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A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

My educational history has taken various routes. It has been a road of highs, lows, accomplishments, and disappointments. I have had the good fortune to be influenced by educators who were role models for me. My models have included teachers, administrators, and professors. The influence of their instruction and direction has helped to inspire and shape my vision to become a teacher and aspiring educational leader. I plan to use my teaching experiences, educational history, life experiences, and administrative preparation as cornerstones for my urban principalship.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING ELEMENTARY 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

Master of Arts in Education

by

Alvin B. Wright

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A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of
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The way to learn is by leading. The way to lead is by learning.
____Anonymous

My educational history has taken various routes. It has been a road of highs, lows, accomplishments, and disappointments. I have had the good fortune to be influenced by educators who were role models for me. My models have included teachers, administrators, and professors. The influence of their instruction and direction has helped to inspire and shape my vision to become a teacher and aspiring educational leader. I plan to use my teaching experiences, educational history, life experiences, and administrative preparation as cornerstones for my urban principalship.

The teachers that have influenced me were nurturing, supportive, and demonstrated the importance of being a lifelong learner. As I embark upon my future as a principal, I will attempt to instill in the students and staff the same importance of being a learner for life. I will do this by being an example to staff and students, providing meaningful learning experiences, believing in their abilities, encouraging them to learn, and providing a safe, caring learning environment.

My first opportunity to teach was in an unofficial capacity. Math was an area of strength for me during my formal educational years. I had a ninth grade algebra teacher who allowed students to do reciprocal teaching, if they were knowledgeable of the content. He gave me the opportunity to explain homework problems at the overhead and answer any questions that the class had about arriving at the answers. When I was leading the class it gave me a sense of accomplishment and confidence. Little did I know at that time, I would experience those same feelings when I became a teacher. I was a very shy person during my early education. That experience gave me confidence in my abilities and helped boost my self-esteem. I feel that my ninth

grade algebra teacher gave me a chance to empower myself and feel confident about my abilities, until then, something I had very few opportunities to experience. That is the same feeling of assurance I wish to bring to the students and staff as a principal. I wish to empower them to believe they can achieve if the effort is given, resources are accessible, and the support is available for them to accomplish their goals.

My high school administrator was another person who had a profound impact on my decision to pursue education as a profession. He challenged me to believe in myself, and told me I could do whatever I believed that I could do. He would say, "If it is to be, it is up to me." He would also tell me to strive for excellence. When I began working as a paraprofessional in the Waterloo Community Schools, he encouraged me to return to school and get my teaching certification. I eventually did, and he continued to challenge me to never be lulled into a state of complacency. He challenged me after receiving my bachelor's degree to take my education to the next level. That is the same charge I hope to establish in my principalship, to encourage others to take their education to the next level, and in doing so, strive for excellence. As an educational leader I will also give positive feedback to the students and staff, and inspire them to grow educationally and personally.

The Urban Education Network (UEN) has given me the opportunity to have confidence in my abilities to impact students, staff, and the community. One of the reasons that I chose to be a teacher was to impact the way students learned. My aspirations to become a principal are to broaden my ability to have an impact on how students learn, the manner in which staff disseminate information, and to generate involvement from the community to take an active role in the educational process. The course work, practicum experiences, faculty guidance, and mentor support, I feel have equipped me with the necessary tools to be an effective principal. The UEN

faculty through educational literature, assignments, and craft knowledge has given me valuable information on the do's and don'ts of being a principal and prepared me for the wealth of opportunities awaiting me. They have shared with me the need to document, know the laws surrounding education, formulate an action plan, know the ISSL standards, develop myself personally and professionally, be aware of fatal mistakes, know the standards and criteria for evaluating teachers, understand best practices for learning, engage in educational research, know the various leadership styles, understand motivational techniques, be aware of transformational leadership, and understand the six leadership skills. I feel these are all essential qualities to have in becoming an effective educational leader. However, I feel the integration of the instructional, collaborative, visionary, organizational, ethical, and political leadership skills are the foundation for understanding how to get students, parents, the community, the central office, and businesses to share in the vision for improved student performance.

