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2008

My philosophy of educational leadership

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract

Early leaders in civilization knew that to keep a country free of tyranny and social depredation it was imperative that the citizens within that culture became educated. Modem leaders of education can be found at the forefront of public education in the form of superintendents and principals. In this paper I will define the role of leadership in education, how it has affected my life, what makes a great principal, the principals role in educational change, a reflective practitioner as a leader, and how a principal can use professional development to enhance the effectiveness of his/her staff.

MY PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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

David A. Clark

May 2008

Dr. Robert H. Decker

This Research Paper by: David A. Clark

Entitled: MY PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of

Arts in Education.

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_5-/-08_

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_5-6-08_

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My Philosophy of Educational Leadership

Leadership is defined as one who directs an operation, activity, or performance (Mish, 2000). Education is defined as a field of study dealing with methods of teaching and learning (Mish, 2000). Early leaders in civilization knew that to keep a country free of tyranny and social depredation it was imperative that the citizens within that culture became educated. Modern leaders of education can be found at the forefront of public education in the form of superintendents and principals. In this paper I will define; the roll of leadership in education, how it has affected my life, what makes a great principal, the principals roll in educational change, a reflective practitioner as a leader and how a principal can use professional development to enhance the effectiveness of his/her staff.

I did not begin my career in education as passionate about leading as I am now. As a fifth year instrumental music teacher at Underwood Community Schools and a graduate of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, I have had many goals and dreams, none of which were to become a principal. The satisfaction that I have felt through the development of my band program is directly linked to the individual and group accomplishments of my students. As they learn, grow, and develop as musicians I also have grown and developed as a leader and educator. I have also been a coach and a player at varied levels of athletics and have had the opportunity to witness many different displays of good and bad teaching and leadership. Through these experiences I have taken the next step in

my own education in order to become a better leader. I do not think that I was born to be a principal or even an educator. I do not know if we are born into positions in life. I do however believe that we can all learn to be better at whatever it is we choose to do.

The world of education is continually evolving, and with it is the role of the educational leader. In past generations, the primary function of the principal evolved from "principal teacher," as a master teacher who also tended to the limited duties required to keep the school organized and operating efficiently, to the principal as the chief executive officer of the campus (Wilmore, 2002). I am choosing to follow the principal's path, striving to evolve along with the world of education into a better educator and leader. As a band director and coach in Underwood I have spent most of my time working with the highest achieving students. I spend very little time in education with the rest of the student body, which consists predominantly of unmotivated students who either struggle in the classroom or do not care enough about their education to put much effort into becoming successful. I believe that with the right type of motivation and a good leader these students can be reached. It will be a challenge to juggle all of the duties of a principal while at the same time identifying and reaching out to those students who need you most. With the help of a good staff and a caring community the principal will be able to reach some of these students. With these thoughts in mind I am taking the steps necessary to try my hand at administration.

My knowledge of what education is has grown immensely since the beginning of the Master's program. We have merely scraped the surface, but I am continually creating and reshaping my own views as to how the education system should be run. Education is important because without it our society would become intellectually stagnant, leaving us vulnerable to tyranny and oppression. I think that as a nation you can see some of the wheels beginning to come off. Test scores are low, family values are deteriorating, and wealth and material possessions are becoming the focus of today's youth. Administrators and educators have a daunting task ahead of them. I have painted a pretty grim picture and I think that in every generation the future is painted in such a way. It is important that we learn from the past and devote our time and resources to those issues within our control. We need to admit that all aspects learned in life cannot come from the schools. Parents and communities need to take more responsibility in education, taking some of the stress off of the schools and educators (Frase & Streshly, 2000). This means that ways in which we educate our children will undoubtedly change. When and how is the question? I would rather be an active part of the change than a passive piece to the puzzle.

One of the major changes that we will soon be facing today is how and when do we begin steering our students toward careers? The answer to this problem will affect the appearance of the entire education system from pre-k to high school. Two very different approaches used are the American and German

schooling systems. Americans believe that Germany does not give its students enough choices or time in deciding what they will become later in life. Germany thinks that America gives students too many choices (E. Hawks, Personal Communication, September 16, 2006). Who is right? I think that all people are different and need different amounts of time to decide what it is they are going to become later in their lives. My view on this matter is similar to my view on most other aspects of education. I believe in the uniqueness of the individual. I do not think that grouping, grading, and sorting have the best interest of the student in mind. At some point in time our education system needs to find a way to teach to the individual and not the group. This may seem impossible, but with the speed of developing technologies and the willingness of other nations to share in the common goal of better education I think that in my lifetime we will see a push for more individualized methods of educating.

