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The practices of a successful educational leader: a reflective essay

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Abstract
Good leaders are essential to successful organizations in the business world. Similarly, good educational leaders are imperative to students’ continual success in the school building and beyond. High student achievement and positive school climate are very important when school is in session, but students must continue to be successful when school is not in session. Some of the many roles that allow an educational leader to make this possible include: being a leader of reflection, educational change, continuous improvement, and service. These roles influence both teachers and students in the development of themselves, encouraging them to continually strive to be successful.
THE PRACTICES OF A SUCCESSFUL EDUCATIONAL LEADER

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Reflective Essay

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Good leaders are essential to successful organizations in the business world. Similarly, good educational leaders are imperative to students’ continual success in the school building and beyond. High student achievement and positive school climate are very important when school is in session, but students must continue to be successful when school is not in session. Some of the many roles that allow an educational leader to make this possible include: being a leader of reflection, educational change, continuous improvement, and service. These roles influence both teachers and students in the development of themselves, encouraging them to continually strive to be successful.

My Beliefs and Values

Merriam-Webster Online (2005) defines education as “the process of training by formal instruction” (entry 1). Conversely, leading is defined as “the process that directs the operations, activity, or performance” (entry 3a). For a principal to be effective in all aspects of school administration, he or she must be adept in both education and leadership of students and staff. Furthermore, this person should possess management qualities to monitor the daily success within the school building. As a future principal, my goal is to further develop these skills to ensure building teachers, staff, and students are successful, in turn making me successful as their leader.

My family has always valued education. My mother is a nurse which required extra schooling to attain her current job, and my father has worked in
construction and farming most of his life. Even though my father did not have post-secondary education himself, he clearly understood the escalating importance of education for future generations. He aspired for us to have an office and work indoors so we would not be subjected to manual labor to which he had become so accustomed.

This, along with my desire to work with children, helped to shape my desire to become an educator. As an educator, I accept the responsibility to instill the importance of education in students' lives. In our current world, it is rare to find a good paying job without at least a high school diploma, and post-secondary education is becoming increasingly important as time passes. Students should not opt to forgo their education, with hopes of becoming the next wealthy rapper or athlete without an education. Instead, they should strive to be the next great rapper or athlete with an education.

As was stated earlier, education is "the process of training by formal instruction" (Merriam-Webster, 2005, entry 1). Generally we see education in this light, but education also takes place during informal instruction. Students often learn valuable lessons through informal means, such as respectful and appropriate interactions with others. Because of these lessons, my definition of education includes the process of training by formal and informal instruction.

As a third year educator, I hold three core beliefs about education. First, everyone has the ability to learn. Not everyone learns in the same manner or at
the same speed, but all students can learn to a certain extent. People with physical and mental handicaps have the ability to move forward and learn just as those without such handicaps can advance. As educators, it is our job to ensure that students gain knowledge and work to the best of their abilities.

Second, students need support from many people in their lives, not just the teacher, in order to reach their full potential. My childhood displays this very well. My father supported and encouraged my education, my community acknowledged all positive aspects of my education, and teachers, of course, pushed me to my intellectual limits. This support from parents, the community, and teachers are all imperative for a student’s success. Missing one of those components can drastically impact the learning process.

Third, a strong work ethic is imperative to a successful education. Pat Summit, Head Women’s Basketball Coach at the University of Tennessee, once said, “The harder you work, the harder it is to surrender” (Chapman, 2005, p. 51). I believe educators have the responsibility to instill this feeling in their students. Many students feel this when they are in the role of athlete; why not feel the same when speaking of course work? Why be satisfied with a C or B in a class when it is obvious that an A is within reach? This work ethic is defined by the supporters of a student’s education – parents, community, and teachers. We must help students understand that there is always room to continually improve, evaluating the choices made and how these choices can be modified to ensure success. This
value of self-evaluation will lead to a successful career. One way educators can model continuous improvement is by taking part in various workshops to help improve learning in the classroom and not doing the same lesson every year.

The University of Northern Iowa (UNI) Educational Leadership program provides me with the education necessary to become a principal in the future, which is a goal I have established. Becoming a principal will provide the opportunity for me to influence students, teachers, and parents in the school community, as well as fulfilling my desire to continually improve myself. By earning a Masters Degree in Educational Leadership, my intention is to gain a deeper understanding of the elements necessary to become a strong school administrator, become an expert at those elements, and work to pass my knowledge onto others in addition to making improvements to overall discipline.

