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## **The lessons and experiences of my transformation into an educational leader : a reflective essay**

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## **The lessons and experiences of my transformation into an educational leader : a reflective essay**

### **Abstract**

The descriptor for Iowa Administrator Standard I, "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared by the school community," is the all-encompassing goal and performance standard I have set for myself to become an effective school administrator.

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THE LESSONS AND EXPERIENCES OF MY TRANSFORMATION INTO AN  
EDUCATIONAL LEADER  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,  
And Postsecondary Education  
University of Northern Iowa

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Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

By

Kelli Kathleen Rixner

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The descriptor for Iowa Administrator Standard I, “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared by the school community,” is the all-encompassing goal and performance standard I have set for myself to become an effective school administrator. In analyzing this descriptor, I understand that the other five Iowa Administrator Standards must be implemented and demonstrated with fidelity in order to achieve the quality of leadership that is expected in this statement.

Standard 2 relates to being an instructional leader. In reflecting on my course work and internship, I have found that facilitating the development of a sustainable school culture that provides success for all students is dependent upon the leader’s knowledge of the instructional program that must be put into place to meet the needs of each student. In order to make this happen, teachers and support staff must be involved in continuous learning and meaningful professional development that is reflected in the research based instructional practices in the classroom. The quality and success of creating and sustaining such an effective instructional program demands that the instructional leader engages parents, community, and other stakeholders in understanding and decision making through intentional communication and planned collaboration (Standard 4). This collaborative model will ensure that the conditions and the dynamics of the diverse school community are addressed, focused, and embraced to fully support the needs and achievement of every child.

Creating the vision, having the knowledge that is necessary to implement an effective meaningful instructional program, and understanding the elements of collaborative leadership are certainly critical components of being a visionary leader. The truly effective visionary leader, however, must facilitate and manage an organization in which the vision is manifested through effective implementation. Standard 3 clearly defines the tasks and responsibilities of organizational leadership.

Clearly, overseeing a safe and orderly teaching and learning environment is vital to the sustainability of the confidence for implementation of effective instructional programming. The principal is obligated and trusted to support the focused instruction through prudent management of the budget that is in compliance with district policies. Additionally, the principal is ultimately responsible for the maintenance of the facility, the staff evaluations and enforcements of staff contractual obligations. The principal must maintain high visibility in the building, and model expected, professional, and ethical behavior, write reports, communicate effectively with all stakeholders, understand and ensure the legal rights of students, parent, staff, etc. Although, these responsibilities are integrated throughout the expectations of an organizational leader, it is within these constraints, regulations, and opportunities that the truly visionary leader proves the quality of his leadership.

The quality of his leadership and the confidence of his staff and community are fully dependent upon his acting with integrity, modeling professional and

ethical behavior (Standard 5). A breach of the behavior has the potential to destroy any or all influence.

Standard 6 requires the instructional leader to exhibit his knowledge and ability to influence trends, legislation, and understanding of educational needs beyond the realm of his building and immediate community. In this arena, the visionary leader will actively participate in political and global influence that affect education as a whole and provides vision for the future of all children.

#### What I Believe About Leadership and Education

Becoming an educational leader is the greatest contribution I will make to society. I value public education and cherish the privilege to work with and for our children. Educators engage the minds and unlock the creativity of our youth. Each day they present the possibilities, address the realities, and shape futures. My accomplishments and experiences as an educator have molded my belief that all students can learn and ignited my passion to play an integral role in the process of creating a positive and meaningful teaching and learning environment for all students.

I have the strong desire to become an administrator. I believe as a principal, I will have a better opportunity and more effective tools available to me in order to impact the education, lives, and success of all students. The choice to become an administrator is right for me. I want the responsibility and the challenge of improving the education of all students. My goal is to become the best

educational leader I can be and make a positive impact on the lives of students and education.

My belief that all children can learn has provided me with a personal mission to become a leader who inspires and empowers teachers, parents, and the community to provide the educational and life experiences that are necessary for a child to be prepared for his next level of educational and social responsibility. This personal belief mirrors the overall expectation tied to each standard stated in the Iowa Standards for School Leaders. I will promote the success of all students. Each of the six standards is linked to overall student achievement. Every decision I will make will be linked to student achievement. After studying and learning the expectations of the standards and dissecting the components of an educational leader, I know I am following the right path. I believe in the expectations and values outlined in the standards and understand the responsibilities I will inherit as a principal.

In order for me to become a successful principal, I will continue to develop my leadership qualities. I recognize a successful educational leader is comprised of the different elements set as expectations in the Iowa Standards for Administrators. I will need to be a successful visionary, instructional, organizational, collaborative, ethical, and political leader.

