried out based on data can be a powerful tool for modeling how this process can be used in their own classrooms. According to Lambert (1998), "Information about student achievement gathered through performances and products is the most precious kind of information for inquiry and general improvement" (p. 23). As instructional leader, it will be important for me to remove the roadblocks to the use of data. Providing the technological support for the use of data will be critical in its use in our educational processes. I plan to encourage teachers to become technologically literate in basic programs that support the use of data through workshops and on-site training within the

school day. Also important will be showing the results of data to the staff on an ongoing basis to stay current with its use. Celebrating the improvements of students when it is evidenced by data will be commonplace. Conversely, when data provides us evidence of failures or shortcomings, it will be crucial to offer support and encourage risk-taking and reflection. The use of data to prescribe and alter instruction must be commonplace. It will never be my intention as a principal to use data as a way to judge performance, but rather as another tool to encourage teamwork, reflection, and continuous improvement.

Community Involvement

Schools exist to educate and improve the quality of life for the members within the community. Public schools are funded by the tax dollars of citizens. The school, in many ways, belongs to and exists due to the support of the members of the community. In addition to capital, the community in which the school exists also has a significant impact on the overall effectiveness of the school by providing additional resources. Danielson (2002) writes, "The relationships between a school and its external partners (such as parents, community agencies, other educational institutions, or businesses) should focus primarily on advancing student learning" (p. 67).

There are various ways that a school can seek the support of the community. Certainly the quality and nature of this support is critical in making the determination about whether or not a school is successful. Most every school

claims to have the support of its community members. The truth is, the nature and degree of support varies greatly between ordinary and extraordinary schools.

Fullan (1997) notes,

The research is abundantly clear: Nothing motivates a child more than when learning is valued by schools and families/community working together in partnership.....These forms of [parent] involvement do not happen by accident or even by invitation. They happen by explicit strategic intervention. (p. 32)

When parents and communities work with schools in a true partnership, student achievement soars. Although there has been countless examples on how communities and schools working together have resulted in increased student achievement, the reality is that many schools, parents, and community members are still unclear as to what exactly the partnership should look like. It will be important as administrator to approach the idea of community partnerships with attention to the purpose that each side is trying to achieve within the partnership. The school must keep in mind that when students achieve, the school is fulfilling a commitment to the community. The community and parents must keep in mind that when they maintain a visible and ongoing presence within the functioning of the school, students are far more likely to achieve a high level of success. The National Parent Teacher Association has used a framework developed by the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships to identify national standards for parental involvement (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). I plan to use this framework for outlining the process used with the school in which I serve as

administrator as a guide to building a productive, mutually satisfying partnership between school and community.

Standard One-Communicating. It perhaps seems obvious, but communication must be timely, two-way, and convenient. Communication must be done in ways that make is easy. Using what technology has to offer in the way of e-mails, cell phones, and other various gadgets will be necessary to maintain communication in this very busy but technologically savvy world in which we live. In the area of communication, parents must be given a variety of ways in which to express ideas and concerns. E-mails and parent newsletters that contain questions and answer sharing will be an essential part of this communication. Communication in various forms should contain positive news sharing to celebrate successes within the school. This is a definite relationship builder that is a key to improvement.

Standard Two-Parenting. When parents are true partners of the school, the school understands and uses information gained from parents about their children in order to better meet the needs of each student. Parents in turn, can take advantage of teaching and educational expertise of teachers to improve upon their parenting skills. With this in mind, I plan to offer parenting information and skills workshops on a regular basis within the school in which I serve as principal.

Standard Three-Student Learning. It is obvious that when parents help at home, student achievement levels increase. However, parents don't always know

how to best help their child at home. Some view helping with and checking homework as good things to do at home, while teachers on the other hand, view that type of help as detrimental because it decreases the motivation on the student's part for paying attention in class if the lesson will be repeated at home. To ensure that the help at home is truly help, it will be important for the school to communicate the exact expectations with parents early on in the school year. I will promote the use of "Meet the Teacher" nights at our school to give the parents and teacher time to acquaint themselves with each other and for them to be able to have time to communicate effectively and early about expectations. Teachers will also be encouraged to provide helpful information regarding expectations in regular newsletters.

Standard Four-Volunteering. Parents and community members are an essential part of the success of a school when they are used in productive ways within the school day to support student learning. There is a plethora of human resources just waiting to be tapped for use in schools. When people are serving as volunteers on a regular basis within a school to help students, they almost inevitably become positive advocates for the school. This type of support is invaluable in this age of high stakes testing and accountability. In order to maximize the potential for volunteers within the school, I believe it will be necessary to have a volunteer coordinator. The coordinator could either be a parent or staff member who is willing to coordinate people and schedules to best

accommodate the needs of our school. Input from teachers about student needs and schedules will be an important part of this process. The use of a volunteer coordinator will ensure that volunteers are used to maximize student learning and not be limited to cutting and pasting that results when there is a lack of planning or preparation.

Standard Five-Making Decisions. Parents can and should be full partners in the education of their children. Marzano (2002) states, "Involved parents sense that the school values and welcomes not only their ideas but also their physical participation. As an added benefit, parent and community involvement can significantly add to a school's resource base" (p. 128). Too often, schools have been guilty of adhering to the beliefs that parents are to always support decisions made by teachers without actually partaking in the decision making process itself. This situation fails to create the type of partnerships needed for high student achievement because it leaves gaps in communication and trust between school and community. In order to achieve a partnership that is positive and effective, it will be important for me as to include parents and community members to be members of decision making bodies within the school system. It will be necessary to involve them at every turn, seeking out parents from all walks of life. Members of parental groups should reflect the student population as a whole. This heterogeneous inclusion will provide a way for support and information to disseminate through the entire community rather than limiting information to

select few. This helps to build a strong sense of support and trust between the school and the greater community.

Standard Six-Collaborating With the Community. This involves tapping into the abundance of community resources readily available to the school. This includes parents within the community but also businesses and agencies that also have the best interest of children in mind. It is my opinion that it is necessary and good practice to use any and all of the resources at our disposal to benefit students. Furthermore, I plan to take an "Ask and you shall receive" attitude in regards to community resources. By investing in and involving the school in the community, the school will be able to better respond to the various needs among the students and their families when the need arises. It will be my intention to work with people and ask for things even though I might be told "No" on occasion. I feel it is always better to ask and be told "no" than not to ask at all.

With a commitment for true collaboration between the school and the greater community it will be a priority to support the use of community service projects among classes within the school. I view community service projects as an important and worthwhile way to give back to the community that continuously gives its support to the school. In order to fulfill this task, as an administrator, it will be important for me to support the teachers in their efforts to go out into the community and provide worthwhile services to the community. Community service projects will be the ultimate way to do our part in

perpetuating the positive working relationship between the school in which I serve as Principal and the greater community (not to mention that it builds individual citizenship skills among students.)

The entire concept of leadership within schools has changed dramatically within recent years. No longer is the principal of a building viewed as the all knowing and ever powerful king of the castle. I welcome this evolution with open arms. I have long viewed collaboration with others as key to individual growth. The four categories outlined in this paper – school culture, continuous improvement, high student achievement, and community involvement – are major factors in the determination of a school's success. Without proper attention and commitment to these areas, schools seriously undermine their ability to produce results in student achievement that lead to measurable success. I am so eager to put to use my leadership skills and knowledge about leadership to positively impact the success of a school for which I will serve as educational leader.

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