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A vision for leading effective schools : a reflective essay

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A vision for leading effective schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

We will face many challenges in the year 2000 and beyond - societal issues, economic issues, educational issues. The school in which I work will strive to promote leadership in all teachers, form a community of lifelong learners, and evaluate and grow professionally together. It is not my goal to manage with a top-down approach. It is my vision that I will lead the school community into exceptional instruction and learning. Leadership strengths will flow from a shared vision, values, and personal reflection. I do believe that by following these three tenets, I will lead the kids of today into a promising and successful tomorrow.

A VISION FOR LEADING EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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by

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A VISION FOR TOMORROW'S SCHOOLS

"The heart of leadership is in the hearts of leaders. You have to lead from something deep in your heart" (Bolman and Deal, 1995, p. 21). This quote from Leading With Soul holds great meaning for me. I believe that as leaders of our nation's schools, we must lead others with what we feel and believe and value to be right and true. We must sincerely want what is best for our children. In order to become effective leaders, we must lead not only with our minds but with our hearts.

As I reflect on my vision for schools in the next millennium, I am struck by how firmly I hold my values and beliefs for the children of today and tomorrow. The last five years that I have worked on my educational administration degree have helped build those values and shape them into the vision I have today.

I desire to be a principal that will foster learning, critical thinking, problem solving skills, cooperation among peers, and a love for lifelong learning. I believe that administrators must first work with teachers and the entire community in order to impact the lives of children.

Therefore, I have three areas that I strive to work on as I become an elementary school administrator. I want to help build leaders among the instructional staff so that we have a school of educational leaders; I want to build a community of lifelong learners in which everyone in the community helps to educate our children and ourselves; and finally, I want to work with teachers to build professional growth plans rather than the traditional clinical supervision model.

My values in life are family, health, happiness, and spirit. I have been fortunate in my short lifetime to have all of these. It is "time now to help someone else on their journey" (Bolman and Deal, 1995, p. 172).

Expectations and reinforcement: Keys to building leaders in Iowa's schools

As an elementary teacher and a student in the Educational Administration program at the University of Northern Iowa, I have spent considerable time reflecting on building leadership qualities among staff in schools. Having been a teacher in three different school districts in Iowa and abroad, I have had the opportunity of being under the leadership of four very different and unique principals. I'd like to examine the four individually so that I may compare and contrast their beliefs on building leaders in schools.

My first experience was as a third grade teacher in the West Des Moines Community School District. I had the privilege of working with a principal who was highly thought of by his peers and teaching staff. He was a "quiet" leader. He gave a lot of responsibility to the teachers, yet he showed us how to be responsible by example. He encouraged the staff to work together because he felt a team could get more done than the individual. Yet, I never thought that this man was building leadership qualities in me. I think this was because he just expected it out of all of us.

This was true especially in the West Des Moines School District. Everyone in the district, from parents (to teachers to support staff to business leaders) truly felt the district was the best in the state if not the United States. When I student taught in the district, I would hear from educators and community members alike

that this was the place to teach. The expectations were extremely high, and I think that is what helped me become a leader. Because the expectations were so high, I strived to become the best teacher in the district. I became involved in committees because I wanted to be a part of the decision-making team in a strong district. I wanted to earn the respect of the parents of the students I taught. I wanted to lead other teachers in the same direction.

After I taught under my first principal for one year, he retired and I began teaching in a newly built elementary school in the same district. I would spend three years there under the guidance of an entirely different educator in terms of leadership style. My principal at this school became my mentor. Unlike the "quiet" leader, this principal led by voicing high expectations. The administrator in this building expected staff to settle for nothing less than what was best for kids. She wanted us to be prepared in the classroom. This meant having detailed lesson plans, keeping track of student achievement, etc. While this often meant spending extra time, I know I am a better teacher because of the high expectations. I learned so much from the modeling of the administrator.

In 1994, my husband and I left for the island of Guam to teach for one year. We wanted to experience life abroad, and we wanted to teach in a different culture. While it was a tremendous experience that helped me grow in many ways, it was eye opening as far as administration and leadership was concerned. The elementary school that I was at had 1,200 students K-5. Huge! There were two principals. Having thought Guam was not a lot different from the U.S., I expected to see the principals talking with kids, visiting classrooms, and chatting with teachers. None of these things happened. The principals did not talk to students -

ever! They stayed in their offices. They did not visit classrooms unless they wanted to give the teacher a message. They did not even visit with teachers. I was to be evaluated three times throughout the year. One principal came in May, visited once, wrote up a great evaluation, and said she did not have to do anything else for me. Did I become a leader at that school? In some areas, yes, but I did that on my own. Was I a very good teacher that year? Not as good as I could have been. We should all be self-motivated to do our best all the time, but with few expectations I believe most people become a bit lazy. I am not proud of it, but I was not the best that I could be.

