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# A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

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# A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

## **Abstract**

There are many personal traits that have been found universally among effective leaders. Intelligence, self-reflection, honesty and not being afraid to seek assistance when confronted with difficult problems are examples of these traits. Effective leaders must have inherent "people skills". They must have a genuine interest in and awareness of the needs of others. Emotional balance and remaining rational in times of conflict, crisis, or challenging circumstances are all positive personal attributes essential of effective leadership.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY  
SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

And Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Timothy D. Hejhal

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Leaders are necessary for any organization or community to achieve its purpose or vision. For these leaders to be successful, there are common characteristics that they must possess. Although effective school leaders are not easy to define, it is generally agreed that principals can have a positive impact on school outcomes. The research about school leadership has established commonly accepted principles that can be categorized as personal attributes, leader behaviors, and organizational outcomes (Davis, 1998). There are many personal traits that have been found universally among effective leaders. Intelligence, self-reflection, honesty and not being afraid to seek assistance when confronted with difficult problems are examples of these traits. Effective leaders must have inherent "people skills". They must have a genuine interest in and awareness of the needs of others. Emotional balance and remaining rational in times of conflict, crisis, or challenging circumstances are all positive personal attributes essential of effective leadership. Some commonly held principles of effective leader behaviors include decisiveness, organization, efficiency, and having a task-oriented philosophy. Other effective leader behaviors include having good communication skills, developing a positive school culture, setting high expectations, understanding and promoting effective instruction, and being a visionary (Davis, 1998). Effective leaders must first have a true desire to lead and must facilitate a collective vision for the organization they are leading. School leaders are somewhat unique due to the variety of people that they lead. Not only do these educational leaders guide teachers and staff members, but they must also lead the students and families of their schools and to be responsive to members of the larger community.

The State of Iowa has developed a set of standards that help guide school leaders in the development of productive schools where all children learn well. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), an organization involving the Council of Chief State School Officers and other professional organizations, worked together to create model standards for schools. Individuals from 24 state education agencies and representatives from various professional associations were involved in this process. Due to many of the changes that have been reshaping our nation, including the No Child Left Behind Act which was signed into law in January of 2001, it has become necessary to have common standards for all school leaders. The standards for school leaders, adopted by Full Consortium on November 2, 1996 have been developed to help educational leaders promote the success of all students (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). With the development of these standards, quality educational leadership can be enhanced throughout our nation's schools. I believe that these standards for school leaders are extremely valuable. No common standards in the area of educational administration were in place before the adoption by the Consortium. In 2001, the Iowa Standards for School Leaders, (ISSL), were adopted by the Board of Educational Examiners for Principalship Licensure in Iowa. The ISSL are almost identical to the ISLLC except for additional indicators for Standard 2. Using this standards approach allows everyone who is involved with educational leadership to drive improvement efforts along the same lines. The standards may allow for better consistency between licensure programs, interviewing candidates to administrative positions, and in revising preparation programs for prospective school administrators. The standards can act as a rubric for positive educational reform. These six ISLLC and ISSL standards utilize

visionary, instructional, organizational, collaborative, ethical and political aspects of school leadership for its framework.

My own personal beliefs and values mirror many of the ideas that are outlined in the state standards. For me, the first and most important reason for wanting to become a school leader is that I want to see all children succeed. I have a great desire to make significant differences in the lives of the staff and students with whom I work. I will strive to make sure that students have the knowledge, skills and values they need to become successful adults. Becoming a school principal will allow me to assume a more influential role in the vision and planning of school goals that will improve instruction and thereby bring success to students.

### Visionary Leadership

Iowa standard number one states that a school administrator will “facilitate the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community” (Iowa Department of Education, 2001). Having a vision is the first step in becoming an effective school leader. I have always been a visionary person setting specific goals and outcomes in my personal life and know individually what an effect this can have on performance. There are many different opinions on what is meant by having a vision. One author suggests that visionary leaders, principals, do their best when they have the ability to diagnose the status of their school to identify critical areas that need to be improved and to establish a focused plan for addressing these needs (Siegrist, 1999).