Leadership is an essential piece to the puzzle of better education. Students, faculty, staff, administration and the school board must be comprised of good leaders. This, of course, starts from the top. The school board has to be able to identify the qualities of a good leader. A good leader is someone with a strong work ethic who is charismatic, holds high moral beliefs, is organized, intelligent and innovative and understands the need and importance of change (Whitaker, 2003). These types of people have great influence on those around them and in turn make great leaders. I think that each of these characteristics can

be developed within each of us. This means that the potential to develop others into good leaders is there. Oftentimes these types of leaders do not chair school boards, and in turn the school systems that they oversee struggle to hire good leaders.

Success is defined as the gaining of wealth and fame (Mish, 2000). Unlike Mish I will judge my success by the number of students who leave my school and make a positive impact on society. As a principal I will be willing to place myself under the microscope of the community in order to help educators make a positive impact. These ambitions have led me to the question, what do great principals do differently to set them apart from the rest?

Great principals have a vision, provide clearly stated expectations, are visible, are trustworthy, helps to develop leadership skills, develops strong teachers, involves others, has a sense of humor, is a role model, offers meaningful kindness. (Hopkins, 2008). These characteristics can be found in great principals all over the country. These are also the characteristics that future principals must either have within them or strive to achieve.

A great principal must first and foremost have a love and passion for the well-being and education of students. Whether this passion stems from past experience or a belief in predestination, a passion for the well being of others is essential. The most prized possession of any community is its children. Children are the key and in order to properly lead a school it is important to know that

children are your most important asset. As students are the most important assets it is the principal's job to make sure that these assets are being nurtured in a way that meets the expectations of the schools vision.

Hiring good teachers is the most important part to creating the best possible learning environment for students. The best way to go about this is to hire teachers who have characteristics that are similar to the leaders. A passion for students, intelligence, a positive attitude, congenial personality, strong work ethic, leadership skills and charisma should be looked for in prospective teachers just as they should be found in the principal. Experience does not always make for better teaching. Teachers are a million dollar investment. It is of the utmost importance to spend as much time as possible prior to the interview researching each candidate. Teachers are the key to reaching students and it is very important that all of the teachers in a school are doing their very best to reach this goal. Simply hiring good teachers is not enough. As a principal we must spend a great deal of time coaching teachers. Teachers have individual needs just as students. A principal needs to find out what these needs are and help to improve any faults and support any strengths. As a principal builds the level of competence in each individual teacher, the school as a whole will feel the positive results. Observing and coaching teachers is not the only way in which a principal is able to improve the abilities of the staff. Most likely there are some good teachers already on the staff who can be used as models for younger or struggling teachers. Along with

suggesting and helping teachers to further their formal education a principal can make significant improvements by providing time for teachers to reflect on their own teaching as time to observe other good teachers within or outside of their school.

The position of principal holds a great deal of influence in the community. There are two types of influence in administration; influence that comes with the position and influence that is earned through trust, dedication, and loyalty. Be careful to acknowledge situations where that influence may alter the reactions or responses of others. This influence must be weighed in decisions that are made, prior to coming to a conclusion. Along with influence principals feel an even greater amount of responsibility. Principals must take responsibility for the actions of their students and staff. Leading in this way will inspire others to do the same. This type of leadership will build the character and integrity of the students and staff members, ultimately changing the face of the school and community.

The vision of the principal is manifested in the wellbeing of the students, educators, and community. All great ideas and ideologies within the vision are lost if the principal does not have the means to effectively communicate them. Great principals must be passionate about the success of students. They must be dedicated to hiring like-minded educators. They must be accepting of, and willing to change. They must possess a sense of responsibility for all stakeholders

within the vision. They must hold themselves and others to high expectations. They must successfully communicate each facet of the vision in order to protect the integrity of the most cherished asset of the community, the children.

