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## A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

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## A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

I have chosen education as my lifetime career because I believe education is, perhaps, the most important occupation within our culture. I believe teachers, individually and collectively, not only change the world, but also improve it. In the service to children, I find personal and professional renewal. I am proud to be part of this noble profession and want to be counted among those in whom future teachers can say they found inspiration.

**A Preferred Vision For Leading Elementary Schools:**

**A Reflective Essay**

**Presented to**

**The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling**

**And Postsecondary Education**

**University of Northern Iowa**

**In Partial Fulfillment Of**

**the Requirements for the Degree**

**Masters of Arts in Education**

**By**

**Mark R. Sade**

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**Dianna Engelbrecht**

This Research Paper by: Mark Sade

Entitled: WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

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Why teach? It is such a simple question. Yet the answer is very important to me. There are many reasons why I chose to be a teacher, but it all comes down to one simple answer. I love kids. I love their innocence and their eagerness to learn everything. It can be as simple as  $2+2$  or as complicated as why grass is green and the sky is blue. I like to listen to kids and if they are troubled let them know that everything will be okay. Teaching provides an unbelievable daily roller coaster ride from the depths of total frustration to the highs of incredible rewards. I may never know the results of my actions as an elementary teacher. It is a profession given little respect and lots of criticism. Everyone is an expert about education and quite willing to tell you so. Rarely do you receive thanks. However, with one tiny look, word or action, a student can inspire and reward you beyond measure. Then I truly find myself thinking that maybe I will come back tomorrow.

Teaching is like no other profession. As a teacher, I wear many hats. I am a communicator, disciplinarian, conveyor of information, evaluator, classroom manager, counselor, member of many teams and groups, role model, and decision maker. The great teachers I have known throughout my education are my heroes and my role models. I began to understand more fully in high school and throughout college that great teachers had skills I wanted to learn. I wanted to excel at the things in which they excelled. Unfortunately, I also experienced

teachers who were not effective. From them I learned what I would not do or even want to do when I would someday become a teacher. I have realized that to be a teacher is truly a calling of both the heart and the mind. I saw the great teachers were good at explaining content, were patient and firm with students, were always fair, set high expectations, knew how to motivate us, and used humor appropriately. They were excellent communicators who had a command of the subject matter content. I wanted to emulate the skills that I admired in them. Yet, I understood I would have to forge my own style of teaching by drawing on my strengths, knowledge, skills, values and experiences. I have arrived in my career fully realizing I still have much to learn and will always be a lifelong learner.

I have chosen education as my lifetime career because I believe education is, perhaps, the most important occupation within our culture. I believe teachers, individually and collectively, not only change the world, but also improve it. In the service to children, I find personal and professional renewal. I am proud to be part of this noble profession and want to be counted among those in whom future teachers can say they found inspiration.

A major reason I want to be an administrator is to serve students. It is also the reason I chose to become a teacher. I want to make a difference in a child's life by improving student learning by discovering and cultivating each student's

multiple talents. I want to be in a leadership position where I can ensure that teachers never quit on their students. As an administrator, I will have more possibilities to connect with the children. Regardless of a child's behavior, every child can succeed. I will be able to interact with them and see what dreams they have as well as watch them mature into young adults. I also want to become an administrator because I have a vision of what a great school should look like. I feel the only way I can make my vision a reality is to step up to the plate and become a leader. I want to be a person who is able to influence other teachers, give positive feedback, introduce initiatives, motivate teachers, and hire good people.

I believe being a principal requires many skills. I must be organized, flexible, and persistent. I must have knowledge, people skills and clairvoyance. I must have hindsight, tenacity and be able to let go of any negatives that can surround my daily duties. I believe my most important asset is my desire to make a difference in education. I want to be the one who creates a culture of high expectations and caring by facilitating shared decision-making. I want to make the school a better place. I believe it would be an amazing feeling to see my ideas work. I want to be able to nurture young professionals and help them grow as

teachers, coaches and business leaders. I know the positive difference I can make for hundreds of kids each year is a tremendous opportunity.

