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Critical elements essential for exemplary educational leadership : a reflective essay

Susan M. Muehl
University of Northern Iowa

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Critical elements essential for exemplary educational leadership : a reflective essay

Abstract

My core beliefs are very strong when it comes to education. All students need effective staff members who are supportive of their endeavors. A supportive staff member is someone who is apart of the school community, they work well with others through effective communication, they support each other, and they all work toward the common shared vision of the school. My core beliefs match my goals to become an effective principal and the way I live my life.

The cultivation of a supportive community within a school happens over a period of time. The principal is the captain that leads the staff in the direction that fosters the educational mission and benefits the students. The critical ways an effective principal pulls a staff together is through strong community relations, strong management skills, supportive mentor programs, and inclusive visionary skills. I am inspired to go "out there" to put forth my best effort to become a successful administrator.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS ESSENTIAL FOR EXEMPLARY EDUCATIONAL
LEADERSHIP: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education
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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Susan M. Muehl

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Date Approved

Victoria L. Robinson

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Robert H. Decker

Second Reader of Research Paper

2-17-05

Date Approved

John K. Smith

Head, Department of Educational Leadership,
Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

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What I Believe About Leadership and Education

I have always wanted to be a teacher. I remember playing school in the basement with my sister and our friends. We would even go to the trash dumpsters in June because we knew teachers threw out all kinds of “goodies” that we could use in our school. What was their junk quickly became our treasure. Even though our school never lasted more than thirty minutes a day, we had a blast teaching each other and we were all experts on any given subject. My elementary school teachers soon became my mentors and I readily looked up to them and wanted to grow up to be like them. My goal was to be able to write on the overhead and chalkboard; to get lost in a book with a class full of children listening to every word that was read, and most importantly, go into the teacher’s lounge because it sounded luxurious.

While growing up it was engrained that college was after high school. I just assumed that all my friends knew they were going to college as well, but their parents did not believe in education and said they could not afford it. My parents could not afford it either, but with student loans and several part-time jobs to help out with expenses, there was a way. My parents engrained the philosophy that in order to make something of yourself, you had to have some type of post-secondary education. Choosing my major was not as easy as I thought. My mom encouraged me to major in business, so I went that route for two unsuccessful

weeks. My ex-husband helped me realize my need to become a teacher based on all my childhood desires.

During my undergraduate work, I realized my desire for something more in life than a BA degree. I wanted to further my education, and researched administrative options my senior year. I taught for two years before applying and was accepted for the Master's program at UNI. My main reason to become a principal is simple: to positively touch and influence more lives than just a handful in one classroom. My goal will be accomplished by becoming an effective principal.

I value education because my family has valued it for generations. My great-grandmother was a teacher and so were many great aunts and aunts. They taught me the theory that in order to become a more affluent society, then the general population needs to be educated. How else will we have more health care providers, business workers, and politicians as well as the many other fields that need education? We need education for the improvement of society. In the area where I live there is a real lack of importance on education. Many people have the philosophy that since their dad was a John Deere worker and made plenty of money and did not have a college degree, that they do not need one either. Times are changing and now even some factory jobs require some type of post-secondary education for employment. As an educational leader, I want to instill

the need and desire for education, help people to believe in the power of education, and to promote what an education can do for them.

Educational leaders have an opportunity to positively influence parents, students, staff, and community members. They can be the positive role model for others to follow and can demand higher standards of teaching from their staff, which would be reflected by the higher expectations of student achievement. I want to be the type of leader that people look up to for advice and that is very involved in the school and community. Both of my parents have been involved in their community, which spilled over into my life. I witnessed how they gave back to their community, which prompted me to be able to do the same thing.

At the magical age of eighteen, I was appointed to the Evansdale Public Library Board of Trustees and soon became the President. Around the same time I joined the Evansdale Early Risers Exchange Club (a civic group that focuses on the prevention of child abuse) and quickly became the Vice-President. At the beginning of my teaching career I became an active member of the Partners in Education, Site Council, and the School Improvement Advisory Committee. I volunteer and have held camp staff positions for the Boy Scouts of America as well as the Girl Scouts. My reason for volunteering is to give back to the community because they gave to me while growing up. Volunteering also shows students I care about them outside of a school and it demonstrates the need for them to volunteer as well.

As an educational leader, my goal is to be involved in what is going on with the school. To recognize and support student achievement, academically and socially is one of my goals as an academic leader. While becoming a teacher leader, I realized students looked up to me more and respected me more since becoming actively involved in their lives. I care for students by being fair in the classroom, listening to them when they have something to say, by giving them respect and by being involved in their community groups.

