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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

When I first made the decision to change the way I serve students by pursuing an educational leadership degree in hopes to one day become a principal, I was filled with excitement and apprehension.

Accomplishing a life-long goal was actually foreseeable. Becoming a principal is something I have always wanted to accomplish, however, I was uncertain of many aspects of the master's program including the coursework, the professional requirements, and I questioned my ability to serve and lead people. With the assistance and guidance of the many people I've worked with, I am confident in my ability to provide equal educational opportunities to students and staff members. My mentor, the professors, and the staff that I work with have been supportive throughout the practicum experience. The Educational Leadership Constituent Council Standards will serve as a blueprint for my future as an educational leader. Whether I serve students as a principal, change facilitator, or curriculum director, I am no longer apprehensive but eager to work towards increasing student achievement. I believe that my true calling in life is to provide a service to children, teachers, parents, and all other stakeholders involved in public education.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

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In Partial fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

By

John Zimmerman

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Dr. Greg Reed

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When I first made the decision to change the way I serve students by pursuing an educational leadership degree in hopes to one day become a principal, I was filled with excitement and apprehension. Accomplishing a life-long goal was actually foreseeable. Becoming a principal is something I have always wanted to accomplish, however, I was uncertain of many aspects of the master's program including the coursework, the professional requirements, and I questioned my ability to serve and lead people. With the assistance and guidance of the many people I've worked with, I am confident in my ability to provide equal educational opportunities to students and staff members. My mentor, the professors, and the staff that I work with have been supportive throughout the practicum experience.

The Educational Leadership Constituent Council Standards will serve as a blueprint for my future as an educational leader. Whether I serve students as a principal, change facilitator, or curriculum director, I am no longer apprehensive but eager to work towards increasing student achievement. I believe that my true calling in life is to provide a service to children, teachers, parents, and all other stakeholders involved in public education.

Service is the virtue that distinguished the great of all times and which they will be remembered by. It places a mark of nobility upon its disciples. It is the dividing line which separates the two great groups of the world-those who help and those who hinder, those who lift and those who lean, those who contribute and those who only consume. How much better it is to give than to receive. Service in any form is comely and beautiful. To give encouragement, to impart sympathy, to show interest, to banish fear, to build self-confidence and awaken hope in the hearts of others, in short-to love them and to show it-is to render the most precious service (Hinckley, 1955, p. 25).

In this passage, I will provide an account of my beliefs, values, learning opportunities and responsibilities of becoming an educational leader. Four critical elements are included that are essential for effective management. Although there are a plethora of necessary duties and standards by which we as educators should follow, I will outline a basic understanding for which I intend to use.

Personal Characteristics

I believe that there are certain essential life-skills that educators should provide to students. These essential learnings include the following: live self-directed accountable lives, communicate effectively, process and apply knowledge and academic skills, effectively apply personal life skills, work and think independently as well as collaboratively, and model appropriate behavior. Many of the essential learnings are also critical elements for exemplary educational leadership. It is my belief that while the world of education and its content is increasing at an alarming rate, we are responsible for all students to be effective, life-long learners. These essential learnings are in fact vital for the academic success of our future generations of leaders.

Similar to schools, I believe that administrators can have vision and mission statements. My vision statement would center on myself providing equal educational opportunities for everyone. My mission would reflect my belief that all students will be provided with a quality education in a safe and supportive environment. I believe that the foundations of education and leadership center on caring for children and helping them become successful in all aspects of life. I value the preparation of all students to become contributing members of society. A shared commitment by all people involved within a school district that share similar values and beliefs to promote life-long learning is very powerful in a school setting. This is the primary reason that

I decided to enter into the field of education. I have had many wonderful successes in school and worked with terrific administrators both as a student and as a team member. It is because of these strong relationships and positive experiences that I am pursuing an administrative degree.

It is my belief that leadership and education are complex systems that encompass many integral parts. These parts involve the beliefs that: all students can contribute to society, education involves everyone, student learning and professional growth is promoted by using technology, and a school has many leaders.

Parents, staff, and administrators must recognize and believe in the many talents that students possess. I believe we should celebrate the diversity of ideas, values, and cultures that each student brings to a learning community. Every student is entitled to a least restrictive environment that ensures a “free” education of the highest quality. It is my belief that as an administrator it is my duty to use the legal system to protect students’ rights and make sure there are appropriate opportunities for student learning.

