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## A preferred vision for exemplary, character-based educational leadership : a reflective essay

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### Recommended Citation

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## A preferred vision for exemplary, character-based educational leadership : a reflective essay

### Abstract

The pivotal personality in the education equation is the educational leader. Without the leadership and guidance of an individual with impeccable personal character, and an unwavering optimistic vision, the educational establishment will shift and toss on a never-ending sea of improvement initiatives – or sink to the lowest common denominator of sorting people into their traditionally proper roles in society. With those characteristics cited above, a leader has an opportunity to deliver on the promise of educational opportunity for more community members. Even with these characteristics, the delivery of that promise is not certain, but it is more likely. And the greater the number of leaders with these qualities within an educational system, the greater the chance that the entire system can work together for the greatest benefit for all of its component members.

This Research Paper by: Kerry M. Ketcham

Entitled: **A PREFERRED VISION FOR EXEMPLARY, CHARACTER-BASED  
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

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

4/26/05

Date Approved

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4-26-05

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4/26/05

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EXEMPLARY PERSONAL CHARACTER  
IS A NECESSITY FOR  
EXEMPLARY EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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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

Kerry Ketcham

May 2005

Dr. Greg Reed

Over the last two hundred years American education has been many things to many people. Even in the twentieth century it went through dramatic transformations including being used as a sorting and training mechanism for industrial society and creating a more egalitarian society by providing education to previously excluded members of society like the poor and minorities. But in 1980, the *Nation At Risk* report began an age of educational reform that has carried over into the new century. As the United States continues to work through the processes of educational reform, it will be necessary for leaders of great character to step to the forefront and assume the burden of creating an educational system that does more than has ever been asked of schools for a greater number of people than have ever been served.

The litany of expectations being placed on schools is quite extensive. It ranges from basic, traditional education in reading, writing, and arithmetic to special services for the gifted and disabled to an expansion of information-literacy and technology skill training relevant to the twenty-first century. Beyond what is considered to be education in its purest sense, schools are providing or being asked to provide an increasing number of social services including fine arts education and performances, community gatherings, and even health services. To provide this increasing level of services, especially in an age of contracting dollars, will require that schools reach out to other organization,

both public and private, to create systems that work together for the benefit of the entire community. If that is to happen, educational leaders will have to have the personal characteristics and interpersonal and organizational skills to develop and manage the necessary relationships.

The greater number of people to be served includes children of very young ages who are eligible early childhood education like Head Start. It also includes services to special education students beyond the traditional graduation age of eighteen years. Through adult education, educational services may also include programs to adults of all ages including literacy training, special interest classes, and technological training to meet the demands of a modern society. To single parents and economically disadvantaged families the schools may, and in some cases already have, become centers for a wide array of social services from medical to legal and political.

When one considers all of these factors together, it is not difficult to understand why it is so important to have educational leaders who exhibit only the highest level of personal and professional qualities. When challenges come together with high quality leadership, it is much more likely that the results will be both appropriate and excellent. The most important qualities that educational leaders should possess are the ability to develop consensus among community stakeholders, the ability to develop a clear sense of vision for the educational institution, a sincere sense of gratitude for the support of the community and the

trust of the parents, and a boundless, tenacious optimism to carry the community through difficult processes of change and growth in the place and role of the school in the community.

### Philosophy of Education

I look at education from several different vantage points in order to arrive at a complete picture of my beliefs about it. Firstly, there is the personal point of view in which an individual has a right and a duty to be educated in order to be a good citizen and a productive member of society. Secondly, there is the responsibility of society at large and the educational agents of the society in particular -- parents, teachers, administrators, and clergy -- to prepare and deliver meaningful content and context to the next generation to prepare them for their roles as citizens. Finally, there is the role of educational leaders from the building to the national level to constantly adjust the process of delivery in educational settings to make it match the demographic characteristics of a changing society.

I believe that in the United States education is a right that is covered under the umbrella of the "pursuit of happiness." While education in and of itself does not create personal happiness, it provides one the opportunity to discover paths to happiness through personal growth and development. As with every right that exists there is a corresponding responsibility to exercise the right. This means that an individual must pursue whatever means of education s/he needs to arrive at the level of knowledge and skills necessary for the pursuit of her/his personal goals

and ambitions. Every person can learn, but obviously not at the same speed or to the same level. It is therefore imperative that each person assume the responsibility for her/his own pace. It is equally important, in my opinion, that learners demand that their teachers give them their due, the education to which they are entitled.

