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## What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

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## What I believe about leadership and education : a reflective essay

### Abstract

To be an effective leader, one needs to have many characteristics. She needs to be a leader of reflection, change, learning and service. When a principal reflects, she will be a better principal. She will know how to make better decisions. A leader that makes changes is an effective leader. With reflection, a principal can realize what needs to be changed to help students in her school. A principal needs to be constantly learning and encouraging her teachers to continue their learning. When principals and teachers continue learning, they can be better educators. Finally, principals need to be service oriented. When a student is well rounded in all aspects of life, including service learning in the community, they become a better educator. An effective leader encompasses all these qualities and effectively implements them.

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION:  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

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Master of Arts in Education

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by

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Dr. Nicholas Pace



A desire to become an educator can happen for many reasons and take different directions for any individual. My own desire began with some experiences in high school and college. After becoming a teacher, I ultimately thought I could have a larger impact on students as a principal.

While I am an educator for a variety of reasons, the main one is to help kids. I believe a teacher can make a big difference in a student's life, and I want to be such a person. High school was a difficult time for me, and there is one teacher who stands out in my mind as a teacher who helped get me through it. Looking back at this teacher makes me realize that I want to help students the way he helped me.

The special teacher who sticks out in my mind is Dr. Patrick Monahan, my senior year English teacher. Dr. Monahan was memorable for me because he told me I didn't know how to write an English paper. This upset me, but it was the second part of his note on the first paper I turned into him that made the difference, "See me during lunch." I went to see him and he showed me the mistakes I was making. Dr. Monahan was the first teacher to really reach out to me like that, willing to take time out of his schedule to meet with me to help. That "lunch date" was the first of many meetings. It wasn't until college did I realize what a difference he made in my life. Dr. Monahan made me realize the impact one individual can have in someone's life.

Another factor that played into my becoming an educator was my experience with Young Life, a Christian organization that reaches out to high school students. I was a volunteer in college, where I became a responsible adult in kids' lives, someone they could talk to when they had a problem. Being part of this organization made me realize that I could always help students if I become a teacher; I could be a responsible adult in my students' lives that they could trust.

Education is one of the most important components of our society. Education is what molds our children into responsible, productive adults in this world. Education not only teaches core subjects such as reading, writing and mathematics, but also about what it means to be an adult through role models.

I have tried to make a difference in the lives of many students as a teacher at Central Alternative High School. I teach students who others have given up on, and who sometimes have given up on themselves. Now I want to make a difference as a principal. Below I share what my philosophies and beliefs about what an educational leader should be.

Education should be an active experience. Students understand ideas more when they learn them on their own, not when they are told how something is done. Anyone can memorize a piece of information when a teacher lectures, but to really learn it, a student needs to discover it on his or her own. Not that the teacher isn't involved, but the "teacher" becomes more of a "facilitator" of the process of learning. The teacher guides students to new ideas and discoveries.

I also believe that all students can learn. I teach math, which is often thought of as the dreaded subject, but it does not have to be. With the right techniques and attitudes, all students can learn math. I need to make some adjustments in my classroom for this to happen. One adjustment is tests. I do not grade solely by tests. In fact, I hardly ever use tests as my assessment. A much more accurate assessment of a student's knowledge is brought out by projects. I create projects for different topics so students can show what they have learned in their own creative way. Another way I assess student learning is through journaling. If a student can write to me how to solve a problem, it shows me he/she has a deeper understanding of that topic. Many tests are just a regurgitation of a concept, while I incorporate students showing me a process of their thinking in projects and journaling.

Another way for students to be successful is that students need high expectations. If teachers set their expectations high, students will achieve those goals. One important component of setting high expectations is an emphasis on revision. If a student makes a mistake, he or she needs to revise their work until it meets my expectations. The process of revision helps students to have a deeper understanding of concepts. Also, having high expectations teaches students to have a high work ethic. Students should be proud to put their name on their work. Revision helps them realize how wonderful their work can be.

I decided to enter the educational leadership program for the same reason I became a teacher, because I want to make a difference in kids' lives. As a principal, I will not only be able to directly influence kids, but also have a larger indirect influence on them as well. I will be the person working with teachers to help them become better educators. This will in turn help students, improving teacher instruction will improve student success.