Establishing and maintaining communication and collaboration between schools and families to ensure student success is another integral part of the education system. Education is a unique partnership between schools, families, and the community. As educators, we must remember that a school is an important part of a larger community. By using the resources of the community and families we enrich the quality of education we can offer to students. The community is the main stakeholder in education. Since children learn in many different ways and in many different places, successful collaboration between school officials, families, and the communities, we can foster positive relationships that promote excellent educational experiences.

I believe in and value the use of data in education. It is essential in decision-making processes that allow leaders to evaluate and implement best-practice programs into a curriculum. As educators we collect data, then implement, and change programs and processes due to what data shows us. The collection of data allows us to impress upon a system that ensures engaged learning. As educators we decipher information to improve the quality and effectiveness of a child's education, thus improving the school as a whole.

Technology supports this data-driven system that promotes professional growth and student growth. By looking at data and assessment through the use of technology, we are organized and successful in measuring student achievement. Along with student growth, we can ensure professional growth as educators by implementing research-based strategies to ensure effective instruction.

The final stages of the system I value focuses on my belief that schools have many fine leaders. I believe most educators can develop into productive leaders that share similar beliefs that in turn promote students to become successful in life. Leadership is most effective when it is the job of a whole rather than by one or two people. By creating leadership teams and action research teams educators develop ownership in procedures and policies set forth in a district thus achieving exemplary leadership in education.

My values and beliefs have shaped my plan towards my professional goals. I look forward to carrying out my vision and my goals to ensure that I do my part in creating a positive learning environment for students.

Even though many people would argue that now is a terrible time to enter the administration field of education, I welcome the opportunity. I believe that the current

restrictions the state and federal governments place upon schools present a challenge to school districts. I am a firm believer that challenges offer wonderful opportunities for achievement.

Critical Elements

Communication

One of the most important parts of making a school district run smoothly involves developing a community of learners. A community in which students, parents, staff, stake - holders, and board members work together to accomplish goals is a dream every administrator should strive to achieve. Seeking first to understand other people's interests, needs, and perspectives is essential in developing effective communication and relationships with families and other community members, groups, and agencies (Wilmore, 2002, p. 67). A shared clear vision is essential to start the school year off on the right foot. I believe this community along with its shared vision cannot and will not be formed without the critical element called communication.

When I think of communication being a critical element in administration, I think of it as an all-encompassing system to the many areas of education. Dr. W. D. Deming inferred that we are all parts of systems, and if there is a lack of progress, a system must be changed, not a person. The vast and complex system of communication is vital for maximizing student achievement. By removing barriers, being accessible, building teamwork, and having a shared vision we can promote a healthy system of communication.

Our students are expected to be more knowledgeable. The more we communicate to them our standards and our benchmarks, the more we can set children up for success and not failure. As methods of communication have changed in the last thirty years, we must change along with it. The use of technology in communication has literally exploded into curriculum, field of study,

and is used as the vital tool in the public school setting. Teachers, parents, and staff members should be able to use technology to not only provide students with reference, but also to communicate with them. Communications with parents occur through the computer. Parents have access to student assignments and work and are able to leave notes and schedule appointments (Cunningham and Cordeiro, 2003, p. 70). E-mail is used everyday in the school that I teach at. Students, parents, and faculty are in constant communication with each other. I believe this is very beneficial as well as powerful. Expectations of students, teachers, administrators, and parents are known and documented with the use of e-mail. I believe it eliminates the “gray” area of communication.

One of the most frustrating aspects of teaching is the lack of communication between administrators and teachers. Many times the only opportunity that staff and administration have to conference with each other is at a monthly staff meeting. Many things happen in the course of a school day, and during a month, whole systems can break down or change. With communication being a cornerstone of effective systems, the school system will not run smoothly or appropriately unless everyone involved is on the same page. I am a proponent of weekly meetings with whole staff, in order to celebrate successes, discuss trying times, review legislation, and promote the school. An open door policy is a must. Informal meetings are just as important as formal ones. Having an open door policy, where teachers, parents, and students can meet with administration at their convenience promotes a healthy relationship. Authentic relationships are fostered by personal conversations, frequent dialogue, shared work, and shared responsibilities (Lambert, 1998, p. 79). Removing communication barriers eliminates faulty assumptions, the “gray” area that I previously mentioned. Teachers, parents, and even students have issues to discuss with principals. I agree with a famous James Humes quote: “The art of

