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An administrative vision for secondary schools : a reflective essay

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An administrative vision for secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

As I study leadership and reflect on the possibility of becoming a school administrator, I am convinced that my personal priorities and values will be challenged and must be clear. An administrative position encompasses a wide variety of responsibilities, skills, and wisdom. Most importantly the role also requires effective judgments and decisions to be made that are financially and legally sound. I continue to be introduced to many new perceptions and views of administrative leadership. Theories of leadership qualities and actions abound. I realize the importance of studying and understanding many different leadership ideas and approaches. It is important to incorporate the most effective practices in creating my own style. Good theory can and does affect good performance, but ethical principles must drive the decisions of an effective, ethical leader. Through a constant routine of situational practice, I continue to clarify what I value in education and sharpen my vision in order to become an outstanding leader.

**AN ADMINISTRATIVE VISION FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

A Research Paper

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

Chad A. Szabo

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As I study leadership and reflect on the possibility of becoming a school administrator, I am convinced that my personal priorities and values will be challenged and must be clear. An administrative position encompasses a wide variety of responsibilities, skills, and wisdom. Most importantly the role also requires effective judgments and decisions to be made that are financially and legally sound. I continue to be introduced to many new perceptions and views of administrative leadership. Theories of leadership qualities and actions abound. I realize the importance of studying and understanding many different leadership ideas and approaches. It is important to incorporate the most effective practices in creating my own style. Good theory can and does affect good performance, but ethical principles must drive the decisions of an effective, ethical leader. Through a constant routine of situational practice, I continue to clarify what I value in education and sharpen my vision in order to become an outstanding leader.

Personal Characteristics

Since I was a junior in high school, I wanted to teach. Working with high school kids, whether in an academic, athletic, or even spiritual setting as a youth group leader, has been a constant desire of mine. I was impressed with my own high school teachers' abilities to relate with me. Using their strong relationship with me, they would push me to accomplish more than I could imagine. I also had a youth pastor who had a significant impact on my

life because of his faithfulness and servant's attitude toward the adolescents he mentored. I am yet fortunate to have a mother and a pastor who continually exemplify Godly principles. My best hope as a teacher and as a future administrator is to have all of those that I serve recognize me in the role of a servant for them. The word 'administrator' means to minister, to serve others. I hope I can serve well.

I have learned the idea of service, of placing others before one's self, and many other virtues from my mother. Having divorced parents, a seldom-present alcoholic father and a drug-dealing and drug-addicted older half-brother was not an ideal family in which to be raised. As is the case too often with a single parent family, finances were tight. Vivid memories of my crying mother with bills sprawled out in front of her will never be forgotten.

However, I am much richer because of my experiences growing up under those circumstances. I learned that everyone either finds reasons to fail or reasons to succeed. My mother never allowed me the luxury of an excuse to fail or to quit. No matter how tough the situation, she was a constant example of hard work and faithfulness. She worked three jobs at times in order to raise three kids and never made excuses for her predicament. Everyone has his or her sob stories and I know that she struggled to keep everything together, but she made it. I ended up going to a college that cost more per year than my mother earned per year because of the persistent and determined attitude that I

learned from her. I found that at school nobody judged me on what was happening with my family life. The teachers didn't care whether my parents were together or apart, and it didn't matter if my brother was in jail or not. I was given the same opportunities to learn and compete as students from more ideal, intact families. These circumstances surrounding me as I grew up are the experiences that have shaped me. Students that I have today hear many speeches that my mother gave me as well as the speeches based on the wisdom of my experiences. These speeches emphasize goal setting, perseverance, fortitude, and old-fashioned hard work, topics that never grow old when I am talking with young people. These are topics that are also crucial when talking with teachers as an ethical leader in the educational environment.