Those in most immediate contact with the students also have responsibilities. Educators must believe in their students' ability to learn and be able to convince the students of it as well. They must create a learning environment that encourages success. Educators must act as role models, depicting the value of learning and the habits of being a life-long learner. They should also be an example to their students of industrious work habits and value to their fellow citizens even beyond their own classrooms. Educators should also demonstrate through their personal behavior how to live an ethical, the value of risking themselves for a goal, and the importance of caring for oneself physically, emotionally, and spiritually. That's a high standard, but it's a position and a responsibility that should not be entered into lightly or assigned to someone before a serious inquiry into their skills and character.

#### Developing Consensus Among Stakeholders

When a new principal comes to a school, there is often the expectation and hope for a new opportunity to continue what is being done well and right and to fix or strengthen areas of weakness. Occasionally these new administrators



actually live up to these hopes, but all too often disappointment sets in first among staff and students, then in the community and district administration, and probably even for the principal himself/herself. What factors within the control of the principal help explain the difference between those who succeed and those who fail? A primary factor has to be whether the principal is able to develop, articulate, and implement a vision of the school as a learning community and a plan of action through which to reach that vision.

The fourth of the ELCC standards for educational leadership directly addresses this need. The reason it is considered first here is because it is foundational. The mission of the school is to promote student success and there is generally little difficulty in getting all of the school stakeholders to agree upon that general mission. The difficulty comes in defining how that success will be defined and what exactly is needed to take the students from their current state toward the goal. According to *Principal Leadership*, the first step in this process is developing the shared vision. (Wilmore. 2002. pg. 21) This is also the first opportunity to begin the journey to success or failure as a leader. The inherent trap for a person who is strong-willed is that he must go beyond his own perceptions, beliefs, and plans to achieve a shared vision. Those staff and community expectations and hopes for a new beginning must be met first by allowing them to share ownership in the formation of the vision. Successfully incorporating the wide variety of perspectives into the vision will create a

powerful community of support for implementation. The consequence of not allowing real input is the creation of frustration, anger, and resentment that will prevent the realization of any coherent vision as each segment of the community works toward its own goals.

An example serves to illustrate one of the possibilities in this stage. Dr. L was appointed principal of a high school that has a strong blue-collar tradition, but has changed demographically to include a significant proportion of student from a low socio-economic level and who represent a variety of non-white ethnic groups. The differences in the culture and values of the new students when compared to the traditional values of the neighborhood had created a vast divide between expected and actual behavior and achievement. Dr. L met regularly with staff and community to determine what behaviors were important to expect in order to move students toward the agreed upon learning goals. As a result of this shared vision and the constant reinforcement of the vision, the behavior of the students changed dramatically in just two years. The staff and community also noted that with fewer behavioral distractions, more teaching and learning was taking place and student academic achievement improved.

Once the shared vision has been established, it becomes the leader's responsibility to continually express that vision to the community. (Wilmore, 2002, pg. 22) Without constant reminders of the shared vision each segment of the community will naturally slip back into patterns that will promote their own

segment of that vision, sometimes at the expense of the rest of the vision. With reminders at every possible opportunity, the stakeholders remain aware of the ultimate destination and the leader enables them to come along side to assist in the process of progressing toward the goal.

Implementing the shared vision requires more talking, brainstorming, and compromising among the members of the community. This is the next great opportunity for success or failure. One of the components of the shared vision will undoubtedly address curriculum. *Breaking Ranks II* supports this element of the vision by suggesting that it is imperative for the staff and activities of the school. Lack of focus in this area will result in fragmentation of effort, evoke community to determine a set of essential learnings around which to build all of the instructional frustration among student sand staff, and decrease the probability of progressing toward the shared vision. (Rourke. 2004. pg.13) *Principal Leadership* also supports this idea when it says that "all...content area goals should point toward and be aligned with the campus vision." (Wilmore. 2002. pg 22) *Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* draws all of these elements together as the author focuses attention on the need for creating and sharing a vision, building consensus among constituents, managing differences within the community, and evaluating the effectiveness of instructional programs. (Schlechy. 1990. pg. 43)

The final step in creating and implementing the shared vision is described as stewardship. This boils down to the leader constantly re-focusing his attitudes

and activities on the vision and then doing the same for the staff, students, and community. It involves making mid-stream course corrections in the implementation of the vision and basing decisions about the use of resources by applying a vision-based test to those decisions. Failure to discipline shared decisions by results means that the decisions will be disciplined by reference to the interests of factions other than of children. (Schlecty. 1990. pg. 62)

Dr. A's experiences illustrate the negative impact of failure to follow through with these steps. She arrived as principal of a school with a long tradition of academic excellence, exemplary citizenship, and competitive achievement. She came with the support of a small segment of the parent population that had co-opted the interview process for their own ends. Dr. A had neither the support of the staff nor that of the majority of the school community. As a result of her limited support, she arrived at a vision for the school that was a consensus of only her opinions and those with whom she already shared a perspective. She ignored current and historical trends of success and failure and set about re-making the school in her own image. By the end of her very first year as principal she had already made a sizable number of opponents and by the end of her third year she was so embattled that she was facing attacks from not only the staff, but the teachers' union, parents, and students themselves. Even so, she refused to recognize her part in creating the problems and it was left to the district level

administration to remove her from her position in order to bring order back to the high school.