communication is the language of leadership.” As I reflect on past leaders that I have associated with, the one ingredient that the really good ones had in common with each other was the ability to have effective communication skills. This includes being a good listener, as well as having quality dialogue. To be a successful school administrator is to be an effective and efficient communicator. Individuals can learn these skills through observation, and guided practice, coaching, skill-focused dialogue, and training (Lambert, 1998, p. 18).

Principals have a multitude of responsibilities and duties and are expected to wear many different hats while dealing with many different people. Most of the decisions and duties done by principals involve human relations. Being a quality communicator is vital for a principal to do his/her job. Education is a people business. Our products, our tools, our clientele, and our natural and capital resources focus on public relations. I truly believe that if an administrator has poor communication skills, he/she will be a poor leader. Dealing with the public means that educational leaders must have refined public relations skills. Administrators need to learn when to talk and when to listen. We must know how to be polite and diplomatic even when we are secretly biting our tongues (Wilmore, 2002, p. 68).

One area that I believe is vital in the communication process involving administrators is staff evaluations. Stephen Covey said, “Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is psychological survival—to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated.” Feedback is the key. One type of feedback that administrators can supply their staff with is an evaluation. Effective school leaders provide non-threatening methods of help, assurance, and praise to their staff. Deep down, I believe teachers generally want to know how they are doing, and what they can do differently to become more effective members of the school community. Just as administrators should provide feedback, I believe this issue should

reciprocate. Teachers should get the chance to have their voices heard, in being able to evaluate their administrative teams. Again... this lowers the assumptions and “gray” areas and promotes effective dialogue.

Effective management and leadership should be a collaborative effort of all members involved within a particular public education setting. Without effective and appropriate communication, the school community will not function. When something breaks down in a school it is often not the people that need to change but the system in which the people operate needs to change. It is through a collaborate effort of communication that schools succeed.

Vision

A vision is a goal or a mission that incorporates and encompasses a school’s beliefs, preferred aims, purposes, and climate. This mission is a shared bond between all members of a school district that includes and is not limited to administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, business partners, and of course students. The underlying theme is focused on providing excellence to all students by improving education. A vision that reflects the needs and resources of the surrounding community gives everyone ownership in the vision, thus bringing public schools and communities together.

When educators speak of vision, they commonly refer to a written statement. It is my belief that a vision actually starts with a “dream” of what we would like our school to ‘look like’, and how we would like it to operate. Think of a vision as the ultimate destination on a major trip you are planning (Wilmore, 2002, p. 20). There is so much more to a vision than just having a written document with good intentions. Vision is bound together by strategic planning, diverse levels of communication, and a proactive staff to carry out the plan, and a strong unwavering set of beliefs. The passion of shared vision empowers people to transcend the petty, negative

interactions that consume so much time and effort and deplete quality of life (Covey, 1994, p.106).

Developing a vision stems from looking at data, it is a continuous process that constantly tests theories. We must begin with an end in mind. The dissemination of data allows school officials a comparison of what that end would look like. The development of a vision includes everyone; staff, families, community members and students. Once everyone has agreed where they want the school to head, and what they want the school to look like; goals, policies and procedures should be put in place to again... test theories. Everything that is done and planned should center on the achievement of the vision. Professional development, curriculum, policies and procedures are set in place to achieve the vision. Theories will be tested, and systems will need to be changed in order to reach the vision. The vision itself may change and grow. It is a continuous process driven by a need for continual improvement.

I strongly believe that for a vision to be met, common beliefs are indispensable. By having a strong belief system, a staff is on common ground, and working toward student achievement. This common belief system is what makes great schools great... great meaning successful in all aspects.

Vision is the best manifestation of creative imagination and the primary motivation of human action. It's the ability to see beyond our present reality, to create, to invent what does not yet exist, to become what we not yet are. It gives us capacity to live out of our imagination instead of our memory (Covey, 1994, pgs.103-104).

