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A preferred vision for leading the secondary school : a reflective essay

Abstract

As I reflected on past experiences in my life, I found myself in a position of leadership. Interestingly, one of my earliest leadership experiences happened around the age of ten. The neighborhood I grew up in had several families with children. It was natural back then for us to play outside most of our free time. As children, it was not unusual for us to have times when no one could make a decision on what we would do that day. On many occasions, I found myself being selected to make the decision for the group. My childhood years were the beginning of numerous occasions where I was able to make meaningful contributions that affected others. The pattern of others looking to me for leadership continued through childhood and throughout my high school years as well.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING THE SECONDARY SCHOOL:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

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and Postsecondary Education

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As I reflected on past experiences in my life, I found myself in a position of leadership. Interestingly, one of my earliest leadership experiences happened around the age of ten. The neighborhood I grew up in had several families with children. It was natural back then for us to play outside most of our free time. As children, it was not unusual for us to have times when no one could make a decision on what we would do that day. On many occasions, I found myself being selected to make the decision for the group. My childhood years were the beginning of numerous occasions where I was able to make meaningful contributions that affected others. The pattern of others looking to me for leadership continued through childhood and throughout my high school years as well.

During my high school years, I attended a band leadership camp, hoping to increase my opportunity to become the drum major at my school. The experience impacted me more than I could have ever imagined. It was during this occurrence; where I observed, learned, and put into practice the many ideas and concepts important in the role as leader. I found myself identifying with a future in a field that would foster my natural abilities, passion for learning, and the opportunity to lead others.

During band leadership camp, one of the teachers stressed a concept by which I abide today. That concept basically stated that a good leader never asks anyone to do a task that they would not do themselves. This philosophy became

very memorable to me. The band camp experience was successful in a number of ways. Because I participated in the camp and learned the characteristics of a good leader, I was made the drum major at our high school. I decided to put my newfound knowledge to the test early in the year. In the role of drum major, it was important that the other band members respected me. Knowing that respect is earned, I was determined to be an example in the area that was hindering our success as a band. The issue was tardiness to practices and performances. I decided to enact a policy that stated if you were late, you were required to complete ten push-ups before practice continued. The first day of practice I lined up about a dozen people that were late. I reminded the band about the policy and then enforced it for those twelve individuals. A month later I was late to practice. I arrived to see all the band members waiting to greet me. I sensed that they were wondering if I was going to follow my own policy on tardiness. When I started my ten push-ups, I could see there was a newfound respect for the policy and me.

I was also fortunate to learn another memorable concept at band camp. I learned that a leader is only as good as those they lead. The camp staff stated that there is never a time when you will have a great drum major in charge of a bad band. Good drum majors will produce good bands. This point was driven home during a very important performance later that year in high school. The setting was our homecoming game. The band was attempting a very difficult piece of music and had adopted a new way of learning charts for the show. Unfortunately,

the decision to proceed in a learning style different than what the band had practiced only lead to confusion among the whole band and staff. Ultimately, this decision was the reason for the show's demise. I found myself standing up on the podium, conducting, only to watch the band fall apart right before my eyes. The experience was devastating. There was nothing I could do to fix it. I realized that I had done my job poorly and let a lot of people down. That moment impacted my future and the way I approached decisions, communication, learning and leadership.

The responsibilities of an administrator are no different. Just as I was responsible for conducting the day-to-day practices and performances of our band, so is the administrator at his or her school. I have found that decisions made in the best interest of those concerned, affect many different groups in many different ways. As an administrator, the students, faculty, parents, and community members all put their trust in you. As a drum major, the band, faculty and parents put their trust in me. Every person that crossed my path or the path of any administrator brought with them his/her own agenda, concerns and needs for reinforcement. In the role of leader, one has to make appropriate decisions based on the information available and keep the best interests of those involved in mind. The results of the leader's decisions are not always going to make everyone happy or be popular and it is unrealistic to believe that you will. There will always be

unhappy people. However, when a decision is handled appropriately and communicated well, people tend to respect the decision and move on.

