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A preferred vision for leading elementary, middle, and high schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading elementary, middle, and high schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

This is a personal reflective research paper that is a discussion of my personal characteristics, values, beliefs, and philosophies, while also outlining qualities that I believe are essential for leaders in education. This paper is a personal statement that will lead to the explanation of what I believe constitutes an exemplary educational leader.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING ELEMENTARY, MIDDLE, AND HIGH
SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education
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In Partial Fulfillment

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Masters of Arts in Education

by

Jodie M. Schepler

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Dr. Gregory Reed

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Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY,
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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master
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This is a personal reflective research paper that is a discussion of my personal characteristics, values, beliefs, and philosophies, while also outlining qualities that I believe are essential for leaders in education. This paper is a personal statement that will lead to the explanation of what I believe constitutes an exemplary educational leader. Before I identify and discuss what I believe makes leaders exemplary, it is essential that I first give an explanation of my background.

I am an Iowa farm girl that grew up in a middle class family. I grew up in a family that placed a significant emphasis on the importance of extended family, education, and hard work. Integrity, being able to communicate effectively, getting along with all types of people, acting with moral duty, and simply being a good person were expected and required in my family. I can remember many mornings sitting around the breakfast table discussing current events, family goals, individual goals and desires, and the importance of staying on track to being the best person each of us could be. My family truly helped create the person I am today.

Due to my involvement in both academics and extra-curricular activities during my own high school days, I developed a desire to pursue the area of family and consumer sciences in college. During the course of my college years I actively enjoyed the opportunity to study and gain a better understanding of this content area. I had a strong desire to work with and help people to better themselves. Deciding to go into education made perfect sense to me. The past five years as a teacher, in the content area of family and consumer sciences, has been exhilarating. I have taught at both the high school and middle school levels and have found it rewarding and refreshing to be able to teach life

skills to my students. Helping students learn how to live healthier, happier, and more productive lives is one of life's most rewarding experiences and creates a feeling that words could never describe.

Each individual carries with them personal attributes that reflect their attitude, values, beliefs, personal code of ethics, and knowledge. Education, personal interests, background, culture, ethnicity, and personal experiences make each of us unique in our demeanor. These aspects of our personalities are carried over into our views, opinions, and philosophies.

In regards to my personal philosophy of education, I believe that all students are individuals, with inherently different backgrounds, needs, and desires in the area of education. These differences enrich our lives and provide a unique challenge and opportunity for teachers and administrators. We must accommodate the students' differences, meet their needs, and fulfill their educational desires while teaching the basic foundation required to live in today's world.

In addition, students must be taught the skills necessary to be able to take on new problems, situations, and challenges when they leave school. This requires the self-confidence to accept challenges, which must be reinforced in the classroom, and knowledge of problem solving strategies, an essential part of school curriculum taught in all classrooms.

Teachers and administrators also need to remember that no amount of schooling will give students all the knowledge necessary to succeed in life. Students must learn how to be a self-motivated learner and be able to teach themselves to adapt to a changing world outside the classroom. Finally, teachers and administrators must never forget that

they are more than a source of knowledge to students. Educators should be mentors and friends. They have a responsibility to live their lives by setting an example and doing what is good and right. Classrooms and schools should show integrity, seriousness, and compassion for mankind.

For the remainder of this reflective research paper the aspects of education that I will be focusing on are leadership in education. This paper is a reflection of my personal and professional beliefs of the critical elements that I feel are needed for exemplary leadership in our county's educational institutions.

A leader in any institution must possess an immense array of qualities that inspire those around them. They must create a positive environment and lead people in a promising direction. Leaders show passion, a desire to better the environment they are working in, and constantly work to enhance the quality of their institution. Leaders can be all types of people, however, there are some basic qualities that are essential for leaders in education.

One of the qualities that I feel is essential for a leader in education is one who takes to heart the success of all pupils in their facility. Elaine L. Wilmore states in her book, *Principal Leadership* (2002), we are here to promote the success of all students (p. 19). This philosophy is essential for all who chose to work in education. It is most essential, however, that leaders in education promote and ensure that all children have the same opportunity to be successful. In order to have success, educational institutions must have a vision, a direction to head in, a purpose for existing. Without a vision, there is no need for existence, there is no where to go. Quality leaders understand this and work to create a vision or plan for their building or district. They institute leadership throughout

the building by promoting, implementing, and carrying out the plan, and then by evaluating the plan.

In Wilmore's book, she suggested that there are four steps to developing a vision in an educational setting. First, leaders must involve everyone in creating the vision, this includes, faculty, staff, students, parents, and community members. Then they must ensure that all faculty and staff, activities, purchases, etc focus on the vision. Second, leaders are responsible for the articulation of the vision to all building employees, students, parents, and community members. Third, they must make certain that the vision is implemented. To implement a vision, everyone must get involved and all activities should help build towards the vision. The fourth step in creating a vision is the stewardship of the vision, which refers to sustaining interest and involvement by all (2002, p.20-22).