Change is one of the most significant factors in the success or failure of a principal's vision. Administrations, educators, students and communities that are not moving forward and making progress are doing the exact opposite and regressing. Change is always needed and should be carefully dealt with. People are scared of change and in many communities the idea of, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it," still applies. When making change in your school system a principal should make sure that the best teachers are always a part of the decision. These teachers, most likely, have the most insight and are also those who change will most significantly affect. They are also the strongest voices on staff and have the most influence over other teachers. Making these teachers a part of the decision-making will help in building a rapport with them that will eventually lead to trust. Gaining the trust of the best teachers on staff will affect a more significant impact on the overall success of your school. Successful leaders learn to embrace change and use its momentum to create lasting positive effects on all of those around them. If your school is not improving it is moving in the opposite direction. Do not allow your school, staff, and students to sit in stagnation because of a fear of change.

It takes a strong leader to make positive change in education. The principal is only one of the leaders in the educational process. Teachers, aids, and support staff have influence and can also be looked at as leaders. The principal's role as a leader and the teachers' and supports staffs' roles vary, but the ultimate goal should be a positive influence on students towards education. Change is difficult to successfully implement, and in education, with its many faces and influences and religious-like traditions, it can be nearly impossible.

The principal should have an on-the-surface view of the school system and all of its inner-workings. The focus of change should be around the schools climate and culture. School culture is the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the "persona" of the school. These unwritten expectations build up over time as teachers, administrators, parents, and students work together, solve problems, deal with challenges, and, at times, cope with failures (Deal & Peterson, 1999). School culture as explained above is strongly influenced by values, assumptions, and norms and it is important that the principal is aware of and understands where the culture originated.

In order for the principal to create educational change the people within the community all must agree on the direction in which the school is going. The principal is a key role-player by establishing plans for school improvement, focusing the community on the future and the goal of what the school will become

and promoting growth. However, the principal cannot create change alone. A smart principal knows that the key to successful change in a school comes from the much stronger influence of the teachers. Teachers have more opportunity and a greater ability to influence the student population within the school.

> Teachers have a vested interest: They care about what they do and how they do it and feel a sense of responsibility for their efforts. Teachers have a sense of history: They are aware of the norms of their colleagues. Teachers know the community: They have information concerning the values and attitudes of the community. Teachers can implement change: They are where the action is in the position to initiate planned change on the basis of need (Zepeda, 2004 p.52).

In many cases it is the principal's job to recruit the best and the brightest teachers. Principals must then prepare these teachers with the necessary tools to become exceptional. Once the teacher has reached the level of expertise that is sufficient for positive educational change it is important that the principal retains these good teachers. Recruitment, training and retention are the steps in a continuous cycle that is the key foundation to successful change. Once the teaching staff has been assembled the principal can implement several strategies to maintain positive educational change by allowing teacher leaders to shape the culture of the school. Empowering teacher leaders within the school is a result of: building on a person's strengths, setting high standards, encouraging teachers to

take risks, making work exciting, praising teachers work, and listening carefully (Zepeda, 2007).

Alongside school culture is school climate. Just as complex as it is important, a good climate is essential in promoting educational change, as is a good culture. The elements that make up school climate are complex, ranging from the quality of interactions in the teachers' lounge to the noise levels in hallways and cafeterias, from the physical structure of the building to the physical comfort levels (involving such factors as heating, cooling, and lighting) of the individuals and how safe they feel. The size of the school and the opportunities for students and teachers to interact in small groups both formally and informally add to and detract from the health of the learning environment. (Frieberg, 1998) It is extremely important not to overlook the importance of the schools climate. Students need consistency and reliability and are often dependant on the schools climate for motivation and encouragement. Do not let the little things be problems for student learning. Classrooms that are too hot and cold can be distractions to students and should be dealt with.