Experience

After my student-teaching experience at Washington High School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, I officially began my career in education with a substitute teaching assignment on the first day of school in the fall of 1993 at Cedar Rapids Jefferson High School. I then took a paraprofessional position in a 3.6 level behaviorally disabled classroom. I also substituted on occasion for various teachers in the special education department at Jefferson. Since January of 1994, I have been teaching mathematics at Jefferson High School. I have been involved with our school improvement team dealing with our comprehensive school

improvement plan. I have participated in a North Central Association Accreditation site visit as well as a successful National Blue Ribbon site visit. I have been involved with writing and implementing proposals for collaboration with our Jefferson Business Alliance. As an active member of our district math department, I have been an algebra team leader taking an integral part in the writing of our district algebra standards and benchmarks, the writing and scoring of our district algebra assessment and rubrics, and the aligning of those district standards with the district assessment. Given some initial parameters, I was afforded the opportunity to build our department's master schedule for this current year at Jefferson. I also have been involved in district and school based discussions concerning a proposed initiative to increase our math requirement from two years to three years. Recently, with the absence of a district K-12 math facilitator and the resignation of our district high school facilitator, I have been involved in some district-wide staff development planning and a textbook adoption process. I have mentored two student teachers: one from a small town, small college background and one, not-so-traditional student teacher, from a university doctoral program. I am currently an initial member of a small number of teachers in our building that have been trained to facilitate the Student Achievement Workshop based on Sean Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens* curriculum as a transitional tool for our freshmen. We are in the formative process making decisions regarding our objectives and developing the steps in

order to activate our action plan. I have coached three different sports at Jefferson ranging in positions from being a volunteer for the varsity basketball program to being head freshmen, head sophomore, and varsity assistant football coach at various times. Presently, I am the co-head boy's tennis coach directing both the varsity and freshman/sophomore levels. I have also aided in the organization and smooth operation of our Jefferson Booster Club Annual Auction that has raised over \$35,000 for our athletic programs since its inception in the spring of 2001.

In my community, I have been active serving as a deacon of my church. In collaboration with my wife, we lead our youth program. I have hosted a church-produced community outreach television show involving our youth. I continue to be a member of our church band that has the regular opportunity of ministering to inmates at the State Reformatory in Anamosa, Iowa, as well as our normal Sunday morning worship services. I have taught our adult Sunday school class periodically and have been asked on an occasional Sunday morning to fill in for our pastor while he has been absent for various reasons.

I have been blessed with opportunities to meet, work with, and serve countless people both young and old through the first decade of my career. I know that I am where I am supposed to be right now, and through my experiences I will be ready to move forward with success. I have learned innumerable lessons about serving others with humility. I can't say that every endeavor I have mentioned above has necessarily been successful, but each experience has created

growth within me. That growth includes further development of my character, knowledge, wisdom, skills and abilities that are essential to becoming an effective school administrator.

Listening

Through the fullness and richness of all these activities I can say that the most important principle or skill I have developed is that of being able to genuinely listen to others, or “seek first to understand,” as Stephen Covey put it in his book (1989, p. 235). The skill of listening is a learned ability to make a concerted effort to truly put one’s self in another’s shoes. “Empathic (from empathy) listening gets inside another person’s frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel” (Covey, 1989, p. 240). Empathetic listening meets a vital need for the communicator to be affirmed and appreciated. Once this need is met then focus can be turned to affecting and problem solving.

I have seen the barriers that can occur when people attempt to listen through their own perspective. When people listen with the intent to reply as opposed to listening for the pure motive of empathizing and to experience the same feelings as the other person, communication is stifled. In order to have successful political and collaborative leadership in any organization the ability to listen for true understanding is essential. I am confident that this is a strength I have developed through my myriad of experiences, a skill that I presently offer to

my family, students, and colleagues, and a skill that will allow me to capably serve others throughout my career.

Philosophy of Education

Education is a social process that begins and ends at home with a person's parents and family. True education occurs at all times and in all places. Formal education serves a purpose for the society at large as much as it serves any individual student or parent. As a public school teacher or administrator, our purpose is to serve the community and that community is our students. As an educator, optimism and enthusiasm are my most effective weapons in the fight for great learning and growing experiences for students. As Charlotte Danielson says in outlining her framework for teaching, "Teachers who excel in [instruction] create an atmosphere of excitement about the importance of learning and the significance of the content. They care deeply about their subject and invite students to share the journey of learning about it" (Danielson, 1996, p. 32). I would add that teachers who excel not only care deeply about their subject, but also care just as deeply for their students.

All students are capable of positive educational experiences. No matter the background of a student, they can succeed if they make that choice and commitment. My primary role as a teacher is to find the trigger that will fire up students' passion about learning and to create an eagerness to excel no matter the academic subject or co-curricular activity. As an administrator, my role will

increase from impacting individual students to the entire student body. Although my direct day-to-day contact with students will decrease, the instructional and organizational leadership I provide for the staff will have a larger, more encompassing positive impact on all students. Focusing on teachers, great teaching, great learning, and organizing a powerfully positive learning atmosphere are the keys to a successful, productive school. The same enthusiasm and optimism that are important to show toward students must also be focused on the teachers under my leadership. Generating a culture where teachers and “students are engaged in meaningful work, which carries significance beyond the next test” (Danielson, 1996, p. 32) is my chief responsibility as an instructional leader.

