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A preferred vision for leading PK-12 schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading PK-12 schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Ever since I can remember I have thought about furthering my education to become an administrator. There are several reasons for this and the more I thought about them, I knew it was right for me. Natural leaders are pushed into situations. My whole life I have been a leader no matter what I have been involved with or what type of job I was working in. Possessing these strong qualities that will help me in being a well rounded and respected educational leader will be very beneficial in all the different situations that can arise. My leadership skills are intelligence, motivation, effectiveness, passion and a desire to better myself using these skills as a positive influence on the students and staff will be keys to my performance.

A PERFERRED VISION FOR LEADING PK-12 SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

As I look back and ask myself why I became an educator many reasons come to mind. The most positive influences in life were my teachers; these people still hold a place in my heart. My father was a teacher and coach throughout his career, which also helped mold my thoughts and beliefs for these people. I made the decision to become an educator in fifth grade. At this time I knew I wanted to try and have the same or greater impact on children and young adult lives as they had done for me. The older I got the more I realized that I could have a positive impact on young people lives.

Knowing that I have the abilities to influence and guide young people and help shape them into what they want to become is very exciting for me, and a big part of why I chose this path. Challenging students and making them think harder and more efficiently has also been a goal of mine since I began my teaching career. Another reason I chose to become an educator has to do with the fact that everyday is unique and interesting in its own way. No day is ever like the next or the last. That gives me something to look forward to, and also challenges the way I do or handle situations. One of my biggest mindsets is finding a positive outlook on whatever has happened, which is something I truly want students and adults around me to see and hopefully learn from.

Getting students excited about learning is probably the most rewarding part of being an educator and something that I pride myself on very much. Education is the foundation for whom a person is, what they choose to do throughout their life, who they become and the manner in which they carry themselves. Education provides a lot of clarity with beliefs,

values and interests a person has during their lifetime. How a child learns in a school system depends a great deal on the way they connect with their teachers and the amount of respect there is between the two of them. I feel that in this field I have to respect my students just as they need to respect me.

One belief that I have always had and feel even stronger about as I gain more experience in this profession is that every individual needs to have a connection to some type of education. There are all types of careers and jobs available to high school graduates. Without the basic thirteen years of education, how would they ever receive the "foundation" they need to be successful in what they choose to pursue? It is important for people to strive to challenge themselves to educate themselves on as many things as they can throughout their lifetime. This make for a well-rounded more knowledgeable person to work and live in our society.

Ever since I can remember I have thought about furthering my education to become an administrator. There are several reasons for this and the more I thought about them, I knew it was right for me. Natural leaders are pushed into situations. My whole life I have been a leader no matter what I have been involved with or what type of job I was working in. Possessing these strong qualities that will help me in being a well rounded and respected educational leader will be very beneficial in all the different situations that can arise. My leadership skills are intelligence, motivation, effectiveness, passion and a desire to better myself using these skills as a positive influence on the students and staff will be keys to my performance.

Using these ideas, I feel I can do better than other leaders that I have seen or worked with and handle situations differently in order to strengthen a school and its community.

Impacting an entire building and not just a classroom is something I want to do. Getting a community involved with a school district is also very important and I feel I have some good ideas and at the administrative level I will be able to do this.

In many situations throughout life people are pushed into taking on a leadership role and are usually needed to get things moving or headed in the right direction. I can remember times in school when I would naturally step up to this person, I have always been looked to as a leader and I am able to connect with all sorts of different people in different situations. I am a good listener and I am able to take others ideas into account which is a very important characteristic to have with this job. Leaders must be confident in their abilities and also be reliable, persistent, on task, open and able to find a way to get the task at hand accomplished.

