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## A personal vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

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## A personal vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

### Abstract

As we near the year two thousand, now is an exciting and challenging time in education. There has been a dramatic change in our schools' populations and the statistics on the numbers of cruel realities our children face daily are staggering. Each day in America, over one thousand students dropout; two thousand students are abused; twenty seven children die of poverty; and thirteen million live in poverty (J. L. Doud, personal communication, June 14, 1993). The role of the education system is being reexamined constantly and more and more demands are being placed on the structure to fix all of society's problems. With all the scrutiny, the school must have the ability to achieve a level of productivity which provides for a high percentage of student mastery of basic skills as well as developing students who can cope and grow in this changing society. An effective school must have order and discipline and clear academic and social/behavioral goals. There must be teacher efficacy, as well as high expectations (for all) and pervasive caring. The school must also gain community support. The most crucial element a school must have in order to be effective is an effective principal and faculty (J. L. Doud, personal communication, June 15, 1993).

A PERSONAL VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Master of Arts in Education

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by  
Catherine L. Schwab

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As we near the year two thousand, now is an exciting and challenging time in education. There has been a dramatic change in our schools' populations and the statistics on the numbers of cruel realities our children face daily are staggering. Each day in America, over one thousand students dropout; two thousand students are abused; twenty-seven children die of poverty; and thirteen million live in poverty (J. L. Doud, personal communication, June 14, 1993). The role of the education system is being reexamined constantly and more and more demands are being placed on the structure to fix all of society's problems. With all the scrutiny, the school must have the ability to achieve a level of productivity which provides for a high percentage of student mastery of basic skills as well as developing students who can cope and grow in this changing society. An effective school must have order and discipline and clear academic and social/behavioral goals. There must be teacher efficacy, as well as high expectations (for all) and pervasive caring. The school must also gain community support. The most crucial element a school must have in order to be effective is an effective principal and faculty (J. L. Doud, personal communication, June 15, 1993).

The first characteristic of an effective principal I must possess is a sense of vision about where the school is and where it can go. It is not enough to just have the vision, but I must share and communicate it through my daily words and actions. That vision must also have flexibility, I must adhere to my core values as well as satisfying others' priorities. Through time and patience the things deemed important should reach a common ground. Second, I must have the ability to

provide leadership for the development and implementation of clear and precise instructional goals. By surrounding myself with experts, reading, and asking the right questions, I will be able to provide that leadership. I must maintain an open-mindedness, both in the ability to see other points of view and the ability to view the big picture; remembering always that instructional improvement is an ongoing process and 'we' are smarter than me. As the principal, I also need to establish and maintain a healthy learning environment free from disruption and possess the ability to secure and allocate resources in ways that support appropriate staff and student behavior. Above all else I must provide a commitment to quality and a willingness to set high standards and expectations to staff, students, and community.

To deal with the many demands on a principal's time I must be as prepared and organized as possible. Dr. Else said in class "...common sense is the best tool to being a principal..." (D. K. Else, personal communication, February, 1994); I agree wholly. In order to be an effective principal, I must have the common sense to guide my other five senses and also own a sense of myself to be able to face the person in the mirror every day and know that I am maintaining unquestionable ethical behavior.

Popeye said, "I am what I am, and that's all that I am." Well, he was wrong, because without knowing what makes me unique, who I am and what I stand for, I can't know anything but mere existence. The questions I have to ask myself aren't easy and some of the answers may not be what I want to hear, but in order to make a difference in this world I must

start by knowing myself. Through the examination of my five senses I hope to show a clear picture of myself and the role of the principal.

### Sense of Sight

#### Sight as Vision

Vision is not something that can be developed overnight nor is it something magical or dream-like. It is an image created by imagination that must be examined and articulated in order to give it life or as Joel Barker (1990) says in his video, "Vision is the result of dreams in action." I agree with Barth (1990), "Without a vision, our behavior becomes reflexive, inconsistent, and shortsighted, as we seek the action that will most quickly put out the fire so that we can get on with putting out the next one" (p. 513). If I want to be an effective leader, I cannot take pieces of others' visions and create a patchwork of ideas and call that my vision. I must examine my own beliefs and experiences and develop my own goals or I will have no ownership or direction in my decision-making. Equally important I must project my goals through my communication and actions and work toward development of shared vision within our school. "The journey is as important as the destination; people come to share understanding of what they are doing by doing it together" (J.L. Doud, personal communication, June 15, 1993). Guthrie and Reed (1991) state that people are advantaged by having agreed-upon goals for which to strive; the school must be oriented around a sense of shared purpose and that purpose must be conveyed to students. Collegiality is an important aspect of vision; collegiality is basically a glorified way of

stating the Golden Rule. Children are very perceptive and quick to imitate the behaviors we model.