Collaborative Leadership

The most important leadership skill that I feel is necessary for principals to possess is to be collaborative. "Collaboration is the means by which leaders use their relationships with others to influence them to work toward a shared goal" (Rubin, 2002, p. 78). To use the quote, "No man is an island, no man stands alone," is a very true statement. I feel that as a principal I need to surround myself with knowledgeable and competent people who are on the same page as myself. I am a firm believer that if people have a purpose for getting involved, they will commit and dedicate themselves to the cause. I would begin the collaboration by establishing a purpose. What I would do to establish a purpose amongst the stakeholders is to combine passion with action.

As principal I would create a climate that shows students, teachers, parents, and the community that the school cares about student achievement, parent input, a positive school culture, and community relationships. I would develop a partnership with teachers, students, the community, and the central office to act in the best interest of the students. Our actions would be predicated on the question, how does this decision benefit our students? To make an impact on student performance, I would bring the stakeholders together to assess the schools needs, create a plan of action, and determine as a group how to best implement the plan. I would work to establish an atmosphere of trust, respect, and congeniality . My role as a collaborative leader would be that of a facilitator. I would empower the stakeholders to build a consensus on the objectives we hope to achieve, and implement them as a cohesive unit. By helping all stakeholders reach a consensus, I will have assisted them in making a connection with each other and establishing a sense of ownership to support our initiatives.

I feel the connection of the principal, staff, students, and parents are a necessary collaboration for the school to operate smoothly and efficiently. As a principal I will create a team concept that says to the stakeholders, together everyone achieves more (t.e.a.m.). Team building is a process that takes time. A team concept is built upon mutual trust, respect, and commitment. I would convey to the students to trust their teachers because they care about their intellectual, social, emotional, and physical well-being, as well as their futures. I would express to the students that respect is a must. The students must respect adults, other students, parents, and themselves to progress in our learning environment. As principal I would also encourage my students to commit themselves to learn all they can, work up to their potential, and to find the genius in their work. Steven Levy (1996) says the genius in a

student is:

The quality that makes them unique. That quality or collection of qualities that makes them who they are, that distinguishes them from everyone else.

When children know that you recognize who they are, they will open up in trust and present to you the fullness of their capability to learn. They will be accessible to what you have to teach them. Whatever ability they have in any given subject will be applied without reservation. (p.4-5).

As an educational leader, I will challenge the teachers and myself to bring out the genius in our students.

I feel that in order to be an effective collaborative principal it also means taking a proactive approach with students, staff, and parents. I would establish a culture of values, norms, and expectations that would foster a positive learning environment. The values would be shared by all stakeholders so there would be a complete understanding of what we hope to accomplish, a road map of how to get there, and what needs to be done to sustain our goals. As a collaborative principal the expectation would be for all constituents to be a part of the vision. I would be at the forefront of the collaborative effort leading with courage, determination, and by example.

Visionary Leadership

“When a leader has vision, we refer to the ability to see the present as it is, and formulate a future that grows out of and improves on the present.” (Snyder & Graves, 1994, p. 1). I feel that visionary leadership is the second most important leadership skill to have as a principal because today’s schools need a road map of where they are going, and how to get there. As a visionary principal I feel the vision must reflect

the school's purpose. Snyder and Graves, (1994) in their article state, "There is always room for improvement, and the way to accomplish that aim is to have vision" (p. 1). There is no advantage to beating a dead horse, the only way to get anywhere is to dismount and reassess the situation. As a visionary leader I feel that statement holds true about some of our schools' proposals. Schools must recognize when to abandon certain initiatives, and find a better way to educate and motivate students to learn. As a visionary principal I will be cognizant of the educational trends and what students will need to know as they learn in the 21st century. As a visionary principal I will inspire staff, students, and parents to work together on school improvements. As a *visionary leader I would involve all stakeholders to work toward a common goal of* improved student performance, values, and culture. We will accomplish our vision through shared decision-making, planning, shared responsibilities, accepting risks, and committing ourselves to sustain the vision. The shared vision would have short-term and long-term goals. As a visionary leader I feel that the more attainable goals should be addressed first to give stakeholders a sense of accomplishment, then the long-range goals will have gained some momentum and support. After implementing our vision we would monitor and revisit it for effectiveness, or make modifications if needed. There is no set formula to carry out a vision, but as a visionary leader, I feel a shared vision is the most effective because it involves all constituents working as one to improve the school educationally and environmentally. A shared vision gives everyone ownership and a stake in its success. As a visionary leader, I feel it is also very important to celebrate the attainment of a vision. This gives all stakeholders an opportunity to feel good about what was acquired, and realize what could be accomplished by working together.

