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

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

### Abstract

In my wildest dreams, I never thought that I would pursue a career in education, let alone become a school leader. No one in my family had gone beyond a high school education. However, in my father's dying moments, he encouraged me to never quit pursuing an education. My father died during my senior year in high school and after high school I floundered in a community college for a couple of years, but I did continue pursuing an education. I began to dream of becoming an educator and coach. I was influenced by previous coaches, teachers, and my father's request. They all understood me and gave me confidence during the difficult times I was having in high school. They showed me that hard work and discipline could pay dividends in the end and this fit in the way I was raised. I came from a blue-collar family, which carried the belief that all kids, no matter where they come from or who they are, can become successful in school or whatever they choose to pursue. Children can carry this success into their careers.

**A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING SCHOOLS:**

**A REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

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**A Research Paper**

**Presented to**

**The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,**

**and Postsecondary Education**

**University of Northern Iowa**

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**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Masters of Arts in Education**

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**By**

**Neal Thompson**

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**Dr. David Else**

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In my wildest dreams, I never thought that I would pursue a career in education, let alone become a school leader. No one in my family had gone beyond a high school education. However, in my father's dying moments, he encouraged me to never quit pursuing an education. My father died during my senior year in high school and after high school I floundered in a community college for a couple of years, but I did continue pursuing an education. I began to dream of becoming an educator and coach. I was influenced by previous coaches, teachers, and my father's request. They all understood me and gave me confidence during the difficult times I was having in high school. They showed me that hard work and discipline could pay dividends in the end and this fit in the way I was raised. I came from a blue-collar family, which carried the belief that all kids, no matter where they come from or who they are, can become successful in school or whatever they choose to pursue. Children can carry this success into their careers.

I truly am a result of the environment and people who influenced me in my life. I am the benefactor of role models who believed in me when I was impressionable and vulnerable. I believe we, as educators, need to be strongly aware of the impact that we have on the students we meet on a daily basis. Over the past twenty plus years, this belief has continued to be supported by students,

now adults, who have contacted me and described the impact I had on them. Some former students did not even have to mention anything specific. They just came back to say a simple hello, to give me an update of their lives, and to reminisce a little. Others have told of specific fond memories, which affected their life. Long-lasting relationships developed in the course of teaching for fourteen years in the classroom, counseling with families and students for another thirteen years, and coaching for a total of twenty-six years. Each of these educational experiences gave me opportunities to grow relationships that have brought me to the final phase in my career: educational leadership.

In my twenty-five plus years in education I have experienced sixteen different principals, nine different superintendents, and nine different teaching staffs from four different school districts beginning with student teaching in 1978. These educators and the relationships I have developed with them have had a profound affect on the person and professional educator I am today. Each of these people has had their own exceptional way of influencing me. They all have their own unique styles and methods that I personally gained from them. They all had their strengths and weaknesses that have helped mold my personal vision of how I would like to be as a school principal and leader.

My vision is represented in some of the schools with which I was associated; because they had strong personal commitment to the children, they

served. The schools developed and had traits similar to that of a strong family that is devoted to each and every family member. This is a character trait I believe is important, because just like a school, a family will have problems but they then need to work together to solve problems. A school is constantly bombarded with problems, crisis, and concerns. The school family can work and problem solve together and continues to become cohesive even during the most stressful times. In the buildings I presently am involved with, we have individuals who work closely together to assist fellow teachers, both young and experienced, and students when the need arises. I think a family atmosphere is conducive to change and open-mindedness as well.

Open-minded faculty members are vital in the effort of problem solving. I think of the adage, "You can't fit a round peg in a square hole." In education, this means that we as educators need to be unique and innovative. Families and the dilemmas they confront are sometimes complex. Simple solutions do not always exist. Therefore, the education field needs to be prepared and flexible to handle and assist with problems and issues that families face today. We as educators need to be more open-minded to ideas. Ideas could include meeting with families on a neutral sight such as a restaurant or in their homes where they may feel more comfortable. By allowing "out of the box" ideas to be introduced as possible solutions, complex problems can be resolved. A final idea might be to invite community members into the school to assist and mentor staff, students and

families. Individual faculty members are not only vital to the educational family system, but they are also important in creating an environment conducive and inspiring to the students' growth both academically and socially.