As an educational leader, I need to stress relationships that are cooperative and collegial for the entire staff. A shared vision must respond to both internal and external communities. Even the best intentioned educational leader cannot attend to the diverse public needs within the current school structure. Only the unified effort of a total community--including interaction between home, family, schools, and all community agencies--can create a truly educated citizenry."...Principals, teachers, students, and parents learning together can create within their schools an ecology of reflection, growth and refinement of practice: in short, a community of learners" (Barth, 1990, p. 514). Joseph K. Hart (cited in Kerensky, 1989) states that:

The community is the true educational institution. Within the community there is work that educates and provides for life; within the community are the roots of the cosmopolitanism that marks the truly educated man; within the community there is room for all . . . . The democratic problem in education is not primarily a problem of training children; it is the problem of making a community within which children cannot help growing up to be democratic, intelligent, disciplined to freedom, reverent of the goods of life, and eager to share in the tasks of the age. A school cannot produce this result; nothing but a community can do so (p.91).



In creating shared vision the principal first and foremost must 'walk the walk and talk the talk'. I must believe in the vision if it is to succeed. As put in Maxwell (1993), ". . . integrity means living it myself before leading others" (p. 38).

### Sight as seeing

Sight as merely seeing is important in everyday 'withitness' and in the process of evaluation. According to Donald D. Clifton, "Your greatest contribution to mankind is to be sure there is a teacher in every classroom who cares that every child everyday learns and grows and feels like a real human being" (R. H. Decker, personal communication, June 11, 1991). Supervision should help improve the attitudes and relationships of all members of the school staff and should help develop good rapport with the community. A principal must see evaluation as critical to the school's welfare. As a principal I should be able to say, " I would want my child in that teacher's classroom." I plan to use the Teacher Performance Evaluation (TPE) cycle, including Professional Improvement Commitments (PIC) as targets for growth, walk my building during class time a minimum of once a day and have 'pace' meetings with all teachers at least once every six weeks--a twenty minute meeting to ask,"What's up?" Remember, if we are maintaining status quo we are falling behind every day.

### Sense of Hearing

Communication must be a two-way process. According to George Bernard Shaw , as cited in School-Based Management Workshop (National School Public Relations Association. (no date given): "The

greatest problem of communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished” (p. 8). I must listen not only to what is going on around me, but to what is and is not being said to me. As principal I must remember I am in a position to be privy to confidential information, whether it's through files or personal conversation, and responsible for that information to maintain confidential. Samuel Johnson says, “There can be no friendship without confidence, and no confidence without integrity” (cited in Covey, 1989). Personal and professional integrity are not values that can ever be compromised. There is a poem, THE MAN IN THE GLASS, by Dale Wimbrow (cited in Blanchard & Peale, 1988) about being able to face the man in the mirror, which I eluded to earlier, that is an excellent illustration of this point:

When you get what you want in you struggle for self  
And the world makes you king for a day,  
Just go to a mirror and look at yourself  
And see what THAT man has to say.

For it isn't your father or mother or wife  
Whose judgment upon you must pass;  
The fellow whose verdict counts most in your life  
Is the one staring back from the glass.

Some people may think you a straight-shootin' chum  
And call you a wonderful guy,  
But the man in the glass says you're only a bum  
If you can't look him straight in the eye.

He's the fellow to please, never mind all the rest,  
For he's with you clear up to the end.  
And you've passed your most dangerous, difficult test  
If the man in the glass is your friend.

You may fool the whole world down the pathway of life  
And get pats on your back as you pass,  
But your final reward will be heartaches and tears  
If you've cheated the man in the glass (p. 108).

Ethics and skills go hand in hand.

There is no tougher position than one of just listening. I plan to utilize the key principles to success learned through Interaction Management: The Challenge of Leadership (Development Dimensions International. (1987): to maintain or enhance a person's self-esteem being specific and sincere; to listen and respond with empathy to both what the person is saying and how they are feeling; and to ask for help in solving the problem by seeking and helping to develop ideas while showing support without removing responsibility. Sincerity and honesty are always the best policy. A person in a leadership position does not always have to possess all the right answers and no one is expected to always do the

right thing; Bennis (1990), "Leaders are people who do the right things; managers do things right" (p. 18). The ability to say I was wrong or I'm sorry is one to be commended.