In almost every human enterprise, leadership is vital. Leaders define reality. Leaders sketch a vision and map out where the group is headed. Leaders help a complex society function while using their voice to speak for those who can not be heard. Leaders ensure processes are not paralyzed by waiting for mass approval and endorsements. Mostly leaders influence others through small one-person-at-a-time exchanges. In order to maintain strong relationships, I believe a leader must find ways to interact with everyone regularly. A leader must arrange formal meetings regularly each quarter of the year. These in-service meetings will allow time to reflect with staff and keep everyone comfortable with the vision. The success of the entire standards-based agenda depends upon having effective leadership at the school level.

My passion for teaching plus the skills I have learned in the Academy have prepared me for the principalship. I believe there are four essential characteristics a principal must have in order to be an exemplary leader. First, I believe principals must be organizational and visionary leaders in order to run an exceptional school. They must have a strong understanding of school culture and be able to build strong collaborative partnerships within the school's community.



Second, principals must also have a deep understanding and love of children and learning that effectively initiate, monitor, and supervise worthwhile programs and policies. Third, principals must make a conscious and visible effort to promote, publicize, and protect the things that are considered worthwhile in their schools. They should have clear priorities which they communicate effectively to others. Fourth, principals must also be a positive role model for representing the school's purpose and expectations.

### Organizational Leadership

To survive and prosper, I believe school districts face many challenges. To accomplish their goals, school districts need a new kind of leader. Leaders must understand organizational leadership and have the leadership skills necessary to successfully apply that understanding to his or her school. Sound decision-making is a top priority in leading an efficient school. Knowledge of research-based theories and concepts as well as of local policies and state and federal laws are essential for a successful administrator (Willmore, 2002). According to Jerry Patterson (1995) the leadership in tomorrow's organization wants, even expects, employee participation.

I believe three dimensions of an organization are determined by leadership. Organizations are characterized by its decision-makers, the nature of its culture,

and the form of its systems and structures. When these three dimensions have certain key qualities, they work together to produce results greater than any one key quality could achieve without the other. Time and time again I see the colossal impact individuals have on their environment. Principals who are proactive, innovative, courageous, and energetic can and do bring about change. Likewise, those leaders who are conservative, reactionary, and frightened of moving forward inhibit growth in themselves and the organization. Jerry Patterson (1995) states when effectively managed organizational change takes place, it can be invigorating. I believe leaders should stop pretending pain does not exist. Leaders should acknowledge how much it hurts to lead. Open and frank discussion will make leaders stronger, not weaker. By unloading accumulated baggage in a constructive way, leaders lighten the road to the future. Regardless of the role of staff members, it is the individuals who will transform themselves, their performances, and improve the success of their organizations.

It is surprising how little some principals seem to know about individuals and how they tick. Working within the conventional model of organizational structure led me to previously view people in a linear fashion. I saw them as a set of behaviors working mechanically toward the achievement of a set of tasks or concrete outcomes. I now believe change involves helping people understand

their behaviors in order to achieve improved or altered outcomes. According to Kenneth Leithwood (2001) responding to change initiatives, organizational learning demands openness to ideas, but from even more diverse resources. I believe real principals have their own needs, objectives, feelings and psychological patterns of thought, feeling, and action. They are highly complex sophisticated individuals who are capable of higher order thinking, rich spiritual experience and emotional transformation. Principals have the potential to be great inventors, creators, and communicators. In varying degrees they have the ability to foresee the future, read body language, and process huge amounts of information intuitively. If I am going to lead or be a significant part of real transformation, I need to increase my level of understanding on how principals actually function.

Principals assume the information they need to bring about radical transformation can be found in book, videos, or in particular courses of study. Our education and training has conditioned us to think that learning is an intellectual process. Yet, from experience, I know the most successful organizational transformations are led by principals who found all the wisdom they need within themselves. Books, videos, and courses can help only in as far as they open us up to our own learning. These principals have assimilated and

synthesized the research to develop their own internal thinking which directs their actions. According to Patterson (1995), the path to bringing about real change within schools comes through fully exploring the complexity of your own being, including your mind, emotions, spirit and actions.

I believe principals should think of the schools in which they work as if they were their own. I believe principals need to be creative and innovative as well as communicate and relate well within their schools communities. They must also learn to understand and meet the communities' needs while continuously looking for ways of improving schools. I feel principals must take responsibility for making calculated risks.