I believe one of the most important tasks of a principal is accomplished in the hiring of high-quality, dedicated staff. Staff includes secretaries, teachers' associates, coaches, janitorial staff, cooks, but most importantly teachers. The higher the quality of the staff directly correlates with challenging students and the higher the academic challenges the more progress students make. I also believe that students who are challenged find ways to improve and excel. We are in a period of time when we need to step up the performance of our children.

Mediocrity is not an option. Therefore, it begins with a leader paving the way with hard work, commitment and innovation thus, leading the school staff down the road of success with our children and the families with whom we are involved.

I have become the person I am today because of special people in my life. A specific quality I have grasped from my father, first, is there is no substitute for a hard day's work. I have gained respect from others in education for my ability to put in the hours necessary to have a task accomplished to the best of my ability. I believe there have to be long days because education isn't a nine-to-five job. There are times when I need to meet with parents and the evening is the only time



to do so. Other events take place outside the regular school day. A good example of this just recently took place for me. The seventh grade is in the process of planning a community service project in a class I teach. The students responded by assisting our local community food pantry in a move to a different building. The students spent two hours on a Saturday morning completing this project. They witnessed first hand, a project in which a community came together with volunteer labor for a group that was in need. The whole community got involved and it was a good lesson for students.

Along with hard work also comes the quality of commitment. I believe, truly in my soul, that children deserve everything that educators have to offer. I believe I am committed to helping teachers become better educators, thus children will benefit in the long run. Every thought, every painstaking decision, every ounce of energy throughout the school day needs to be committed to benefiting the children we educate. Therefore, commitment does not just mean doing the best we can with what we have and know, it means constantly learning and finding new and innovative ways to teach. It means being committed to completing the task of educating and preparing students who leave our school geared up and enthusiastic with the prospects of their future.

I was blessed in my life with a number of coaches who instilled in me the importance of the quality of perseverance. When my future looked bleak and I

was just living day-by-day nearing the end of my high school career, I remembered the game plan. I remembered dad's wish for me to keep going to school, but I also remembered coaches telling me to overcome past failures and move forward, learn from the mistakes. I remember my senior season, after my last game in a difficult sectional baseball game that we lost, being told by a coach to always keep his phone number nearby. He told us that when we needed someone to call him. Just knowing that he cared more about us than he cared about winning an important game made me realize I could overcome hardships and persevere when the going got tough. I remember these things because they were vital in assisting me to have determination over life's pitfalls. The road in life will have its ups and its downs but I could and would endure. I became tenacious in my vision to become like my life's heroes.

I intend on being an educational leader like my life's heroes. Critical elements in need of attention as a leader include a strong commitment to kids while keeping children as the focus and in the center of educators' attention. As we lead toward academic success there needs to be a culture and climate conducive to new ideas, innovations, and open-mindedness as well. This progressive atmosphere will allow for new, researched-based ideas and strategies to overcome inefficient practices. Thus, the result is the success of all students. Even when there are many strikes against some of the less fortunate children and families, there is also ways to boost a child's resiliency. Making a strong effort to

enhance a child's feelings about themselves will correlate with better emotional, social and academic performance.

### The Commitment of the Academic Family to Student Achievement

I believe an effective school is similar to a well functioning family system.

The school family system consists of students, teachers, a principal, and community members including parents, board members, and other staff. In order for this system to be effective, the family must include some key ingredients. The family members need to be collegial and professional while committed to the academic achievement of each family member or student. Collegiality and professionalism are necessary when staff work together, similar to when parents need to work together, in problem solving endeavors, in daily interactions with each other, and while confronting the challenges of educating today's youth.

I believe the attainment of collegiality and professionalism occurs when a school staff is committed to the success of the student as their number one goal. As a future school leader, my challenge, while making educational plans, will be to make sure a positive impact on the students occurs. I believe it is imperative to get the academic family members committed to student achievement. This can only happen when professional educators are mutually respectful and proficient as an educational community.