To effectively address curriculum, instruction, student learning, and organization, I will need to identify the overall educational vision for the building. This vision will be critical in facilitating the success of all students and the



effective management of the school. I will be responsible for the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of this vision. I will need to demonstrate my understanding of societal issues, my commitment to student achievement, and the ability to successfully facilitate a thorough vision.

As an instructional leader, I hope to accomplish creating a positive educational environment where all students learn and experience success. The school environment is critical in a student's opportunity to learn. In order to enhance student achievement, a positive educational culture must be established; a culture that promotes instructional programs, student learning, and professional growth. It will be my responsibility to create and implement this vision. It will be vital for me to model the desired behaviors relevant to the success of sustaining the building vision.

In order for me to successfully facilitate the implementation of the building vision, I must deliver effective management of the organization, operations, and provided resources essential to a safe and effective learning environment. My execution of these critical elements will require me to multi-task, a mandatory skill for a competent educational leader.

I will be responsible for leading the development of the partnership between my school and community. This collaborative relationship is necessary for all entities to thrive. Creating a two way partnership will be an effective means of obtaining public resources for the benefit of teaching and learning. I will need to genuinely recognize and understand the population's diverse groups, strengths,

and issues in order to build this confidence. I will need to be visible, proactive, and vocal about the needs and accomplishments of my school. This will open the door for a nurturing relationship between my school and community. As a principal, I must be a successful collaborative leader.

If I am to be an effective leader, I must carry out all tasks with fidelity, fairness, and ethical behavior. All stakeholders must view me as trustworthy, consistently judicious, and genuine in my relationships and decision-making. I have defined my personal mission, and I will dedicate my life to upholding this mission in order to be a successful role model and leader for all stakeholders.

I understand that I need to lead by example and become a proactive advocate for all children. I will be required to respond to and influence others to bring out positive change in the educational system. This includes possessing a broad base of current knowledge and maintaining the skills to affect prevalent and relevant educational issues with efficacy. Encouraging others to promote and implement strategies for the success of all students and teachers is a critical role for an educational leader.

Using the effective practices of shared decision making, collaboration, and my communication skills, I will create strong partnerships with all stakeholders. My dedication and drive to be a life long learner will help me to become a visionary and instructional leader committed to the intellectual, social, and emotional growth of all children.

Mastering the execution of the skills outlined in the Iowa Standards for Administrators is crucial to my success and effectiveness as an educational leader. My studies and experiences have also shown me the importance of developing into a reflective leader who responsibly and effectively influences and encourages active participation and collective commitment from all stakeholders. These critical elements comprise the ideal educational leader.

### The Reflective Leader

The No Child left Behind (NCLB) legislation has been highly criticized among educators for what seem to be unfair and unrealistic testing practices for all children and the unfair labeling of schools that do not demonstrate the percentage of proficiency among students according to the set standards of the federal government. While there is great debate on both sides of the issue, it cannot be denied that the NCLB legislation has had a profound impact on the way educators “do business.” One of the virtues of the legislation is the awareness it has imposed on educators at all levels. For the instructional leader, it has demanded the focus of education be directed at the learning and achievement of students. It has demanded the analysis of the effectiveness of instructional strategies, programming, and reflective leadership. Reflective leadership is now, and should have been, the protocol for all instructional leaders. The NCLB legislation has, in many cases, revitalized and created standards of accountability for the reflective leader. No longer is managing instruction the dominant practice of principals. The leadership style is now distributive, visionary, and reflective.

Current research shows the educational leader works more effectively the more he reflects on and monitors his actions. “The effective leader will constantly monitor his actions, checking to see if what he does is having the desired effect, and if not, changing to another course of action” (Starratt, 1995, p.20). This type of reflection consists of focusing on the questions, “Is this working?” or “What situation gives me a clue as to what will work?” To further connect his decision making to the building vision, the leader must enter into a deeper level of questioning, “Why am I doing this?” or “What does this have to do with where I want to go with this issue or person?” This allows the practitioner to relate the present action to its significance or value. “Such reflection is intended to relate the present activity to those meanings embedded in one’s vision to determine whether the activity expresses and is consistent with the vision” (Starratt, 1995, p.20). It is vital for the educational leader to contemplate the critical questions that support the design and stewardship of the building and district vision. Standard 1 of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) clearly states this stewardship is the responsibility of the visionary leader. “This type of reflection encourages questions of meaning and significance, which focus on day-to-day practices” (Starratt, 1995, p. 21).

