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Visions and beliefs for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

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Visions and beliefs for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

As I strive to become a strong elementary school leader, my emerging philosophy of leadership reinforces my firm belief that all children can learn. It is based on five key responsibilities: Effective leaders possess a strong knowledge base; model ethical and moral behavior; work collaboratively with all stakeholders; provide a safe environment conducive to learning; and ensure a sound education for all children. Rooted in research, study, personal experience, and reflection, these beliefs establish the foundation for my vision of leading others toward education for all.

VISIONS AND BELIEFS FOR LEADING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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In today's complex and changing society, ever growing local and national expectations and increasing challenges face schools. Multiple influences impact children's lives and concerns about violence mount, as the number of qualified teachers and leaders declines. Still, much as schools have always done, today's schools endeavor to prepare young people to become productive citizens. Yet, as Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, and Jefferies (2000) have noted, "Many students, particularly those being educated in urban schools, are failing to achieve the level of academic and social success necessary to reach and secure life goals" (p. 59). Further, McAdams (2000), school board member and author of Fighting to Save Our Urban Schools...and Winning!, has stated, "in the high-technology global economy of today and tomorrow, the negative consequences of inadequate public schools are much greater than they used to be" (p.249). Now, more than ever, strong administrators are needed to lead America's schools.

As I strive to become a strong elementary school leader, my emerging philosophy of leadership reinforces my firm belief that all children can learn and is based on five key responsibilities. Effective leaders possess a strong knowledge base, model ethical and moral behavior, work collaboratively with all stakeholders, provide a safe environment conducive to learning, and ensure a sound education for all children. Rooted in research, study, personal experience, and reflection, these beliefs establish the foundation for my vision of leading others toward education for all.

Strong Knowledge Base

Just as the power of a vehicle's engine correlates highly to how efficiently and effectively it operates, the knowledge base on which educational philosophies and programs are built correlates to the efficiency and effectiveness of educational endeavors. Knowledge precedes application; individuals cannot apply that which is not known. Therefore, a leader whose knowledge extends across all areas of education possesses greater capability to guide others toward a school's ultimate vision.

First, knowledge of educational philosophies and practices is critical. The valuable daily experiences as a teacher provide a strong foundation for undertaking the role of instructional leader. With a practical understanding of child growth and development, learning theories, curriculum design, classroom management, and effective instructional strategies, a school leader is poised to guide others. Still, this foundation merely provides a base, since much has been learned in recent years about the brain and how learning occurs. Gunter, Estes, and Schwab (1999) have outlined key principles in planning instruction that stimulates the brain and enhances learning, including the importance of patterning, emotions, providing challenge, and minimizing threat, among others. In conjunction with this emerging knowledge, the body of best practices' research has expanded to include key guidelines that span across all academic areas. Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998) in their book on best practices have detailed

guidelines for educators across nearly all subject areas, guidelines for best practice that incorporate knowledge of the brain and learning into daily instructional practice. Such knowledge opens limitless pathways to leaders and schools willing to take the venture.

Second, venturing toward best educational practices requires change, but as Zemelman et al. (1998) have stated, "Educational change at the turn of the millennium is a deep river filled with crosscurrents" (p. 219). Personal experiences in four districts and five school settings confirm that, although the prospect of change sometimes stirs excitement and hope, change itself is rarely easy. Responding to the commonly heard phrase "this too shall pass", Sipe (2001) has provided an important message to school leaders.