The same hopes and dreams of new beginnings that many students experience with a new school year or a move to a new level of school are shared by staff and community members at the prospect of a new beginning with a new principal. These hopes and dreams can be defined, nurtured, and grown to reality or they can be dashed upon the boulders of frustration and disappointment. Much of the power over this choice resides in the principal's ability to create a consensus in the school community, articulate it, implement it, and keep it alive. That is why the Educational Leadership Constituent Council lists developing consensus within the ISSL standards.

#### Developing a Clearly-Defined and Consistent Vision

Possessing a clear, fully defined, almost palpable vision of what the school should be as a learning community is critical for a principal who wants to be an educational leader. This vision derives from an understanding of current and historical underpinnings of the school as an educational establishment and component of the community and the best available educational research. It must be student-centered and focused on results rather than an attempt to micro-manage the environment. For all of these reasons, the first standard of educational leadership deals with vision.

The vision has to focus on the teacher-student relationship, be empowering to both, emphasize outcomes over methods, and stress the belief that all students are expected to learn. (McAdams. 2000. pg. 8) As the primary contact point of instruction, the teacher is the most critical element in the educational process. Each teacher must believe in the ability of every student to learn and take responsibility for ensuring that the learning takes place. Every teacher should also feel that they have the support of the administration for their instruction and classroom management decisions. Methods of instruction cannot be the focus of control, but should be a large component of staff development in order to give teachers a multitude of instructional options. All of these elements should be observable in scheduled and unscheduled classroom visits by the administrators. And, as Steven Covey puts it, one must "...begin with the end in mind." (Covey. 1990. pg. 14)

The vision has to include the notion of the school as a place of stability and order in the world. Children suffer enough from the instability of the outside world and often within their own families. The school has the opportunity to provide the structure and stability that children need in order to feel safe enough to focus on learning. This means that teacher turn-over must be kept to a minimum, student schedules must be kept as stable as possible, and the policies and procedures of day-to-day operation must be stated and enforced clearly and firmly. For students whose entire world is chaotic the school becomes an island

of order in which they feel safe. (Garbarino. 1995. pg. 59-60) The problem that this creates for the school is that these students will not want to leave and return to the chaos. The vision, therefore, must also include a portrait of how the school serves the students and their families beyond the regular school hours.

The vision of the school as a learning community also has to weave together the disparate threads of curriculum, personal ego, and students' ability to impact the content and quality of their courses. According to Dr. Thomas Cornell, "...the bridge to academic success in urban schools must be built on a foundation that has taken an in-depth look into the issues of curriculum, student self-esteem/self-concept, and student empowerment for learning." (Thomas. 2000. pg. 27) When students feel empowered to impact the school they feel more ownership and responsibility and are less likely to feel isolated, unappreciated, or disaffected. That results not only in greater participation and fewer discipline problems, but it increases the likelihood of students' continuing to attend school, achieve higher levels of learning, and reach graduation. *Breaking Ranks II* also addresses this issue by encouraging the entire staff of a school to be involved in determining the essential curriculum. (Rourke. 2004. pg. 13)

All of this is the responsibility of the principal. The principal provides leadership in the high school community by building and maintaining a vision, direction, and focus for student learning. (Rourke. 2004. pg. 17) The four steps to achieving a campus vision are development, articulation, implementation, and

stewardship. (Wilmore. 2002. pg. 20) The first and third of these steps are very collaborative; the others are much more the individual responsibility of the principal.

### Gratitude and Appreciation

An attitude of gratitude is a definitive element of being an effective administrator. It is imperative that a school administrator feel and express appreciation to a variety of constituents within the school community. This includes everyone from the parents and students to businesspeople in the community to the teachers and staff of the school and to those in authority over the administrator at the district and state levels. The expressions of gratitude and appreciation demonstrated by an administrator have the capacity to “grease the wheels” of educational mechanisms and promote more positive interactions in the future when needs or problems may arise that threaten to derail educational processes. These actions fit ELCC standards six and eight because they help to build collaborative relationships and help the educational leader to work through the political environment of the school, district, or state.