One particular incident comes to mind when thinking about decision-making, respect and leadership. While in band leadership camp, I sensed that it was not impossible to be a friend and also a leader. For example, I had friends in band who were not doing what they were supposed to do. They were disruptive. I went over to let them know there was a problem. However, my first attempt to steer the group back on the right track was not successful because they were still not contributing to our work in a positive way. It was unfortunate that their behavior dictated the manner in which I had to address them next. I had to be stern with my friends and ended up reprimanding them in front of the entire band. I knew my actions caused them some embarrassment and they were not happy. However, I had a job to do. After rehearsal that day I pulled the group aside and reminded them that they were my friends, and I hoped that they would continue to be. I explained to them that I had a job to do. They could either help the band accomplish its goals or continue to cause problems. If they chose the latter, they would be removed from the band. Through that conversation, my friends were able to understand what they needed to do so the show would be successful. Not only did they understand that I meant business, they also understood their contributions to the band could positively influence the outcome. The practices continued uneventful after that, ultimately enabling the band to earn its highest

ranking ever at the state competition. From this experience, I learned that leadership is not a popularity contest. Although this style of leadership is not effective in all situations, it was one that proved beneficial during that year with the high school band.

I enjoyed my high school years and the leadership roles I was afforded. The experiences strengthened my desire to continue in leadership roles that would allow me to impact the future of those with whom I would have contact. I found myself a doer. I needed to be involved, able to give input, and understand what is going on. I liked the opportunity to influence the future.

I was not someone who grew up knowing I wanted to be a teacher. I was still unsure about my future when I arrived at the University of Iowa my freshman year in college. Initially, I applied for admittance to the school of engineering, even though, I knew very little about engineers. I knew I enjoyed math and also knew I could make a good living as an engineer. As I studied the requirements for graduation however, I realized that I ultimately wanted to be an educator.

I followed my heart and enrolled in classes to become a teacher. Many of the classes that prepared me for the field of education required that I write papers about what it meant to be a teacher. Preparing those papers helped me understand that the teaching profession is a leadership position. As a teacher I would be in charge of the students in my classes. I would be the leader in the class, the person the students came to for instruction, assistance, and guidance. It was exactly what

I was looking for. It was exciting to consider the opportunity to take what had become natural for me, the role as leader, applying my knowledge and skills to students with whom I would have a hand in directing their future.

I was fortunate to have had many teachers who made a significant impact on who I am today. It was amazing to find myself wanting to do the same for others. As a teacher you have the power to influence the future. The students you work with can become positive contributing members of society. Just as I took lessons from those who influenced me, I now witnessed students learning from me. It is my goal that my students will carry my lessons with them and, hopefully, pass them on to the next generation. Assisting students through their life's journeys is an incredible place to be. As a teacher, I am honored and take great pride in doing what I can to help a student succeed.

I was not naïve enough to believe there would not be times of difficulty as an educator. While there are a lot of things that are positive about being a teacher, I find one particular area troublesome. I feel as the laws governing education are changing, they are not necessarily changing to represent the best interest of all children in public education. It appears there are too many people in decision-making positions that have little understanding about the actual day-to-day operations of today's schools.

Times are changing but the public school systems are not. I believe that school systems enforce rules that are outdated and not representative of how

current society thinks. Student discipline is one of these areas of concern. On several occasions, I have found myself frustrated with the bureaucracy that comes with the application of outdated policies. I found myself looking at my strengths and wondering how I can better contribute to improving the current problem. It is the goal of all educators to provide an environment that is safe and nurturing for the faculty, staff and students, while providing the best educational opportunities possible. As an administrator, I will accept the challenge of ensuring that this particular goal is reached.

I believe that my experiences as a coach have helped prepare me for the role as leader. Communication is an essential part of leadership. There have been occasions when a parent wanted to speak with me about a concern they had with their children's experiences. Several times I found that no matter what explanation I offered, it did not satisfy all the parental concerns, which ultimately led to less than desirable situations. In a book I read in the Educational Leadership Program, I was offered a quote that addressed this concern. When dealing with the public, the book indicated, "we need to know how to be polite and diplomatic even when we are biting our tongues" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 68). Coaching is a very satisfying, yet a challenging position. The coaching environment creates situations where communication tends to be emotional and at times, self-serving for those involved. Wilmore's quote is a reminder to me to become a more patient and effective listener and communicator.