I've cited Webster's (2005) definition of leading as “the process that directs the operations, activity, or performance” (entry 3a). In order to accomplish this, the leader must set the tone early. The school leader must work to ensure that teachers and students understand the expectations of the school and what it takes to reach these expectations. The essence of a leader is to lead by example and model these expectations. By following this example, students should understand that there is always room to improve, by evaluating the choices made and modifying these choices to bring about improvements. This value will take students beyond academics, into a successful career.
Principals have an all-encompassing role as an educator, a leader, and a manager. Tasks vary from maintaining supplies to managing budgets to maintaining high test scores; I do not expect being a principal is an easy task. But it is one that has the potential to be very rewarding. The educator is often the first support system in a valued education, working as a link between the community and individual families. The career requires working hard to provide learning opportunities for the students and teachers, as well as modeling continued education and a strong work ethic.

A Reflective Leader of Learning

"Reflection is the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder on the actions of oneself and others in one's immediate environment" (Heiskanen, 2006, p. 1). Reflection is imperative for any professional that desires to be a part of a successful workplace. This action is essential because it allows for connections to be made among observations, past experiences, and judgments (Place & Greenberg, 2005). The objective of reflection is threefold: Evaluating how a problem was solved, assessing procedures and the sequence of events involved with the situation, and questioning the assumptions made when dealing with the problem (Heiskanen, 2006). Through conquering objectives during the act of reflection, lifelong learning takes place (Place & Greenberg, 2005). As professionals entering the workplace, we must realize that reflection must occur,
either in isolation or with others, in order for us to learn from the experiences we have had – good or bad. Without reflection, we are at risk of repeating our mistakes and not leveraging lessons from positive experiences.

Following reflection on a recent occurrence, a professional should set goals, take action, monitor the actions taken, and finally, make adjustments to help achieve the goals that were sought. Reflection is not something that automatically occurs in a person’s life; rather, it is something that must be consciously practiced. Because of this, teachers should allow time for students to reflect on current practices they have employed and evaluate whether a different approach can improve results.

As a leader of learning, being a reflective practitioner is vital to the success of the school as a whole and to each of the individuals inside the school to include teachers, students, and other staff members. Leaders in schools constantly make important decisions that impact both teachers and students in the school building. Because of this, educational leaders are also regularly challenged regarding the choices that are made. In order to lead successfully, it will be imperative that I reflect both before and after making decisions. Reflection before an event may include foreseeing possible outcomes, recalling similar situations from the past, or working with a group of educational leaders to share experiences and lessons learned. After gathering this information, a sound decision can be made and supported with solid reasoning. Finally, the result of a situation should
be evaluated in both areas of strengths and weaknesses. Strengths should be included in future decisions, and weaknesses should be diminished such that the overall goal of the school can become a reality. Completing this process will help both the stakeholders and the decision-maker be more at ease with the decisions that were made.

Being an educational leader will require me to not only reflect on my own practices, but also encourage others to practice reflection. Donald Schon, (as cited in Holmes, 2005) a well known supporter of reflective practice, believes that this process supports teachers and guides practice. According to Schon, good teachers are empowered to elevate teaching to an art where teachers masterfully connect theory and practice. But, as stated earlier, reflection is not something that automatically occurs in a person’s life; rather, it is something that must be practiced. Because of this, staff should be encouraged to question and evaluate themselves after lessons. The primary focus for educators should be to determine whether or not the desired objective was achieved. If it was not, teachers must understand how lessons can be modified to help attain that goal in the future. A principal, asking insightful questions will help to coax teachers into reflective practice. These questions may include: How do you think the lesson went? How will you improve your lesson for next time? What were positive and negative aspects to your lesson today? What evidence do you have that students learned?
An answer by the leader is not necessary if the educator is truly reflecting on the effectiveness of the lesson.

Not only should a teacher be encouraged to reflect on his or her practices, but students need to become adept at evaluating their efforts on a particular task. To help ensure that reflection is a part of a young person’s life, goal setting should be encouraged. The practice of setting goals at a young age and evaluating progress may help lead students to a future of accomplishments guided by the practice of reflecting on experiences. One example of reflection for students would include the setting of goals for each term in the academic year. At the end of the quarter, students evaluate how well they did in reference to the desired goal. Many times, the goal will not be reached. Students can then reflect on the actions that kept them from reaching goals and create a procedure to help them reach these desired outcomes in the upcoming term. Goal setting is often practiced in athletic events and should be carried through on the academic side as well.