While all members of a school setting are vital for success, a leader to oversee and facilitate the plans of vision is crucial to the success of the school. A principal plays a very pivotal role in shaping and forming a community that will share a vision. Standard 1 says; a

school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community (Wilmore, 2002, p. 19).

Four questions are asked... What do I believe? What do we believe? What must we do? What will we do? Leaders must be articulate, ask, listen, learn, lead, coach, and experiment. They must develop people's minds, gain control of systems, measure and respond to data. Leaders focus on improvement, which in-turn represents the vision. Being a visionary leader involves ethics, timing and courage. Living everyday by a strict belief structure is essential. Model behavior is evident in a truly successful administrator. It involves intense caring, commitment, passion, and perseverance (Wilmore, 2002, p. 30).

As a principal I would seek out stakeholders, parents, students, and staff to gather data, and develop a plan to improve student achievement. These words are echoed in Mother Teresa's quote; "You can do what I can not do. I can do what you cannot do. Together we can do great things." As an educational leader, I plan on involving everyone from the custodians to the students in forming an appropriate vision for the school. When everyone has a say in our common goals, there is a certain shared ownership.

I believe vision to be the most vital aspect of administration, whether that means developing a new vision, or setting up policies and procedures to achieve an existing one.

As a visionary leader, I plan on providing an ample amount of time for appropriate professional development opportunities that would allow new strategies to be learned to continue our quest to meet our goals. Developing people, whether they are students or staff, is the most important task a visionary leader can do. I would encourage and model team building within my building.

Being a visionary leader incorporates many critical elements. Communication, organization, professional development, and political awareness are vital for a vision to become an effective guideline in which to work with. Without vision we are simply wandering about in hopes that our efforts are just. Vision creates a timeline, a guide, and a standard in which we can measure student successes and failures thus allowing a strong accountability piece to be set in place. Vision is not only a “dream” or a plan but it is a measurement tool.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a critical element essential for exemplary educational leadership. Collaborative leaders inspire commitment and action by emerging and organizing others to create visions, achieve goals, and solve problems.

In the real world of schools, problems are not solved independently. The complexity of the problems addressed by school leaders required collaboration. Collaboration requires learning to listen to others, collectively reviewing outcomes, and responding to and partaking of relevant discussions (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2003, p. 334).

While we tend to think of committees as teams, I think it is useful to discuss them as two entirely separate entities. In respect to collaboration, a committee is in itself very ineffective in creating and reaching visions. In a committee, the administrator plans all of the work, identifies tasks, makes the decisions, and usually takes the credit. The committee members do all of the work. It is an ineffective and poor attempt to give people a voice in their work.

In thinking collaboratively, we find the word “team”. We often think of a team associated with baseball, football, or basketball. In a sense that is what school administrators are attempting to do, build a team.

A team is a group of people who collaborate and interact to reach a common goal. In football the common goal is the end zone that gives the team six points. In education it is an agreed upon vision that will lead to improved student achievement. A team directs its own activities, goals, meetings, tasks, and decisions are made collectively.

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources (Wilmore, 2002, p.66). An effective principal acts more as a facilitator than anything else. The principal must give all stakeholders a voice, inviting them to contribute their services, resources, ideas, and time. A collaborative leader will identify relationships to create an environment in which the diverse talents and problem-solving abilities of the school community may flourish.

Collaborative leadership is about inclusion, not exclusion. Strong, broad-based, and diverse community leadership is critical for community success. Diverse team members bring creative ideas and flexibility to respond to challenging times in education. Facilitators must encourage families and community members to use their talents and join staff members in the school improvement process. Once parents and community members see that school officials have the best interest of children in mind, a powerful relationship will develop.

Shared vision and stewardship agreements empower us to see people in terms of opportunities instead of problems. We realize that people are not things. Neither are they simply “delegates.” They’re living, breathing, human beings with their own space between stimulus and response, their own unique endowments, and the capacity to synergize with us to create first things together in a way that far surpasses what we could ever do on our own (Covey, 1994, p. 284).

With budget cuts, teacher shortages, federal interferences, and the increasing number of students with disabilities, the most powerful decision a school leader can make is the decision to include and collaborate with parents, students, and other stakeholders.