Developing a vision takes time and careful planning. It is important to keep in mind that implementing a vision is an ongoing process that is always changing and

expanding focusing on the particular needs of the school and its students at any given time. Planning ahead and being proactive is very important. I feel that much more can be accomplished in a more positive and supported way if the principal has a vision for the future direction of his or her school. Although the school principal plays a vital role in shaping a vision, it will be much more successful if the vision is one that everyone agrees with and embraces. It is important, therefore, for a principal to involve teachers in the planning of a school vision since they are the ones who ultimately must turn the ideas into practical classroom applications. If teachers feel actively involved in developing the vision, they will be much more likely to carry through with its development (Lashway, 1997). Educational institutions today are constantly changing because of the diverse needs of a particular school or its students. Therefore, the vision of a principal or school might need to be modified to make a more direct impact. Educational leaders must constantly be analyzing and evaluating their plans as well as fine-tuning the paths they wish to take on a daily basis. This constant analysis will help ensure that the vision can be implemented and supported by everyone.

I believe developing a vision is a very important first step in becoming an effective school leader. The vision of the school I would be leading would have to be tailored to the specific needs of that school context. Although I already have a core set of beliefs, I would take several actions to accomplish the task of developing a collective vision. It would be important to be informed of the history of the school as well as to include an assessment of the needs of the staff, students, and parents. I feel it would be important to involve all stakeholders in this process in order to establish their trust and support. This evaluation might be accomplished through surveys, discussions, and an



overview of the school climate itself. Having completed an assessment of past and present needs and the desires of everyone involved, I would then have the tools to facilitate the refinement of a vision that meets the needs of everyone.

### Instructional Leadership

A principal's role in the instructional development of schools has been a focus of educational research for more than twenty years. Instructional leadership is often defined as a blend of several different tasks, such as supervision of classroom instruction, staff development, and curriculum development (Whitaker, 1997). Principals who demonstrate effective instructional leadership skills can have a positive effect on teachers, classroom instruction, and student achievement (Blase, 1999). Standard number two states that "a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth" (Iowa Department of Education, 2001).

One study that examined the everyday strategies of principals and how their instructional leadership influenced teachers resulted in some very interesting findings. Two major themes that were identified as being positive for effective principal leadership include talking with teachers to promote reflection and promoting professional growth and related strategies (Blase, 1999). Principals who promoted reflection by teachers used five primary talking strategies. These include making suggestions, giving feedback, modeling, using inquiry and soliciting advice and opinions, and giving praise. Teachers who were questioned about principals using these techniques reported positive effects on their motivation, satisfaction, self-esteem, sense of security, and feelings of support.

Effective instructional leaders use several different strategies to promote professional growth such as providing formal staff development opportunities, providing time regularly for teachers to work collaboratively, developing coaching/mentoring relationships among educators, being flexible as to the use of diverse approaches to teaching and learning strategies as well as providing essential resources to support program redesign, working to create cultures of lifelong learning, and implementing action research with faculty in order to implement new strategies on student learning (Blase, 1999). As shown from this study and many others, principals who are defined as effective instructional leaders tend to use a range of the above strategies and using these leadership strategies enhances teachers emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally.

I believe leaders who work effectively with all teachers increase teacher enthusiasm and motivation and have a positive effect on students by creating a productive learning environment throughout the entire school. I strongly agree with the research conducted by Blase about effective instructional leaders. As a new principal in a school, I would work to develop strong relationships with my staff members. One of my first priorities would be to make sure an open line of communication is established between the entire staff and myself. I would also make sure teachers are provided collaboration time throughout the school week. Learning what areas they would like to focus on for their staff development needs would be imperative. Professional development should also be aligned with the school's vision and the instructional goals set for students. In addition, I will ensure that all teachers follow the eight Iowa Teaching Standards and Criteria that were adopted by the Iowa Department of Education on May 10, 2002 (Iowa Department of Education, 2002). The eight teaching standards and forty-two criteria

were developed and adopted to provide Iowa school districts with a consistent approach to quality teaching. The Iowa teaching standards also serve as the foundation for comprehensive evaluations of teachers and their instruction as well as for professional development plans to facilitate teacher quality.