After asking the critical questions, the effective educational leader must interpret the answers in order to make the best educationally sound decisions. Determining what the practice of X has to do with the building vision and what does Y reveal about the assumption made about students and/or about their ability

to learn is the key element in this reflective process. "The practitioner must demonstrate skill in facing problems or issues with numerous contextual variables. Such practitioners analyze the uniqueness of specific problems and frame them in ways that structure their intelligibility" (Starratt, 1995, p.43). They think about the results of their actions and determine the reason things work or do not work. "In order to continue their quests to fulfill the set visions, they must generate a reservoir of experiences, insights, and intuitions they can call upon for solutions or suggestions" (Starratt, 1995, p.43). Standard 2 (ISSL) calls for the administrator's direct demonstration of this process as it relates to the success of all students by sustaining a school culture which promotes an effective instructional program and pertinent professional development for teachers. The effective leaders consistently participate in the reflective process. "They carry on a conversation with a problem or issue and listen to it talk back. They are reflecting even in the moment of action so they can respond to the action as it unfolds" (Starratt, 1995, p.66). For instance, the moment of action might be a leader's observation of a teacher effectively re-engaging a student in active participation of the lesson. As this moment unfolds, it is necessary for the reflective leader to acknowledge and compliment the teacher on his effective instructional practice.

"That interpretation is another form of commendation, another way of reinforcing vision. Questions, interpretations, and commendations are ways the leader keeps vision close to the action rather than in a book on a shelf in the

principal's office" (Starratt, 1995, p.20). At this point in the reflective process, it is important to include other stakeholders, by sharing the findings and conclusions. The data can be used to generate a collaborative educational environment and will enable the vision to energize and lead the staff and community to transform the school into the kind of human learning community the vision holds.

Generating the collaborative educational environment is the most challenging and most critical practice of the reflective leader. "As the human factor is introduced into this process, it is important to remember that the human factor is in a constant state of flux" (Starratt, 1995, p.51). The student population changes from year to year and brings with it a new set of parents with varying expectations. Also, the staff changes as new teachers are hired and veteran teachers leave. The community takes on different characteristics too, as businesses move in or close or lay people off. The district leadership fluctuates as school board members are voted in or out. These types of scenarios become even more complex when legislation creates new standards and funding streams are earmarked for certain programs or eliminated all together. The reflective leader must maintain a constant knowledge base of the ever-changing variables that impact the set vision. As Standard 4 (ISSL) states, the school administrator must demonstrate his ability to create collaborative leadership. He must develop skills to create relationships that reinforce the collaborative community, yet maintain

the flexibility and foresight to keep the vision living and adjustable to meet the needs of the learning community it serves.

Researching the characteristics of the reflective educational leader has strongly reinforced my belief in the educational process. I believe that all students can learn and that the professional on-going search for knowledge and understanding is critical to the success of a vital and effective teaching and learning environment. Belief, search for knowledge and visionary leadership are the key factors that will guide my practice as a reflective leader.

In becoming a reflective leader, it will be important to develop a mental organization as well as a practice organization that balances the management issues from the leadership practices. This balance is more succinctly embedded when the reflective process becomes more prominent and pervasive among teachers and other stakeholders. "For instance, the Downey Three-Minute Walk Through exercises for administrators is an organizational practice for principals to be in every classroom daily or within a certain length of time, depending upon the size of the building" (Toni Dann, Hiatt Middle School Principal, Personal communication, January 17, 2005). Obviously, the purpose of the practice is to provide meaningful, routine time for the principal to observe every classroom and witness specific instructional strategies in each classroom. The more important element included in the "Walk Through" is the practice of posing reflective questions to teachers in a non-threatening conversation. "Asking the critical questions of why the teacher chose to use a particular instructional strategy to

teach a particular objective opens a thoughtful, reflective conversation with the teacher” (Dann, 1995). This practice should create consistent reflective dialogue among teachers about what works and what does not, and why.

I mention the Downey Walk Through to emphasize one of my major beliefs about the reflective process. While it is imperative for the reflective practitioner to sustain reflection, it also necessary for the instructional leader to model the reflective process and coach others in its implementation and effectiveness. One of the first ways I would try to coach others into this process is by implementing a walk through process.

“The reflective process for the instructional leader is that constant internal dialogue about what practice of X has to do with the doing of Y and what that reveals about student learning and maintaining the vision” (Starratt, 1995, p.20). Creating a common dialogue among teachers, parents, students, community, etc. keeps the vision alive and the teaching and learning practices on target.

Inherent in creating a reflective educational community is the most basic element of human trust...communication, communication, communication. As a reflective leader, I will be inclusive and share information and ask questions in order to open the dialogue and not fear the answers or the changes that lie ahead.