An effective leader creates teams by asking the nine “C” questions. They are as follows:

What contributions can this person make, What is this constituent’s competency, Does this person possess effective communication skills, Can they become cooperative, Can we achieve chemistry with different views in mind, How creative is this person, Will conflict be a strength, Will there be cohesiveness, and Can we build a sense of community with this person (Carolyn K. Haase 2004)?

A school is a part of a larger arena. Appropriate resources will need to be made available if school districts are to flourish in terms of student achievement. It is the collaborative leader that will succeed in building a powerful team of parents, students, and stakeholders to increase a school’s learning potential.

Resiliency

The federal government, the state government, and the local school boards are putting many restrictions and mandates on public schools lately. Teachers, principals, and superintendents are feeling the “crunch” of data driven research, research based curriculum, and NCLB regulations. Administrators are wearing many more hats than they have ever had to wear. Their jobs are getting more challenging. With challenge come failure and many lessons learned.

I believe that administrators who lose touch with their staff while hiding behind a desk are doing their school district an injustice. While more mandates are being imposed on schools, I believe it is the successful administrator who can spend even more time with his/her teachers and students working to find out how to increase student achievement. Administrative

tasks and paper work are important but the primary reason an administrator is in a school setting is to develop leaders and offer a helping hand. By being more of an instructional leader comes balancing time constraints, designing new schedules and systems, and delegating authority to teacher leaders.

Wilmore (2002) found the following to be true: To promote the success of all students, as principals and other school leaders, it is our responsibility to “facilitate the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning.” Facilitate does not mean dictate. Facilitate means to provide for and enable others to be able to attain their goals. But we cannot stop there. We must see to it that this vision is “shared and supported by the school community.” To reiterate, people support what they build (p. 24).

With the pressures put on school officials, some lessons will be learned the hard way... by failure.

In an interview with Education World, Joy Hood found that “practicing fearlessness was important for principals” (Education World, 2004). School leaders are doing the difficult but noble job of putting students first. Some mistakes will be made, but if a principal can practice fearlessness and stand up to his/her beliefs, progress will be achieved. There are many great quotes by many great people that have to deal with resiliency issues. One of my favorites is from Dr. Lew Finch. Finch (2003) stated, “It is important to know the difference between preference and principle.” He meant that it is noble to stand up to something that is valued as a belief and it is just as important to know when an issue is a personal preference. In order to reach agreements compromise should be made when dealing with preference issues.

Patience and trust are two words that I think make resiliency happen. An administrator must be patient with his staff, parents, and students. Patience is a key ingredient to successful administration especially in the first few years of a new job. Many of my colleagues have stated to me that change is difficult. Whether you are changing curriculum, policy, or whole systems, people move at different rates. Hall and Hord (2001) found that even when the change is introduced to every member of the organization at the same time, the rate of making change and of developing skill and competence in using it would vary individually (p.7).

The advice given to me was not to change much the first year of being a principal. Finding out how things work and developing a trusting relationship with the community is the most important aspect of leadership. By doing this, I believe failure is less likely.

Being a resilient administrator is important of all aspects of the job. Implementing new curricular ideas that are “sure to make a difference”, planning a new schedule, busing issues, discipline problems, teacher union issues, and hiring practices are a few of the responsibilities that can backfire in a hurry. Having a schedule that works is difficult. Mistakes will be made. Busing is always a tricky business especially with inclement weather. Student discipline can get out of hand in a hurry. Teacher unions put pressure on administrators to make decisions hastily. Hiring is always the most important job, but many times it is done quickly and sometimes ineffectively.

Failure may seem imminent, but what you learn from it makes you a great leader. In my mind progress can be defined as ‘what you do after you fail’. Being unorganized by making a mistake twice is unacceptable and should not occur. This is why I believe being a resilient leader is just as important as collaboration, or communication elements.

Effective leaders take the blame when things go wrong, and praise others when things go well. This is a good example of character. Collaborative, visionary, instructional, organized, political, ethical, and reflective leaders demonstrate resiliency daily.

I believe a proper summary for this paper to be from Wilmore (2002): You must have courage, valor, and strength to weather turmoil, conflict, and difficult choices. You must walk with confidence knowing that as long as you keep focused on what is best, fair, and consistent, you cannot get too far off base (p. 90).

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