Another reason I entered the educational leadership program is I think I possess distinct qualities which would allow me to grow into a great principal. I am an organized person, which will help me accomplish goals for a school. I am also ethical and trustworthy. These qualities, I believe, will inspire others to follow my vision. I have a strong passion for Central Alternative High School, and I believe this passion will follow me wherever I go.

Leadership is an important element of all schools. Leadership is what establishes a school focus. Being an effective leader requires several vital characteristics. The first part is a willingness to listen. Leaders need to listen to what the teachers are looking for. This may not always be what your top priority is, but I think it's important to hear what they have to say.

Secondly, leadership is having a vision. If the principal or leader doesn't have a vision, then there isn't a focus for your school. The principal needs to have a vision and then convey that vision to her staff. A principal needs the staff on board with her vision, or the vision will not have a chance of becoming reality.

Thirdly, leadership means being honest. If a leader isn't an honest person, then no one will trust that leader. Being honest with your staff will make them want to follow your ideas and vision. If you do not have this trust and honesty with your staff, then no one will trust your vision.

Finally, being a leader means following one's heart. If the decisions one make as a leader are what she believes are best for one's school and staff, then the leader has done the right thing. Being a leader isn't always making the popular decision, but it's always making the right one. One aspect to ensure the best decisions are being made is through reflective practice.

### **Leader of Reflection**

An effective principal relies on reflective practice as an important part of her job. John Dewey defines a reflective practitioner as

the teacher who thinks systematically about how to integrate interesting content and sound pedagogical practices, about how best to adapt content and methodology according to the experiential levels and interests of students, and about how to exercise the teacher's collateral responsibilities toward students and the community, (Drake & McBride, ¶3).

There are many ways the skills of a reflective practitioner enhance the qualities of an effective school principal as defined by the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL).

The first ISSL standard is visionary leadership. Visionary leadership and reflective leadership go hand in hand. Reflection on decisions made for the school environment and the overall vision for the school is incredibly important. Dewey said reflective thought is “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge,” ([www.infed.org](http://www.infed.org), ¶2). My interpretation of Dewey is that any visions a principal has for her school needs to be considered or reflected on carefully.

Instructional leadership is the second ISSL standard. “When a teacher turns her attention to giving kids a reason for listening to what they (the teacher) say, then teaching itself becomes a form of reflection-in-action,” (Schoen, ¶10). Reflection in instruction is important to assess what students learn. The leader needs an assessment of what is going on in the instructional world to figure out what needs changing. Reflection on instruction is important to improve student achievement and to determine how effective learning or motivational theories are.

The third ISSL standard is organizational leadership. A school or organization has many components. “Reflection helps the CEO (principal) understand the implication and, equally importantly, the relative criticality of each (part of the organization),” (Malik, ¶5). It is important to reflect on the organizational part of a school to make sure all parts are working to the best of their abilities. Reflection will help this happen. Parts of an organization may need to be changed. Reflection on what is happening would help a principal figure

out what to change and how best to change it. Even if things are going well, reflection will help one “understand why they did” (Malik, ¶5).

Reflection is an important part of being a collaborative leader, which is the fourth ISSL standard. “The behaviors and skills related to collaborative work should be integral parts of the curriculum and not considered an add-on element. Evidence indicates that professionals grow through an interactive process of learning from each other,” ([www.wm.edu](http://www.wm.edu), ¶5). Teachers and leaders learn from one another when they take time to sit down and actively reflect together. This is important in collaboration. Without reflection, teachers and leaders would not learn from each other. Leaders are more successful when they collaborate and reflect.

The fifth ISSL standard, ethical leadership, when combined with reflection is significant in being an effective leader. An ethical leader is one who reflects on her decision to be sure it is the best one. Blunt (2003) said, “I ask them to take all of that reflection and square it against their daily calendar...I ask them to address the question –What do you need to do to get clearer about your purpose and your core values and beliefs...” (p. 39). Blunt is telling us we need to reflect on what we believe in and then live it out. We need to know what values and ethics we hold and then put them into action. Abraham Lincoln said, “...the ultimate test of his leadership capacity...came in reaching the very goal that he had so long

sought—leadership of a nation...this is what ultimately tests the character of all who aspire to reach leadership once they arrive” (Blunt, 2003, p. 35).