Vision is what creates and fosters the growth of schools and classrooms. Vision gives directions, a way of progressing. Vision and it's implementation is what helps us meet our goals whether it be better hallway behavior, higher test scores, increased reading levels, or whatever the school or district identifies as important. It is critical that everyone in the school believes in the vision, if they do, it will be a stable foundation for the school to grow and build on. If a vision fails to be seen by all faculty and staff members as important, there will be no foundation for the school nor will there be support for student learning and activities. It is vital that the building principal be the visionary leaders for his or her school..

A visionary leader, is someone who not only helps create and implement the vision, but also someone who communicates effectively and directly to the faculty, staff,

students, parents, and community about the vision and its progression. Visionary leaders focus on proactive leadership, empowerment, cooperation, and shared responsibilities. They find it imperative to ask questions, get all faculty, staff, and students involved in order to ensure that the vision is supported and carried out. They are organized, manage time well, and are goal driven. They are problem solvers, creative, and love to think outside the box. Visionary leaders are responsible and caring individuals who care about students and the welfare of education and society. Leaders who are successful create practical, manageable, and reasonable visions.

Part of having a successful vision is setting attainable goals to reach the vision. Goals and goal setting tend to play a key role in motivation, as they direct attention and action, mobilize efforts, and promote persistence and effort over time. Goals provide a course of action that lead to the vision, providing that the goals are coordinated with the school's plan (Alderman 2004, p. 129-130). It is imperative that the goals for the school whether they are short-term or long-term, are student-based or staff-based, be in alignment with the vision, as should all activities, actions, and spending. Simply stated, everything within the school should support the vision (Wilmore 2002, p. 21-22).

A second attribute of a leader in education is instruction. Instructional leaders value our country's education. They understand that schools exist and teachers and administration are hired for one reason only: to help students achieve (Wong & Wong 1998, p. 197). They understand the importance of increasing tests scores, of improving reading, math, and science levels, they work to prepare students for standardized tests, they support vocational education, and they constantly work to prepare students for the

next level. Instructional leaders believe that curriculum and instruction are the “meat” of schools (Wilmore 2002, p. 35).

Instructional leaders recognize the difference students have in their learning styles and work with their teachers to create a variety of teaching strategies and curriculums to meet a spectrum of learners. We live in a society that is quick to judge and label people, thus it is essential, as a teacher and leader in education, we step above and beyond the idea of labeling and understand that there are not just special education, gifted and talented, and average learners. These are just three of the most obvious categories that children often get labeled as. Instructional leaders recognize that it is the school’s responsibility to offer a meaningful learning experience to all types of learners.

Instructional leaders are advocates for quality classrooms. They make certain that their teachers understand that all children are unique and that “one-size-fits-all” curriculums do not meet the needs of every child. They encourage teachers to use a variety of teaching strategies to meet the needs of their learners. They support professional development for their staff and work to ensure that their building is equipped with current resources and technology.

Another core attribute of effectiveness in an educational institution is organization. Organization involves the management of the facility in every dimension (Wilmore 2002, p. 52). Organizational leaders hold regular meetings and keep open communication among key personnel and groups that keep the school up and running. They stay abreast of what is going on in the school. They define roles for their staff, students, support staff, parents, and community members (Whitakers 2003, p. 43-50 & 57-67).

Organizational leaders manage schools in a manner that ensures a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. In their management of the school, they strengthen school cultures and modify the structure of the building for optimal efficiency (<http://eric.uoregon.edu>). Organizational leaders understand the importance of school climate and the effects it has on student achievement, motivation, and on teacher productivity and satisfaction. Leaders work to understand school culture so that they can be better equipped to shape the values, beliefs, and attitudes necessary to promote a stable and nurturing learning environment. To understand a school's climate, it is important for administrators to understand current routines, ceremonies, and traditions. If these activities are in conjunction with the school's vision and express positive school cultures, then administration should play an active role in supporting such activities (Stolp 1994).

Other traits of an educational leader include the art of communication and the skill of collaboration. It is important that all individuals working in education, especially those in an administrative role work well with and are able to communicate effectively with people from all walks of life. Communication can be learned and enhanced throughout life. Leaders with a desire to communicate better find a way to do so in order to better themselves and their relationships with others. It would be impossible to be an effective leader in education without the ability to successfully correspond with students, parents, faculty, staff, and the community. Effective communicators seek to understand others and their points of view. Part of being an effective communicator is understanding the art of listening. Good listeners ask questions and give timely feedback (Irmsher 1996).