The most difficult of all challenges in educational change is the change. Nobody wants to deal with change and everyone shies away from it. Principals should learn to embrace change and encourage teachers to try new methods and techniques that involve change. The only way for a school with a poor climate and culture to make steps towards a better quality of education is to change. A

few keys to making successful change are to know your staff, climate and culture. Understand who on your staff is going to resist change and who will embrace it. Identifying those staff members who have the most influence can also be very beneficial during the change process. With the influential members of the staff on your side you will better be able to persuade the rest of your staff that the changes you are making are for the best. By communicating ideas of change early and often you can lessen the amount of stress that change places on staff members who are less likely to change. Change is something that should be done over time and not over night. One strategy that can be used to help promote positive change is an implementation bridge. An implementation bridge, bridges the gap between current practice and the changes in practice that help to promote positive outcomes (Hall & Hord, 2006). You would first identify what changes need to be made. These changes should be accompanied by past and current practices. Once you have identified specific areas that require change you can map out strategies that promote change in a way that is most beneficial to your specific situation.

Locate the leaders within your school. Empower them with strategies and programs that magnify their strengths. Become familiar with the culture and climate of the school and community. Use strategies that help to implement positive change, concentrating on weaknesses from the past and present. These strategies revolve around the development of you and your staff in becoming reflective practitioners.

The term "reflective practitioner" in relation to educational administration is the educating of instructors through adaptations made during the conclusion of a completed lesson or educational experience. That may sound complicated but in fact is a practice that good teachers and administrators have been using in and out of classrooms for years. The practice of reflection is nothing new to the world of education. Teachers, administrators, and students have reflected on lesson plans, professional developments and homework for as long as the modern education world has existed. This paper will help inform the reader of the specific reasons why reflective practice can help an educational leader.

"Teacher Research" refers to a process in which practitioners adopt a systematic reflective stance to their practice not necessarily bound by the constraints of the traditional academic research paradigms (José Reis, 2007). Reflective practitioners learn far more about themselves, their colleagues, and their students. Reflection helps educators and administrators understand their own styles of teaching. When you reflect on past lessons you are able to identify the positives and negatives. What were the goals for the lesson? Did I meet my goals? What were the student objectives? How were these objectives met and what could I do to make reaching these objectives easier for the students? Administrators use the same information during observations to help give positive feedback after observations as well as staff developments.

Reflection is also a way to interact with colleagues. When you reflect on your own educational practices you will be faced with many questions. A great resource for teachers and administrators alike is their colleagues. Once questions about practice are discovered and goals and objectives have been identified, finding the answers to those questions can be as simple as finding a teacher in the same department, sending an e-mail to a fellow administrator, or locating someone more experienced within the community. Seek out these people and learn from them. Nothing can take the place of experience, and the experience does not always have to be undergone directly to learn. Administrators should listen to staff members and always provide them with a chance to reflect on professional developments and other issues that directly pertain to them. The teachers within a school system have more experience than all of the administration combined. Understand this and use it to your advantage.

The final and most important pieces to the reflection puzzle can be learned from the students. Direct participants in the class have a much greater understanding of their own progress than a teacher ever will. Take time to reflect on the perceptions of students and their ability to digest information as it pertains to class goals and objectives. One thing is for certain; all teachers have a practical interest in reflection and inquiry guided by the intention to uncover problematic aspects of the classroom. Examine teaching goals and practices with a view to

introducing and assessing changes to practice in order to suit the learners'
different styles, needs and capabilities (José Reis, 2007).

Teachers and administrators who become reflective practitioners feel that
they become more professional, more pragmatic, and how they think about
educating begins to change. A higher understanding and the use of reflection will
ultimately lead to a more efficient educational experience for the learner.
Organization as a result of data collection helps to begin the metamorphosis from
average to exceptional. A more professional feeling is generated because the
approach that is used is more exact and a better determinant of the outcome the
students will generate. A more pragmatic approach is the result of time invested
in practice and the inherent desire to see results. Teachers and administrators who
implement reflective practices feel that they have more ownership over the
outcome and it is their teaching and strategies that are the cause of learning and
not simply the ability of the students.

Administrators can concentrate on six areas that will help to improve the
atmosphere in which to apply reflective practices. Those six areas include;
collaboratively build and monitor an action plan, negotiate the relationship, be
available, provide access to human and fiscal resources, maintain the focus on
instructional leadership, and help maintain balance to avoid overload (Pankake &
Moller, 2006).