Political leadership is the sixth ISSL standard. Reflection is also an important part of being a political leader. Leaders need to reflect on what legislation is being passed to be sure she agrees that it is what is best for students. According to Kenneth Wolf, “reflection is what allows us to learn from our experiences: it is an assessment of where we have been and where we want to go next,” ([www.ncpublicschools.org](http://www.ncpublicschools.org), ¶1). Reflecting on what is happening in the political world will help leaders to focus on where to go next. Education should not stand still; leaders need to have a vision of where education will be in the future. “Being a reflective practitioner requires time, practice and an environment supportive to the development and organization of the reflection process,” ([www.ncpublicschools.org](http://www.ncpublicschools.org), ¶11). Time is an important factor in being a reflective practitioner.

Being a reflective practitioner is an important part of being an educational leader. Reflection in what one does or wants to do will help make more positive conclusions. “In every case of reflective activity, a person finds himself confronted with a given, present situation from which he has to arrive at, or conclude to, something that is not present,” ([www.infed.org](http://www.infed.org), ¶4). Every decision an educational leader makes should have the reflective process with it. Using the

reflective process efficiently will enable a good school leader to effect positive growth in her school.

### **Leader of Change**

The leader of a school is the most important player in bringing about educational change Philip Hallinger said, “Both the school effectiveness research and the classroom effectiveness research identified principals as keys to schools ability to implement the kinds of changes that would meet this need,” (Turnbaugh Lockwood, ¶6). Research shows that principals are the key to important changes in schools.

This research impacts me to a large degree. It tells me that I need to be involved in my school as much as possible. Research says that “the role of the principal (was moved) from the background to the foreground,” (Turnbaugh Lockwood, ¶7). This means I need to be active and conscience of everything that is happening in my school to be the most effective leader I can be. Being a leader does not mean sitting on the sidelines coaching my teachers, it means I need to be out there in the classrooms with them. I need to be apart of what is going on in every aspect of the school. People will not just know my name, but know my face too.

The first ISSL standard is visionary leadership. “The refinement of the vision and the action plans that make that vision a reality are often the result of a cascading process of leadership,” (Jacoby, ¶3). To make a vision happen, the

leader needs to put the wheels in motion. If educational change is going to occur, there needs to be a vision of where it is going. The leader needs to start that change and get others involved in it.

Instructional leadership is the second ISSL standard. Research on instruction is constantly changing in education. “Research and exemplary practice have documented that the principal is a central element in improving instructional programs within the school,” ([www.sedl.org](http://www.sedl.org), ¶10). A principal needs to believe in instructional change for teachers to believe in it. Great principals will encourage and assist teachers with instruction to make them better for students.

Principals also need to be at the forefront of changes involved in organizational leadership. Organizational leadership includes school operations and policies, safety and security, personnel procedures and school scheduling. There could be many changes to these aspects of a school any given year. I think back to when I was a student; we didn’t need to have lock-down procedures, but now every school has them. It is the principal’s job to help with these changes that will occur in a school. Some may be easy, others may be difficult, but it will go smoother if the principal is in the front supporting and encouraging organizational changes.

Collaborative leadership, the fourth ISSL standard, and educational change involves a variety of people working together. To have collaborative

partners in the community, the principal needs to be actively involved.

Community members or organizations may be able to help with an educational change, but they need to be involved to help with it. It is the principal's responsibility to get involved in the community and gain support for the change. An important role of the principal is "to engage with parents and members of the community whenever possible. The interaction...wins deep, sincere support and ownership from parents and community members," (Jacoby, ¶7). When a principal wants a change to occur, it will help to have the support of parents and community members. This will happen if there is already a relationship there and others feel invested in the school.

The fifth ISSL standard is ethical leadership, which is important for educational change. Principals need to have similar values and beliefs of those they work with. If they are seen as people that can be trusted, teachers and community members will be more willing to embrace educational change.

"...Effective change facilitation occurred in schools that were administered by principals who communicate particular expectations and model the norms they (teachers and the community) support," ([www.sedl.org](http://www.sedl.org), ¶12).

The final ISSL standard, political leadership, involves responsibilities that include knowing current issues affecting teaching and learning, as well as state and federal laws. For an educational change process to occur, it needs to be aligned with national, state or district standards or laws. A principal also needs to

be knowledgeable of current issues in teaching and learning. This ties into instructional leadership, as instructional leaders need to know what research based learning strategies are best for kids. Political leadership also entails this concept. Principals must be aware of what is going on in the political world to know how to best help students.