## The Leader's Role in Educational Change

“The focus of educational leadership has changed from the authoritative manager to the leader with influence” (Heifetz, 1994, p.12). Influence is powerful in that it is inclusive and distributes the responsibility of achieving the vision among the constituency. In *Leadership without Easy Answers*, Ronald Heifetz says, “Leadership arouses passion... When we call for leadership in our organizations and politics, we call for something we prize” (Heifetz, 1994, p.13). Expressing the passion and understanding of the prized values manifest themselves into influence thus establishing shared leadership.

“Shared leadership is the current research-based practice in education and also in the corporate domain (D.J. Corson, trainer for Deming's TMQ, Total Quality Management, Personal Communication, November 3, 2004). Sharing the leadership requires the leader to create a guiding coalition within the organization. “This group creates the foundation of the balanced leadership that strengthens the commitment and accountability of the whole membership to work toward the common vision of the organization” (Corson, 2004).

In education, the change to balanced leadership in school buildings and school districts has redefined the role of the principal. This movement has been popular among parent, teachers, and voters. “The idea behind distributive leadership is that the complex nature of instructional practice requires people to operate in networks of shared and complementary expertise rather than in hierarchies that have clearly defined division of labor” (Elmore, 2000, p.3). This is a well

understood concept among coaches and other team oriented organizations. In education it is understood also, but it has been less likely to be practiced with fidelity or longevity for a variety of reasons.

Now the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has imposed accountability for student achievement among all members of the educational structure, focusing the greatest responsibility on the shoulders of the leadership. This means the building principal truly assumes the role of an effective instructional leader and commands the implementation of distributive leadership. Principals must encourage the emergence of teacher-leaders to assume different responsibilities on the basis of their knowledge and competence. "No longer do teachers go to their classrooms and deliver curriculum in isolation whereby students are allowed to fail by default. Meaningful planning and implementing strategic instruction is based on the routine monitoring of individual student achievement data" (Elmore, 2000, p.4). Considering the statutory and public scrutiny of such accountability, the educational leader must create a collaborative, responsive culture that continues to value the input and shared decision making to create the ownership that will guide the stakeholders' collective efforts to sustain the vision and ensure the success of all students.

In the past two years, the Des Moines Public School District has made a concerted effort to increase ongoing, purposeful, collaboration among all levels of administrators, teachers, support staff, and operational staff to guarantee the success of all students. This effort has given me the opportunity to participate in

district wide leadership and helped me to plan strategies that I will implement when I become an administrator.

As an effective principal, I will need to create a collaborative educational culture that promotes the success of all students. In order to be successful at this task, it is imperative that I align my research with the ISSL standards and execute the elements with great thought and care. As Standard 1 (ISSL) states, "The school administrator will promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community." As principal, it will be my responsibility to facilitate all four components of this standard. This task will entail a collaborative process which will also fall under the expectations of Standard 3 (ISSL) which calls for collaborative leadership.

I realize the importance of being a learning leader. I believe understanding that leading and learning are firmly linked in community and that is my first important step in building a culture of shared leadership. Designing opportunities for shared learning and collaboration will be key to the success of this process. As principal, I will need to shift the former collective focus of teaching to learning. We as educators are no longer just responsible for the learning of our students. "Most recently, educators have come to realize that we are responsible for our own learning as well" (Lambert, 2002, p.38). In order to establish this learning culture, I will need to be a strong learning leader.

I believe the teaming process is an integral element in forming a collaborative culture which is essential to balanced leadership. The daily schedule must provide teachers with time to collaborate. This time will include embedded staff development led by the teachers themselves and supplemental training.

“Teachers need training, resources, and support to overcome difficulties they encounter while developing common outcomes, writing common assessments, and analyzing student achievement data” (DuFour, 2002, p.14).

I will follow the example my current principal has set by establishing a leadership Team. Teachers on this team attend monthly district leadership meetings, which allow them, time to formulate and discuss their own core educational values and also participate in district wide professional development. Currently, these team members present to the staff and are to facilitate the development of our Comprehensive School Improvement Plan.

In every aspect of sustaining the vision and the mission of the school, I will involve the staff, student, and community. I understand this is a daunting task and easily abandoned due to the many variables that lie beyond my control. However, the vision and mission of the school must remain meaningful and pertinent to the needs of the school; therefore, my control is not the key factor. My ability to influence and encourage active participation and collective commitment among others will be the critical component in keeping the vision alive and will reveal the success I achieve as the true leader and motivator among my colleagues and constituency.