### Organizational Leadership

The third Iowa Standard for School Leaders that “a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment” (Iowa Department of Education, 2001). This standard focuses on the organizational leader. A principal’s organizational responsibilities can cover a wide range of areas from ensuring that the school building itself is safe, clean, and well kept to keeping current with emerging trends and operational procedures to maximize opportunities for successful learning. An effective organizational leader must have good time management skills so all of the school’s organizational goals can be met without taking away time from other important areas of a leader’s responsibilities. All of the standards for effective leadership require principals to be committed and willing to put forth a great deal of effort beyond what is normally expected in order to help their schools be successful. As an organizational leader, a school principal must also have effective problem-solving skills so problems can be identified early, confronted, and resolved in a timely manner. Procuring and managing financial resources are also a part of a leader’s organizational responsibilities. The organizational aspects of running a school are necessary and important in maintaining consistency and structure much like running a business (Hart & Willower, 1994).

Another aspect of organizational leadership is that of school culture. There are many factors that can influence individual or group behavior in any organization including that of a school. Culture can be defined as, “the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges” (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p. 28). According to these authors, it is up to school leaders to help identify, shape and maintain strong, positive school cultures. Peterson and Deal go far enough to say that “without these supportive cultures, reforms will falter, staff morale and commitment will wither, and student learning will slip” (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p.28). A statement made by Snowden and Gorton based on their research on this subject says that “if school leaders desire to improve the morale and productivity of those they lead, it is imperative that they strive to understand and enhance the organizational culture of their school or school district” (Snowden & Gorton, 2002, p.113). They also state that “researchers have recently emphasized the importance of developing and maintaining a positive organizational culture...if a school is to be effective” (Snowden & Gorton, 2002, p.116). Four major elements of the culture of an effective school are outlined in this textbook on school leadership. These elements include having an emphasis on academic effort and achievement, adopting a school wide belief that all students can achieve, providing ongoing faculty development and innovations to improve instruction, and establishing a safe and orderly learning environment at all times (Snowden & Gorton, 2002).

Establishing and being knowledgeable about the culture of the school can have effective benefits for the students. Through a program called the Comer School Development Program, Yale’s Child Study Center found that students improve in many

areas when the school works to build an effective school culture (Squires & Kranyik, 1996). These areas of improvement include “self-efficacy, relationships with peers and adults, general mental health, achievement on standardized tests, and classroom grades” (Squires & Kranyik, 1996, p.29). School leaders are key to shaping school culture. In a fieldbook devoted entirely to this process, the authors have identified three key processes for shaping the cultural ways and traditions of a school. These three key processes include reading the culture, assessing the culture, and reinforcing or transforming the culture (Peterson & Deal, 2002). As a principal in a new school, it will be my responsibility to quickly determine the history and current condition of the culture of the school I am going to lead. I will need to identify the positive supportive norms, values, rituals, and traditions that should be continued and built upon as well as to identify any negative things that may need to be changed or altered.

The responsibilities related to organization as a school leader are essential. These responsibilities which include management issues, maintaining the day to day operations of a school, decision making, problem solving, and building a school culture, can be quite overwhelming. However, as in any profession, I do believe that being organized is a very important aspect of being a successful school leader. I feel to be an effective organizational leader, I need to be able to determine which tasks might be assigned to others. Having the ability to delegate authority and responsibilities to others is essential. Currently, as Department Head of Wellness Education I have developed the ability to utilize a limited budget, equipment, and facilities by working together with the staff to maximize student achievement. I believe this position has prepared me well to utilize time management and organizational skills. My position as Logistics Squadron

Commander in the Iowa Air National Guard has also prepared me well as an organizational leader. In that position I am responsible for ensuring the timely delivery of base supplies, fuels, and equipment. I also must organize and lead squadron commander's call meetings and develop agendas for supervisor meetings. I believe that my current skills or proficiencies in these leadership positions prepare me well for school leadership.