According to the Iowa Standards of School Leaders (ISSL), reflection is an integral part of leading a successful school. Both Standard One and Two help show the need for reflection. Student success is the primary focus of all six ISSL standards, and reflection by students, teachers, and administrators will help these standards become a reality. More specifically, Standard One focuses on a shared vision of learning, and Standard Two concentrates on a school culture that is
conducive to student learning. Students who reflect on their own learning become a part of this shared vision and contribute to a positive school culture by having a goal in mind and working to achieve that goal (School Administrators of Iowa, 2006).

Reflection is an integral part of any successful professional's job. Through the act of reflection, connections are made among observations, past experiences, and judgments. Because these connections are made, improvement is more forthcoming in the workplace.

A Leader of Educational Change

Change is omnipresent in any successful, professional organization. This is evident in the school system, as schools experience changes that are both large and small. Since 1954 when desegregation was first implemented to when mandates from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) were enforced, changes have impacted the educational world (Boehner, 2004). Likewise, lesser modifications such as block scheduling, time of day for homeroom, and a new emphasis on summarization techniques have also materialized. No matter the size of the change occurring in the school, the principal is always the catalyst. As Hall and Hord (2006) point out, "Administrator leadership is essential to long term change success" (p. 10). Without this support, difficulty will be found in sustaining change for an extended period of time.
A successful change requires five attributes: vision, skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan. Without one of these qualities, confusion, anxiety, gradual change, frustration, or false starts may occur (Ambrose, 1987). An educational leader's responsibility in the change process is to see that all of these attributes are in place so that the change can be implemented as smoothly as possible. While doing this, the leader must remember that a change in one system may not be effective in another system. In fact, "Educational changes imported from other systems have the potential to create chaos when they do not address the real needs, context, and cultures into which they are introduced" (Busick, Hammond, & Inos, 1992, p. 2). A similar innovation may be applicable, but without appropriate adaptations, the change initiative will fail.

Because adaptations are necessary for success, change is risky. There is no guarantee that the desired outcome will be achieved just because another school experienced success (Busick, et al, 1992). Since it is well known that success does not come with every change, organizations often abandon an innovation at the first sign of failure. Hall and Hord (2006) remind change seekers that "The change process takes three to five years" (p. 5). After one year of less than desired improvement, more time is necessary. Michael Fullan, (as cited in Busick, et al, 1992) a Canadian researcher, recognizes that results may even decline before they improve. He calls this the implementation dip (see figure 1) and warns leaders not to become discouraged too early. Fullan goes on
to explain that a leader’s role “is critical in moving the process out of the implementation dip and toward more positive growth and change” (p. 11).

Figure 1:

![Diagram showing the change process from where we started to where we are headed, with a note to not get discouraged.](Busick et al., 1992, p. 11)

The change process is difficult because everyone must be willing to work at making it successful. One negative mushroom can spread throughout an organization and stop any progress toward the desired outcome. A good leader recognizes this negativity and confronts it. Any concern that is shared can be put to rest by the leader. Any misunderstandings should also be discussed, so this poisonous mushroom can be changed into a positive mushroom for the change that is being made (Hall & Hord, 2006).

As a future educational leader, it is important to recall the pitfalls that can be seen in relation to change. The goal of the principal should be to avoid any snares that are barriers to the change process. In order to evade these obstacles, planning is necessary. A leader must recognize where the school is now, compared to where it wants to be (vision) so that confusion may be avoided. This vision must be shared with stakeholders so the entire organization can strive for a common goal.
"The chance of any reform improving student learning is remote unless district and school leaders agree with its purposes and appreciate what is required to make it work" (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 4). If the staff does not possess the skills needed, anxiety will likely be present for all those involved. The leader of the change must provide for training in any area where the staff is deficient. An educational leader is not just in charge of setting up the training, he or she should also be a part of the training. This will allow the leader to offer suggestions if questions arise. It also shows staff that the training is important to you and you are a firm believer in what is being taught.

To help encourage change, it will be necessary to provide incentives for those involved. Incentives do not have to be monetary; instead group planning time for the innovation may prove to be effective. Having the resources necessary to make the change is essential. If resources are not available, those involved will experience frustration. Leaders should also have an action plan ready for any change that takes place. Without knowing the next step in the process, false starts may occur and success will never really be achieved (Ambrose, 1987). These things, combined with the understanding that change does not happen immediately, will be helpful as leadership opportunities become available.

Change is connected to the Iowa Standards for School Leaders because it is about supporting success for all students (School Administrators of Iowa, 2006). If something is not working even after time and effort have been given,
something else must be attempted. As stated earlier, a vision is necessary for the success of any change. This vision is shared with all stakeholders so it is apparent why certain changes are being made. The only way this change can be successful is through continued professional development. Change cannot just be introduced and expected to be successful. Follow-up sessions are needed to share what is successful for some and what is not working for others. This also helps to provide an effective learning environment for all students.