In the article, *Vision: How Leaders Develop It, Share It, and Sustain It*, (Quigley,

1994) states that "Vision is a road map to the future and suggests guidelines to those in a given enterprise--how people are to act and interact to attain what they regard as desirable" (p. 37). Although this article is about a corporation's vision, it is parallel to the perspective of an educational vision. The article goes on to state:

The vision of the corporation is the most fundamental statement of its values, aspirations, and goals; an appeal to its members' hearts and minds. It must indicate a clear understanding of where the corporation is today and offer a road map for the future. Because the corporation is so very important to our lives, we as members want to know its:

Values : what distinctive or fundamental beliefs it stands for

Mission: what it is today and what it aspires to be

Goals: what it is committed to and where it is going

The answers to these questions form essential elements of the vision, with shared values as the foundation (p. 39).

The similarities in this article about a corporation's vision and a school's vision could be interchangeable. One educator, such as Rita Pierson, an educational consultant from Houston, Texas who spoke at the Waterloo Community School's Opening Day in 2002, believes that schools are businesses. She says that schools are run by rules, guidelines, and are accountable, the same as businesses (Pierson Video, 2002). To further explain the parallel between schools and businesses, the CEO of a company is similar to the superintendent; the stockholders are similar to the principal, teachers, students, parents, and the community; the board of directors are similar to the school board; and the profit would be comparable to student achievement. So schools could very easily be compared to businesses, because schools are in the business of educating children to prepare them for the job market. The values, mission, and goals

of a company's vision pertain equally to a school's vision. However, the noticeable differences between schools and companies when deciding their visions are: the stakeholders must be concerned with decisions based on caring, passion, patience, and understanding children's needs.

I feel as a visionary leader I must stay current with an ever changing educational system and society. The changes in our educational system and society often dictate the needs for determining a vision. As a visionary leader I will work with students, staff, and parents to address the concerns of student achievement, inclusiveness, diversity, the drop-out rate, drug abuse, and educational proposals that have an impact on the conditions under which our students learn. I will utilize our school's vision as a means to unify our staff, students, parents, and community to promote a climate of solidarity, high expectations, and high morale. Also, as a visionary principal I will use our school's vision and mission to help direct and facilitate our goals, and create better ways to educate our students.

Instructional Leadership

As an instructional leader I will have a good grasp of the educational practices that guide and influence teachers in the area of curriculum. "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and their staff's professional growth" (Hoy & Hoy, 2003, p. 1). To be an effective instructional leader I would be knowledgeable of motivational skills, communication skills, the content, and the teaching and learning environment. As an instructional leader I would be visible and accessible to the staff, as well as network with the teachers to exchange best practices for instruction. As an instructional leader

I would not become bogged down or stifled by managerial duties, but interact with teachers, students, and parents to promote the school's vision and mission. I would spend time in the classrooms to build collegial relationships with the teachers, share teaching strategies, build a rapport with the students, and offer to teach lessons to demonstrate my vision for shared responsibilities. Carter and Klotz (1990) state that:

Undeniably, the most compelling message from effective schools' research is that when teachers expect students to learn, help them learn, and hold them accountable for learning, students learn. Likewise, when principals set the learning expectancy for their buildings, help teachers meet the expectancy and hold them accountable, teachers discover methods useful for teaching students--and again students learn (p. 38).