This is my second year teaching in the town of Dike, population about 1,000. This has been another wonderful experience. I have taken on several leadership responsibilities that I did not think I would be able to do being relatively new to the district. This has been largely due to actions my principal and superintendent have taken. They visited my classroom several times at the beginning of the year; they asked me to be on committees; they gave me positive feedback from the community. All of these things made me very confident and gave me a sense of leadership.

I am now almost completed with my educational administration program, so that could have something to do with feeling more at ease in leadership positions, but a lot of it has to do with experience (years in teaching), guidance from three very different principals, and the belief from others that I could lead! I think that is the biggest factor in helping principals build leadership capacity in teachers - saying, "We believe in you! We want you to be a part of this team.

What you say and do counts and makes this a better school." As Richard Ackerman, editor-in-chief of Every Teacher as a Leader, states:

> " teacher leaders are offered opportunities to develop. (Principals) are quick to recognize and promote partnerships with teacher leaders. Teachers are invited to participate in professional development activities, to visit other schools, and to be involved in significant decision making within the school. Once a teacher shows an interest in an area, these principals quickly secure resources to support this interest" (Ackerman, 1996, p.9).

I also believe that administrators must hold high expectations for the instructional staff. Very few people will step up into the leadership position if little is expected of them.

School/Community relations and helping teachers grow personally and professionally are two areas that I feel are vital for today's administrators. This paper will focus on both areas.

School/Community relations: A collaborative effort

As educators look toward the twenty-first century, we find ourselves dealing with problems in our schools that did not exist fifty years ago. Parents now have dual incomes, and children are often left unattended before and after school hours. Drugs, violence, and crime are issues that we must now address in our schools.

Teachers and administrators are finding that educating the child now involves much more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. It has become the school's responsibility to educate, care for, and guide the children of today. It is a

tremendous task that we cannot accomplish alone. We are in need of help from all members of society to raise our children to become productive citizens.

We need to build communities of learners where all people can learn from one another. All people have talents to share, and we must tap those resources to effectively ensure that our children will have a place in the society of tomorrow.

> "If schools are to teach the larger connections...they must begin with the connections of everyday experience, the connections to our peers, to our extended families, to the cultural dynamics of our neighborhoods, and to the politics and economics and technology in the homes and on the streets of the neighborhood" (Starratt, 1996, p. 77).

It is my belief that we can accomplish these tasks if and only if we are committed to working together as a group of concerned citizens. Many schools across the country understand the need for school and community relations. However, school and community relations means something different to all people.

To some, it means simply putting public relations tactics to use. To others, it means enlisting the help of business leaders, parents, senior citizens, and other concerned members of cities and towns to help in schools and school to work programs. Yet to others, it is a way of life. In these places, it is difficult to differentiate what is the school's and what is the community's. They are so intertwined that no one can see a separation. There is a belief that all people are lifelong learners that can teach one another and learn from one another. The latter is the vision that I have for the schools of tomorrow.

I was interested in studying the ideas that Cedar Falls Community Schools have for creating positive and lasting relations with the members of the community. I interviewed several people in hopes of getting a good representation

of how citizens view community involvement in the schools. First, I interviewed Dr. Dan Smith, Superintendent of Schools. I also had the opportunity to interview a teacher/parent, a citizen with no children in the school district, a co-op teacher at the high school, and a former superintendent who now lives in Cedar Falls. Each person gave very important feedback for my study.

I had several questions for Dr. Smith in regards to what was being done by the school district to ensure that school and community were in fact working well together. Are community members kept informed via newsletters, annual reports, newspaper articles, etc.? How are citizens involved with the children in the schools? Is there a program where students can work outside of school to learn the trade of certain businesses? Are there business partnerships in the schools?

I was very pleased to learn from Dr. Smith that indeed Cedar Falls Schools are promoting most of the issues I just listed. All schools in the district have business partnerships and most elementary schools have formed a partnership with more than one business in the community.