Parents make up the second group of stakeholders we serve. The school’s expectations need to reflect the desires and expected results of the mothers and fathers who trust us with the educational, physical, and emotional well being of their sons and daughters. Being a relatively new father has confirmed my original perspective, parents are the lead teachers in a child’s informal and formal education. I see the role of my wife and me to be greater than that of any other individual teacher in the education of our children. As parents we need to provide positive motivation and inspiration for our kids. However, as educational experts, teachers need to share their expertise in the actual curriculum or developmental area of concentration. We, as teachers, must add value to each and every student

with whom we have contact. Our focus has to be on increasing that value every day. As a political leader in the school community, the principal must ensure that this value is not only being added, but also that it is being advertised. The parents need to be made aware of the progress of the school. The lines of communication must be kept open for contact to be made both ways, from parent to school and school to parent.

Society at large is another an external customer the educational profession serves. Our complex political, social, and economic environment requires us to produce more than just another batch of employees each year. Skills are very important, however, our educational goals must be much more comprehensive. Optimism is not optional. As educators entrusted with our society's youth, we must see these young people as dynamic leaders and shapers of their future. We have to recognize each student's potential and be able to release him or her into a bigger and brighter future than we can imagine. We are called to push them to dream big and imagine the best they can and to understand ethical values of hard work, studying, learning for a lifetime, collaboration, and teamwork as the ingredients for reaching their goals. As an educator, one has to have a love and enthusiasm for the opportunity he or she possesses to affect so many lives. As is pointed out in Philip Piele and Stuart Smith's *School Leadership: Handbook for Excellence* (1997):

Are there particular beliefs that lead to success? The early effective schools literature identified one: The best schools had principals who sincerely believed students could and would succeed...Effective change agents share a number of common beliefs and values. They have a distinctive vision, a mental image of what the school is capable of becoming. They believe the contributions of staff members are vital. They believe schools are for learning and students come first (p. 28).

Again, optimism is not an option; it is a prerequisite, and it is my strength!

Transformational Leadership

I was graduated from Cedar Rapids Jefferson High School in 1989.

As mentioned earlier, my student teaching took place at Cedar Rapids Washington High School. Currently teaching at Jefferson High School, I have had limited experience with diverse administrative approaches. As a student at Jefferson, I had a philosophically different principal than I have now as my supervisor. The previous administrator assigned seats at staff meetings, while the current principal receives complaints about not having an attendance policy. Simply being a student under the first, I only have hearsay to in order to judge how well his strict approach worked toward the goals of educational leadership. However, the present principal has a style that I believe promotes collaboration and cooperation throughout the staff. He expects teachers to take part and lead in the school improvement team. He also encourages consensus-building techniques for many of the decisions concerning our comprehensive school improvement plan and our day-to-day conduct of teaching and learning. He demonstrates a willingness to listen to suggestions

by the staff and is comfortable enough in his position to not feel threatened by those who may not agree with every decision he makes.

Last year I was a participant in a process that clearly illustrates the strength of the shared decision-making model that our principal employs. I was involved in a teacher-led initiative to pull all of our freshmen out of the large cafeteria study halls and place them into smaller, individual classroom study halls. Two other teachers I and initiated a discussion about our concerns of under-performing ninth graders. The students were not using their time wisely enough to consistently complete simple homework assignments. They were not demonstrating the maturity level needed to resist common distractions in a large cafeteria full of 130 adolescents with only one supervisor. These were the conditions of a typical study hall. Obviously, it was not a conducive studying environment for any of our students, especially the younger, less responsible, more impressionable freshmen. Even with good intentions, it seemed that many of our 'good' kids were being influenced poorly by some of the other misbehaving students. With the large numbers in such a large room as our cafeteria, it didn't matter the age, size, or gender of the supervisor, it was a no-win, unmanageable situation for anyone involved.