I would have high expectations of the students, teachers, and myself. I feel when there are high expectations set, people will rise to those expectations. As an instructional leader I would hold students accountable for learning, and teachers accountable for teaching. "The principal can demonstrate a new emphasis on instructional leadership through active support of effective teaching, by fostering a climate that continually monitors the content to be learned, and by recognizing high student performance of rigorous standards (Cross & Rice, 2000, p. 62). I would maximize instructional time and work closely with the teachers to promote learning-centered environments. My focus for instruction would be on teachers interacting with their students and giving them real world experiences. I would monitor classrooms to ensure that the district directed curriculum was being followed. As an instructional leader I would encourage the teachers to build a relationship with their students by getting to know them, and finding out the type of children they are. I feel that once a positive rapport is established with children, they will be more receptive to learning, and being taught.

I will be a staunch supporter of giving teachers time to plan and exchange ideas with their colleagues. Having been a teacher for the past five years I understand the importance of having time to research information, gather materials, develop lessons, and have a common planning time with other grade level teachers.

As an instructional leader I would support teachers' professional development. If teachers want to attend workshops, demonstrate lessons during staff development meetings, and share materials or strategies with their colleagues, I would support them in their efforts. I would be an advocate of teachers planning collaboratively, making use of peer coaching, and engaging themselves in action research. I would either cover their classes myself, get a paraprofessional to watch the class, or call for a substitute teacher to provide them with the time to improve their teaching skills. I will provide and participate in professional development, and use it to reflect and collaborate with the staff's growth. As an instructional leader I would build meaningful relationships with the teachers by praising, supporting, and trusting them. I feel that when teachers are supported and appreciated they will give their best effort.

Finally, I would ensure the learning environment is conducive to learning. I would do this by providing a safe and orderly environment for the teachers to teach, and the students to learn. As an instructional leader I would assure the teachers that I would handle any discipline problems firmly, fairly, and in a timely manner. I would also remind the teachers to use their classroom rules and management procedures to set the tone for the learning environment. As an instructional leader I would implement a building wide discipline policy in which students, teachers, and parents will know the expectations for appropriate behavior, as well as the consequences for inappropriate behavior. I will also stress to the students, teachers, and parents the district policy of zero tolerance for weapons and drugs. My goal as an instructional leader is to have a

safe and orderly learning environment, with students immersed in real world learning experiences, taught by competent and qualified teachers.

Organizational Leadership

"Organizational leaders employ activities to produce shared values and beliefs among organizational members, which serves as the bases for their commitment to the organization" (Pounder, Ogawa, & Adams, 1995, p. 584). As an organizational leader I would involve students, teachers, parents, and the community in working toward common goals. I would include all stakeholders to help guide the school's vision and mission, create a positive culture, enhance student performance, and work cohesively to provide an efficient learning atmosphere to benefit all students. An organizational leader cannot be everywhere at all times so it is important to empower teachers and staff members to take responsibility for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. As an organizational leader I would let my staff know that I have trust and confidence in their abilities to support the values and beliefs of our school. "When you share authority, you share responsibility. By sharing authority, others are allowed to take ownership for the direction of the school" (Picucci, Brownson, & Kahlert, 2002, p. 40). I believe that an organizational leader and stakeholders help to define the school's objectives.

As an organizational leader I would surround myself with staff members who have the same ideals, goals, values, and passions that I do for the students. I would be drawn to teachers who have high expectations for their students, make learning experiences meaningful, use instructional strategies to engage students, connect students' background knowledge to instruction, provide support for students in need of extra instruction, and most importantly, believe that all students can learn. As an

organizational leader I would incorporate into the learning environment, values, norms, purpose, and structure to shape the type of culture that students and teachers will commit themselves to, for the promotion of continuous learning and improvement.

Finally, as an organizational leader I will lead by example. I will demonstrate by my demeanor, work ethic, and communication skills that I am committed to giving the students and staff the most productive and engaging learning environment that I am able to provide. I would have the same expectations for the staff, students, and myself.

Ethical Leadership

As an ethical leader I would hold the staff, students, and myself to standards of high character, moral, and ethical behavior. I would exhibit exemplary behavior and be a role model for the staff, students, parents, and community. "Ethical leadership refers to the common-sense behavior or accepted rules of conduct" (Arnold & Harris, 2000, p. 12). I will make decisions based upon what is right, and what is in the best interest of the students and staff. As an ethical leader I will examine issues from different perspectives and make decisions that are equitable and just. I will adhere to a value system that promotes moral development and respect to support an inclusive and compassionate school environment. As an ethical leader I will be honest, socially responsible, democratic, and culturally sensitive.