There are definitely different situations in leadership. Different situations require attention and need to be handled one on one. With being an administrator several different situations can arise and it is important to look at them all one by one and from a global perceptive. Different people are better with different situations and as an administrator it is crucial to recognize this and handle situations accordingly. As I reflect on my personal values and beliefs I am able to realize where a lot of these ideas came from. Although my parents obviously had a huge impact on who I am and the way I live my life, so did my teachers. This is something that I keep in mind everyday as I am working with students. I have a job that is important in many ways, but most importantly the fact that I am influencing and guiding young people. It is important for me to remember this as I am part of their lives. If I do my part to help students learn and understand the learning process I am also helping them grow and mature into responsible adults. In order for such a positive

outcome I must be a good role model and a strong leader, two very important qualities for an administrator to possess. "Leaders, who do not have high levels of all the skills, need to capitalize on their strengths and find ways to compensate for their weaknesses, usually through the assistance of able advisors" (Sternberg, 2004, p. 113).

Believing a leader is capable is just as important as the leader's belief in their support structure. Creating this understanding and the sense that all situations can be accomplished is the idea in education referred to as creating a positive culture. First, creating and then promoting a relentless campaign of positive attitudes, policies and ultimately, positive results is one of the most important elements of leadership, especially educational leadership. A school's culture should be easily recognizable to the public and should display the attitudes held by the leaders, staff and students that work and learn in the building. The culture of learning and achievement should constantly be displayed to all parties in the community, not just parents and those directly impacted but all should see the culture of the building.

The importance of this element to leadership many seen obvious but it isn't. The problem with the obvious is that is often neglected. In today's ever changing educational world the urban educators and leaders or urban schools must pick this role up and work to make their building stand out as a positive asset to the community as opposed to a liability. A building's culture must be presented to everyone at all times. Administrators have to take their roles as leaders and lead the charge in promoting a positive culture throughout their buildings. Too often urban schools are labeled as poor achieving magnets for violence and chaos. Negative press is the only press remembered and negative culture is to change.

Where one begins often determines where one ends up. Beginning with the attitude of the staff and transforming this into something positive is crucial. Without the staff, leaders would be helpless. When culture is being formed it is important to use positive language. Lemley (2003) explains that certain terms or phrases should be pulled out of culturally rich schools. Some phrases like working "in the trenches" or "it's a jungle in there", or teaching on the "front lines" have no place in education. All of these phrases conjure up thoughts of negativity and inherent trouble. Too often teachers in urban schools and leaders of those schools wear their building dysfunction as a badge of honor. It is as if teaching in a low achieving building is more difficult and therefore more respectable. Respect should grow from the ability to improve the building not from the ability to maintain its current status.

Once the staff is on board and the negative language has slowed to a stop it will be time to involve the community and create a culture of ownership. Manna (1999) says that the success of a school has very little to do with "special programs, expansive playing fields, huge endowments, snappy uniforms, celebrity alumni, or whether the school is wired to the Internet." The idea here is simple, the success of a building is dependent on the culture of the building, the feeling their building is special. A sense of ownership by the parents, students and staff is imperative when discussing positive culture in a school building (McEwen, 2003, p. 101).

With parents, staff and students all on board to create a positive culture for their building it is time for the leader of that building to step up and implement the necessary procedures for success. "Dismantling a toxic culture and building a new one is complicated, messy and even confrontational at times." (McEwen, 2003, p. 94). For this reason the

changing of a culture must be done rapidly and without restraint. Personnel who are not immediately on board must either be dealt with to change their negative ways or by removed. Parents have to somehow be empowered to make decisions at the building level. All administrators must be available to talk to students and staff in order to identify all barriers in front of success. Students must be monitored and guided as well as promoted and praised. Any negativity must be confronted immediately and conversely positive displays must be rewarded immediately.

All change is met with resistance. Change in building culture is no different. Though the past was negative and at time unproductive it was comfortable and familiar. Here perseverance must be employed to make sure the positive culture takes hold. Often times building leaders look to implement change and either abandon the policies or lose momentum when met with challenges. Cultural changes are often severe and require a lot of forethought and staff training. If everyone involved is clear on the desired outcome as well as the plan of implementation, creating a positive culture will be less difficult to employ. "Most important, we want to build a safe and civil school culture where our students feel valued and respected, empowered and confident-and where they know that the future is theirs" (McCloud, 2005, p. 49).