### Collaborative Leadership

“Collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources for the benefit of the students” (Iowa Department of Education, 2001) are all included in the responsibilities of the school collaborative leader. It is extremely important today for schools to be actively involved with the community and with families. School districts often need to reach into the community to utilize resources and/or to ask for assistance. We often need to ask the public to vote on issues such as tax referendums to help with the financing of staff and/or building issues. Building positive relationships with community members as well as allowing them to be involved in school district decisions will help ensure that the school and the community can serve one another. A good example of collaboration is the Dubuque Community School District's business partnership program. Every school in the district has established partnerships with local businesses. These partnerships allow for a school-to-work connection by utilizing resources from these businesses as well as giving the business partners a stake in the education of the youth in the community. At Washington Junior High School in Dubuque student-led morning announcements are broadcast to all classrooms, due to the donation and use of video

equipment by its business partner. This provision of equipment is just one of many examples of the advantages and opportunities made available by this unique school business partnership.

More and more families today have needs that cannot be met by the school. However, the neighborhood school can provide information to families about resources available within the community and can help families get into contact with the right people and agencies. Anything a school can do to improve and support the lives of its students and the students' families will help to increase parental involvement and ultimately student achievement. Families who feel welcome in the school, feel that the school cares about their lives, and have their basic needs met may be less likely to be transient as well, thus creating better situations for the children.

A reform movement supporting the school's collaboration with families and community members is that of shared decision-making. Shared decision-making is a process of making educational decisions in a collaborative manner at the school level (Liontos, 1994). These decision-making teams often include students, parents, and community members as well as members of the school staff. It is hoped that by using these groups to make school decisions, teachers, parents, and school staff will have more say about the policies and programs that affect their schools and children (Bauer, 1992). These shared decision-making teams should feel a greater sense of ownership and responsibility in the process of making decisions or changes.

I strongly agree with the research by the above authors related to collaboration. In today's society, the schools play a very strong role in the development of the future citizens for our communities and country. As a school leader, I will work to establish

positive relationships with community members and leaders. One way to build positive relationships is to invite parents and community members to serve on the school's site-council, the group established to make decisions. I will also actively recruit and encourage parents to become involved in the school's parent-teacher association as well as to invite them to be volunteers within the school. To make myself a highly visible member of the community, I will attend city council and school board meetings on a regular basis.

### Ethical Leadership

School principals are faced with many decisions each day. Often these decisions may involve moral or ethical issues, therefore a principal must not only behave responsibly as an individual and be a good role model for students and staff, but he or she must also create an ethical institution (Lashway, 1996). ISSL standard number five states that, "a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner" (Iowa Department of Education, 2001). This standard refers to ethical leadership. This moral expectation for leadership places a tremendous responsibility on school administrators. "For educational administrators, who will be expected to state their principles and bring them to bear on important decisions, ethical reasoning is vital. All leaders must carefully examine their values and beliefs so they can act responsibly and ethically" (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000, p.202). Principals must practice what they preach so to speak and must demonstrate both a personal as well as a professional code of ethics. Being morally and ethically responsible means that at times the principal must put aside any thoughts of personal gain in order to enhance the educational program. A principal must always be



careful to treat people fairly, equitably, and with dignity and respect. Although school leaders are expected to exercise authority over both students and staff, they must do so in an ethical way. Given the fact that school leaders have obligations to many people who often have competing or conflicting values or interests, it can be very difficult to make the “right” decisions. Although there are no easy answers on how to solve moral dilemmas, there are some guidelines educational leaders can follow. First, leaders should respond using ethical standards of caring, justice and critique (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000). The ethic of caring involves “relationships with others and the responsibilities that accompany those relationships, including our relationship with the environment” (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000, p. 210). This ethic allows students to become involved in the decision making process. The ethic of justice involves “equity and fairness in relation to individual and community choice” (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000, p. 211). This ethic demands that administrators serve as advocates for students. The ethic of critique “facilitates conversation and dialogue between people in organizations” (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000, p.211). It encourages conflict and questioning when making decisions. Principals should also examine dilemmas from several different perspectives and be prepared to reframe certain issues. An example of this might be to negotiate an alternative assignment in the case of a parent who objects to a particular assignment on religious grounds. It is widely believed that in order to yield the best possible decisions, administrators should collaborate with others, especially those who bring special insight and knowledge to the situation and those who will be affected by the decision (Denig & Quinn, 2001). Finally, principals should make it a habit to reflect on their own conscience when making moral or ethical decisions. Ethical leadership is a