As an ethical leader I would provide equal educational opportunities for all students. I would accept and respect ethnic differences, adhere to the legal responsibilities of special needs students, and ensure that students and staff are guided by moral standards and professionalism. I feel ethical schools are equivalent to effective schools. Calabrese (1988, p.2) states there are 10 guidelines that an ethical principal should focus on to avoid any violations of trust from their constituents:

1. Develop a vision consistent with sound educational philosophy
2. Apply strong moral leadership
3. Condemn discriminatory practices
4. View effective teaching as a duty
5. Build community
6. Balance the rights of all groups
7. Right issues are not always popular issues
8. Base decision-making on what is right for the school community
9. Make moral courage an integral part of the principal's role
10. Communicate ethical behavior, integrity, and moral action.

Finally, as an ethical leader I will engage in self-reflection by examining what I believe, feel, think, and value to gain a better understanding of my convictions, and to determine what's viable or needs to be changed. Also, as an ethical leader I feel that communicating my beliefs and values to stakeholders will avoid any misinterpretations as to what my position is on issues of moral and ethical behavior.

Political Leadership

As a political leader I will understand and be sensitive to the political, social, and economic climate of the school's environment. I will use my political leadership skills to work within the framework of the law, gain access, shape public opinion, build alliances within the community, and promote the school's initiatives. I would be knowledgeable about laws affecting public school funding and public officials' positions as it relates to public education.

Principals are not usually thought of as political figures, but with changing societal and political issues affecting education it is imperative that educational

leaders be aware of the political climate that may affect how schools educate their students. A prime example of principals needing to be informed of the political climate is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLBA). This act is based upon four components. The components are: accountability for results, an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research, expanded parental options, and expanded local control and flexibility (<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/esea/exec-summ.html>). The NCLBA is an overhaul of federal efforts to support elementary and secondary education in the United States. Under the NCLBA, states must measure yearly reading and math scores for students in grades three through eight. The legislation mandates that reading and math must be measured at least once between grades 10 and 12. The NCLBA gives parents the option of transferring to a higher performing school if the school their child is attending is in need of improvement. The NCLBA requires that all teachers be highly qualified and schools must report their progress annually on their objectives and goals. The NCLBA also gives states and local school districts more flexibility in the use of federal education funding by allowing them to allocate resources as they see fit. If schools do not meet the criteria set forth by the NCLBA they can lose their federal funding for Title I schools. As a political leader I will be aware of legislation that affects the school's operations by ensuring that students achieve, and teachers are well-qualified to teach.

I will also be sensitive to the use of standardized tests as a political leader. I feel standardized tests could be used as political weapons under the No Child Left Behind Act. In the article, *Political Leadership and Educational Failure*, Sarason (1999) states that :

Standardized tests focus upon measuring mere knowledge. The use of standardized tests are used to determine the health of our educational system.

It is not that such tests should be abandoned, but they cannot be taken as the sole indicator for the educational health of the nation. They do not measure motivation or creativity and are an unreliable guide to student learning (P. 57).

When conducting action research I will be mindful not to rely totally on the scores of standardized tests, but to take contributing factors into consideration when implementing a plan of action. Having been a teacher I know there are mitigating circumstances that will impact how students view a test. When taking tests some students may have had experiences that affect their ability to do well on them. Some students may not take standardized tests seriously, lack motivation, may have had a bad experience at home or on the playground, or become stressed when taking them. As a political leader, I would be cognizant of factors that may have an impact on students' performances and I would look beyond the scores when determining a viable plan to address students' weaknesses. I would encourage the teachers to motivate the students, build their confidence, and teach test taking strategies to help them do well in school, as well as on standardized tests.