According to Peter Senge (1990) organizations are in a constant state of flux. Their change can be positive, regressive, or aimless. Schools can develop their own learning procedures to solve their problems. They can become places where teachers and principals can continually expand their capacity to create the results that they desire, where emergent patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is liberated, and where people are constantly learning how to learn (Senge,1990).

Change presents us with a real opportunity. Organizations aren't the only place where principals have been encouraged to give up their basic humanity. The

socialization process through which most of us pass so that we can function as contributing members of society encourages us to give up parts of ourselves to fit in. First at home, and then later at school we learn to give up those feelings, intuitions, and opinions that don't conform to the accepted norms of our parents, teachers, and peers. I have learned that most people feel it is better to be like everybody else than to take the risk of being rejected for being ourselves.

As a principal, I must support people who engage in a wide variety of personal/professional development programs and give people the autonomy and responsibility to make a difference within their own area of influence. Leaders of transformation are constantly seeking people with the courage to be different. They encourage those with an alternative point of view. Trend-setting educators know when people take control of their own lives they can bring increased value to organizations through increased effort, insights and innovation. Many principals, however, are still so stunted in their understanding of their own personal professional growth that when they have a dynamic subordinate they feel threatened. They push these people away, satirize differences and undermine individual empowerment. These principals really need to start exploring their own human effectiveness as part of their professional development. Trust in the workplace is the belief that one can depend on another to do what has been

promised, to provide accurate information and be able to pick up the pieces when systems fail.

Individuals are the basic unit of any change program and all individuals, from the top to the bottom of the organization, need to be growing, learning and blossoming together. I feel successful leaders get feedback, learn from it, and study or reflect upon their experiences both the good and the bad. They see themselves and think of themselves as continuous learners. When things go wrong, I need to stop and understand why. When things go well; I need to reflect on what elements contributed to the success. I need to ask for feedback both from confidants and from employees. I need to constantly keep learning and not just behave as if learning was something we did just in school.

The challenge of leadership is to continue growing. The high-potential leaders of the future I have studied believe many of the important qualities of the past such as integrity, vision, and self-confidence, are still essential in the future. They also viewed the building partnerships inside and outside the organization as a requirement, not an option for future leaders (Goldsmith 2002).

### School Culture

I believe leaders who want to change the school's culture must first want to understand the existing culture. Cultural change by definition alters a wide

variety of relationships. These relationships are the very core of institutional stability. Reforms should be approached with dialogue, concern for others, and some hesitation. The prime purpose is to facilitate optimal student learning. Optimal learning cannot be accomplished in a facility or organization that is disorganized, inconsistent, or unpredictable (Wilmore 2001). Successful school improvement requires establishing a clear educational vision, a shared institutional mission, and knowing how well the school is accomplishing that mission. Principals must identify areas for improvement while developing plans to change educational activities, programs, and implementing those plans or new programs effectively.

So, where do principals begin? I believe school leaders should encourage and support the development of a collaborative school culture. A positive school culture must have clear educational missions and processes. It should also have structures, resources, and processes that allow educational change to flourish. School leaders shape the school culture through their actions, words, and deeds; what they get excited about; and the plans and activities to which they devote their energy.

I believe school leaders understand the dynamics of the change process. Successful schools have leaders in both the principal's position and

in the classroom to overcome the obstacles and challenges that develop during the changing processes. I believe school leaders should be committed to providing high-quality learning for all students. Principals should also initiate, implement, and integrate programs that improve access to engaged teaching and learning for all students. School leaders appreciate the importance of working in teams and facilitate the development and work of teams that lead school improvement initiatives. According to Richard Dufour (2002) the essence of cultural shift is collaborative teams of teachers who are building a culture by engaging in active research. School leaders use the resources and expertise of parents, businesses, social service and community agencies to foster the academic, emotional, and social well being of students (Dufour 2002).

The most effective change in school culture happens when principals, teachers, and students model the values and beliefs important to the institution. The actions of the principal are noticed and interpreted by others as what is important. A principal who acts with care and concern for others is more likely to develop a school culture with similar values. Likewise, the principal who has little time for others places an implicit stamp of approval on selfish behaviors and attitudes.