Clarity is a key, sharing expectations with staff, parents, students and the community will take care of any misunderstandings. Maintaining a high level of discipline and being consistent will be an aid to success. Communicating student progress to not just the students but parents on a regular basis will prove the program is working. Evaluating staff in a non-threatening manner will ensure quality instruction as well as a positive learning environment. Modeling the behavior desired is also an important ingredient to success of a

positive culture change. Accomplishing all of the aforementioned items will never guarantee success but it will definitely make failure more difficult.

A cultural leader helps the community see the necessity of a positive culture. They also allow the building to improve by engineering change and bringing everyone affected by the school into the equation. This element of leadership aligns with the Iowa Standards for School Leaders in that it shows a clear intent to acknowledge strengths and improve performance of a building. "In the culture of a school, caring connections, positive behavioral supports, and social and emotional learning are essential" (Fleischman, 2005, p.84). This is clearly a critical element of any educational building leader.

Discipline is a critical element as an educational leader. Maintaining a constructive classroom and a building containing students who are eager to learn and focused is necessary when striving to become an effective leader in a school building. It's a combination of discipline, an organized curriculum and encouragement that will lead to success. If an administrator is too lenient, students will take advantage of situations and act out of control, or the other hand if the administrator is too strict the student may be reluctant to express themselves.

The most carefully formulated plans of a building leader are sometimes result of the behavior of their pupils. This behavior cannot be allowed to persist for the sake of the educational progress of the students, as well as the professional integrity and personal well-being of the teacher.

There are seven different models of discipline that I've found to be effective. The first is the group dynamic model. It assumes that the teacher's problems emerge from the interactions of the group. Controlling the group is an integral part of the teaching and is

maintained through such procedures as giving cues, correcting and explaining. Teachers may feel like they need eyes in the back of their head to be able to two or more tasks at once, as well as be aware of the effect that punishing one child has on the rest of the students in the class.

The self-directed modeled of discipline comes from an explanation of problem behavior as evidence of immaturity. The goal of the self-directed model is to enable the pupil to achieve self-control. Pupils should be informed of the objectives of their work and its value in relation to the future of their own lives. This ultimate goal here is to ensure greater interest and self motivation so that the students won't misbehave. This can be done by placing students in situations in which they must make their own decisions. Despite the fact that they will mistakes, it's important that they make their own decisions.

The social strain/subculture conflict model states that students should identify closely with the aims and expectations of the subculture that influences the students. Articulating attainable short-term objectives are important for the students and they should be encouraged to speak out for them.

The psycho dynamic model is another child-centered model, which states that the child needs opportunities to express his or her own subconscious urges. Discipline problems can be resolved by methods which are usually compatible with the quality of the relationship between the student and teacher. In other words, if the student and the teacher don't ever get a long, the negative behavior will most likely happen again. If there is a good relationship the students will feel remorse and realize they were disrespectful to not only an authority figure but a friend as well.

On the first day of school each year our students are given a handbook that provides adequate descriptions of the institutional procedures in cases of student misconduct. Several key components of these handbooks ensure that students know they will be punished for breaking the rules and also comfort students and their parents who are concerned about the safety of the institution. This is also an opportunity for the parents to review what the proper procedures are for the school building. Using this handbook is something I do and sometimes even read rules straight from the book to parents over the phone.

When there is a problem, we must identify the cause's misbehavior and pinpoint that to which rules their actions break in the handbook. At this point, depending what the infraction is, others from the school staff become involved and different methods, procedures and techniques are applied. Sometimes students get delight in causing adults problems and enjoy seeing adults lose control of them selves. Another area of importance is not to label the students when talking to or about them. Doing so could cause many new problems and seriously damage the parent-child relationship. Many behaviors or changes in behavior can signal an underlying emotional or mental health issue.