### The Vision of My Administrative Future

Within the next ten years, my career goal is to become a principal of a responsive middle school as described in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2000). *This We Believe* is a publication of the National Middle School Association that represents thirty years of research on the intellectual and developmental needs of adolescents ages 10-15. The focus of the research is to create a student-centered instructional environment combined with exemplary social and emotional support for adolescents.

Experience in all phases of middle school administration is necessary to achieve the position of middle school principal. Of course, sustained successful teaching experience at the middle school is the necessary first step to attaining this goal. I have developed my leadership skills during my eight years of teaching. Imbedded in my teaching position, I have made the most of the presented opportunities to experience administrative responsibilities and take on the positions that offer teacher leadership roles in as many aspects of the school as possible. This has included serving as a team leader and district leadership team member, substituting for the dean of students and vice principal during their absences, and assuming the role of the principal's designee in any position that he assigned. These experiences have helped me articulate my future goals.

Currently, I am sending in my resume and letter of interest to the Des Moines Public Schools for the newly posted dean positions for next year. I plan on being a dean of students for the Des Moines Public Schools next fall. Everything I have

done during the past two years in my administrative program has prepared me for this next step. The dean of students position in the Des Moines District is a pseudo-administrative position that mirrors the vice principalship, with the exception of evaluating certified staff. The duties include district and building leadership roles, but focuses mainly on student management. I look forward to becoming a dean and furthering my leadership skills so I can continue to move up the administrative ladder.

Within five years, I do plan to advance to the position of vice principal. This position is the precursor to becoming principal. The duties are varied and focus in large part on the safety and welfare of the students and staff. The vice principal is fully licensed to evaluate all staff and, most importantly, assume all duties of the principal in the principal's absence. The skills I learn in this position will groom and prepare me to be the instructional leader of my own building. Look for me to be a middle school principal in the year 2016.

I have set the goal of becoming a middle school principal and this means I have dedicated myself to be a lifelong learner and continue to develop my leadership skills and the pursuit of knowledge. This will include fostering mentoring relationships, seeking further professional development opportunities, taking advantage of leadership experiences, and mastering needed skills. I will value each lesson and see each one as a step to becoming an effective educational leader.

## Conclusion

Everything I have done over the past two years has been connected to my goal of becoming an effective educational leader. I have aligned myself with positive role models and have sought out every possible opportunity to gain leadership and practical administrative experiences. It has been exciting, invigorating, and exhausting all at once. I look back at where I started as a teacher and am proud of my continual transformation into an effective educational leader. I have my experiences to thank for my developmental process.

My favorite experiences have occurred when I have served as an administrator in the office. I began substituting for the dean of students or the vice principal actually before starting this program. My substitution opportunities have naturally developed into now a daily time period I spend in the office as an actual administrator. I have sacrificed my daily personal plan for this opportunity, but it has been so exciting and full of lessons. My mentor, Connie Sloan, continues to groom me for a principal position. She began this process by meeting with me daily to explain the skills of routine, organization, communication, and policy. She always allows me to practice these skills after a lesson and we discuss my process each time in a reflective session. These reflective conversations are priceless and continue to have a great impact on the development of my leadership skills.

I am now extremely comfortable working in the office. I have mastered the routines, organization, communication, and policies. I deal with situations,

students, teachers, and families with confidence. The repeated exposure to these situations in the office has prepared and provided me with great confidence to serve as a dean of students next year. This is my immediate professional goal.

The Des Moines Public Schools established a leadership academy last spring. All district administrators were charter members and in the practice of distributive leadership, they were asked to choose two teachers to also serve in this brigade. We attend monthly meetings and professional development sessions. Our most recent session was focused on Curriculum Mapping. As building leaders, we have now been charged to return to our staffs to train and lead the beginning steps of individual curriculum mappings that will later coincide with district maps. My experience in this academy has exposed me to cutting edge educational developments and has allowed me to network with established educational leaders in my district. Continuous participation in professional development and networking with district leaders are critical elements involved in moving towards my goal of becoming a principal in the next ten years.

When I do become a principal I will have the experience of writing a Comprehensive School Improvement Plan. I have served on the School Instructional Leadership Team for two years and have played an important role as one of the stakeholders and building leaders responsible for writing this ever growing document. This experience has been valuable in showing me the importance of following district requirements and working with a group of stakeholders while developing a vision.



All of my coursework and hands on experiences have allowed me to develop a repertoire of skills that I will use as a dean of students, vice principal, and as a principal. With each experience I have gained another ounce of passion for my career and dedication to serving all children. I am hungry to be an administrator and an effective educational leader. That is because I have thrived on each lesson and experience afforded to me in this program.

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