The classes I have completed in the Educational Leadership Program are aligned with six Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL). The ISSL Standards are required for principal licensing in Iowa. To be an effective administrator you need to be visionary, instructional, organizational, collaborative, ethical, and a political leader. Four critical elements I believe most important for me to become an effective leader are based on all six standards, but most closely align with: visionary, collaborative, instructional, and ethical leadership.

Visionary Leadership

Those who have been successful in the leadership field have had a vision that guided their goals and actions. In the role as administrator, I would need to be knowledgeable of the district's vision as well as my personal vision for the building in which I would be assigned. It would be important to complete comprehensive assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the building, faculty and staff, students, parents and the community in order to better lead the change process. It would be my responsibility to continue to grow the strengths of the school and its people as well as collaborate with the community of faculty, staff and students to lessen or eliminate the weaknesses. A visionary leader cannot fear change, but instead, should be excited about the idea of change offering new and better ways accomplishing goals.

Today's schools deal with issues that continue to increase: high dropout rates, teen pregnancy, poor student attendance, single parent homes, low student

performance in the core classes, and students working full-time. Although policies and procedures of the past may have proven effective, those same policies seem ineffective today. Educational institutions must recognize that the world has changed. Employers and students have needs that our current delivery system is not meeting. Over the next five years, the use of technology combined with other instructional practices will dramatically change the nature of the teaching/learning process (Treuhaft, 1995, <http://www.algonquinc.on.ca>).

An article in *Principal Leadership* addresses the issue of reform in today's schools. "Reforms to meet these problems cannot depend upon trying harder within traditional structures and practices because the levels of personal and instructional support needed by most students in these schools exceeds the boundaries of the conventional high school building, scheduling, and authority hierarchy" (McPartland & Jordan, 2001, p. 28). So where does this change start? According to Sue Fuhrmann of the College of Education, Coordinator of the Fourth Annual National Principals' Leadership Academy, "Principals are the key agents of change and reform in education" (Moncure, 1995, p. 12).

I am involved in helping find solutions to improve instruction at our high school. I am co-chairing a committee to explore an alternative schedule for West High School. We are considering changing the schedule to a block style instructional schedule in an effort to improve poor test scores, increase one-on-one instructional time for teachers and students, lower dropout rates, and enable

incoming freshman to become more successful in their transition. The committee has researched traditional schedules as well as new ideas for a class schedule. The pursuit of this endeavor has shown our committee that the optional formats for scheduling may better appeal to today's student's needs. Our committee realizes that more students have increased external school obligations that need to be considered when creating a system for academic delivery. Growing numbers of students are working part-time while enrolled in high school. Current educational delivery systems do not meet their unique needs (Treuhaft, 1995, <http://www.algonquinc.on.ca>). These students are frustrated and increasingly feel alienated from the school. In 1996, David Mathews saw vision as a way of reconnecting schools to an increasingly alienated public. Mathews found that little changed unless the principal took the lead and actively pushed (Lashway, 1997, <http://www.ericfacility.net>).

Being a leader means having a vision and surrounding yourself with individuals that will help make that vision a reality. One of my favorite ways to remember this philosophy actually came from the movie *With Honors*. Actor Joe Pesci portrays a homeless man who is sitting in on a lecture at Harvard. The professor asks a question about the United States Constitution. No one offers an answer, or one that the professor finds acceptable. The professor finally notices Pesci and begins to embarrass him. Having had enough, Pesci gets up to leave the

auditorium. As he walks out of the room, he gives the professor the answer he sought; “The genius of the Constitution is that it can always be changed.”

Pesci tells the professor that the constitution was written by “great men”, continuing, “They were great men because they knew the one thing that all great men should know. That they did not know everything. They knew that they were going to make mistakes but they made sure they left ways to correct them” (Warner Brothers, 1994). I am amazed and awed by the authors of the Constitution. These were men who had a vision. They were able to see into a future that they knew nothing about. The words written on the document these men produced so long ago are still relevant today.