Our discussions continued and we included three other primarily ninth grade teachers into our deliberations and formed a proposal for the administrative team. Our plan involved a drastic realignment of our existing

teachers' supervisory duties and schedules. The proposal was met with open minds and open dialogue. The administrators, specifically our head principal, let us know of the possibilities and the limitations of our ideas. In order to continue our commitment to the current supervisory objectives, the resulting solution included the hiring of a new paraprofessional position to oversee our main computer lab that was previously managed by 21 different teachers during a year. The financial commitment by the administrators was not something that we, the teachers, foresaw, but certainly demonstrated the trust and professional treatment and support that have become the cultural norm of our school. After finalizing an acceptable innovation and giving us their endorsement, the administrators then assigned us the otherwise daunting task of proposing our recommendation to the rest of the staff. The staff accepted our suggestion positively, and even though change is always met with at least some slight degree of opposition, consensus was reached that the plan should help all students by decreasing the number of students in study halls. A paraprofessional was hired immediately and the school implemented the change the very next term in order to help the students as soon as possible. At the end of the year, the staff agreed to stay with new study hall and supervisory configuration for the next year because of the positive results that were experienced.

The empowerment of the staff is a direct consequence of the openness and trust that is given and expected through our head principal's practice of transformational leadership. Our process illustrates Keith A. Liethwood's (1992) point:

The collective action that transforming leadership generates empowers those who participate in the process. There is hope, there is optimism, there is energy. In essence, transforming leadership is a leadership that facilitates the redefinition of a people's mission and vision, a renewal of their commitment, and the restructuring of their systems for goal accomplishment (p. 9).

I am surrounded by a consistent example of the positive and challenging attributes of site-based management techniques through the efforts of my present principal. The importance of using site-based management is imperative; I have been a part of the energy it generates and truly believe in its power to ignite synergy among a staff. "Transformational leadership provides the incentive for people to attempt improvements..." (Leithwood, 1992, p. 9). As Linda Lambert writes in her article, *A Framework for Shared Leadership*, "Leadership is the professional work of everyone in the school...Everyone has the right, responsibility, and ability to be a leader" (Lambert, 2002, p. 37).

With the increasing demands and expectations of stakeholders landing squarely on the shoulders of the school's leader, how can a single person be solely responsible for the entire gamut of responsibilities too numerous to

even begin to list? They simply can't. A principal is required to be able to effectively empower, enlist and appeal to the professionalism that is within each educator, counselor, paraprofessional, janitor, cook, social worker, psychologist, volunteer, parent, or any individual employed with the charge of serving the students in the school community. As Lambert (2002) warns, "A principal who goes it alone or who dominates will find that the school becomes overly dependent on his or her leadership. As...principal Barbara Kohm explains, 'The more adept I became at solving problems, the weaker the school became'"(p. 40).

Constructing time for teachers to collaborate and team is a critical ingredient for the transformational leadership process. "In collaborative school cultures, staff members often talk, observe, critique, and plan together" (Liethwood, 1992, p.10). For building collaborative professional cultures, strategies include creating time for joint planning. The study hall solution arose out of original discussions that I had with my two partner program teachers. A language arts teacher, a science teacher and I, the math teacher, shared the same 75-80 students during the first three periods of our schedule. We also shared a common preparation period during the fourth period of the day and met twice a week during that time to discuss students, curriculum, and any other concerns, questions, or ideas that we had. The other group of three teachers we pulled into our discussions are another team of partners that

shared the same students during periods five, six, and seven. They, too, were given fourth period free to collaborate. Without these common times purposefully built into the schedule, the positive results that the school enjoys today would have never occurred. To illustrate our administrations commitment to transformational leadership further, the actual existence of both partners groups came about through the suggestions of the teachers. The administration again followed through with the suggestions and made the partnerships work within the schedule. It was a major commitment and a scheduling nightmare to accomplish the vision set forth by the founding members of the groups. Once again, the administrators empowered the teachers by accepting their thoughts, working with the possibilities, and implementing a change that allows our teachers to better serve students.

In my own setting, I realize the limitations of my skills and knowledge. I will be more than willing to let go the reins to tap into the vast resources of our educational team. As Leithwood (1992) found in his study of transformational leaders, “These leaders shared a genuine belief that their staff members as a group could develop better solutions than the principal could alone” (p. 11).