Senior citizens and other community members have the opportunity to volunteer in the schools in cooperation with a program called F.R.I.E.N.D.S. In this program, a flyer is given to citizens, and they may select what area they would like to help in as well as which school (if any) they would prefer to volunteer at.

The superintendent writes up an annual report, and this is sent to all community members. The report gives information on any levies that are in the process of being voted on, a district profile, and a financial report. The letter from Dr. Smith that is included in the 1996 report states, "The Cedar Falls Board of Education believes that it is important to maintain open and thorough

communication with the community we serve" (Cedar Falls Community School District, 1996).

The one area that Cedar Falls Schools does not cover is the mailing or distributing of a monthly communique or newsletter that outlines district-wide activities, issues, programs, events, etc. Dr. Smith did state that individual buildings do send out a monthly newsletter to the parents of their school, but community members at large do not receive monthly information regarding the schools (D.Smith, personal communication, July, 1997).

I wanted to get feedback from teachers and parents in the Cedar Falls School District on their perceptions of school and community relations as well. I interviewed JoAnn White, teacher at Hansen Elementary School and parent of two students in the schools. She gave me new insights as to what the elementary schools are doing in the district to promote community involvement.

The elementary schools really take advantage of the wealth of knowledge that is in the community by tapping those resources to speak and share information on curriculum topics (i.e. health education, multi-cultural issues, etc.). Each school also has at least one business partner as I mentioned earlier. Hansen's business partner is Sartori Hospital. Students and hospital staff get together on many occasions. The students walk to Sartori in their Halloween costumes for a parade. The students also make favors to be placed on the trays used for serving meals. Not only does this brighten up the hospital, but it also reaches out to patients who are members of the community. Sartori, in turn, will come to school to help students understand the health field and what their jobs are.

Another program that JoAnn shared with me was the idea of a spring picnic for students and their parents. All parents are invited to school in late May to have a barbecue with their children. Parents take off the lunch hour so that they can sit on the school lawn and share lunch with their children. What a great opportunity to bring families together in a school setting! JoAnn says that over 900 people are fed annually at this event. That is great school/community relations in my mind.

I, then, asked JoAnn to talk about how she believes the school does to keep her informed and involved from a parent's point of view. Her girls are in high school and junior high. She does not feel that she is as informed as the elementary school parents possibly are, but she also recognizes the differences between elementary school and junior/senior high school. The principals of her daughters' schools send out monthly newsletters that identify all upcoming activities. She feels like she knows what is going on, but there may not be as many programs for her to be involved in if she so chooses. This was yet another interesting viewpoint (J.White, personal communication, July, 1997).

Troy Becker, industrial technology/CO-OP teacher, also shed some light on the relations between school and businesses. He is one of four teachers at the high school who is in charge of students and their placement in the Cedar Falls business community. Students with an interest in trades/industry, health occupations, food service, and business/marketing have the opportunity to be placed in a business so that they can learn a specific trade. Many of these students are not college-bound, so it is very important for them to have apprentice-type training. As Troy stated, the CO-OP program is a win-win situation. Not only do

students learn a trade and get paid while attending school part time, but the employers have students working for them who do a great job because they are more accountable (students get school credit for doing a respectable job). As Miller states, "It is this community standard that drives the students to revise, reconsider, and improve their projects. Students willingly work to demonstrate their capabilities to their community partners" (Miller et al, 1995. p. 25). This program, and those like it, are so important-especially to students who are not college-bound as Troy indicated (T. Becker, personal communication, July, 1997). "Problem solving is what the real world is about. And the workplace requires people who can integrate skills taught across the curriculum, people who are competent not only at reading and writing but at defining problems, analyzing, creating, evaluating, and making decisions" (McFaden and Nelson, 1995, p. 13).

To get yet another perspective, I interviewed John Wersinger, a single man with no children in the Cedar Falls School District. I wanted to know if people with no connections to the schools felt informed. He said he felt very informed because the district does a good job of sending out pamphlets illustrating what is going on. He did say something, however, that I never thought about. He said that he always wondered why they sent information to him, since he does not have kids in school. He was pleased that the schools were making an effort to involve him, but I got the impression that he really did not care if he was informed or not (J. Wersinger, personal communication, July, 1997).