I will try to remember that message. It is not necessary to always know everything. Surrounding yourself with people who can bring out the best in you and for whom you do the same creates an environment where everything and anything is possible. One needs to know the past in order to influence the future. I will be the administrator who is always searching and looking for new and better ways of doing things.

It is not unusual to expect the principals of the 21st Century to be like the CEO of an organization. Just as CEOs are ultimately responsible to their stockholders, so are principals held responsible to their stakeholders. Just as successful CEOs move from one location to another, so do the principals of the 21st Century. Principals must also have the ability to be flexible in their

leadership styles as they move from one situation to another (McKinney, 2002, <http://www.learnnc.org>). As times are changing, administrators must find a positive way to move and be successful with the change. Laraine Hong wrote, in her article *Surviving School Reform: A Year in the Life of One School*, “as schools work through the challenges of vision, they discover that they perhaps can make the impossible possible” (Lashway, 1997, <http://www.ericfacility.net>). To be an effective administrator, you need to be a visionary leader.

Collaborative Leadership

Collaboration is successful when administrators effectively communicate with many different groups to meet the instructional needs of students. I have learned one simple rule over the years from administrators with whom I have worked. Keep me informed no matter how small the issue. With good communication all predicaments can be more effectively addressed and ultimately resolved. When I was a basketball coach I heard the same thing from both the head varsity coach and from my activities director. They wanted to be informed so when a problem was brought to their attention by an upset parent, they already were aware of the problem and had an answer prepared to help ease the parent’s concerns. In each situation those involved worked together to resolve issues quickly and appropriately.

Today’s principals are expected to deal with many responsibilities. The ability to communicate well is important. Successful administrators communicate

often and accurately with teachers, administrators, parents, and the community. In an article titled *Authentic Communication in an Email World: The Principal as Communicator*, Zach Kelehear states, “A successful school leader is an effective communicator” (2001, <http://www.emtech.net.>). My experience working on the grant writing committee for the West High Fine Arts Graphics Lab taught me firsthand that good communication helps individuals work together more efficiently to reach project goals.

Just as important as being a good communicator is that of being a good listener. “The effective listener is an effective communicator” (Kelehear, 2001, <http://www.emtech.net.>). I found it an advantage to practice this skill when I was serving on the alternative scheduling committee. I knew the teachers had legitimate concerns and questions so I listened and by doing so was able to determine what the committee’s next step needed to be as we moved forward with the research. As a principal you are called upon frequently to answer the concerns of teachers, faculty, parents, and students. To properly address these concerns, you need to be able to listen and ask appropriate questions to better inform yourself on how to solve the problem.

Honesty is an important component of good communication as I learned through a painful experience. The principal of the first school in which I worked was not an honest communicator. I was a part-time teacher at his school. I really wanted to move into a full-time position because I liked the school and thought I

could make a positive contribution to its future. However, one day I learned my principal had not been truthful with me on my potential opportunity to become a full-time faculty member. I decided to take another job in a different district. I lost trust in that principal because he was not an honest communicator. Clarke and Crossland pointed out in their CNN broadcast conducted February 20, 2003, that seventy-one percent of people who quit their jobs do so because of the relationship with their manager or their manager's manager, and the majority of those people pinpoint poor communication as the chief issue (Clarke & Crossland, 2003, <http://www.ctnenergy.org>).

At my new school I decided to try to be a more effective communicator. I planned on being open and honest when communicating with my principal. I kept her informed of any problems or concerns I had. On one occasion I was very upset about a decision that had been made. Instead of venting to someone else, I decided to talk with the principal. She was honest and helpful with my feelings regarding the situation. After that conversation I felt better, even though, I did not agree with the decision. It became apparent to me that while I did not agree with the decision that had been made, my principal and myself respected each other's views and continued to work together for the betterment of the school.

A principal makes a huge impact on a school's success. Author Brian Ward responds to a question by Danice M in *Steps to Becoming a Good Leader*, "Tell the world. Don't shirk from this. Muster all the courage you can and simply

tell everyone and anyone you meet what your leadership focus is. Attract true and loyal followers by focusing on the outcome” (Ward, <http://www.affinitymc.com>).