I believe once principals have a firm understanding of the direction they want to take in improving the school culture, then they must then develop the proper



path. Whenever we find an effective school or an effective department within the school, without exception, that school or department has been a part of a collaborative professional learning community (Mclaughlin & Talbert, 1993). I believe principals need to build strong teams or groups of people who interdependently achieve a common goal.

The key to effective teams is to embed collaboration in routine practices. The school must also focus on learning and time for collaboration built into the school day and school calendar (DuFour 1998). To find this time for collaboration, principals must consider parameters according to Richard DuFour. These parameters are not interrupting instruction, not keeping the kids at home, never increasing costs, and significantly impacting instructional time. (1998 p.73).

Principals must understand the key components necessary to increase student achievement. I believe there are three pivotal components of the successful school-based reforms. First, all students must be challenged with a strong curriculum. Second, there must be collaborative school culture. Lastly, meaningful opportunities for professional growth must be available or provided.

### Visionary Leadership

I believe a visionary leader takes the time to mentally synthesize the way things are and propose a better reality. Visionaries sometimes get a bad reputation

because many people believe they are just dreamers. True visionaries are realists, and more. They can see things the way they ought to be. When you form a clear and powerful vision about the way things ought to be, it can create an awesome tension. This tension is the gap between where you are and where you want to be. Something has to fill the gap to relieve the tension.

I believe a leader is a visionary who has the ability to motivate people to work together to accomplish a common goal. This leader does so by empowering people and encouraging others to take ownership in the goal. I believe the vision is first developed through dialogue. To keep the dream alive, it must be repeatedly articulated in many forms. According to Burt Nanus (1995), communicating the vision is a key to instilling shared meaning and purpose. Communication regarding the vision is used to excite, inspire, motivate and unify both leaders and followers. The communication is a two-way sharing that facilitates the process of elevating the moral purpose of the shared vision, building relationships, and shaping the culture of the organization (Nanus,1995). I believe listening is the most important component of communication for visionary leaders. The visionary leader listens so as, to fully understand the perceptions of the followers' needs and concerns. Listening requires probing questions and feedback, as well as reflective thinking to enhance understanding. These leaders

display a willingness to be influenced. They use their understanding to further shape the vision, ever increasing the shared nature and support for the vision.

An important role of the visionary leader is the ability to clearly articulate the shared vision, values, and beliefs. The skilled leader inspires groups, provides encouragement and enhances motivation. Together everyone moves into action. Visionary Leaders communicate high expectations. Visionary Leaders consistently walk-the-talk and lead by example. I believe a web of high-quality relationships makes it possible to communicate and effectively share the vision to shape the culture that supports the vision. Shared values are important in the development of relationships and facilitate achievement of the vision. These interactive relationships have been described as being shared, two-way, mutual, and collaborative. Visionary leaders tend to be friendly and informal. Visionary leadership clearly involves a relationship in which the leaders and stakeholders are fully engaged with each other in achieving the shared vision of the organization. Visionary leaders build trust through their actions.

I believe a visionary leader must be a role model and set an example by demonstrating the consistency of actions critical to building trust among followers. In addition, these leaders trust followers. Leaders must be clear about their own values and ensure that their behavior consistently reflects those values.

Visionary leaders conduct themselves and even communicate through their actions. These actions help build relationships and shape organizational culture. However, visionary leaders also guide implementation of the shared vision, rather than relying exclusively on the actions of the empowered. One common guiding action is to teach. "A great leader is usually a great teacher" (Parnell, 1988 p.1-2). These leaders provide opportunities for their employees to learn and grow. They constantly mentor or coach others in the organization. As noted above, the relationship is friendly and informal. The leaders treat subordinates as equals, while providing encouragement for their personal and professional development. They see their role as a servant leader and seek to serve their own followers, as well as other stakeholders inside and outside of the school. I also believe visionary leaders guide by engaging in moral reasoning and principled judgment, as well as teaching these ideas to their followers.

I believe visionary leaders encourage others to take reasonable or calculated risks, experiment, and develop innovative ideas. Encouraging innovation is particularly true in such areas as educational reforms and use of technology. At the same time, visionary leaders are careful to assess the degree of risk and take steps to reduce the risk of failing by providing risk takers with the necessary resources. The leader's commitments to improvement facilitate success, monitor

progress and suggest modifications to avoid traps and pitfalls.