Relationships

I do understand that there is a delicate balance between other people’s ideas and my own. Ultimately, final decisions will rest with me, as an

administrator. However, relationships have to be built on trust, and relationship building is the essence of leadership. “Education is a human enterprise and you can’t take the humanity out of it” (Houston, 2002, p. 46). Whether it is in a classroom, in the athletic arena, in the staff lounge, or in the main office, personal connections motivate people. As a teacher, I make my vision clear that I have more important goals than just becoming friends with my students. I know, however, that if my students like me and see that I like them, they will work harder and give more effort in order to not disappoint me. One of the worst feelings a person can have is that of letting down someone whom you respect, admire, and like. The establishment of respect along with friendliness can be used as a very strong motivator in teacher and student, as well as administrator and staff, relationships. As Ruby Payne pinpoints in her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2001), young people from dire family and financial conditions have a much greater chance of success when they have made just one quality connection with a mentoring-type adult. “The key to achievement for students from poverty is creating relationships with them” (p. 142). I would argue that her statement is true for all students and all adults, not just unfortunate impoverished children.

With the principle of fostering quality relationships in mind, at the beginning of the school year, I make it a point to talk with each student in class on the first day. I have all of their names memorized by the second day

as well. I make sure they know that I am genuinely interested in them as a person, first, and as a student, second. “To honor students as human beings worthy of respect and care is to establish a relationship that will provide for enhanced learning” (Payne, 2001, p. 144). I demonstrate to them that I am a servant to their needs in the classroom. My job in the class is to do anything in my power to teach and encourage the students to accomplish more than they ever imagined.

As an administrator, I see an expanded, parallel role. Along with my ultimate service to the students, I will be a direct servant to the needs of the staff and the community at large. “Leaders who see themselves as stewards will be able to create school communities that are both collegial and responsive to the needs of community members” (Piele & Smith, 1997, p. 30). The relationships an administrator forges with his or her teachers will be the tide on which a school is swept up to ride in, or possibly ride out. “The single factor common to successful change is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, schools get better. If relationships remain the same or get worse, ground is lost” (Perkins-Gough, 2002, p. 92).

Education can open the doors and give anyone the opportunity to do something special. No matter the political view, we have social mobility in our society because of a commitment to free, public education. However, the educational system cannot force success. No matter how hard we try at times

as educators, as administrators, as a community, as a society, or even as a government, we cannot strong-arm successful learning on any individual. Schools are there to provide every opportunity the law will allow and to encourage and persuade and show the way, but success is still no guarantee for any students. External motivation affects some people more than others, but all need to find their own purposes. Hopefully, as educators, we can help young people to find intrinsic motivation towards positive ends. However, we don't have much control over intrinsic motivations, or else our jobs would be greatly enlightened. Therefore, kindling positive relationships with young people and between young people can be our strongest ally in our endeavor of reaching all students. It is through positive relationships that educators use leverage to help move students toward successful learning. As I heard in a video, the speaker made the statement, "Rules without relationships breed rebellion."

A report in Education Week illustrates a difference in how some European countries react to and deal with school violence as opposed to here in the U.S., "Rather than metal detectors and armed security officers in schools, Mr. Thoelken of the German Embassy said, 'German citizens and policymakers are far more likely to support ... creating programs to improve relationships between students and teachers'" (Bowman, 2002, Access to Guns section, para. 5). In a BBC News article on the internet about problems

of student tracking, Dr. Sue Hallam of London University's Institute of Education is quoted, "Where pupils don't feel valued by the school, they will seek other ways of maintaining self-esteem, such as buying into sub-cultures which hold anti-educational values, where it is 'cool' to be alienated" (*Streamed classes 'demotivate,'* 2002, para. 4). By far, the best way to let kids know they are valued is through developing a sincere understanding relationship with each and every student possible, whether they are at the top, bottom, or the too oft forgotten middle of their class. Knowing that success is not always guaranteed, an effective educator must apply the knowledge that success becomes more possible the more one connects with the student on any level. As a teacher and as an administrator, being an eternal optimist is a must. An upbeat, confident attitude sprinkled with a little realism is the kind of balance needed in a sound approach to educating the masses. As my mom always said, "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

Culture

Interwoven within the idea of establishing strong, trusting, serving relationships is the idea of harnessing a culture conducive to high educational productivity. I believe in the theory of leadership posed by Thomas Sergiovanni that is based on a culture of moral connections. "Moral connections come from the duties teachers, parents, and students accept, and the obligations they feel toward others, and toward their work." He goes on

saying, “Obligations result from common commitments to shared values and beliefs. Moral connections are grounded in cultural norms rather than psychological needs. For this reason, they are stronger than extrinsic or intrinsic connections” (Sergiovanni, 1996, pp. 32-33).