Leaders in most any institution pride themselves as being people-oriented.

Though it is necessary to be task driven, educational leaders can not lose site of the people within the system, this includes the students, their families, and especially the staff (Bloom 2004). It is in the school's best interest that everyone works collaboratively. In doing so, collaborative leaders acknowledge and address the needs of those around him or her. They understand, accept, and welcome differences. Collaborative leaders figure out how to get along with people and work for the common good of the system. Wilmore suggests that educational leaders should seek to understand other people's interests, needs, and perspectives because it is essential in developing effective relationships with families, community members, and other groups (2002, p. 67).

Collaborative leaders understand the importance of working together as a team and understand the need to be open to the needs, opinions, and ideas of others. They are open to thinking outside the box and encourage such innovative thinking. A principal must act as the facilitator and give a voice to all stakeholders, they must identify common values, and work to resolve conflict while building a team, its unity, and its vision (Wilmore 2002, p. 67).

A principal can sharpen their own leadership by fostering and developing the leadership of teachers, students, and parents (<http://eric.uoregon.edu>). Collaborative leaders are team players. As a team player they motivate the group to progress down a path that is in a positive direction for all people concerned. Collaborative leadership promotes cohesion, thus fostering the growth of the entire school community.

Collaborative leaders concern themselves with the school community and with the outside community in which the school resided in. They seek out and ask community

agencies, “what can the school do for you” instead of always asking, “what can you do for us”. They concern themselves with service learning, community services, and volunteer work. A collaborative leader understands the importance of educating our children in every aspect of life and does what it takes to see to it that our children are fully prepared for life’s journey.

Another quality of an outstanding educational leader is empathy. Those in education must genuinely care for and be concerned for students and their futures. They must want to help students to become the best person that they can become. They should show a passion to teach to all types of learners and a desire to ensure success of all teachers and their classrooms. Empathetic leaders teach beyond the contents of textbooks and teach about life. They understand that part of preparing students to be successful is not only teaching them how to read, write, and solve math and science problems, but it is also about helping to guide them in developing the qualities of character that are valued in the community that we live in (<http://www.ed.gov>). In order to live successfully in society people must demonstrate respect for mankind, be able to communicate effectively, get along with all walks of life, be able to work with a variety of personalities, and be responsibly individuals.

In Cunningham and Cordeiro’s book, Educational Leadership, A Problem-based Approach (2003) they address several qualities that they believe it takes to be truly human in nature. One of the qualities that I particularly agree with is the quality of transcendence. Cunningham and Cordeiro define transcendence as a quality that leads us to understand that there is something greater than ourselves (p. 186). From birth on, human beings have very selfish tendencies. Somewhere in the course of life, hopefully

younger than older, humans have to realize the world revolves around more than just themselves. As educators it is important that we teach our youth to internalize a set of values that will promote the continuation and enrichment of our culture. Schools are key institutions in the creation of caring, compassionate, and dynamic civilization (p. 186).

Administrators must not only show empathy for students, but all for their staff. It is meaningful for staff to know that the hard work and effort that they put in on a regular basis does not go unnoticed. It is important for administrators to pay attention to their staff, their needs, and what they do for the students and the school, and then show gratitude for those things. Empathetic leaders show compassion and are mindful for the positive things going on around them (Byock 2004, p. 103-112). It is important that administrators do not forget what it is like to be a teacher. They should be certain to circulate among staff, call teachers by their first name, compliment staff, and show an interest in them as a person (Bulach, Pickett, & Boothe 1998).

Ethics is another characteristic that I feel is essential for an educational leader. According to Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, ethics is defined as the discipline of dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation (1998). Ethical leaders ensure that educational institutional demonstrate good and moral behavior. They model such behavior and expect the same behavior from their staff and students. Ethical leaders treat all students, families, and staff fair, yet take the time to understand the story behind their action. They are a person of integrity and are trustworthy. Ethical leaders are consistent and work to always be reasonable.

It is vital that administration understand the significance of their roles in schools. Their behavior sets the tone for the entire building. To set a positive tone, decisions and

leadership in the building should reflect fairness and veracity. Ethical leaders control their responses, ensure that situations do not get hostile or out of control, and most importantly, they control how they act or re-act to situations. A principal's impact is significant; thus it is essential that the principal ensures that the school climate is that of fairness, integrity, and honesty (Whitaker 2003, p. 27-33).

Educational leaders who want to be effective can and should instill their own values and beliefs in the schools they operate. When this is done, people tend to believe in the same things, creating unity. Staff then tend to take what is important to the building and adapt it to their classrooms. Keeping this in mind, great principals understand it is not beliefs that are necessarily important but rather behaviors. A change in behavior naturally leads to a change in belief. Nonetheless, great principals also maintain a professional respect for other's beliefs (Whitaker 2003, p. 57-61).