I believe visionary leaders are committed and motivated by a higher purpose. Visionary leaders are passionate. They are focused and committed to the shared vision, a vision for the common good. Leaders have a commitment to higher education as a means of improving the quality of life through society at large. So strong is this passion they may willingly give all of their time and energy to the cause. Visionary leaders also practice and support lifelong learning. Such learning promotes personal renewal. On a large scale, it also promotes organizational renewal. According to Conley, principals remain key players in the development of a shared vision, both before and after the school adopts a new direction (1996).

Creating readiness is crucial. Principals who have already adjusted to new ways of thinking often underestimate the time needed for others to do the same. All participants must have the opportunity to examine their current thinking, develop a rationale for change, and entertain new models. This preparation can be done by forming study groups, visiting schools or businesses that have already restructured, and collecting data that challenge comfortable assumptions such as test scores or surveys of community satisfaction (Conley,1996).

Robert Starratt (1995) emphasizes the importance of institutionalizing the

vision. No matter how inspiring it sounds on paper, the dream will wither unless it takes concrete form in policies, programs, and procedures. At some point, curriculum, staffing, evaluation, and budget must feel the imprint of the vision or it will gradually lose credibility. At the same time, I believe principals must remain focused on how the vision will impact in classrooms. After an in-depth study of restructuring schools, Richard Elmore (1996) concluded enthusiasm for new visions does not automatically lead people to see the implications for teaching. Elmore found it was extraordinarily difficult for teachers to attain the deep, systematic knowledge of practice needed to make the vision a reality (Elmore, 1996, p.122). I feel without unrelenting assessment, analysis, and professional development, the vision may remain a glossy facade rather than becoming a vital, living presence in the life of the school. Above all, principals must create a climate and a culture for change. Principals must sculpt the vision often and enthusiastically by encouraging experiments, by celebrating successes and forgiving failures, and by remaining steadfast in the face of the inevitable problems and missteps.

I believe a principal becomes a visionary the moment he or she walks into the school. You need to be a visionary, but you have to be sure the people embrace your vision. As a team, we discuss the idea and then as a leader, I facilitate a

common vision. When this happens it becomes a collaborative effort and everyone has ownership. The leader needs to guide the vision and facilitate its implementation. A leader redirects their actions to believe everyone has to think alike and move in the same direction. The challenge of organizational development requires responding to the adopted mission and goals of the school.

I believe principals should develop visionary leaders within the school environment. Principals must develop leaders who are committed to the ideals of the school district through meaningful contact and engagement in meaningful activities. According Jerry Patterson (1995), a principal should ask the following questions related to the future of the school: First, have principals fully involved everyone as participants in the problem solving? Second, have principals listened carefully to all points of view, particularly the unpopular perspective? Lastly, have principals openly acknowledged they could be wrong and you could be right, clearing the way for a solution that is stronger than any other perspective (Patterson 1995).

Visionary leadership is the first standard of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders required for the Iowa Principal License. I know the effective principal supports the success of every student in every facet of his or her life. According to ISSL Standard One, the principal facilitates the development, articulation,

implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by everyone involved (Wilmore, 2002). I believe an extraordinary leader is a visionary. He or she can see a possible future that others do not yet view or see. I believe great leaders inspire others to embrace vision and to do so with enthusiasm.

### Collaborative Partnerships

The fourth and final element I believe is essential for me to become an exceptional principal is to know how to build collaborative partnerships. I believe collaborative partnerships are the conceptualization of human development that emphasizes the influence of various social ecologies (i.e., families, schools, and neighborhoods) on development and growth across the human life span.

According to Gill Nicholls (1997) an important assumption of the ecological framework is that no single institution can by itself meet the developmental needs of children and families; nor is knowledge itself the sole purview of any institution (Nicholls, 1997). We must solicit and welcome businesses and encourage them to become an integral part of our school community (Wilmore, 2002).