Another critical role the administrator plays is that of a public relations manager. It is important that educational leaders focus on public relations within the school walls (Kelehear, 2001, <http://www.emtech.net>). Successful administrators find ways to effectively communicate to the public as well. It is only with the public’s approval that schools are allowed to move forward and grow. To collaborate effectively with the community at large, an administrator may choose to use the media. When a partnership develops between the school system and the media, positive relationships result. The media will become an important ally in delivering current events happening in the district. The media may be more compassionate when they must report a negative story about the district when a positive relationship already exists. With any healthy relationship, communication is essential to its continued growth.

Because of technology, today’s options for communication now include e-mail. While this system has fast become an easy way to deliver communication in a timely and efficient manner; its use has to be selective. Electronic communication, however, cannot become an easy out for a poor administrator to do what should be done face-to-face with its stakeholders. As principals increasingly communicate electronically, authentic communication remains crucial to productive relationships within successful schools. With email and its

loss of visual contact, principals and teachers can both lose important cues and signals that generally contribute to understanding the message. Understanding and developing effective electronic communication skills becomes especially significant for a principal. Clearly, authentic communication through email calls for special attention in today's school reform movement (Kelehear, 2001, <http://www.emtech.net>).

Considering the advantages of e-mail, the West High School Scheduling Committee found it to be an effective tool for communication. It was a timely tool for responses to surveys, which allowed us to move on to the next question to be considered. In a place where people are the reason for existence, principals need to be committed to authentic communication. Principals have a special obligation to be accurate, genuine, and trustworthy. "Successful leaders were above all else effective communicators" (Kelehear, 2001, <http://www.emtech.net>).

Instructional Leadership

I consider instructional leadership the most important standard. As a principal you are the teacher of teachers. Your job is to instruct your faculty on how to become the very best teachers they can. Through professional development, you will demonstrate and facilitate effective ways to educate students. A good teacher never stops learning. As an instructional leader you

need to constantly educate yourself on instructional techniques that are being implemented in schools similar to your school context that are excelling.

To be an effective instructional leader you must start leading by example.

I believe my leadership style echoes a philosophy that I live by, never ask someone to do what you would not do yourself. It is through example that I try to lead and inspire others. The University of Arizona's website offered a list of characteristics of what makes a good leader. One characteristic was, "Don't ask anyone to do something that you would not be willing to do yourself" (Davies, 2001, <http://www.ag.arizona.edu>).

I have applied this rule when coaching girls' freshman basketball at West High School. One of my practice rules was, if you missed your free throws, you then were required to run a down-and-around. As an encouraging leader/coach I also shoot free throws with the girls. If I missed, I ran with the girls. Being a good role model allows you to set the example of what you expect. I took great pride in being a positive influence in the girls' lives.

I believe that pride in one's school starts with the principal and is echoed in the students. If there is a sense of pride in most schools, it typically translates to the athletic programs. Currently I am concerned about the lack of interest I see in the staff and school at West High School. The level of support demonstrated at West today pales in comparison to that of the past. Getting an education should

be every student's top priority, however, there are lessons that the students can also learn through athletics.

West High School has utilized a traditional seven-period day for many years. When practice started after school I used to call it "eighth period." During "eighth period class" I taught my players not only about basketball, but also about being responsible for their actions and the importance of working to reach a goal.

In the magazine *Principal Leadership*, the author discusses Irving C. Jones Sr., the principal at Monticello High School. Jones was voted the 2003 MetLife/NASSP National High School Principal of the Year. "He was out there; he was in the pep rally. If we're doing some 70's funk, he's out there dancing with us" (Andrews, 2003, p. 40). Principal Jones exemplifies what I want to do as an administrator. Through the principal's attendance at extra-curricular events he/she can learn more about the students that attend their school. Not only will they learn about the students who participate but also the students that attend the events. As an instructional leader a principal demonstrates the type of behavior he/she would like from his faculty. I cannot stress how much it means to students to have their teachers at their games, concerts, art shows, etc. and to receive positive feedback from them. Teachers benefit as well, through attendance at extra-curricular activities, by learning more about the students in their classes. A principal and teacher will have the opportunity to see students who may not be very successful in their classrooms excel in another area in the school setting.

The teachers can take what they learn at these events and try to apply it to their methods of teaching, resulting in a more inviting and exciting learning experience for the students.