Maybe we are assuming that community members want to be involved. I would hope that many do, but we must also keep in mind (as I did not) that others are very happy just letting the schools do their own thing. We have read

repeatedly in journal articles and books that community members should be involved if we have true community education. However, some people are just not interested in what the schools are doing. In situations like West Des Moines, though, there are opportunities for lifelong learning. Classes that are for all community members might really get those that are apathetic to be involved. "Part of the meaning of membership in a learning community is the willingness of all participants to see themselves as learners who are open to inquiry" (Baker and Moss, 1996, p. 3).

Finally, I had the privilege of talking about school and community relations with Dr. David Else, former superintendent in Atlantic, Iowa. Dr. Else has been a member of the Cedar Falls community for the last nine years. I was interested in comparing what Atlantic Community Schools were doing for the community with what Cedar Falls is doing now. There are many similarities, but there are some additions that I would like to share as well.

Dr. Else stated that at the time, the school district was "doing more public relation types of things". He felt that in the last few years, schools were really making a concentrated effort at incorporating the community into the schools. Neighborhood Coffees were set up by building principals to meet with community members so that they were hearing accurate information about the schools that they could share with other community members. Administrators wanted to ensure that positive information was distributed to community members and that they could learn of any concerns that citizens might have about the schools. This definitely helped with school and community relations according to Dr. Else.

A Key Communicators Club was also put into place when important issues needed to be disseminated to the public (i.e. upcoming bond issues, votes, etc.). Dr. Else felt that by working with several positive community leaders and outlining what the district hoped to accomplish, they could send those leaders out into the community to "talk up" the issues at hand.

Senior citizens were invited to a coffee once a month to listen to what was happening in the district and to voice any questions or concerns. They also had the opportunity to walk around the buildings to see firsthand what kids were working on.

All of these activities helped to bring the community and schools closer together, but Dr. Else noted that schools today are working together more than they did ten years ago (D.K. Else, personal communication, July, 1997). I agree with Dr. Else in that schools are doing more to involve the community than they used to. However, I have a vision for what our schools should look like if we are truly going to educate students for life in the twenty-first century. I would like to offer some thoughts.

I believe that students learn best when they are immersed in projects and have to use critical thinking to solve problems that become important to them. I also feel that we need to give children as many opportunities to put into practice what they have learned. This oftentimes means going out of the four walls of the school building to immerse themselves in real world activities. Miller, Shambaugh, Robinson, and Wimberly state,"...not only are students more motivated when learning moves into the real world, but they also increase the complexity of their learning" (Miller et al, 1995, p. 23).

Students also need to be prepared for work outside of school and the social implications that go along with the world of work. How do educators do all of this for all students? They do not. They must work with community members to build a bridge between school, home, and community.

Sweden has built this bridge very effectively. They put into place a program which requires youngsters from the age of 7 to visit their parents and their best friend's parents at work so many days out of the school year. As the students get older, they are expected to attend work with their parents more often. This is done for observation purposes, not work experience. What community members and parents found was that "...there is not an adult in this community who does not now realize that the education of young people is far too important to be left to teachers alone, in schools, separated from our daily activity" (Abbott, 1995, p. 9). Community members felt that not only did the students benefit from the village educating them, but they learned from the students as well and in some cases changed what they were doing because of suggestions from the students.

In a similar study, citizens were asked to share their expertise with students. The citizens that participated "..were intrigued, too, with the possibility of their life's work being incorporated in school lessons. They not only suggested new and unexpected connections, but also saw ways the school could better prepare students for the world of work" (Christ, 1995, p. 35). What a great learning experience for all involved. In both cases, they have bridged the gap a great deal between school and community.

How can schools and communities work together to better the education for our children? Thompson lists four ideas: 1) Students work with adult

mentors. 2) Students get real-world experiences. 3) Students in turn make contributions to the community. 4) The work experiences are developed to meet the needs of *individual* students (Thompson, 1995, pp. 18-19).

This idea has multiple implications. Not only are we involving the community, but we are giving the students real life experiences that address their individual interests and needs. And in turn, students are contributing members of society. That is what we want for our children.

I do feel that Cedar Falls Schools are on track to becoming effective in building positive relationships among community and school. However, I hope that in the future the district and others around the state of Iowa can expand their horizons by developing a true learning community in which young and old are learners and teachers. John Goodlad states, "The development of the educative community requires mobilization of all present educational institutions and all potentially educative institutions in a common concern for educating all children and youth. In effect, the entire environment must educate, and everyone within this environment must become both educator and learner" (Thompson, 1995, p. 17).