Collaborative partnerships cut across societal institutions that are contextually and systemically based. Collaborative partnerships build on the perspectives and



strengths of various constituents and are essential to the effective development, delivery of relevant research and service that pertains to the needs of children and families (Nicholls, 1997). I believe collaboration involves multiple systems working together toward the goal of improving the quality of life for individuals and families. I feel the process of building collaborative partnerships is multidimensional. It involves recognizing opportunities for change, mobilizing people and resources to create change, developing a vision of long-term change, seeking support and involvement from diverse and non-traditional partners, choosing an effective group structure, building trust among collaborators, and developing learning opportunities for partners.

I believe there are many catalysts for comprehensive partnerships. Often leaders or local policymakers initiate collaboration. Other partnerships begin when a community becomes aware of an urgent need for change or when funding becomes available to respond to conditions in the community. According to Gill Nicholls (1997) these partnerships give communities a structure for organizing, planning, and implementing their ideas. I believe collaborative partnerships are the mechanism for designing comprehensive strategies that strengthen children and families. I also believe collaborative partnerships often bring together individuals with very different knowledge bases, attitudes, and assumptions.

According to Mark Maier (2001), it is tempting for new efforts like comprehensive school linked strategies to just do it and organize for action as quickly in order to begin program implementation, leaving staff development for a later time (Maier, 2002). The time it takes to build knowledge and support is essential if I want partners to reflect on the effort as they develop it and create a shared understanding of the work they are doing. This reflection and planning are the real work of a partnership. The purpose of collaboration is to build a community of learners and to allow different stakeholders to come to consensus and a common understanding.

According to Esther Rodriguez (1994), developing a partnership is essentially a learning process. It is artificial to separate professional development, parent education and community involvement from the rest of the work. I believe when collaborators initially come together, they need to spend a considerable amount of time learning about each other and the community. For example, school superintendents and administrators of other public agencies often do not know each other despite years of working in the same community. Horizontal relationships among people of partner organizations need to be developed as do relationships that span in the community. For example, partnerships between parents and agency staff. The goal is to develop a sense of collegiality and

common purpose throughout partnerships.

Partnerships begin planning for action by establishing guidelines for partner relationships, defining a target community, creating trust and shared vision among partners, and building cultural awareness. I believe as the principal, I must create a two-way dialogue between the schools, the parents, and the community to establish a mutual understanding of needs, concerns, and goals. I feel schools should provide opportunities for parents to participate on campus before, during and after school hours in meaningful activities such as computer training, ESL classes, etc. School agencies should distribute brochures throughout the community describing how to communicate with schools, what activities are available and how parents can get involved. Elaine Wilmore said it best, "Principals must be highly involved and visible within the community organizations, activities and functions because whether we like it or not, we are the face of the school" (2002, p.122).

In conclusion, I believe as principal I am responsible for facilitating the school's effectiveness as a learning organization. The demands of the 21st century will require our school to become a learning organization. I will commit myself to a long term attempt to shift the way I think and behave. I will enable myself to accomplish our school's goals. I must continue to succeed in making a

difference in the lives of students. The 21st century will rapidly bring even more dazzling technological advances in education. These advances will substantially change our external and internal environment. Our external stakeholders (e.g. community agencies, regulatory bodies) will create ever increasing pressures for me to continually improve how I educate, serve, use, and disseminate new knowledge. My success in meeting these demands will depend on my ability to change by incorporating what is learned so that quality products (e.g. student learning outcomes, intellectual capital, knowledge utilization, and new knowledge) can be produced in an efficient and timely fashion.

I must work to achieve particular goals via the executive and staff members. I must provide the leadership and drive. The final responsibility for making the school an effective one rests with me. To be an effective principal I must be deeply involved with the community the school serves. I must communicate the shared vision and clearly elaborate the agreed upon goal to teachers, parents and children. I must let parents know that they are welcome and valued in the school and encourage them to communicate with the school and to provide opportunities for them in its daily routines and decisions. Parents may ultimately come to realize the values demonstrated and taught at the school are the same as their own. I will foster a caring and supportive community, a community ready to defend its

school from general media and hearsay criticism. As the representative of the school with whom the public and parents have most contact, I will have an obligation on behalf of the school and state educational system to report the achievement data of school programs and policies with enthusiasm and convictions as well as integrity and honesty.

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