Change is ever present in any successful organization. The leader of the organization is responsible for the successful implementation of any innovation. This accountability requires the leader to adapt the change for his or her school, be cautious of pitfalls, and get staff on board with the change. An effective leader of change typically leads the organization as a whole and the individuals within the organization to success.

A Leader’s Role in Improving Learning for Students and Adults

“The call for strong leadership is unmistakable – leadership that brings about significant improvement in learning and narrowing of achievement gaps” (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003, p. 5). A leader that can provoke these types of changes is invaluable to a school because “the school and district administration bear the responsibility for improving student learning” (p. 5). Because of the high stakes associated with testing, if student achievement does not improve, educational leaders may be replaced. Improvements in student achievement are
more likely to occur if the educational leader of the school provides meaningful learning opportunities for students and adults as well as time for teachers to collaborate regarding instructional strategies.

An educational leader must be the catalyst of improved learning for all students and adults in the school building. In contrast, Malcolm Knowles believed, “Adults need to be active participants in their own learning” (as cited in Lee, 1998, p. 1) by seeking professional development opportunities within and outside of the school. By doing this, teachers not only further their own careers and knowledge, they also set an example for students to follow in their own lives.

“Leading for learning means creating powerful, equitable learning opportunities for students and adults, and motivating them to take advantage of these opportunities” (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003, p. 12). One of the many jobs of an educational leader is to provide learning opportunities for students and adults in the school building. The above quote points out that motivation is another responsibility of the educational leader. If the learning opportunity is not seen as beneficial, it will prove to be a wasted time; however, if the school leader obtains feedback on learning opportunities that should be offered, those attending will be more motivated to make the learning a success.

One of the suggestions for school leaders is to focus learning opportunities on instruction (Supovitz & Christman, 2005). By doing this, students also benefit because teachers are more able to carry their new knowledge directly into the
classroom. Educators will be able to continue improving themselves by sharing experiences with other teachers who were a part of the learning opportunity. Teachers should not only talk about their instructional endeavors, they should seek constructive feedback from one another so their teaching skills continue to improve (Supovitz, & Christman, 2005).

Simply providing professional development opportunities for staff members does not guarantee improvement. Instead, “Leaders must provide the necessary structures, strategies, and support to help teachers hone their instructional strategy” (Supovitz & Christman, 2005, p. 2-3). Gene Hall and Shirley Hord (2006) insist that “Change is a process, not an event” (p. 4). This means, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, teachers should share with one another and seek constructive feedback about their educational endeavors and student progress. By providing this time for teachers, they will be able to continue learning about the strategy and customize it for their own classroom. When learning opportunities for teachers focus on instruction, students will continue to see the benefit of a teacher’s professional development in the classroom and will grow as learners themselves.

Michael Knapp, Michael Copland, and Joan Talbert (2003) provide five areas of action leaders can take to advance powerful and equitable student learning. These areas of action include “establishing a focus on learning, building professional communities that value learning, engaging external environments
that matter for learning, acting strategically and sharing leadership, and creating
cohere"nce" (p. 12). By focusing on these five areas, leaders can positively impact
student achievement and encourage continued development for adults.

The most important area of action is establishing a focus on learning. The
purpose of professional development is to improve student achievement. Because
of this, when learning a new strategy, teachers should focus on how it will be used
in the classroom. Follow up meetings should be used as a time for teachers to
discuss strategies that were tried and offer constructive criticism to colleagues so
instruction can be improved. Jonathon Supovitz and Jolley Christman (2005)
conducted a study in the late 1990s and concluded similar to Knapp, Copland, and
Talbert (2003) that a focus on instruction is essential. In both cities studied,
reforms were successful. Students desired to be more successful, test scores
improved, and teacher collaboration was beneficial in locating areas of needs for
students (Supovitz, & Christman, 2005). This occurred in large part because the
principal was a leader of learning and was able to provide support, structures, and
strategies for teachers to polish instructional skills.

Providing meaningful learning experiences for both students and adults is
necessary for a leader. Learning opportunities that are initiated only to pass the
time are obstructive and often problematic instead of being useful. Educators
should receive an appropriate amount of time to reflect on and discuss their use of
the professional development. Providing this time will make learning
opportunities for students more advantageous and lead to the closing of the achievement gap.

The Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) correlates with these ideas because they tell the importance of promoting a student’s success. Standard One speaks of the school’s vision (School Administrators of Iowa, 2006). Without learning opportunities for teachers, it will be difficult to continue to move students closer to this goal. Meaningful learning opportunities cause teachers to look at their own practice and enhance student learning (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003). The leader must seek what is needed to increase student achievement and then provide that opportunity for students and/or adults. This is shown in Standard Four because the educational leader must be aware of cultural and community interests and needs when trying to meet the goals of the school.

“A school or district leader’s ability to imagine ways to improve learning depends on an understanding of existing and potential connections between leading and learning” (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003, p. 9). The school leader must be able to identify the needs of the school and appropriately meet that need. This can appropriately be done by providing learning opportunities for both students and adults. Learning is a life-long process that should be fostered by the educational leader.
A Leader of Service

Houghton Mifflin (2004) describes service as “an act of assistance, benefit, or work done for others” (entry 8b). An effective school principal is recognized as a leader of service because of the actions he/she takes for others. Such principals primarily work for the betterment of all students in the school building, but also strive to ensure all staff members are ready and able to perform the tasks they are set to do in order to be successful parts of the school community. These two groups working together with an effective leader provide a positive school climate and flourishing school community.

Robert Greenleaf (2006) described a servant leader as a “servant first” (p. 2). An effective administrator provides services to others, but must work on all aspects of being a servant leader. One of the most important aspects is earning the trust of the people being led. This trust is needed so people know that the leader is devoted to moving the organization in the direction of its shared vision. Each positive action allows followers of the leader to put more trust in him or her. In contrast, violating trust one time can lead to mistrust and withdrawal of contributions from followers (Joseph & Winston, 2005).

When teachers, students, or community members question the motive of the principal, trust is not present. The lack of trust results in the school’s progress toward its vision to remain idle. In this situation, the principal must reiterate his or her position and gain the trust of the people being led. By clearly
communicating with those being led, trust in the leader is strengthened (Joseph & Winston, 2005).

One way to gain trust is to provide service to those you lead. Russell and Stone stated, “The servant leader's primary objective is to serve and meet the needs of others” (as cited in Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004, p. 5). In doing this, the leader displays how important each person is to the success of the organization. An administrator becomes successful by helping those he is leading to meet their goals. Without high achievement by all members of the school community – students and staff – the principal is not able to meet his or her individual goals. By serving and meeting the needs of others, individuals in the school may move closer to achieving the goals they set out to meet. As much as possible, the principal provides the resources needed to allow these triumphs.

Besides earning trust, a leader who provides service to others serves as a role model for those being led. An article written by James W. Spears (2006) in *The Servant Leader* describes the impact of witnessing continued service to others (as cited in Greenleaf). Observing service on a daily basis led this student – and others – to become a servant leader himself. “Along with other students I have offered my time and assistance to people in my community by: donating money or canned foods to the hungry, carrying items for those who needed an extra hand, placing books back on their shelves in the library after school, or even helping to decorate displays for certain school events” (Greenleaf, 2006, p. 6). This alone
provides the purpose of a leader as the example is set by actions, not words spoken. Certainly any leader would be proud to have this impact on others.

As a future principal, I will work to earn the trust of all members of the school community and to be a role model. Providing services to others will be my main focus and will lead to the achievement of educational and social goals. An open door policy will be implemented so lines of communication can remain open and so staff and students will feel comfortable speaking with me about issues. Students and staff should feel comfortable talking to me when problems arise or successes occur. At times when I am unavailable, leaving a message is appropriate so I can follow up with them. Servant leadership will be shown in these times by setting paperwork aside to focus on the troubles or successes others in the school. In addition, my leadership will show others what I see as important and will push them to serve one another inside and outside of school.

Being a leader of service connects with the ISSL standards by working for the betterment of those being led. This is epitomized by the ISSL standards because each standard begins by stating “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students...” (School Administrators of Iowa, 2006). The focus is not put on the administrator, instead the student and staff are imperative to the development of student needs.

Farling believed, “Servant leaders provide vision, gain credibility and trust from followers, and influence others” (as cited in Stone, Russell, & Patterson,
2004, p. 5). In doing this, the leader allows students and staff to be prepared for the obstacles they approach throughout the year and in the future. One of the most important parts of this process is gaining the trust of followers and not violating this trust so as to continue the positive school climate. By attaining that trust and providing a model of leadership, leaders within the school may be developed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an educational leader has numerous roles and responsibilities to perform at a high level. Some of these roles include being a leader of learning, change, continuous improvement, and service. Fulfillment of these duties – while taking into account what is best for students – leads the school, teachers, students, and ultimately the administrator to be successful.
References