The importance of creating a productive, nurturing, professional, and caring culture surfaces repeatedly through the work of many authors. As the key catalyst in the cultural development of a school, “the principal plays an important role in communicating and sharing this culture with...teachers,” (Colley, 2002, The Principal as Culture Builder section, para. 2) as well as students and parents. “By providing instructional leadership, cultivating a positive culture, and fostering mentor relationships, principals create conditions that will provide their schools with a staff of stable, competent, and successful teachers” (Colley, 2002, The Principal as Mentor Coordinator section, para. 6).

My purpose, as an administrator, is to attain the knowledge, dispositions, and skills designated by the Iowa Standards for School Leaders to serve the entire community and address the educational needs. Identifying and sustaining a set of core values is an important ingredient to a successful school culture. Marilynne Quarcoo, an elementary principal in Newton, Massachusetts says, “Core values allow the school community to remain focused on what’s important” (Lindy, 2000, para. 6). A teacher at Quarcoo’s

school, Jodi Escalante, states that, “Having core values gives me a consistent direction. It removes my opinion from the equation...If a solution promotes a core value, it is acceptable” (Lindy, 2000, Define Your Core Values – They Create a ‘Default ‘Position’ section, para. 3).

All this talk of a common culture of core values is wonderful, however:

Trust is a key to system change that appears to be in short supply. Currently it seems as if everyone at each point across the system not only does not trust and respect persons at other points along the continuum, but also is cynical about the intents of those other people (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 11).

In this day and age of mistrust surrounding education, Sergiovanni would argue, and I would agree, that it is precisely trust that must be built in order to allow core values to be agreed upon and effective. Principals and teachers, parents and students should be encouraged to “become self-managing, to accept responsibility for what they do and to feel a sense of obligation and commitment to do the right thing” (Sergiovanni, 1996, p. 41). Core values must be a reflection of shared values of the school as a moral community. Through a culture of strong relationships built on the trust that is gained through service, it is the principal’s responsibility to nurture the direction of core values. It is the administrator who needs to give time, opportunity and setting for trust to first be established and then common values can be examined, defined, and refined. In his article, *The Culture Builder*, Roland

Barth sums up the school's "most important mission--to create and provide a culture hospitable to human learning and to make it likely that students and educators will become and remain lifelong learners. This is what instructional leadership is all about" (2002, p. 10).

Vision

Proverbs chapter 29, verse 18 warns, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." My vision is continually being formed and reformed as I learn and grow toward being a more comprehensive educator. A dynamic school is one that employs a variety of teaching and assessment styles, approaches, and beliefs. Articulation between diverse teachers is a necessity. Teachers learn best from each other's experiences. "If teachers are to teach for deep understanding, they must be intellectually engaged in their disciplines and work regularly with others in their field" (Danielson & McGreal, 2000, p. 16). The shared vision that I will endeavor to develop is a school that is a true learning environment for all. I envision a learning community where the teachers' and students' learning curves are much alike. As teachers' knowledge is expanding, they are bringing the kids with them. From an administrative standpoint, igniting teachers' enthusiasm and inspiration parallels a teacher's efforts with his or her students. I feel fortunate to be currently involved with a teaching staff that has a good mixture of quality veterans and less experienced, eager, new teachers. The common

denominator for the team is the clear demonstration of authentic commitment to students by staff members. Obviously, no staff is perfect, and we are not made up of perfect individual teachers. However, I do see the important ingredients of collegiality, professionalism, and friendships among the teachers. These qualities, combined with compassion for young people make our staff a generally highly effective teaching team.

The 2000 evaluative visit by the North Central Association noted that both teachers and especially students have an overwhelmingly good feeling about working and learning at our school. Similarly, receiving our U.S. Department of Education's Blue Ribbon Award in the spring of 2002 was based on that 'good feeling' atmosphere and how it goes a long way toward quality production in and out of the classrooms. The principal establishes the collaborative tone amongst teachers and between teachers and students. Empowering current teachers and hiring new quality teachers are two keys to setting that atmosphere.