I consider the academic community/family to be anyone who has a stake in the success of the students in our area. It is my hope that all of these committed people work like a family to sustain educational growth of the students. Should our team just consist of the trained professional educators? The book, *What Works in Schools* (Marzano, 2003), explicitly mentions in research that parental involvement is a factor that influences student achievement, while implicitly mentioning community involvement in two other studies. The research also mentioned that collegiality and professionalism are necessary and yet have a nonlinear correlation to the impact on student achievement. Marzano believes that even higher priorities are a viable curriculum, having challenging goals and giving effective feedback. He states, "Those factors with weaker statistical relationships with student achievement positively impact achievement only to a certain point" (p. 20). Therefore, I believe that the relationship of the staff with one another, both collegially and professionally, the joining of team members from both parental and community sources, and the development of these relationships with professional educators is vital in achieving academic success and an effective school. Attaining positive outcomes in schools prevail when staff members cooperate with each other, community involvement in our schools occurs, and a commitment to student achievement is the vision. This is accomplished when student achievement is the number one goal of all involved. This must be communicated from the first day a school leader takes the helm.

Accomplishing student achievement through commitment of the educational family can occur during team involvement and planning. This planning can take the form of school improvement when a team is committed together; they plan a roadmap of the needs of the school, and develop a compass on how to get there. Sally Zepeda (2004) in her book, *Instructional Leadership for School Improvement* suggests that just like a traveler a school needs a roadmap. "The roadmap is the school improvement plan and the goals serves as the compass" (p. 10). I believe vying for school improvement is imperative to an effective school and a credible leader with a strong group of co-leaders and followers is necessary for the continued vitality of the educational family. How exciting to be a part of a family team which is goal oriented and striving to improve school achievement. I see this as a strong priority in the schools I plan to lead. I will begin with finding out what the concerns of the staff are, prioritizing the concerns, and then developing a plan to alter these concerns. Success will come down to teamwork and a family style environment and culture. Will the staff agree all the time? The answer is obviously no. Nevertheless, we can have respectful and constructive relationships that are authentic in nature and the benefit of this collegial work will profit the professional educators, the students, and the family community.

At this point, I am tempted to tell of the horror stories of the past in regards to healthy authentic relationships among educational stakeholders, but I only keep those experiences in the back of mind for the sheer reminder on how not to do

things. Instead, I aim to keep in perspective the challenges and task of educating today's students and I remain positive for their future. Whitaker (2003) states, "It is people, not programs that determine the quality of a school" (p. 8). He goes on to say, "Effective people build relationships with others" (p. 12). This is not rocket science, but it is another challenge of the effective principal. It is the challenge of creating a mindset that we are all in this together, a family. Creating this culture and climate in the schools I lead will be a major goal of mine because truly strong relationships can make a difference in the success we have as educators on the life of the children we serve.

It is the responsibility of the principal, the leader of the educational household, to respond to the needs of the school. Leaders are responsible for all that is happening in the schools, both good and bad. If a teacher is struggling with classroom management, the principal needs to make suggestions to assist. If the staff and climate of the school is not positive, the principal needs to make a plan for change. If data is not showing academic progress that is acceptable, then the principal needs to be at the forefront of data driven change. To me this looks overwhelming for one individual to handle. The solution is then, to have relationships in tact that will allow you, as the principal, to ask for help. Like the quote from the movie *Field of Dreams* said, "If you build it they will come" (Robinson & Kinsella, 1989). I believe if you have a foundation with professionals working towards a vision committed to student achievement then a

family will come together. Again, with the help of quality people in collegial and professional relationships many good things can happen.

Whitaker (2003) mentions that effective leaders prevent themselves from lapsing into emotional volcanoes. He states the principal who knows this, "Will aim to treat the people with respect ten days out of ten" (p. 97). He goes on to say that "A relationship once damaged, may have resulted in personal hurts that are never totally healed" (p. 97). The conclusion would be that this lack of respect could end up causing negative consequences to the students in the end. This is just the opposite of what I want for the students and staff at the schools I lead.

Then how do we carry a positive relationship with all employees and people we lead? Marzano (2003) reminds us that we certainly do not need to be friends with our staff. He states, "The most striking result is the negative correlation between student achievement and friendship interactions among staff. 'Friendship' interactions between teachers equates to lowering student academic achievement" (p. 61). Thus, relationships need to be based on respect and professionalism. The family team that I envision in the schools I lead will be supportive, respectful and courteous. The same I ask of my own family members. The leader modeling the behavior he/she demands can only accomplish this. I

realize I will not be a perfect fit with all the staff I lead, but I also know that I will attend to each person in a consistent, respectful manner.