Collaboration is an essential piece to a leaders puzzle. Work with teachers to help them reach the educational goals that have been set. This means that communication will take place and help to strengthen the relationship between staff and administrator. It is also important that the administration and staff have a shared vision. Collaboration and communication will also serve to ensure that all members of the team understand their role within that vision.

Negotiating the relationship is not as easy as it sounds. To negotiate the relationship between administrator and educational leader it is important as stated above to create open lines of communication. This can be done in several ways such as; brief weekly meetings, advising the teacher leader on educational decisions, allowing time for reflection during staff meetings and in-services and understanding that progression requires change and change takes time. A very important step for administrators that often gets overlooked is to be available. All administrators are busy but the top priority should be to coach. Making time available for even a brief meeting can make all the difference to a frustrated employee.

Resources also play a big role in the success of educators. These include: space, time, student learning data, technical manuals, web sites, contacts at other schools or levels of the school system, secretarial assistance, and, of course, professional development (Pankake & Moller, 2006). Principals should let

teachers know what is and is not available to them and provide access to as many

resources as possible.

The administrator should also be the proverbial "lightning rod" for

instructional leadership. Administrators should try to limit the amount of work

educators have to do that is not directly connected to instruction. This step is a

combination of many of the previous steps: being available to answer teachers'

questions about teaching and learning. Mentoring new teachers. Working with

individual teachers who request assistance. Pulling together assessment data for

teachers to use in their decision-making. Seeking outside resources to support

teachers. Building relationships with parents and community members to support

student learning. All of these steps help the educator to save time and focus on

instruction.

Administrators can help educators by not overloading them with tasks

outside of instruction. Teachers often find themselves running committees,

student groups, planning for activities, and monitoring hallways. All of these

extra tasks are important and have a place in the educational process however;

finding ways to even out time demands of these types of activities will give

educators more time to focus on instruction. Finally, an administrator who

effectively reflects on his/her practice will realize the met and unmet needs of the

educators in their schools. By taking time to facilitate open lines of

communication, administrators foster an atmosphere of teamwork in providing

quality instruction to students. By encouraging educators to use these same reflective practices they will come to know themselves better as educators, more comprehensively understand their curriculum, and in turn better understand the learning process of their students. The trickle-down effect of a reflective practitioner ensures that the schools vision of learning will be achieved. A principal can begin promoting the idea of the reflective practitioner and so many other inspiring ideas during professional developments.

Professional development is a challenging aspect of the principals' job. To motivate a group of students, with their many different interests, abilities and backgrounds can be difficult. To motivate a group of adult educators whose interests, abilities, and family situations all vary can be even more challenging. "High quality professional development refers to rigorous and relevant content, strategies, and organizational supports that ensure the preparation and career long development of teachers and others whose competence, expectations and actions influence the teaching and learning environment" (Iowa Department of Education, 2007). From a principals standpoint there are several different aspects of professional development that need to be taken into consideration. The three most important of these are need, resources and relevance. Within these three pieces of the professional development puzzle the principal will make his/her decision on what types of professional development strategies to employ. When implemented successfully professional development can serve as a bridge

between where prospective and experienced educators are now and where they will need to be to meet the new challenges of guiding all students in achieving higher standards of learning and development.

What deficiencies does the school possess and can those deficiencies be met and corrected through professional development? What are the major hindrances to academic and social success and is there a way to help teachers and staff to better deal with these types of problems? There are hundreds of similar issues that combine with a variety of unique problems that make up the different types of needs faced by our schools. Discovering all of the problems that a school has is never an easy task. Whether the problems are academic or social there are strategies and methods a principal can use to help rectify them. Once the principal has made a decision on which aspect of the school is most problematic, it is their job to find a professional development program that fits.