There is something humbling about recognizing the incredible trust that is placed in our hands every day by parents who send their children to our schools. They expect that their children will be safe and will be taught not only the curriculum, but a host of skills relevant to their personal relationships and future work experiences that will assist them throughout their lives. Appreciation for



this trust can be demonstrated in a variety of ways from the corporate to the personal. Corporately, appreciation can be expressed in articles printed in the school newsletter or at brief addresses to public gatherings like PTA meetings, school board meetings, or special performances. These general and somewhat impersonal expressions do not suffice to fully express the complete sense of appreciation that will endear an administrator to the community of parents, but merely lays the foundation of a relationship between the administrator and the individual parents. Personal expressions to individual parents can have an even greater impact. Words of thanks expressed in heartfelt appreciation for parental support and student effort are remembered for a long time by the recipients. Even more long-lasting are words written on a note card or personal stationary. These personal notes don't serve the same purpose as official letters of recommendation which should be on school letterhead; they are lifelong reminders of the impact that the parents and/or students have had on the individual teacher, administrator, school, or community. (WriteExpress Corporation. 2002)

Businesses in the community need to know that the school administration appreciates their involvement in the educational process too. Sometimes that involvement is direct in the form of donations of money, materials, or in-kind services like printing. Those are the obvious levels of involvement that should definitely be noticed and appreciated. In addition, there may be businesses in the community that display posters for school events, employ students in after school

positions, or simply maintain friendly working relationships with the staff and students as consumers. Their goodwill can be nurtured and perhaps spread to other businesses through the application of regular expressions of appreciation for what they do.

The staff of the school needs to experience the expressions of appreciation for their involvement and effort too. (Bulion. 2001) It was Mark Twain who said, "A man can live for a week on a good compliment." Teachers, support staff, and building maintenance personnel are no exception to that. Everyone likes to have their efforts and achievements receive notice. The principal can not only write notes and speak words of appreciation to staff members, but public affirmation in the presence of staff, parents, and students is very important too. Principals can also encourage teachers to express their appreciation for each other and create a climate in which this habit abounds. At Des Moines' Roosevelt High School, a former principal encouraged this habit by asking teachers to write letters of appreciation regarding the effort and achievements of their peers. At one staff meeting a month he would draw two of the notes and the writer and the recipient would each receive a dinner certificate to a local restaurant. All of the notes would then be distributed to the rest of the recipients. Every aspect of the process was covered. Staffers were encouraged to do good things for each other and to express appreciation to each other through the drawing. Many people were encouraged to continue to do good work to support their colleagues by receiving a

thank you note and possibly a gift certificate. And the principal got a monthly opportunity to publicly express appreciation to the staff for their hard work. Sharing the credit or recognition for a good event at school goes a long way toward creating a positive history between individuals and departments and that history can pay real dividends when difficulties or problems arise in the future. Those who have felt appreciated are much more likely to be willing to work toward a mutually agreeable solution and to take some of the responsibility for doing the work necessary to create that solution.

Finally, a principal has a responsibility to express appreciation to district personnel who may rarely receive positive mail, phone calls, or recognition. Frequently this is done at ceremonies and special occasions. A ribbon-cutting ceremony is an excellent example. When an addition or remodeling project is finished, there have been many people involved in making the process happen and in being supportive of the project from its inception. Those people can be invited to attend, be mentioned in the principal's speech, and even be asked to stand in for the photographs of the ceremony. District level administrators who feel they are supported and appreciated by building level personnel are also much more likely to be supportive in future problems or plans.

In short, those who feel appreciated are much more likely to be cooperative and to work harder because of the personal connection that is created between the individuals and organizations involved in the expressions.

Expressions of appreciation can be the difference between an employee, boss, or “customer” that is satisfied or one that is happy and loyal. (Gitomer. 1998. pg. 188) Efforts to write personal notes and publicly express appreciation are rewarded with that loyalty. A climate or culture of collegial appreciation would therefore produce an atmosphere of personal and professional unity that would make for a more productive and harmonious work environment. (WriteExpress Corporation. 2002) That is why a sense of gratitude and appreciation is a critical element for a school administrator.

#### Tenacious Optimism

According to Hall and Hord, change initiatives often lose steam within two or three years after their initial implementation because of lack of support from “above” (federal, state, or district policymakers) or resistance from below (teachers and support staff) (Hall, G. 2000. pg. 7). Policymakers often move on to the next initiative and teachers resist as if each proposed change is just the latest in a long line of educational fads. For an educational leader to implement a systematic change takes a considerable amount of time, effort, and energy. To pursue it over a long time and bring it to fruition requires a leader with incredibly high standards and tenacious optimism. Others have called this characteristic by terms such as positive perspective, hope, faith, optimism and tenacity, and stubborn optimism.