We must be very careful what we start because every time a district initiates a program that fails, the resulting cynicism--like scar tissue--builds a tougher layer of resistance that must be overcome for future change efforts to stand a chance. (p. 36)

In contemporary society, schools continually face the need and expectation to reform and grow. During this time of increased accountability and ongoing reform initiatives, the challenges inherent in the change process and ways to more effectively support change pervade educational literature across multiple topics. This current focus provides valuable information for leaders, especially as schools engage in the comprehensive school improvement process. Evans (1993) has identified five dimensions of change, including substance, staff, setting,

support, and leadership, noting the importance of understanding the goals of reform, the individuals involved and their own readiness for change, and the fiscal, political, and organizational culture in which change will occur. Covey (1989) has offered powerful insights for personal change that may be applied to change on an organizational level. Covey has stressed the need "to start with a clear understanding of your destination...[and] to know where you are going...so that the steps you take are always in the right direction" (p. 98). Tools, such as Calhoun's (1991) Schoolwide Action Research (SAR) matrix, enable educators to achieve just that. The SAR matrix, which is a component of the action research model included in Iowa's Every Child Reads program, provides a guide for educators in discussion and decision-making that is rooted in data analysis and based on current research. Further, in a study by Kruse (2001), the research has concluded that "carefully orchestrated attention to data and its uses in the decision-making process allowed these districts to attend to the issues and problems that most affected the performance of students in their classrooms across all levels" (p.378). Worthwhile change relies on ongoing data collection and thorough data analysis, and true reform entails dedication, hard work, and commitment over time.

Consequently, filling the role of transformational, visionary leader presents many challenges. To affect change, a leader needs a continually expanding arsenal of knowledge. An awareness of emerging trends, policy

changes, and current research accompanied by a working knowledge of assessment and data interpretation and an understanding of human interaction increases the engine's capacity to tackle unforeseen and challenging roadways.

Third, for a fully powered engine, a command of sound administrative practices is crucial. Checkley (2000), like many others, has described the changing role of the school leader, noting that quality leaders empower teachers through sharing responsibility and authority, rather than merely exercising power over others. This complex and changing role requires understanding of concepts across all six leadership standards. In addition to the traditional and important role of being organizational and fiscal managers, today's administrators fill the crucial role of collaborative leader. As Cunningham and Cordeiro (2000) have stated, "Strong administrators are good at both leadership and management" (p. 153). This requires knowledge of effective communication techniques, collaborative dynamics, and relationship building, as well as an understanding of budgeting, scheduling, and allocating resources, to name a few. A leader who possesses a firm grasp of management and leadership concepts and maintains a professional code and personal ethics can become a collaborative, visionary, effective school leader.

Nevertheless, with the complexity of administrative duties and such wide-ranging, dynamic information in education, it is nearly impossible to know all there is to know. Therefore, an effective school leader knows when and how to

tap into the expertise of others. Utilizing resources within the building, within the community, in professional literature, and among administrative networks, a quality leader embraces and models a desire for continual learning and growth.

But "in order to lead, whether it is a school or classroom, you must first know who you are" (Thomas et al., 2000, p. 128). An administrator's many roles place her among people, conflicts, and challenges on a daily basis, and being prepared and able to deal with these requires an understanding of and a commitment to caring for oneself. "This is the single most powerful investment we can ever make in life--investment in ourselves, in the only instrument we have with which to deal with life and to contribute" (Covey, 1989, p. 289). An administrator with a firm grasp of who she is, along with a multitude of professional knowledge, is like a vehicle powered to confront the multiple pathways that present themselves.

Ethical, Moral Behavior

The educational leader, like the driver of the vehicle, determines the pathway and manner through which the journey will be reached. Consequently, I believe that an administrator's road map should be one of clear values and ethical standards. While unexpected roadblocks arise along the way, an administrator armed with the defense of strong ethical principles more readily gains respect and cooperation and minimizes occurrences that derail the educational mission.

An individual's inner qualities determine the conscious and unconscious daily actions through which others perceive her, and these actions hold great power. "Basically, we do not act differently from what we value, believe, or perceive" (Bernhardt, 1998, p. 41). Consequently, an effective leader values and displays characteristics of empathy, caring, honesty, and trust, for one cannot respect or be respected without them. Thomas et al. (2000) also have stressed the importance of respect, trust, and caring in building a community of learners, a community so important in today's era of reform.

Certainly, an ethical base is important in the moment to moment decisions one makes, but it is crucial when more complex ethical challenges arise. As Lashway (1996) has noted, decisions required of a school leader rarely fit neatly into a right or wrong scenario. Rather, "dilemmas arise when cherished values conflict....[and] conflict is heightened because school leaders are public officials with obligations to many people who often have competing values or interests" (paragraphs 7-9).