The area of discipline is pretty much opinion based. As a teacher and future administrator we must do what we feel is right and be grounded and consistent with those decisions. "Past theories and practices have lead many people to think that educational leadership lies solely in the hands of administrators whose role is to manage schools as efficiently as possible" (Doyle, 2004, p.196). There has been a change in the last thirty years towards the administrators setting high expectations for students and staff and actively monitor their achievements. With this change we need the other teachers and staff takes a more active role with discipline. We need to communicate with other faculty members and

see how they deal with disciplinary action; we might find other ideas or find that we need to be more consistent as a building. Finding a level of discipline that applies to the way you think misbehavior should be handled is the first step. With more time in the school setting we should become more understanding of what we expect and what procedure we follow.

After-school programs are becoming more and more important for both students and parents in today's schools. These programs are a valuable way to keep students focused and eager to learn. Extracurricular clubs and projects invite students to sacrifice their time outside of the classroom and extend their creativity into achieving something the students can feel good about. "After-school programs can be an exceptional cost-effective approach to supporting school district goals, such as improving student achievement and building vital community partnerships" (Fletcher & Wayne, 2005, p. 21). "School leaders tend to agree that after-school programs are sound educationally but struggle to operate and sustain such programs" (Miller, 2005, p. 20). It has been my experience that students who get involved with after school programs are more likely to succeed in the classroom. Unfortunately, not every student wants to participate and many would rather be at home keeping their mind off school.

At a young age, parents should start to encourage their children to join after school programs so that when they get older they fell accustomed to doing so. Parents should make an effort to stay on top of new extracurricular activities offered by the school for elementary and middle school aged students. If we force children to stay involved in the programs after the class day, the students will learn the exciting world of after school programs. Parents will see a difference in their child's time-management abilities as well as a passion for school that may not have been there before.

A lot can be said about a school regarding how much they have to offer for extracurricular activities. It's no surprise that schools with more money can afford to provide more expensive programs but this should lead us to believe that schools with a lower budget can't provide programs too. While the wealthier schools may go to museums or do work on there computers, the lower budget school may have a poetry club or drama club to be involved with. In the lower –income schools keeping students out of trouble is important and a positive asset for the community. By providing after school programs for the lower income students, may give them a positive place to go after school. Wealthier schools have their problems too, so after school programs can keep the students occupied and engaged in positive activities. Many schools districts have had to cut budgets as of late. "One positive result of these cuts has been schools' renewed interest in community involvement. "Such involvement is valued as a means to generate both needed resources to support school improvement efforts and students' learning" (Sanders & Lewis, 2005, p. 1).

Tutoring programs in today's schools provide help to students who are struggling in certain areas. It is the time sacrificed by the faculty that determines how effective after school tutoring can be. If no one is willing to stay after school and help these students, then they will continue to struggle and stay academically behind their peers. Here at Anamosa High School we set about a half an hour everyday after school aside for students to be able to go see their teachers. Practices are now allowed to start during this time so the student-athletes do not have to pick between the two.

There has been a nice increase in the establishment of after school programs in the United States. Initiatives of federal, state and community groups have created or expanded after school enrichment programs in both public and private organizations as of late. Steps

have been made to establish after-school programs in a wide variety of locations, usually within schools, community centers, park and recreation facilities, youth organizations like the Boys and Girls Club, YMCA/YWCA, religious institutions, museums and libraries. With such a variety of locations the number of after-school programs has increased in all major urban areas, and with youth participation, these programs strengthen every year. Indeed, it is currently estimated that approximately 25-30 percent of American students spend between three and five afternoons a week in organized after-school programs. This rapid growth in after school programming has occurred in response to the dramatic rise in the number of divorces, single parent families and families with two working parents. Each of these family situations results in households where adults may not always be available to care for their children. Among families with children between six and seventeen years of age, the parent works outside the home in seventy-nine percent of single mother families and eighty-five percent of single-father families. In addition, seventy percent of two parent households with school-age children have both parents working outside the home. Research also suggests a significant gap between parents' working schedules and children's school schedules, leaving over 20 hours per week that school-aged children could be left unsupervised. On the other hand, it's nice that we have so many programs which could be argued are due to high amount of single-parents.