Benjamin Franklin used to say when he was experimenting with electricity: "I haven't failed 1000 times; I have found 1000 ways that don't work, which has put me even closer to a solution." (Franklin. 1989. pg. 371) This is an excellent perspective for an administrator to adopt. If the role of an educational leader is to create an environment filled with learning opportunities and, as the state of Iowa demands, continuous school improvement, then it becomes imperative that the leader have such a passion for the positive vision of his or her school that specific instances of failure do not distract from the levels of purpose and energy necessary to achieve the vision. An important aspect of achieving the ability to overcome setbacks, is to recognize where failures may occur and what the consequences of those failures might be beforehand.

Once you pinpoint what happens if you fail, you will be better prepared to determine if you can live with that result... Think through what is important to you and by doing that you can start to more clearly define what you are really afraid of. Are you afraid your ego might get hurt? Do you define yourself strictly by your accomplishments and not by your values and integrity? Are you afraid a financial failure? Is it because you won't be able to own all those nice things and that is what you need to be happy? (Bukow. 2003. pg 167-168)

Even members of Congress and experts providing testimony regarding school improvement measures speak of the importance of the characteristic of tenacious optimism using the words “tenacious” and “hope” in place of that phrase. They are quoted in the Congressional Record. “The heroes in this freedom movement are many and varied and they are represented among the panel today. They display a drive and tenacity which pushes them to succeed, and their vision and hope for the future pull many others into the movement.” (Esbrandt. 2000)

Tenacity and optimism do not just apply to educational leadership. They are evidenced in excellent business management, coaching of sports, and even a person’s personal endeavors. Often those who possess this characteristic demonstrate it in multiple arenas of life. This can be seen in the lives of poor immigrants in Stuyvesant, NY described by Peter Hamill in the New York Daily News.

If the public school system appeared to be a shambles, there were still school teachers who stubbornly and valiantly insisted on teaching poor children to read. There were brave women who held together their families even after their men had vanished in the wind. They are still doing it. Last year, I spent three hours with a group of adults from the Hospital Workers Union. Most were African-Americans, Hispanics, and immigrants. They were

working for their General Educational Development (G.E.D.) high school equivalency diplomas and as part of their curriculum... At the end of the session, a handsome black woman came to me with two copies of my book to be autographed. "One for me," she said, "and one for my son." She paused. "Write something nice to him," said this woman struggling towards her high school diploma. "In September, he's going to Harvard." God, I thought: this is an amazing country. Who could meet such a woman and not believe in possibility? (Hamill. 2001)

In this example, the teachers, the adult students, and the minor students were all working against significant economic and social disadvantages and yet they possessed that tenacious optimism that allowed them to overcome the obstacles that life had placed in their way. As Helen Keller said "Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope." (Keller. 1903)

It is that great hope that is so essential a possession for an educational leader. Absent that hope, school becomes a place of failure or, at best, a sorting room to separate those who will succeed in society from those who will not. It is the job of the educational leader to create a place where the entire community of teachers, students, and community members is inspired to grow and improve to be ever more than they have been before. Helen Keller attempted to condense the essence of this intense optimism into a creed, stating:

"I believe in God, I believe in man, I believe in the power of the spirit. I believe it is a sacred duty to encourage ourselves and others; to hold the tongue from any unhappy word against God's world, because no man has any right to complain of a universe which God made good, and which thousands of men have striven to keep good. I believe we should so act that we may draw nearer and more near the age when no man shall live at his ease while another suffers." ...These are the articles of my faith, and there is yet another on which all depends—to bear this faith above every tempest which overflows it, and to make it a principal in disaster and through affliction. (Keller. 1903)

An educational leader could have no better creed than this.

### Conclusion

Even considering the role of the individual's responsibility for his or her own education and the importance of the role of societal expectations, the pivotal personality in the education equation is the educational leader. Without the leadership and guidance of an individual with impeccable personal character and an unwavering, optimistic vision the educational establishment will shift and toss on a never-ending sea of improvement initiatives or sink to the lowest common denominator of sorting people into their traditionally proper roles in society. With those characteristics cited above, a leader has an opportunity to deliver on



the promise of educational opportunity for more community members. Even with these characteristics, the delivery of that promise is not certain, but it is more likely. And the greater the number of leaders with these qualities within an educational system, the greater the chance that the entire system can work together for the greatest benefit for all of its component members.

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