An ethical leader is someone who acts respectful, who is conscious of the effects of their behavior on others, who values integrity, and who treats all individuals with fairness. They are positive, take time to understand and acknowledge the perceptions of others, and simply treat people with respect everyday. Great educational leaders expect themselves and others to behave in a manner that is congruent with the building goals and vision. They teach their staff and students to do this through role modeling and demonstrating this in their everyday behavior. They praise staff and students for positive behavior, professionally address inappropriate behavior, show genuine care and concern for all who are in the building, and show respect for themselves and those around them by practicing moral behavior both on and off the job.

Among the many qualities it takes to be an exemplary leader there are several underlying characteristics that make certain individuals stand out. One of those is attitude. Attitude reflects a person's perception of the world and it influences their response to situations. It is imperative that school administration control their attitude, and when doing so they control their responses to situations, thereby influencing the outcomes (Brock & Grady 2004, p. 105).

The ability to handle stress is significant to any person in a leadership role, especially those in school settings. In order to manage stress administrators have to separate themselves from the problems in the school. They have to set aside their gut responses to problems and come at them from a systems perspective (Bloom 2004). Also, to help reduce stress, leaders should delegate or assign duties to other responsible individuals such as vice principals, deans, counselors, and/or department chairs.

They may also need to modify their personality to eliminate tendencies to worry, fret, be a perfectionist, or an overachiever. Another way to eliminate stress is to simply be positive and visualize success (Brock & Grady 2004, p. 105). Principals need to understand that their job is never finished, that it is always a work in progress. In addition, to managing stress comes the ability to grow "think skin". When a leader is able to develop "think skin" they learn to manage emotional responses to criticism and conflict in order to manage their own personal stress and to be an effective problem solver (Boom 2004).

With any good leader comes the need to be flexible and the ability to adapt and lead change. One of my favorite quotes comes from the book Who Moved My Cheese, by Spencer Johnson, and states, "if you do not change, you become extinct" (1998 p. 46).

Change is constant in our society. It can happen with or without you. Change in education has emerged as a trend in our society and among our government leaders. Today, schools are the target of reform and school leaders are viewed as the change agents (<http://eric.uoregon.edu>). School leaders need to continually assess every aspect of their institution to ensure that they are operating efficiently. Most operations can be improved with change. Educational leaders must never lose site of a school's prime purpose; to facilitate optimal student learning (Wilmore 2002, p. 54-55).

Most individuals in leadership roles have a natural drive to work hard. Hard workers define themselves as life-long learners. Good educational leaders are constantly looking for new ideas, tools, and solutions to aid in their development and in the development of their teachers and classrooms (<http://eric.uoregon.edu>).

Successful leaders recognize that taking care of themselves is an important aspect of healthy leadership. To be effective in any role, people have to invest in their own well-being, including their interests and relationships outside of work (Bloom 2004). To maintain a healthy life it is essential to focus on physical, mental, and emotional aspects of one's life. Not adhering to one's own needs is detrimental to their personal and professional life.

It would be impossible to create a list of qualities that would describe a "perfect" educational leader. Just as each person is unique and different, so is each school and district. A suburban, culturally diverse, and poverty stricken high school would have different needs than a rural middle class elementary school. What both schools would have in common is the need for an educational leader who demonstrates a true compassion for education and the well being of students. Every school needs dynamic,

positive, and goal-oriented leaders who will work for the common good of the school community.

It is important to remember that a person is not born a leader nor can leaders be magically successful. It is my opinion that good leadership includes the qualities described in this reflective research paper. Educational leaders today, are generally drawn from a pool of qualified "teacher leaders". These "teacher leaders" are generally experienced in curriculum and instruction, but tend to have little experience in actual leadership. As a school district it is essential that appropriate resources are provided to ensure success of administrative leaders. School districts can do this by providing resources, professional development, mentoring programs, and other similar programs. By providing these and other tools, districts set their leaders and schools up for success (Bloom 2004).

The final component of this reflective research paper is to reflect on my personal vision for administrative practice. I am currently a teacher who has experiences several teacher leadership roles, but none as magnificent as an administrator. I feel that I have the basis of the qualities I have described throughout this paper. In the experiences that are ahead of me, I know that the qualities that I possess now will enhance and grow, making me an even better person and educator. As an administrator, I would use leadership to help create a shared vision that the entire building found value in. Within that vision, I would ensure that it focused on instruction, the implementation of change, collaboration, and acted as the moral center for the school and from which all activities supported. The vision would support the school, its staff, and its students, aiding them in excelling to

reach their fullest potentials. It is vital to me that my administrative vision ensure the success of all students.

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