If we agree to develop respectful relationships then the next goal of the family is to be professional. Professionalism means being prepared as a qualified educator with knowledge of the subject matter in which you teach. It also means to treat fellow staff and students with respect at all times. This is the way I expect to be treated and how I expect any family member in my household to treat each other. I think an important way to elicit professionalism is by making high-quality, thoughtful decisions when hiring new staff. Staff professionalism will be important for me when I hire new personnel. I will also be very aware of the professionalism when I evaluate staff. Time and energy will be spent attending to staff in regards to collegiality and professionalism.

The many messages I have discussed in the previous pages leads to an environment, culture and climate I want to establish in the schools I lead. I will expect commitment from all who serve students. I expect cooperation, respectfulness, uncompetitive professionalism, goal-oriented and visionaries to be a part of the educational family traits of the school. This family; students, staff, community, board members, and superintendent will all be focusing on the challenge of teaching and learning. Focused and committed to the achievement of all youth will be communicated to all stakeholders.



As the head of the educational household, it will be my task to cultivate the staff and the community involved in educating youth. Gabriel (2005) uses a quote from Robert Crandall, former president of American Airlines,

The ideal leader of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be one who creates an environment that encourages everyone in the organization to stretch their capabilities and achieve a shared vision, who gives people the confidence to run farther and faster than ever before, and who establishes the conditions for people to be more effective, more innovative, more creative and feel more in charge of their own lives than they ever believed possible. (p. 156)

It is my goal to establish a shared vision that allows for all involved to become the very best that they can possibly be in all aspects of their life while they are at school as well as at home and with their friends and families.

Crandall's (Gabriel, 2005) ideal leader is an awesome example of the potential a strong leader has in the lives of the staff and the students being served.

In Standard 5 of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders states, "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner" (School Administrators of Iowa, 2005 p. 5). I will keep these standards in mind for the students we are educating and all decisions, judgments and energy will be made to benefit students.

## Instructional Leadership

### *Open-minded and Innovative*

Why is it that people resist change? Clearly, this is a concern in the field of education. Resisters of change not only noticeably resist change they vigorously resist change. Even more obvious to me are the administrators who will avoid modification and innovation because of their fear of this resistance. Thus, the key question is how to be innovative and transform what is not effective in education for the sake of student achievement.

I do not believe in the concept, "Change for the sake of change or if it is not broken do not fix it." I believe there is a need for progress and school improvement. The first thing I will do as a new school leader is be very patient and acclimate myself with the school before attempting to implement new or innovative programs. I think it important to assess the staff to find out who would be leaders in reform when the data supports change. John Gabriel (2005) in his book *How to Survive as a School Leader* remarks, "It is important to sell the benefits of change, not the proposal itself" (p. 84). He points out that if teachers and the staff are made aware of how students will benefit from a proposal they may be more inclined to work with you on the proposal.

Implementing change based on the vision of the school is another early step in the adjustment process. Standard One (ISSL, 2005) of the Iowa Standards for

School Leaders reminds school leaders to promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of a vision of learning. Therefore, a school staff, led by the principal, must revisit and consistently discuss methods for achieving the schools vision.

Revisiting the school's vision can be accomplished in staff meetings by having the vision printed on the agenda and any other forms of written documents for staff as well as openly discussing the vision with the staff. The vision can also be displayed on any school literature sent to families: school newsletters, report cards, faculty meeting agendas, and on report cards to name a few. If the vision of the school is well known and understood by the community as well as the staff, then all future decisions should be based on consistently reinforcing and meeting the vision and mission of the school.

Resistance does not always have to be a negative trait in a school setting. Negativism and resistance to change has fostered itself because of the many proposals, mandates, and initiatives in the past that seem to be cyclical and the present "No Child Left Behind" mandates (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Many of these mandates have been forced upon educators without discussion and debate. I believe educators must see the relevance from what is mandated and there must be a connection with the school vision and mission. Richard Daft (2005) states, "Communication and training is the single most effective way to

overcome change because it reduces uncertainty, gives people a sense of control, clarifies the benefits of change, and builds trust” (p. 646).