The second piece to the professional development puzzle is resources. Most schools allot a specific amount of money for administrators to use to fund staff developments. Money is also provided by the state to fund specific types of professional developments. Some school districts lack funding for professional development that can cause limitations as to what a principal can implement. School boards may not agree that staff development is an efficient or economic way to resolve educational issues and refuse to increase the funding. As the educational leader it is the job of the principal to come up with resource solutions

and insist that professional developments are worth the time and money. One place to go in Iowa to find resources to fund professional developments is the local Area Education Agency (AEA). The local AEA is an excellent resource for finding professional development resources, speakers and programs. Area Education Agencies (AEAs) work as educational partners with public and accredited private schools to help students, school staff, parents and communities meet educational goals in communities all over Iowa (Iowa's Area Education Agencies, 2008). The AEA has access to an abundance of resources that can easily be made available to administrators to help with many different aspects of the school process including staff professional development. The AEA will do what it can to provide as many free resources as possible. Staff developments are not always on that list. As the educational leader, it is the job of the principal to come up with resource solutions and insist that professional developments are worth the time and money. Administrators can also help their own cause by finding and researching programs such as the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program. The federal comprehensive school reform (CSR) program is authorized to provide formula grants to states to award competitive grants to local districts on behalf of schools (Iowa Department of Education, 2007). These grant programs and others like it are a nice way to boost an already productive professional development program but should never become the soul means of funding. Along side the superintendent, principals should constantly be lobbying

for the establishment of annual professional development programs. Finally,

principals have many resources available via the Internet. An example of

professional development ideas via the internet can be found at www.cast.org.

Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) was developed to help educators

at all grade levels meet the challenge of teaching diverse learners with Universal

Design for Learning (UDL), CAST offers high-quality professional development

and other resources to individuals, school districts, and postsecondary institutions

(Center for Applied Special Technology, 2008).

 Why spend so much time and money developing our teachers?

 Research confirms that teacher knowledge of subject matter, teaching

 methods and student learning and development are all important elements

 of teacher effectiveness. Today's higher expectations for students raise the

 bar in what we have expected from educators. We can no longer assume

 that teaching is an innate gift or that education majors learn all they need

 in college (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2008).

Developing teachers has a number of positive residual effects. It is

important to realize that there is not a "best" way to educate students. Unlike a

manufacturing company that deals with an easily manipulated product. Educators

face hundreds of problems in and out of the classroom. Teachers deal with

students, families, and the community. All students are individual case studies

that require different stimuli to achieve best results. They come with

preconceived ideas of ability and genetic limitations that may require educators to think outside of the box when coming up with involvement and assessment strategies. There are better ways to help students achieve academic success and better ways to teach. Today's society provides students and teachers with access to information all over the world. Teachers should be informed of what is available to them and suggestions should be made by administrators to promote the development and use of these new technological advantages into the classrooms to spark the interest of all learners. There is no better time or place to do all of this than during professional developments.

Prior to "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) many school districts implemented professional developments with less focus on the student and more on the teacher. Post NCLB professional development groups decided that teachers are competent in their content areas but lack the insight and strategies it takes to motivate all students to learn. With colleges demanding class ranks and ACT scores and the federal government placing schools with poor standardized test scores on the "Watch List" it is no wonder the main focus has shifted to student motivation. Motivating students is one of the biggest concerns of schools all over the world with 346,000 websites identified by Google on that topic (Worley & Dyrud, 2003). Unfortunately, with the majority of the focus on standardized testing scores teachers are finding themselves spending half of each professional development studying standardized testing data. Graphs, charts, and

tables now plague the focus of teacher in-services. Standardized tests results have become all-important to school districts. Every decision that is made hangs in balance by the results of these tests and the students that take them. Education begins with the success of students and the ability of teachers to make students successful so that they create their own desire to learn. A principal can achieve this feet through well-planned and executed professional developments. Principals need to stop wasting time watching their teachers argue over testing data and get back to helping teachers find ways to connect with and motivate students.

Teachers struggle to find time to continue their own education. It is the job of the principal to bring "cutting edge" teaching, disciplinary, assessment and involvement strategies to the teachers. A poor teacher can become a good teacher and a good teacher can become a great teacher if we use professional development for the right reasons. The entire community will see the positive effects that can result from the solid foundation of a good educational staff.

As a future principal I will do my best to always promote education. I will do this by never being satisfied with my performance and striving to seek out great principals and apply their strategies to the culture and climate of my community. I will help my school and community to embrace change rather than fight it. I will reflect on my community, my school, my teachers and myself to help lead in times of change. I will utilize my resources to conduct meaningful professional developments that will inspire teachers to become passionate about

learning. I believe in our school systems and know that the future will bring with it many great opportunities for the youth of our country. I look forward to becoming a principal.

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