An example of such a dilemma has been clearly demonstrated, as I have followed the district's movement toward a "true feeder system". Moving toward alignment of the elementary, middle, and high schools in a feeder system necessitates change in attendance zones and boundary lines, consolidation of school populations, and construction of new buildings. Meetings among teachers, parents, administrators, and board members have fueled divergent, and often

intense, discussions, revealing strongly held, generally sound, yet sometimes vastly different viewpoints. The discussions generated at these various meetings have reinforced to me the difficult nature of leadership and the complexity of arriving at a solution, especially if one desires a solution that is collaboratively created and representative of all stakeholders. In particular, representation of all stakeholders, especially in urban areas, presents a unique challenge, as some populations are traditionally underrepresented. Yet, ethical leaders ensure that all students' needs are met, which requires that even those not represented by their parents or community are adequately represented by someone, and that someone includes educators and leaders able to voice the needs of a diverse population.

"Students of ethics are unanimous on one point: moral leadership begins with moral leaders" (Lashway, 1996, paragraph 18). For me, this means valuing respected, honorable characteristics and believing in respectful treatment to all people, from supportive individuals to angry, oppositional ones. It means being open to and understanding of diverse views and desiring representation of all viewpoints in making decisions that affect the education of children.

More importantly, ethical leaders demonstrate these valued characteristics in their daily actions. First of all, utilizing effective listening and communication skills, full attention goes to the person communicating and, especially, to the message being delivered, just as good drivers attend to the multiple surroundings affecting the journey. In a quality school built on respectful, equitable treatment,

diverse cultures, backgrounds, and ideas are welcomed and appreciated. This means more than just being open to diverse ideas; it means understanding cultures and families in such a way that their needs are met. Covey (1989) has stated it well, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" (p. 237). This, in turn, often leads to approaching things differently, from meeting at various times and locations to providing interpreters and incorporating nontraditional ways of involving people. Finally, in a quality school, both legal and ethical principles prevail, as the confidentiality of students and adults are consistently maintained.

Most importantly, sound ethical principles are portrayed through the way in which decisions are made. "Decision-making processes for anything major typically include careful listening, looking at a situation from all sides, getting input from and involving others, and then taking a problem or concern all the way to resolution" (Lyman, 2000, p. 95). An irony exists in that leaders often need to be quick decision-makers, while at the same time arriving at reflective, well-thought-out decisions. This makes an ethical, moral foundation coupled with a solid knowledge base even more essential. As Lyman has noted, "making decisions grounded in caring is not simple" (p. 82). Guided by a personal code of ethics, the driver of the educational vehicle is self-reflective, able to be critical of performance yet consciously aware and appreciative of efforts and achievements, for this creates a more effective, enjoyable, and productive educational climate.

Collaborative Skills

Vehicle maintenance requires frequent, regular tune-ups and constant monitoring so as to detect potential problems arising and to avoid breakdowns.

Teachers, parents, and administrators often work independently of each other to find solutions to problems. This results in independent and fragmented attempts to resolve a problem and frequently addresses the symptoms rather than the causes. By working as a team, the efforts are merged, providing different perspectives as to the cause of solutions to the problem. (Weller, 2000, p. 68)

Similarly, I believe an administrator maintains the school vehicle by working collaboratively with others, sharing ownership with all stakeholders.

No leader can single-handedly make an institution better. The leader can inspire, articulate the dream, monitor and evaluate and tinker with the series of actions that makes the dream happen, but the people actually live the dream and make it real. (Monroe, 1997, p. 140)

Collaboration with teachers and colleagues, with families and communities, and with district and political leaders provides essential groundwork for building and maintaining movement toward a common vision, toward making the dream real.