I feel that as a political leader I should be informed of what is legal under the First Amendment rights that guarantee all citizens the freedom of religion, assembly, press, and speech. I feel these are important rights that should be known by educational leaders and adhered to, not only in society, but in the school environment as well. As a political leader I will exhibit the courage to enforce First Amendment rights, take informed risks, and legally work to gain support for school improvements. I would communicate my position effectively on legal issues as it relates to teachers and students at school. Finally, I will maintain a positive relationship with the media. I feel that the school should always be presented in a positive light, and as a political leader I would conduct school affairs in an exemplary and professional manner.

Conclusion

As an educational leader I would use visionary, instructional, organizational, collaborative, ethical, and political skills to respond to the ever changing needs of the school community. As an educational leader I would be seen interacting with teachers, students, parents, and the community. I would lead the instructional program, ensure the safety of students and faculty, manage budgets, build partnerships, develop action plans, promote staff development, handle discipline problems promptly and decisively, effectively analyze situations, understand the legal implications of the school's operations, have tolerance for different opinions and cultures, make informed decisions, document information, and respect all constituents.

As an educational leader I would be a hands-on principal who was involved with students' education by getting into the classroom whenever possible to see what they were learning, and how they were being taught the curriculum. I would have high expectations for my staff and students, and give positive feedback to the teachers and students for their efforts. As an educational leader I would let my staff know that their opinions were valued and they could talk to me about anything. I would be my staff's strongest advocate by giving them time to collaborate, plan, engage in professional development, and peer coach. I would encourage teachers to engage students in a variety of experiences that would meet their diverse needs by promoting their social, emotional, and academic growth through authentic and meaningful instruction.

As an educational leader I would conduct myself in a manner that is fair and exemplary. I would be approachable and sensitive to the needs of my staff, students, and parents. I would share the responsibility for decision-making, however, I would reserve the right to make the final decisions based upon what is in the best interest of the students. I would subscribe to the team concept by working with all stakeholders

and communicating to them that together everyone achieves more. I feel that in order to be an effective leader, there must be people who have confidence in my abilities, and are willing to follow my lead. I feel that effort can be accomplished by building relationships with stakeholders, and being an example for the behavior that I would like to see. As an educational leader I would engage in continuous reflection and search for ways to improve my leadership abilities. I would blend bottom-up and top-down managerial styles to build alliances, and control the learning environment. I would also follow board policies, district procedures, and contractual obligations.

As an educational leader I would ensure the staff and students are in a school environment that is safe, orderly, and conducive to learning. I would have zero tolerance for distractions to the learning environment. I would be fair, firm, and decisive with discipline problems by sending the message that inappropriate behavior would not be accepted. I would let students know they are responsible for how they act, what they say, and what they do. As an educational leader I would encourage my staff to let the instruction guide the students' behavior. I feel that if students are actively engaged in interesting, relevant, and meaningful material the learning environment will control the classroom management, in most cases.

As an educational leader I would build partnerships for the school. The partnerships would be with community members, businesses, higher learning institutions, political groups, religious institutions, social organizations, and other schools in and out of the district. The partnerships would help to promote and enhance students' performances and social skills. I would open the school in the evenings to parents and the community for computer classes, adult education, and recreational activities. I would ensure that the school was fiscally sound and operated within its budget. I would also have fund raisers to supplement the budget, and use the proceeds to

acquire additional resources to increase student achievement or fund experiential learning field trips.

As an educational leader I would assure that the school is clean and inviting to students, staff, and the community. The school would communicate through its staff, students, and culture, as a place that made parents and visitors feel welcome and comfortable. I would encourage the teachers to create a positive climate for their students by decorating their rooms to make them student-friendly, and building up their students' confidence level through praise and recognition.

As an educational leader I would ensure that all students, staff, and parents are treated with respect. I would possess high moral standards and commit myself to the overall improvement and educational development of children. As an educational leader I would collaborate with dedicated and competent stakeholders who are willing to assist the school community in providing meaningful and authentic learning experiences for all children. Finally, I would remember what my pastor, Reverend Wilson O. Rideout, told me about being a leader, he said, "You can't lead where you won't go, and you can't teach what you don't know" (W.O. Rideout, personal communication, April 26, 2003). As an urban educational leader I will lead, as well as direct stakeholders to improve and foster student achievement.

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