complex responsibility that must follow the rules of basic human integrity. An ethical administrator must be aware of current research on effective teaching and learning which will allow them to ask questions related to the ethics of critique and justice

In today's diverse society, it is essential that the research in the area of ethical leadership be considered and utilized. As principal, I will make sure to treat all people, including students, parents, and staff, fairly, equitably, and with dignity and respect. I will gather data to ensure an awareness of all diversity within the school community so that all needs are considered when decisions or actions are being made. I will make certain that any moral and/or ethical decisions that need to be made will be done in a collaborative way so that I can combine the justice and care approaches to solving ethical dilemmas. Most importantly, I will strive to be the best role model possible.

#### Political Leadership

The final Iowa Standard for School Leaders refers to political leadership. An educational leader will demonstrate this standard by "understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context" (Iowa Department of Education, 2001). Because schools are public institutions, it is inevitable they will become involved in political realities. For many families, schools are the most accessible part of their government (Lindle, 1999). People, in general, exercise their free speech and citizenship in relation to schools. School officials, including teachers, are often more available and more approachable than most government representatives. In recent years, local, state, and federal politicians have all been involved in the issue of educational reform. This reform has also politicized schools. Education is often seen as the political link to a stronger academic future. Because of these realities, it is the

responsibility of all school leaders to be current in understanding and addressing educational trends, issues, and potential changes that might effect the school environment. Schools must operate within the framework of local, state, and federal policies, laws and regulations. Most importantly, the lines of communication need to be kept open with decision-makers outside of the school community as well as within the school community itself.

To gain the support of citizens and community leaders, school leaders need to keep people informed as part of the decision making process. Recently, the citizens in my district passed a local option sales tax increase of one percent. In response, our superintendent and school board have made it quite clear that any decisions to be made about these funds will be determined with public input. Currently, in my district, a task force has been developed to make decisions regarding a new middle school and the needs of a downtown early childhood center through the use of parent surveys. As principal, I would seek parental and community input by always keeping the lines of communication open with stakeholders. I believe it is essential to have stakeholder support when making any school-based decisions and determining the need for resources to support these decisions.

The responsibilities and essential skills defined by the ISLLC and ISSL Standards for effective leadership for principals can be quite overwhelming. Most of the literature that examines the skills of successful school leaders makes reference to many of the same qualities that are outlined in the Iowa Standards for School Leaders necessary for principalship licensure. It is a fact that principals do have an effect on school outcomes and student achievement either positively or negatively. Effective principals who impact

student achievement positively must be skilled team-builders, instructional leaders, and visionary risk-takers. They must exhibit integrity, embrace responsibility, and be open to taking on new roles in our ever-changing society (Terry, 1999). My experiences as both an educator and a military officer have helped prepare me as a leader. There is a strong correlation between the standards that have been developed for school leaders and the experiences I have had as a military leader. As a commander, I have been an instructional leader by ensuring that my troops are proficient in their work skills and have been exceptionally trained to be prepared at all times to meet their military obligations. Collaboration is an essential part of my job as I work with senior non-commissioned officers as well as junior officers to accomplish a task or mission. Our unit has also established strong ties in the community by volunteering numerous hours to school education programs, donating blood to community blood banks, and helping disadvantaged families. It has also been my responsibility to ensure that the vision and goals of the squadron are being met at all times. Although being an educational administrator carries with it several demanding responsibilities, I believe that becoming a school principal would be an exciting challenge. My past and current leadership experiences have given me the confidence and desire to meet the challenge of the secondary school principalship.

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