The reasons for implementing something new also has to be data driven and most importantly must benefit the children we serve. If a positive educational impact does occur, then I believe this impact will be beneficial for both the students as well the teachers. When staff knows that the educational leader is consistently assessing the vision of the school and assessing school data an environment of change can become the norm. Staff will be in the forefront of change if they see the relevance in it. Whitaker (2003) says, “As leaders we must help our teachers take responsibility for the performance of the classroom. If everyone looks in the mirror when they ask, ‘Who is the variable?’ we will have made tremendous strides toward school improvement. Success in any profession starts with a focus on self” (p. 19). This would cause a paradigm shift in some schools. The shift would have to place students’ achievement and student success at the forefront of all decisions. I think that is exactly what the No Child Left Behind mandates are trying to accomplish. Staff will be saying it is the principal’s responsibility to improve and achieve the vision of the school.

Significant results from open-minded teachers trying to achieve better results for students could lead to more innovative, student-centered decisions in schools. The staff philosophy would be similar to that of a sports team who uses

the motto, 'There is no 'I' in team.' The results would be open discussions taking place and debates occurring for the sake of adopting new initiatives or proposals. Not only would it be awesome to be open-minded to change, it would also be great to have difficult questions asked and answered before time and energy is spent on a new project. We can get rid of defensiveness and replace it with critical questioning, authentic discussion and honest reflection.

The goal of critical questioning, authentic discussion and honest reflection of the outcomes can open the door for innovative instructional methods that can assist all children in their learning. As we are aware, one of the basic needs in classrooms today is to be responsive to all learning styles. The different learning styles of students require that teachers facilitate active, engaging learning methods. This means to connect all students in the process of attaining an education. Having an open-minded attitude and willingness to be innovative could produce a classroom conducive to different instructional strategies. Tate (2004) describes twenty different instructional strategies that she says, "Can teach anybody anything because, by their very nature, these strategies take advantage of the ways in which we learn best" (p. xii). Marzano (2003) makes a key point that school leaders should not be intrusive in the daily lives of teachers, but they should monitor the continuity of curriculum, be accessible to teachers, and be an influencing factor with teachers. This tells me that there should be formal and informal evaluations taking place, which teachers and leaders use to monitor,

discuss, and influence future classroom decisions. The everyday management of the classroom and the lessons taught are influenced by the instructional leader but carried out by the teacher. TheodoreSizer (2004) suggests teaching is a 'calling'.

"I will marshal them to a worthy cause. I will treat them with the respect they deserve as individuals, I will attend carefully to their feelings as well as to their thoughts as well as to my, or society's, hopes for them" (p.viii.). Even though Sizer is talking about marshaling as a teacher, the quote has a personal meaning for me as a future school principal and my relationship with the staff I lead.

Resistance has its place, but not when it inhibits the progress of students and their achievement. Standard One (ISSL, 2005) of the Standards for School Leaders states in the first disposition that, "The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to the educability of all" (p. 10).

I believe it is vital for a school leader to monitor the learning process. I believe that when data warrants change then critical questioning, authentic discussion and honest reflection of the outcomes has to take place with the staff and leader before, during and afterwards. Bringing together concerned stakeholders and finding ways to create new and innovative ways to improve learning and instruction where the data shows concerns will accomplish this. The goal of this openness is to show staff how students will benefit and to alleviate some of the resistance that staff will have. Once this climate and culture becomes

the norm of a school then a staff of educators will be able to facilitate active, engaging learning methods that result in improvement of student achievement.

As the educational leader of the school, I believe their needs to be a constant revisiting and evaluation of the school's vision, the state standards, and their accompanying criteria. I will attempt to keep staff focused on the task of educating all youth.

### Collaboration in Schools

#### *Promoting the Success of All Students*

There is not much more that can lift the spirits of the school's educational staff than having the leader of the school greet you in the halls every morning with a smile and a wish for a good day. The leaders I have wanted to work hardest for were those who outworked me. They arrived early, worked later than most, came to all the meetings and seemed to take pleasure in it everyday. A leader like this just seemed to set the tone for the day! School leaders who promote the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a culture conducive to student learning is like a few principals and a coach I would like to emulate: Mr. Johnson, Mrs. Hall, Coach Welter and Mr. Stinson just to name of few. Standard 2 for school leaders illustrates the many performance indicators that ensure every student learns and the staff grows professionally.