Foremost, working with teachers underlies much of what an administrator does, for teachers are the primary players in the implementation of the educational vision. The teachers in a school are like the students in a classroom. It is their efforts and work that ultimately results in learning, and leaders lay the foundation and tone for success. As a teacher, I see the positive results that stem from actively involving students in their learning, from making them a part of the

educational process. In much the same way, sharing ownership of goal setting and learning among staff members greatly enhances the result. In fact, Lambert (1998) has identified leadership as "learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively" (paragraph 17). She has proceeded to identify key assumptions about leadership, including "Leadership is learning that leads to constructive change....Everyone has the potential and right to work as a leader....Leading is a shared endeavor....[and] leadership requires the redistribution of power and authority" (paragraph 28). These assumptions reinforce the shifting role and expectations of today's school leaders and stress the importance of being a collaborative school leader.

As collaborative, instructional leaders, effective administrators facilitate teachers' identification of strategies and approaches that will make teaching more effective, not just more. "To simply say to teachers 'Do more' would be similar to demanding that students try harder as the sole means of increasing their chances to succeed" (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 116). Rather, to achieve student success, communication lines among staff members remain open, while idea sharing and diverse viewpoints are encouraged and accepted. Weller's (2000) research has concluded that applying Deming's total quality management principles, especially constancy of purpose, continuous improvement, and working as a team, "promotes greater quality outcomes in both academic and nonacademic areas" (p. 81). Collaboration equates to much more than just working together, Lashway

(1995) has noted; collaboration creates a collegial environment of support based on common goals. Ultimately, ownership and responsibility are shared, as beliefs and programs result from the input and efforts of all colleagues.

The surrounding community and families also hold major investments and interests in the school's mission. Hence, active involvement of these parties remains essential as well. According to Davies (2000), the gap in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students narrows when schools create close working partnerships with families and the community. From building school and business partnerships to maintaining dialogue with a child's parents, many avenues exist for collaboration towards the benefit of children.

Still, establishing partnerships and nurturing parent involvement are not simple tasks. Working amidst a school community in which parental involvement often is minimal, at best, the challenges of increasing and maintaining parent involvement are clear. Particularly in such situations, collaboration begins with the day to day encounters with families and communities. When parents phone or arrive at the schoolhouse doors, a warm, welcoming environment and a sincere response are vital, for perceptions hold great power. Each interaction creates an impression, develops a personal relationship, and impacts future interactions and ultimately the children a school serves. Collaboration entails much more than the traditional parent-teacher organization meetings; it includes truly working with those adults that influence students' lives. Most importantly, effective leaders

consider the concerns, expectations, and needs of families and the community, and they find ways to involve parents and community members in developing, monitoring, and implementing goals and programs, to the greatest extent possible.

Finally, influences at the district, state, and national levels cannot be ignored, because they play major roles in a school's operations. The position of school leader naturally places administrators alongside individuals at all levels. Consequently, quality leaders possess the ability to present themselves well both personally and professionally and the ability to positively represent their schools and districts. This role as collaborative, political leader fills a crucial component of leadership, because decisions at the district, state, and national levels directly impact that which occurs at the local building level. As in all collaborative endeavors, open communication lines and regular dialogue are critical. Again, knowledge and understanding provide the basis for this collaboration so that leaders can effectively work toward affecting policies that are in the best interest of students and of those providing education to students.

Safe Learning Environment

The school vehicle may be powered by a strong, knowledgeable engine, driven by an ethical leader, and maintained through the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders; but if the vehicle itself is not sound, safe, and able to serve its passengers, the journey is likely to be ridden with multiple obstacles. In the end, the mission may never be reached. Building a safe environment that is conducive

to learning, I believe, is essential, because the environment in which the vision is implemented greatly impacts the extent to which learning occurs.