### Sense of Smell and Taste

The next senses are more internal, but no less important. The first is the sense of smell. Through availability and withitness a good principal has the ability to smell both trouble and success. By being aware of the 'big picture' I can put the "Gretsky factor"--not skating to the puck, skating to where you think the puck will be (D. R. Jackson, personal communication, June 13, 1991)-- to work and be one step ahead of the trouble and there to commend the success. Next, is the sense of taste. A leader of leaders needs to motivate and inspire others, to give the taste of ownership and the taste of success through shared decision making and specific feedback.

### Sense of Touch

#### Who I am and what I stand for

The greatest gift of all is the ability to touch the lives around you and give the encouragement and guidance to let that person achieve. This poem, A LEADER, by Lao-Tae, 565 B.C., (Class notes, June 24, 1991) says it best:

A leader is...best

When people barely know he exists.

Not so good

When people obey and acclaim him.

Worse when they despise him.

But of a good leader  
Who Talks little  
When his work is done  
His aim fulfilled  
They will say  
“We did it ourselves.”

I have had the good fortune to be touched by many wonderful people in my life; these people are my heroes. These heroes taught me numerous lessons and gave me those gifts to pass on. The greatest lesson ever taught to me was the gift of giving. There is no greater joy than helping someone meet a challenge and knowing you were part of their success. I am very selfish that way, I wish I could be the one to touch thousands of lives every day and know that I made a difference. That does not mean stand on the school's roof and shout, “I helped!” Humility is an important trait to grasp; Blanchard and Peale (1988) indicate that; “People with humility don't think less of themselves...they just think about themselves less” (p. 49). I love to watch movies or read novels where the hero/heroine triumph in the end and because of their triumph the world is a better place. Being a hero intrigues me. The one thing I have to keep in perspective is that I can make a difference, but I cannot save the world. One of my top goals of the principal is to make the world better for the students, the dream that follows is for each of those students in turn to go out and strive to better other corners of the world. The vision of that impact is extraordinary.

Another thing I have to remember is everyone has their own values

and ideals and, though I can influence, I cannot expect everyone to adhere to my standards. I need to gain tolerance. It is not my place to tell anyone that their life is not acceptable, but to open the doors to opportunity and hope to raise their level of consciousness. I also need to remember that I do not need to be on top of every problem and at the center of every solution. As a principal I need to empower the staff to be heroes, for a principal is a leader of leaders. I need to recognize the courage it takes every day to challenge twenty to thirty young minds to expand their horizons. A motivational speaker at an opening school workshop stated that teaching is the most important profession: ask any person what is the most important profession and whatever their reply ask where would that person be without a teacher? My job as the principal is to enhance the teaching profession. Teachers have their hands full with the day to day classroom experience. I will have my hands full everyday seeing to it that that same classroom is filled with the equipment and the teacher is filled with enthusiasm for creating the citizens of tomorrow. The principal is in charge of enabling the staff, students and community to see the big picture. An administrator of today must be an effective leader of leaders. Although humility is a strong characteristic of a leader one needs to view oneself as a model in order to be an individual who accepts the authoritative expectations of others to responsibly guide the activities and enhance the performance of an organization (Guthrie & Reed, 1991).

## Heroes

My childhood heroes were teachers. I loved them--Mrs. Haydon for pulling my teeth; Miss Markey for letting me help decorate the room for Christmas on a Saturday afternoon; my kindergarten teacher for buying me a special gift when I got a scribble picture in the exchange; Mr. Constance for letting me believe I had talent, and the list goes on. The thing I wanted to do most as a teacher was to make a difference in someone's life just like they did in mine. The principalship will allow me to take that goal one step further; instead of trying to mold thirty young minds, I can strive to create a learning climate where three hundred young minds can find success.

Another one of my childhood heroes was my Grandpa Ben; he was kind and loving and always made me feel I could and would move mountains. The older I get the more I realize the most heroic of all are my parents. They have given me all of the qualities and the faith it takes to become a hero myself.

## Pithy sayings

In addition, to being touched by wonderful people, I have also been touched by a collection of pithy little phrases or cliches; these also help to define me. I have doodled them in margins of notebooks or quoted them repeatedly to anyone who would care to listen. Some of the phrases have been forgotten over the years, others have remained an intricate part of all that I do. Some have been around for decades, others for a shorter time, but it is with these phrase that I can help sort out what makes me, me.

The first one I just recently acquired, yet know it will remain with me forever. My mom and I were discussing the lives of various family members, remarking on perils and tribulations, when she shared with me something my dad had said about life: "A person only really needs three things in there life to be happy: a strong faith, a family who loves and cares for them, and to be able to work." I was struck by the statement and now think of it often when the 'little things' pile up.