Principals are key factors in educational change. They are the ones that need to “rally the troops” together to figure out what is best for students. Principals need to know what research based instruction is out there and find what works for their school. They also need to be an ethical person so community members and teachers know they can follow them. Finally, a principal has to have a vision for the change, otherwise it will not happen. “Principals that lead and guide others in school change take risks but not carelessly or without forethought. Furthermore they encourage others to be risk takers by providing an environment that makes this safer,” ([www.sedl.org](http://www.sedl.org), ¶9).

### **Leader of Learning**

In addition to piloting the school in educational change, a leader of learners has the responsibility for improvement of learning for both students and adults. “Effective principals are strong educators, anchoring their work on central issues of learning and teaching and continuous school improvement,” (Seremet, ¶1). Student learning and improvement is a crucial goal of a principal, and to

accomplish this objective, teachers need to be trained in the best possible ways to reach this goal.

This will be an incredibly important part of my job as a principal. Student learning should be the focus of everything I do in my school. Research says that “students need access to standards-based learning opportunities,” (Miller, ¶1). Standards-based learning helps students accomplish goals and have a desire to learn. When students do not understand a topic or feel frustrated, misbehavior results. “The teacher’s challenge is working with individual student needs and the wide span of skills in the classroom,” (Miller, ¶4). When individual student needs are met, students can be successful in the classroom.

The next challenge as a principal is to help teachers accomplish the goal of student improvement. According to Seremet, to accomplish this goal, a principal needs to promote collaborative problem solving and open communication; collect, analyze and use data to identify school needs; use data to identify and plan for needed changes in the instructional program; and implement and monitor the school improvement plan. This needs to be a collaborative effort by the principal and the staff. If it is not, the staff may not believe in the changes that need to be made.

“Principals must also ensure that staff development needs are identified in alignment with school improvement priorities,” (Seremet, ¶1). Staff development is the key for teachers to improve student learning. Teachers need to know how

to help students learn better, which is best done through staff development opportunities. According to Guskey (2001), there are four staff development principles: to have a clear focus on learning and learners, focus on both individual and organizational change, make small changes guided by a grand vision, and provide ongoing professional development that is procedurally embedded. These principles are clear, consistent, and are important to the process of improving results. Successful staff development can make an incredible impact on student learning and improvement.

The most important implication of this research involves staff development. Staff development is crucial to teach teachers how to teach students better. Part of the problem in many schools is teachers do not have the skills and strategies to improve their own teaching. With appropriate and beneficial staff development, teachers will be equipped to help all students improve. Processes that are likely to improve student learning include “participants’ motivation and commitment (to staff development) and learning at the individual and organizational levels,” (Guskey, ¶ 39). Encouraging teachers to try new strategies in the classroom through staff development will improve student learning. Support from the principal needs to be in place for teachers that are unsure or hesitant to try new strategies. Just any staff development will not be adequate. The principal and teachers needs to look at where students have gaps in achievement and focus staff development on that. Incorporating staff into those

decisions will give staff some power in what needs improving. If a principal tries to implement strategies that staff members do not feel are helpful, then it will not be successful. Allowing staff input on what to change will make the staff development a success.

This research is directly tied to the ISSL standards. The standards of visionary and instructional leadership have an alignment with a school's curriculum. Focusing on student improvement relates to the mission of the school and district and analyzing the curriculum. Student improvement should always be part of the school's mission. Also, the principal and staff need to analyze the curriculum to determine what changes may need to happen to improve student learning.

This research also aligns with organizational and political leadership. Organizational leadership requires appropriate school and program scheduling. There may be times that adjusting scheduling could improve student learning and should be examined by the principal and staff. Also, effective political leadership demands that the principal thoughtfully consider current issues affecting teaching and learning. The current issues which affect teaching and learning also affect student improvement. These issues need to be observed to determine how to help students improve.

The leader's role in student and adult learning is an essential one. Teachers need to learn how to improve student achievement. The principal needs

to offer beneficial staff development opportunities to train staff properly. A staff ready with new strategies will improve student achievement.