Building relationships within the school setting is becoming more important in today's schools due to the students not having the types of relationships that they used to at home. Often we tend to overlook the value of the importance of a positive relationship between the student and the teacher. We sometimes have this attitude of us against them that creates an environment of mistrust and bad communication. From a student's

standpoint, a negative attitude will cause some students to miss out on potential learning. From an administrators stand point a negative attitude towards the faculty will result in many problems which tend to multiply

Establishing a positive circle of trust involving the student, the faculty and the administrator is no easy task however, this should be among the most important aspects of a successful school. Communication, encouragement and setting goals are mandatory when regarding the circle as a growing team. A positive attitude is the center of this circle and trust therefore must be carried out on a day to day basis.

Understanding about teacher use and acquisition of knowledge and skills is fundamental to our understanding about how and in what circumstances teachers use research and evidence to develop the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. It is important to explore a model of coaching in which joint planning and resource development are combined together to create mutual observation. In addition to the development of knowledge, skills and effective implementation, professional training should allow people to learn how to be more effective to learners. Although this may require additional time and a considerable amount of extra work, it will pay off in the long run with results.

It is highly important to understand that training consists of four main concepts; developing knowledge through exploring theory to understand the concepts behind a skill or strategy, the demonstration of modeling of skill, the practice of skill and peer coaching. Training our subordinates is the only way to achieve greatness and reach the highest possible potential in growth as a school. For teachers to become effective learners they need specific attitudes and skills including persistence, understanding of the transfer of training, understanding of the need for theory and the ability to use peers productively. "The reality

is that each teaching style has certain advantages and disadvantages and no plan can be used as if it were a master key" (Grasha, 2006 p. 1). It's important that teachers understand this and that they continue to be lifelong learners to strive for that "master key." If the teachers are not continually learning they are not progressing the way they should.

Effective training should accomplish the gain of knowledge, of awareness of educational theories and practice, as well as academics content. The four components of training include knowledge, modeling, peer coaching and practice. Knowledge consists of exploring the theory of the new skills or strategies. Modeling is needed in training and is better when conducted in a setting that is similar to the workplace. Practice the skill takes about eight to ten seeks in order to bring a teaching model to moderate complexity under control. Peer coaching is the collaborative work of teachers in planning and developing the lessons and materials to implement the training effectively (http://www.ncsl.org.uk/mediator/image/randd-engaged-joyce.pdf).

Especially now schools are ethical organizations and administrators are faced with ethical dilemmas and moral decisions. Decisions that are made by the administrator and the values that underlie those decisions are compiled with moral issues for the entire school community. School organizations must support the effort of the employees and remain sensitive to their needs. It is also important to remain committed to establish long time organizational goals. As a practicing school administrator, we must believe that the ethical dilemmas are commonplace in today's world of prompt decision making (http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/high_school_journal/v084/84.4html).

Another way to promote positive student/teacher relationships is to encourage participation from all members of the classroom. By using our classroom as a 'learning lab'

that promotes fairness, inclusion and recognition of different learning styles you might find that the classroom runs more efficiently. A cooperative learning group requires that all students are given a role and time to speak. We should not expect one student to be the main speaker because this might make them feel uncomfortable and portray to others that lack of responsibility is acceptable.

Promoting a positive teacher student relationship is one of the most important aspects of administration. I've been fortunate enough to have all my experiences in Iowa. Iowa always maintains a top ranked school system and I feel lucky to be a part of that. It's important for teachers to view their job as a team trying hand-in-hand to reach a goal.

Leadership and education are the foundation we provide for our young people and the adults of tomorrow. Helping these people understand and appreciate this will help them throughout their lives. I hope to be a positive influence in the lives of my students as teachers, coaches and administrators in my past have been in my life.

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