*The Leadership Experience* (Daft, 2005) illustrates personal attributes of a leader that are similar to the four leaders I previously described. Daft describes personal characteristics of leaders as, "Having high energy, physical stamina, enthusiasm, drive, desire to excel, persistence, tenacity, and independence" (p. 48). I appreciate a person who has this kind of energy and desire to achieve. Daft goes on to state, "Star headhunters Thomas Neff and James Citrin believe there are some traits that are shared by today's best leaders as described in *Lessons from the Top* (Neff, Brown & Citrin, 1999). . One core principle they believe important that successful leaders live by is to build a great management team. Great leaders hire people, "whose skills and experiences compliment their own, but whose passion, attitudes, and values are one and the same" (p. 49). The value they put into their work is very stimulating to me. It is their passion and it inspires my passion. It is also energizing to students because these characteristics cause the leader to be in the forefront of many children's eyes everyday. Leaders with these qualities are seen and active throughout the school day.

In the case of Mr. Johnson, he was seen in many classrooms many days. He would get right in there with kids and lend a hand by tutoring and assisting them or by observing and being excited about their accomplishments. He knew each student by name very early in the school year. He went out of his way to give them positive feedback by putting stickers on every piece of paper displayed by each teacher and he often gave positive feedback to the staff. This relates to the



performance attribute of a leader who ensures that students feel valued and important. The other leadership attribute I believe this effort symbolizes is that each student accomplishments are recognized and celebrated.

Doing all these simple little things for kids and staff may sound easy and effortless but as I look back, these characteristics took a lot of energy each day. Gabriel (2005) says, "Teachers appear to be relieved when they aren't observed by a principal walking through their classroom, yet they also want to be recognized for the great activities and lessons they are providing to students" (p. 104). I believe these are teachable opportunities to work with staff and give positive feedback for what they are doing each and every day of the year. I also believe these are opportunities to see students displaying their talents. For me this will be energizing.

I see active energetic leaders in the forefront of education. True educational leaders refuse to allow for mediocrity in their building. They believe all people can be successful and they are leading the way towards this end. It is easy to blame education for the current academic failures occurring across America. Whitaker (2003) spoke from the heart when he told a group of businessmen the real plight regarding who is to blame for some of the ineffective students they are hiring. He also notes the fact that some are hiring responsible workers because he has been in business where students are good employees. He points out the need for everyone becoming responsible for their own performance. From the school

leader, to the classroom teacher, to the parents, to the community members, we all need to become part of the solution for high academic achievement. The focus needs to be on self rather than playing the blame game.

The school's mission and vision are not a quick fix to school change. Sustaining a school culture and educational program conducive to student learning and staff professional development requires time and energy. To achieve and sustain energy towards the goals of the district will take determination and rigor. This begins with the leader. This is not to say that the success of the school is totally the responsibility of the school leader. Johnson (2005) talks about building a commitment to a shared purpose if you follow these principles:

- All individuals have inherent value as contributing members of the organization
- The fundamental purpose of change is to create structure that makes the most of everyone talents
- Organizational success depends on individual success. (p. 116)

It takes an environment of focused individuals to help maintain an atmosphere of engaged learning. Lunenburg and Irby (1999) discussed the need to raise the standards of quality in education by redesigning curriculum, creating professional development opportunities, creating networks in education locally, statewide and nationwide. This is a difficult challenge, but one that can be achieved by leading with energy and a focused mission and vision. I plan on

motivating those already at the school I lead by being a role model that demonstrates high energy, determination and vigor in order to create a culture conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

### Securing a Safe and Supportive Environment

#### *Creating Resiliency in Children*

In the final analysis, when I look back at the career I had as a teacher, counselor, coach and soon to be principal I will be evaluating the effect I had on children and the staff I worked with. I will not revel over the successes I had while teaching, counseling and coaching children and families. On the other hand, I will not hold responsible others for any of the difficult times I had as a teacher, coach, and counselor. As a future educational leader I will look within myself for what I could have done differently, what I would have changed, or what my responsibility was. In describing the variables of effective teachers Whitaker (2003) says, "Great teachers look at themselves for answers; poor teachers look elsewhere (p. 15). When I look within myself, I will be most satisfied in the improvement and adaptations I made from the lessons I learned over the years. My own personal growth came from the patient leaders I worked for over the years and I can only hope to do the same for those I lead. The lessons I learned from the educational experiences that affected me can only have a positive impact on those I connected with over the years and will connect with in the future. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once stated, "We judge ourselves by

what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done" as cited in Johnson, 2005. I feel good about what I have accomplished and I am excited about what the future will bring.