Having the vision of an effective learning environment is important. "Vision exists when people in an organization share an explicit agreement on the values, beliefs, purposes, and goals that should guide their behavior" (Lashway, 1997, What's in a Vision section, para. 1). Action is essential to the vision. Just as faith without works is dead, vision without action is likewise. As an administrator, a safe school with a positive learning

environment is the first priority. “This is accomplished by actively engaging employees in the decision-making process; the leader's role is not to solve problems personally but to see that problems are solved” (Lashway, 1996, *How Do Leaders Use Facilitative Strategies?* section, para. 1). Being personally involved with a relatively successful school will be a solid resource from which I can draw when attempting to establish or continue a productive educational environment. Again, my purpose is to attain the knowledge, dispositions, and abilities aligned with the Iowa Standards for School Leaders to serve and empower the entire community with educational opportunities and direction. I will accomplish this attainment through professional relationships, lifelong learning and continuous improvement.

Implementation

The implementation of my vision for an educational environment with a strong positive learning culture based on sincere, caring relationships will begin with me. I will be the leader who first establishes personal connections. I will be seeking first to understand before trying to be understood. Through building positive, sincere relationships with others, I hope to model a caring compassion that compels others to care in a way that the entire community can be affected. I hope to model a notion of humility and service that directs our sight constantly on the task of benefiting our students and their families. Understanding the pendulum swing of measuring up to the current rise of

political standards and having a strong background in mathematics, I hope to be able to ease the burden put on the classroom teachers from those political pressures so they can excel at their profession of effectively teaching children. Great things will happen when teachers are empowered to collaborate on decisions about how and what to teach. I hope to promote individual growth in teachers through raising their level of commitment to caring for their students and their colleagues. Collective growth is also accomplished through caring collaborations like study groups, research groups, and various goal-oriented committees where the focus of each differentiated goal is ultimately student achievement and active involvement in the learning process.

The Crux

I realize my vision is broad and that I have painted a picture of my views with a wide brush. The emphasis of each section from my experience to my philosophy, to my ideas, can all be boiled down to relationships. I really have not mentioned any *programs* or initiatives that I have studied or in which I have participated. I have never been a big *program* person. I simply think that quick-fix *programs* are presumptuous, at best. Are there valuable lessons within programs? Of course there are. However, there are no shortcuts to quality. Our education system is thought of as one of the largest affective social *programs* in the world. It is an inherent error to treat education as a *program*. Education is a *process*. Education simply happens,

no matter what, and that learning process is different for every single individual person in the world. Seeing education as a process instead of a program leads to an analogy Stephen Covey uses in relating physical development to character development. Physical development is clearly seen and understood and cannot be faked:

What happens when we attempt to shortcut a natural process in our growth and development? If you are only an average tennis player but decide to play at a higher level in order to make a better impression, what will result? Would positive thinking alone enable you to compete effectively against a professional?...The answers are obvious. It is simply impossible to violate, ignore, or shortcut this development process. It is contrary to nature, and attempting to seek such a shortcut only results in disappointment and frustration (Covey, 1989, pp. 36-37).

However, deeper emotional and character development cannot really be seen and can be sometimes pretentious:

Our level of development is fairly obvious with tennis...where it is impossible to pretend. But it is not so obvious in the areas of character and emotional development. We can 'pose' and 'put on' for a stranger or an associate. We can pretend. And for a while we can get by with it—at least in public. We might even deceive ourselves. Yet I believe that most of us know the truth of what we really are inside" (Covey, 1989, pp. 37-38).

Covey's entire analogy can be taken one step further to include the innately social *process* that is education. From the individual student faking their way through a day in class or maybe even the entire semester to the teacher that is in over his or her head and is faking their way through the same class. In the

current political environment there are entire schools, districts, and states in our nation that ‘put on’ for the public and in so doing are deceiving themselves. The education process is like that of character and emotional development, it can be faked and we can even deceive ourselves, but not for too long. The frustration continues when another *program* comes along to hide behind again without recognizing the true encompassing process that is imperative for real education to occur.

Covey’s main point in his illustration is that we simply can’t skip steps of development, whether it is in tennis or in our character or in education. Again, the education *process* is innately social which means that it is completely dependent on community relationships. Therefore, as the leader for the educational *process* of a community, my focus is completely on fostering a quality, caring web of relationships throughout the entire community and beyond. It is my mission to get all people to *care*, for themselves first, then to care for others. It is a daunting mission. However, I am one person and as long as I care then I can start there!

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