First of all, the school itself must be a safe environment, and as the headlines too often show, school safety cannot be assumed. In response to recent incidents of massive school violence, social psychologist Elliot Aronson (2000) has noted, "The roots of violent behavior are surely in the society at large. But when violence occurs at schools, it is a problem that schools must deal with and ultimately prevent" (p. 99). A school leader plays a key role in assuring that procedures for safety are in place and understood so students and faculty both feel safe and truly are safe. Although this certainly means that violence is greatly minimized or eliminated, individuals in a safe learning environment also feel free from abuse, taunting, and harassment, whether it be physically, sexually, culturally, or educationally. Creating such an environment requires the ability to understand and apply principles of school law. These principles protect the rights of students, in particular, as well as the learning environment itself. Without a sound legal and ethical basis to guide a leader, an unsafe, potentially harmful atmosphere is likely to prevail, and maximum learning cannot be reached.

Even when a safe environment exists, however, a maximum learning environment may not. For children who face daily challenges beyond what many adults have ever encountered, schools need to offer more. "Given the enormous changes occurring in families and society, it is no surprise that schools and health

and other social services are being asked to take on greater responsibility in filling the evolving void in child care" (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000, p. 275). Just as Aronson has discussed a school's need to address violence when it occurs at school, schools today need to address that which children bring with them each day that interferes with their potential to learn. For school leaders, this role entails creating avenues to identify student needs, such as a building-level social health committee, and networking with community agencies and district resources that can assist schools and families. Again, collaboration is key.

Further, the presence of a positive school culture also creates a safe, learning climate. "Learning climate is a concept that is easy to recognize but difficult to define....All seem to agree, however, that the principal is the key" (Lashway, 1995, paragraph 12). An administrator's leadership and management style determines much of a building's tone and climate. In a quality school with an effective leader, an atmosphere of teamwork and community exists in which risk-taking and learning by all is encouraged, accepted, and respected. Evaluation, change, and growth are welcomed. Teachers and students experience support for their efforts and accomplishments, and celebrations abound. This positive learning climate encourages all to work toward a vision aligned for success and makes school a place that kids and adults want to be.

Such a climate may prevail only when positive relationships among students, teachers, parents, and administrators are valued and nurtured. In

studying urban adolescents, Wilson and Corbett (2001) have identified that "a phenomenon central to effective urban education...[is] the quality of the relationship between inner city students and their teachers" (p. 88). Similarly, Aronson (2000) has stressed the need to restructure students' academic experiences and learning environment, because "in many respects, how a topic is learned is more important than the content of what is learned" (p.131). In fact, Wilson and Corbett have concluded that "believing a teacher cared about them did more than just make them feel good....Students transformed teachers' caring enough to 'teach' them into academic self-confidence" (p. 89). Finally, Linda Lyman (2000) has adeptly pointed out that "if uncommon caring were commonplace in schools, barriers of difference would be dissolved, circles of community would be rebuilt, and schools would become welcoming learning environments for all" (p. 13). Certainly, the crucial role of environment and climate cannot be overestimated.

Sound Education for All Children

Finally, a sound education for all is the ultimate destination. It is the reason that an educational vehicle exists at all. The vision of educating children to be productive members of society lies at the heart of most schools' missions, and the mission provides the destination that guides the school vehicle. I believe that an effective administrator ensures that all children receive a sound, quality education and that the destination is reached. "No longer can a principal be

judged solely on how well he or she manages the administrative duties of a school. The quality of the principal must relate to a school's capacity to ensure achievement for all children" (National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2001, p. 1).

Amid nearly all school visions lies the belief that all children can learn, yet in reality, this belief often eludes many in education, appearing merely as enviable words rather than actuality. Still, there must be "an underlying belief that all children can succeed and that it is the schools' responsibility to ensure that this happens" (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 117), as this belief is essential to implementing school reform and attaining the goal of high student achievement. McAdams (2000), who has been actively involved in school reform, has stressed, "school trustees must not accept low levels of performance from poor children" (p. 257). Rather, educating all children, especially those who traditionally have achieved at the lowest levels, involves viewing this educational task differently.