### **Leader of Service**

The role of a principal as the leader of service is something that is still being researched and evaluated. Research does say that incorporating service in schools will “help students to become more active members of the community, increasing student knowledge and understanding of the community...and encouraging students’ altruism and caring for others,” (Billing, 659). It is the leader’s responsibility to encourage and examine how service in school can be implemented.

As stated earlier, the principal has numerous responsibilities. An interview shows that to encourage service a principal needs to “serve on the Community Service Learning (CSL) Leadership Team, support CSL activities with his presence and participation, and is responsible for the inclusion of CSL in the school improvement plan,” (Driscoll, 2006).

This research applies to me as a leader just as previous research does. It is important to actively incorporate service into my school. Being a part of service teams and making sure teachers are getting the help they need are just a couple of the responsibilities of a principal.

Community members support service learning because they feel it includes “active participation, thoughtfully organized experiences, focus on

community needs, structured time for reflection, opportunities for application of skills and knowledge and development of a sense of caring for others,” (Billig, 659). People in the community want well-rounded students, so I believe it is part of the principal’s responsibility to listen to people in the community and to offer those types of programs. Also, many argue that service in schools allows “students to gain a greater understanding of concepts while they contributed to their communities,” (Billig, 659). It is the responsibility of the principal to ensure students have the greatest understanding possible, and integrating service into learning is seen as an excellent way to educate students.

Incorporating these ideas into a school will take time. The most important part as a leader is to have the rest of the staff onboard with this decision. Teachers will need to understand the importance of including service into our curriculum for the inclusion to be successful. Research shows that “teachers like the potential for service-learning to impart practical experience, improve academic performance, create better citizens, and aid in personal development,” (Billig, 659). Not only does incorporating service into learning make better citizens, but it also improves academic performance.

Along with teachers, students also need to understand the importance of infusing service into a school. According to Wegter, (2004, p. 3) “some classes encourage students to develop products which are helpful to the school and

community.” Students will feel a sense of pride when they can help their school or community.

This research aligns with the ISSL standards. Visionary leadership, the first standard, ties into the curriculum aspect. Visionary leadership looks at planning, data collection and effective communication. These are necessary components in implementing and gauging the success of service in learning in schools.

Instructional leadership is another standard that aligns with this research by analyzing the curriculum, supervision of instruction, learning theory, staff development and the change process. It is the principal’s responsibility to supervise the instruction that happens in the school. This means ensuring service learning is being incorporated into all classes. This may also require the principal to find appropriate staff development and to evaluate where the school is in the change process to know where to go next. Also, the curriculum needs to be analyzed to find opportunities to incorporate service-learning. “...in order for service-learning to be sustained it needs to be grounded in curriculum,” (Fratturelli, 2006).

Collaborative leadership, the fourth ISSL standard, is also an important component in supporting service learning. It is crucial for schools to have community and business partnerships for service learning to be successful. The principal needs to help teachers make these connections and partnerships.

“...education does not happen just within the walls of the school, but within the whole community,” (Driscoll, p. 2, 2006).

Lastly, an ISSL standard aligned with service and the principal is political leadership, the sixth standard. This standard addresses current issues affecting teaching and learning and professional affiliations and resources. Service learning is a topic that is affecting education everywhere and needs to be addressed and incorporated into learning. Also, it is important for a principal to know about professional affiliations and resources. This can help a principal start service in her school or have places to turn when there is a “bump in the road.” Also, if a principal is involved in professional affiliations, it may encourage teachers to do the same.

Overall, the current research shows that infusing service into schools is beneficial for students, teachers and the community. The principal needs to ensure that service is incorporated throughout the curriculum, not just as an add on element.

To be an effective leader, one needs to have many characteristics. The six ISSL standards clearly state six major qualities a great leader possesses: vision, instruction, organization, reflection, ethics and politics. When a leader learns to incorporate all six standards, she will be a well-rounded principal.

Not only does a leader have these six qualities, but also needs to be a leader of reflection, change, learning and service. When a principal reflects, she

will be a better principal. She will know how to make better decisions. A leader that makes changes is an effective leader. With reflection, a principal can realize what needs to be changed to help students in her school. A principal needs to be constantly learning and encouraging her teachers to continue their learning.

When principals and teachers continue learning, they can be better educators.

Finally, principals need to be service oriented. When a student is well rounded in all aspects of life, including service learning in the community, they become a better educator. An effective leader encompasses all these qualities and effectively implements them.

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