In order for a leader to be positively affecting a school, he or she must influence others. Standard five (ISSL, 2005) in the leadership standards believes, along with me, that leaders should be committed to upholding ones own principles, subordinating ones own interest for the good of the school community, and development of a caring school community. I believe that in order to be influential and inspiring one must be strong in confidence. To be able to temper my interests because it is in the best interest of the students is a great illustration of the confidence I want to display at the school I lead. My confidence comes from the inner strength I gained over the years from experiences I had and learned. A strong and confident school leader can influence the lives of others. How important is this for youth today?

H. Stephen Glenn and Jane Nelson (1989) quote research from the Search Institute stating, "Peer influence correlates closely with the rise in rebellion, resistance, chemical abuse, and promiscuity" (p. 208). They go on to say, "Without a close and trusting relationship with a significant adult, young people turn to their peers" (p. 208). It is imperative for youth to have close relationships with school personnel. Educators today have a great opportunity to have an impact on the lives of children. When their peers negatively treat children, a

teacher and a principal can have a great impact on the situation. School leaders and teachers can bring hope in an otherwise desperate time. Wessler (2003) says, "It is striking that students do not forget those teachers who step up to confront bias, prejudice, and harassment" (p. 61). I hope to be influential to the staff and students by treating them fairly and with dignity and respect. It certainly makes sense that in order for students to be successful they must feel safe and connected to the staff. The climate in the school I lead will be filled with caring and empathic educators to be there for students.

Sustaining and creating the kind of climate conducive to a safe and caring environment will take a change initiative in some schools. Henderson (1996) says the difficulty with change comes from, "Admitting that things must be done differently, summoning the energy to do so, and taking the risks necessary to change" (p. 49). Change requires moving towards the uncomfortable zone of the unknown. "If we want to change the situation, we first have to change ourselves" (p. 18). As a future school leader aligning my performance with the leader standards, specifically standard two (ISLLC, 2005), it is my responsibility to ensure a nurturing environment for all students and staff. Thus, I must model what I want from students and staff.

If I model what I want in our children, then I must admit my imperfections first and then change. I must assess the culture and climate on a regular basis and make sure the students, staff, and I are meeting the culture of high expectations in

the school. I think we must role model what we want for our children because they may not have the best role models in their lives.

From the foreword of the book *Children Learn What They Live* (Nolte & Harris, 1998) it is written, "This book can help you become the parent you want to be, and raise the kind of children you can always be proud of" (p. xi). Canfield goes on to say, "As with all principles for living and parenting, they are easier to talk and write about than to put into daily practice" (p. ix). Currently it truly seems accurate that it takes a whole community to raise a child. Adults at schools and in the community can assist parents as we work together raising children today. In standard six the school leader has an opportunity to help families realize that education is the key to opportunity and social mobilization. As an inspiring school leader I believe I can have the kind of impact on the school community to provide the quality of education children deserve.

Peter Benson (1998) believes, "A caring school climate can provide opportunities where children feel cared for, encouraged and supported" (p. 52). Benson also believes students need to be involved in activities and this is what I feel our Dragon Dens provide. They are opportunities under adult leadership, for adults and kids to reach out to one another. Dragon Den time is spent in a caring environment full of positive interactions and lessons the entire school can improve upon.

## Summary

Over the course of twenty-seven years, I have gained confidence and knowledge as an educator. The result for me is an internal optimism and excitement readying me for a future role as a school leader. I am motivated to take on this challenge because I have not only paid my dues through the time and energy spent, but I have also learned from the experiences I have had. I realize my strengths and my weaknesses and I am much more able to adapt to the styles and personalities of the staff, students and community members I lead.

I am grateful for the years of experiences I had in high school, junior high school and elementary school as a teacher, counselor and coach. Every role I have accepted over the years led to challenges that have made me ready and able as a school leader. Now I have taken on the role of the school district's special education coordinator and curriculum director. The final experience that is preparing me for the role of a school leader is the experiences I have had parenting and raising three children. What I have benefited most from is the lesson on how to work together with my spouse to become a unified team raising three children cooperatively. I am a single team member who hopes to develop team players in the future schools I lead.

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