I hope that the John Wersingers of the world feel more ownership in their schools so that they cannot only access resources but become resources as well. I truly believe that all people have something to share with others, but we need to give each and every person that opportunity. The school is the arena for that opportunity. Research shows repeatedly that we need help in educating our youth. Research also indicates that more learning and retention is achieved by hands-on experiences. As St. Augustine was reported to have said that "he learned most not

from those who taught him, but from those who talked with him" (Abbott, 1995, p. 10).

We have a great challenge ahead of us. How much easier it will be to educate our youth when we work together and learn together. Only then can we build the bridge between today's children and tomorrow's leaders.

Helping teachers grow professionally and personally

"Administrative supervision views the purpose of supervision to be quality control, in which teachers are treated as if administrative supervision is necessary to ensure proper behavior" (Poole, 1994, p. 287). More and more research is being done on moving away from clinical supervision of teachers to helping instructional staff build professional growth plans. For most of us in the teaching field, we are rated and put on a scale two to three times a year every other year or something similar. While many of us intrinsically develop ourselves for the profession, there are many others who teach for the observation and go back to their own style of teaching, be it good or bad for students. Basically, the traditional supervisions are "benign, ritualistic exercises that are time consuming, unfulfilling, perfunctory, and superficial" (Cousins, 1995, p. 200). It is my hope that as administrators we can move away from that to working as equals to ensure quality teaching and new ideas for our youth.

Professional development can mean several things. It can mean encouraging and supporting teachers to go to workshops and conventions that will benefit their teaching. It can also describe a way of working with all teachers to

come up with goals and objectives for the future. Some schools are using the latter along with or in place of traditional supervision and evaluation strategies.

One of the most important aspects in growth and development is for the principal to "lead by doing: participate in the same manner expected of the teachers" (Frase, 1992, p. 30). I must learn and set goals and work toward those goals just as the teachers would. Modeling is a very strong tool. By setting a good example, teachers tend to respect the administrator more and also learn how to improve their teaching.

I do believe in the strategy of incorporating a clinical-type model with a personal professional development plan. I think that it is important for me not only to model professional growth, but also to observe teachers and lend support and suggestions when needed. In order for this to work, I also feel that teachers should observe me and offer support and suggestions when needed. "In colleagueship the supervisor and teachers work together as professional associates bound together by a common purpose. The common purpose is improvement of teaching and learning through the professional development of both teacher and supervisor" (Sergiovanni and Starratt, 1993, p. 278). Observations and evaluations can be so intimidating to all of us. We want to do well, but oftentimes the observee feels threatened because of the top-down syndrome. By having teachers observe and evaluate the supervisor as well, I think that it will become a learning cycle for all of us that will result in more quality instruction.

> "Observing and being observed, giving and getting honest but
> straightforward feedback on areas of weakness and suggestions
> for improvement, are the most powerful tools for instructional
> improvement and professional recognition now" (Frase, 1992, p. 36).

Peer mentoring is yet another way for teachers and administrators to grow professionally and personally. It should no longer only be the principal's duty to evaluate teachers. According to Cousins, "recent evidence suggests that teachers prefer to obtain feedback from compatible peers" (p. 204). Peer mentoring is often less threatening to teachers and therefore, it promotes risk-taking. Teachers should feel free to try new methods of teaching that might help kids succeed in school. By working as a learning community, we can promote professional growth that will also help encourage teacher leadership.

Conclusion

My vision is that when I become a principal, I will strive to reach those goals and ideals that I have listed above. We will face many challenges in the year 2000 and beyond - societal issues, economic issues, educational issues. The school in which I work will strive to promote leadership in all teachers, form a community of lifelong learners, and evaluate and grow professionally together. It is not my goal to manage with a top-down approach. It is my vision that I will lead the school community into exceptional instruction and learning. "Leadership emerges out of a vision of what the leader and the colleagues can accomplish. The vision embraces an ideal, a dream that is grounded in those fundamental meanings and values that feed a sense of human fulfillment" (Starratt, 1995, p. 14). Leadership strengths will flow from a shared vision, values, and personal reflection. I do believe that by following these three tenets, I will lead the kids of today into a promising and successful tomorrow.

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