“Roll up your sleeves. Never be afraid to do what it takes to get the job done. Team members will respect you more when you work alongside them” (Stack, 1997, p.38). “Respect is an important part of what we try to install in our students,” said Gail Graham, principal at Whitney Institute Middle School in Bermuda. “Respect must be earned, and I firmly believe that one cannot earn respect without being the best role model that one can possibly be” (Hopkins, 2000). Principals can effectively instruct their staff by being a good role model. If you expect your staff to be out in the hallways patrolling after school, then you as the principal need to be out in the hall with them. If you want the students to pick up a piece of trash when they see it in the hallway, then you need to bend over and pick up one yourself. I believe it is essential that the principal be as visible and involved in the daily life of the school as its faculty, staff, students and volunteers. Your school is a reflection of you. Striving to be your best invites all around you to do the same. As I learned long ago, as drum major you are only as good as your band. That same truth holds in the educational setting for principals.

Ethical Leadership

A person in a position of authority has to be ethical above all other things. To be a good administrator, one has to be honest and trustworthy. Without these

two principles, it is difficult for administrators to lead and to manage a school properly. Principal Betty Luckett, of Oakes Elementary, in Okemah, Oklahoma stated in an article in *Education World*,

If credibility and trust are not established, nothing the principal sets out to do can be achieved. As principal, trust and credibility are the foundation for my goals and objectives (Hopkins, 2002, <http://www.educationworld.com>).

As with any relationship, trust is essential for its success. I had an experience early in my teaching career that proved to me just how important trust is. I was unfortunate to have an administrator that violated every important characteristic of the ISSL Standards. I wanted a future with his school, but after being led on for a while and with no direct communication from the principal, I later found that he had no intention of hiring me for a full-time position. I ended up taking a full-time position elsewhere, leaving a job I really loved. That experience only strengthened my resolve to treat everyone with dignity, even if the message was a difficult one. No one deserved to be treated as I had. It was a lesson well learned.

The web article entitled *Being Trustworthy Shows Character – Succeed with Good Character* says that one benefit from being trustworthy is “People like to deal with those they can trust” (Kurtus, 2003, <http://www.school-for-champions.com>). In a large school such as Davenport West High School, trust is

essential to our success. Currently at West we have five administrators. I feel comfortable dealing with three of the five administrators having established a rapport with them. I find them trustworthy and interested in the school and its participants. “If people trust you, they will like you and give you more opportunities than others” (Kurtus, 2003, <http://www.school-for-champions.com>). Trust is important when asking individuals to do something that they might not totally agree with, but which is in the best interest of the school.

I once met with a principal to discuss my concern with her overturning a suspension. It involved a student in my class and a gang-related project he turned in. During our meeting she explained why she had made her decision. I told her that I did not agree with it, but knowing she had supported me in the past, I believed that she was doing what was best. Even though I did not agree with her decision, I still trusted her and believed she made the decision with everyone’s best interest in mind. I learned that we are not going to see eye-to-eye on everything, but I could trust her when there were situations she had to handle. I feel that this trust also gave me a sense that she knows what it is like to be in my situation, and that she was one of us. Sandra Nichols stated in her article on the web site *Education Matters*, “The attitude that goes with being ‘one of us’ enhances the trust factor” (2002, <http://www.tellingthetruth.com>). Trust is

earned. It cannot be forced. “Trust is an easy thing to lose and an incredibly difficult thing to regain” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 87).

Conclusion

Being in a leadership position is an awesome task. Administrators are asked to fill many roles within the school environment. There are a lot of people for whom principals must make decisions; each comes with a different concern. The decisions you make and what you ask from your staff should not be anything you would not do. If you want your staff to respect you and to strive to become their best, you need to let them see you do the same. To be an effective administrator, you have to lead by example.

As a principal I know that I can have an impact on the educational environment. There are both good and bad things happening in today’s schools. Working with the school community to ensure a safe and productive learning environment for the students is a challenge I am willing to accept. Teaching the students coping skills to handle their life’s journey is a goal in which I take great pride. I believe that I have the vision to help our students achieve the ultimate goal in education of becoming educated, competent contributing members of society.

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