Another is the poem (as cited in Apollinaire, 1980):

Come to the edge, he said.

They said: We are afraid.

Come to the edge, he said.

They came.

He pushed them ...

and they flew (p. 184).

I do not remember where and when I found this poem, but I knew it was for me as a teacher. I have always wanted to teach and this poem has been on my bulletin board for as long as I can remember. The same message I used to guide my teaching will now, as a principal, include not only students but also my staff. To be a person who makes others fly is the best occupation in the world. As an administrator, I will have the pleasure of helping my staff learn to fly and watching them help the students learn to fly as well. The staff will need to have confidence in themselves and their ideas, the freedom to try those ideas, and the knowledge that they have my encouragement and support whether the idea is a success or failure. Bennis (1990), "...a mistake is simply



“another way of doing things.” Leaders learn from and use something that doesn’t go well; it is not a failure, but simply the next step” (p. 22).

The staff will possess the knowledge that a unsuccessful idea is just a trial toward greater learning, an experience, and Blanchard (1989) says, “Experience is not what happens to you; it’s what you do with what happens to you” (p. 50). They will possess the courage to try again.

The other poem I hold near and dear is Footprints, a religious poem about God and a man walking through the sand of his life. Throughout the scenes there are two sets of prints in the sand: his and the Lord’s. Until the last scene the man looks back and notices many times along the path of his life there was only one set of prints. He questions the Lord and he replies that it was then that he carried him. I cannot explain the powerful effect of the psalm except to say it gives me the faith and security to continue my dreams. I hope as an administrator I can invoke a certain faith in my school community.

One saying I am fond of repeating often is: Plan your work and work your plan. I use a modification of this saying repeatedly with my students, “What’s your plan?” I know the first phrase can be viewed as meaning you have to manipulate people, but if you use this positioning for the good of the children it is justified. I truly believe in having a plan, one that includes all aspects of your life. I have learned to be more flexible with my plan and not to forget to live in the present not just envision the future. Again, I like to think my plan takes into account the “Gretsky factor”--not skating to the puck, skating to where you think the puck will be (D. R. Jackson, personal communication, June 13, 1991). I plan to continue to

use 'What's your plan?' as a principal with both staff and students; teaching people to take responsibility and handle problems only creates better people.

A rule I learned when I first entered the teaching program will also serve me well as an administrator, respect first and then liking; the need to accept the fact that not everyone is going to like me; Euripides says (as cited in Lundy, 1990) "Authority is never without hate" (p. 37). I need to remember to dialogue and critique a person's idea not the person them self; I hope to create a climate in which two people can have a heated debate on a practice and even agree to disagree, yet they can still ride home at night as colleagues. The best way to achieve this climate is through symbolic leadership; sometimes a message has more meaning when it is something that is done not said or "People do what people see" (Maxwell, (1993, p. 119). I need to balance a caring, open attitude, yet at the same time I need to develop a tougher shell.

Another statement I plan to put to good use is this: if you do not read-- you will only know what you think (Trustees of Columbia University, 1991, [videotape]). We live in an information society and if we are not continually moving forward, we are falling behind daily. There is no way I can hope to maintain a supply of updated information without doing two things, reading and surrounding myself with experts.

### Conclusion

A plan can be easily stated as a mission statement including personal, home, church, community, and school/career. My personal mission statement for life is the umbrella under which falls the rest of the

categories; it is to live a healthy, happy, and productive life and always maintain a sense of humor--that's life! Under the heading of school/career I have the following : to continue my education to the doctoral level, maintain my enthusiasm and caring for students, continue to try to have a good impact on the lives I touch and teach life skills as well as the three R's, and to follow a career path with which I will be happy and in a position to have a positive impact on education's future.

Lastly, I need to remember the most important sense, the sixth sense, common sense. I know a good leader does not always rule with her head, but sometimes with her gut and often with her heart. Byrd Baylor, author of I'm in Charge of Celebrations (1986), indicates you must know the spirit- not material things-for personal development. "Once you make that decision, your whole life opens up and you begin to know what matters and what doesn't" (p. 27). As a principal I will use my five senses and trust my value system to effectively work with the staff, parents, students, and school community. I will test my skills as a communicator, instructional leader, change facilitator, and visionary on a daily basis. My main focus is the children and I always need to have their welfare first and foremost in my mind. If we did not have the children, we would not exist. They are the reason we are here. Sometimes when someone has so many roles and responsibilities they lose sight of what's most important; when I awake each morning I plan to ask myself, "What am I going to do today to brighten the children's present and future?" The list will always be long and detailed, but there is no time better for prioritizing than while facing the mirror and brushing my teeth!

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