We must begin to realize that it is not the experiences, or lack thereof, students bring to the classroom that pose our greatest challenges, it is how we perceive and value these experiences as potential connectors for new learning and what we do with them as a starting point for more teaching and learning to take place. (Thomas et al., 2000, p. 116)

Reaching the destination of education for all students begins with a school's vision, and a meaningful vision serves as a compass guiding the decisions and activities within a school. Such a vision encompasses diverse student and

community needs, evolves from collaborative efforts, and considers all students, especially those most difficult to reach and teach. Unfortunately, as McAdams (2000) has argued, "while pursuing their personal interests, everyone proclaims that they want what is best for children. They do. It is just that there is something else they want even more" (p. 260). An incredible challenge faces all stakeholders--to truly place children's needs ahead of their own personal needs as individuals. School leaders, in particular, must do so, advocating for the educational needs of children and withholding any temptations to merely attain personal gain. Pursuing a school's vision requires clear focus and dedicated leadership.

With a vision clearly defined, the real work in ensuring quality education begins, empowering educators to implement the vision. Encouraged by the current movement focused on student achievement and accountability, a renewed focus on instructional practices provides an essential component for meeting the needs of all students. Zemelman et al. (1998) have written, "If we really want to change student achievement in America's schools, we must act directly on teaching and learning" (p. 3). Despite the many varied tasks school leaders address daily, "Everything a principal does in school should be focused on ensuring the learning of both students and adults" (NAESP, 2001, p. 10), for school leaders play a key role in ensuring that quality instruction truly occurs.

To ensure education for all, a transformational, instructional leader serves both as a teacher of teachers and as a teacher among teachers. These leaders actively oversee teaching and learning processes, providing the necessary time and resources and nurturing teachers' growth through the ups and downs of their own learning, while still maintaining high expectations and holding educators accountable in their daily work. Geijssel, Slegers, and van den Berg (1999) in their research on transformational leadership have stated, "Transformational leadership...involves motivating and inspiring teachers to innovate and perform in better ways" (p. 317). Further, as a leader guiding implementation of the vision, "you've got to walk around, watch people work, schmooze with everyone, and make yourself visible" (Monroe, 1997, p.111), because "classroom observation is the principal's most important method for improving school tone and student achievement" (Monroe, p.128). In addition to providing visible support, an educational leader also makes current research available and frequently seeks data that can assist teachers in identifying barriers to reaching the vision, innovative approaches to be attempted, and resources and skills to attain. Quality school leaders actively support the educational journey to ensure that the vehicle maintains a clear path toward its final destination. Schools possess limited, valuable time with students, time which needs to be used efficiently and effectively for the benefit of kids.

Conclusion

Before an individual jumps into a vehicle and enjoys a trip to a wonderful destination, multiple factors contribute to making this a reality, from the many people involved in building the vehicle to those that lay the roadways and create the maps to the driver who carefully leads the journey. While it seems simple in a world in which travel is so common, further inspection reveals the complexity of putting all the pieces carefully together to reach the final destination. The same is true for education. As education appears, at times, to be a simple task of teaching kids to read and write, so much more is involved in accomplishing this task.

In today's complex and rapidly changing society, serving as a leader of this journey presents a crucial, but challenging, task, one that requires a sound philosophy of leadership and the ability to apply this philosophy well. For me, this philosophy encompasses firm beliefs in the value of a sound and growing knowledge base, of holding and practicing ethical and moral principles, of utilizing collaboration to achieve greater results, and of creating a safe, positive learning climate. Most importantly, it is only through the integration of these valued traits that a leader achieves the very essence of the leadership philosophy that I embrace--ensuring that all children receive a quality education and that the destination is truly reached.

Lorraine Monroe (1997) has stated it well. "If kids can have one place in their daily lives where there is order and stability and where worthwhile activities

are going on, then there is a high possibility that their lives can be transformed for the better" (p. 125). After all, transforming kids' lives for the better is what the educational journey is all about.

As a prospective leader, I acknowledge not only the multifaceted aspects of reaching the educational destination but also the vital importance of this journey. Leading the journey toward quality education for all kids is a great challenge, but it is a challenge I embrace. I welcome this challenge, because I possess the desire and the vision to make a difference in the lives of children.

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