With high expectations for students we do goal setting and we monitor their steps in meeting their goals. I demonstrate to them that what they are learning now will impact them now and during their adult and working lives. We talk about careers and how long it will take them to go to school for certain jobs. This involvement encourages everyone to be a lifetime learner and a supporter of education.

My core beliefs are very strong when it comes to education. All students need effective staff members who are supportive of their endeavors. A supportive staff member is someone who is apart of the school community, they work well with others through effective communication, they support each other, and they all work toward the common shared vision of the school. My core beliefs match my goals to become an effective principal and the way I live my life.

Community Relations

As an aspiring principal, one of my critical elements is to build strong community relations between the school, the parents, and the community through positive communication. Strong community relationships are absolutely essential to foster a positive culture for students. Students can see that education is the key to success because they have so many people to guide them. Another critical element is to promote education and student success as much as possible, and to not only see, but feel the value of learning by taking ownership in their education. Everyone in the community needs to become a partner for students in order to meet their “educational needs” (Cordeiro, P., & Kolek, M., 1996, p. 14).

The old African adage of “it takes a village to raise a child” has become increasingly evident. Schools today are expected to give children a strong educational foundation as well as build their sense of community, “the school, family, and community are overlapping influences on students’ growth and development” (Dianda, M., & McLaren, A., 1996, p. 2). When children have several people in their life that care for them and show an interest in them, then they are more likely to succeed.

The principal’s role in the community has gone through changes in recent years. Principals were viewed as educational leaders within their own buildings. Now the public views them as navigators to move and improve the community as a whole through the building of collaboration (Seifert, E., 2002, p. 20). Principals

are expected to develop successful parent groups, such as Parent-Teacher Associations, partners-in-education, and Site Councils to promote a sense of community and to improve student's well-being. In order to improve student's well-being, principals need to keep in mind that there are "five factors as preconditions for successful partnerships: leadership, trust, stability, readiness, and a common agenda" (Cordeiro, P., & Kolek, M., 1996, p. 8). Principals set the tone in their community on how well people, who interact with the school, can work together through their leadership and trust. Once people have a common ground, then they can work together more effectively to benefit all children.

Over time the community has become more involved in the education of students through volunteer and mentor programs. Since the role of the principal has changed, "it has been increasingly evident that the school in a dynamic, changing social order cannot adapt itself to change or make the necessary improvements in its program without involving citizens in its affairs" (Bagin, D. & Gallagher, D., 2001, p. 11). I have personally experienced the positive changes that have taken place in my community through the formation of site council, partners-in-education, and various parent support groups. Students receive extra services and recognition in their community. The community promotes more positive influences in student lives through mentoring, academic achievement recognition, and self-esteem promotions. Students also learn about giving back to their community through service projects around the area.

“Partnerships provide schools – and local associations – with an opportunity to bring the influence of the school, the family, and the community into balance” to build a strong collaboration between the students, the parents, and the community (Dianda, M., & McLaren, A., 1996, p.3). My role as a principal is to be a liaison between the various community partnerships. The ISSL standard number four is related to collaborative leadership. “Schools and communities must work together in collaborative partnerships for the benefit of society as a whole (Willmore, E., 2002, p. 66). When people work together with a spirit of “we can do it” then everyone will benefit. One of my goals is, to help everyone benefit from collaboration through teamwork building opportunities.

Studies have indicated that when several people from various backgrounds work together, then students have enormous benefits; such as: higher grades and test scores, improved attendance, higher homework completion rate, increased civic responsibility and citizenship, and higher graduation rates (Dianda, M., & McLaren, A., 1996, p. 13). When several people support students in their endeavors, then students experience many rewards. Students can see that someone from their community takes an interest in them, which will promote them to socially and academically improve in school.

One of the most important elements to build strong community relations is communication. As a building principal and community leader, I need to keep everyone informed of the activities inside and outside of the school. One of the

ways I can do this is through monthly newsletters. Research recommends that principals mail out monthly newsletters to every family that is involved in the school and to various community leaders. Different school groups, students, staff, and parents need to be given the opportunity to contribute articles in order to build ownership within the newsletter (Schumaker, D., & Sommers, W., 2001, p. 12). My goal is to form a committee to work on a newsletter together and to provide them time and space in which to work.

“Creating school relationships in the community is more important for today’s school than ever in the history of public school education” and it is my intention to promote school-community relationships (Seifert, E. & Vornberg, J., 2002, p. 283). Principals need to keep an open dialogue between the students, the parents, and the community to ensure that everyone can work together. One of my goals is to foster positive working relationships between these three groups for the social success of the students.

Management

My second critical element necessary for exemplary educational leadership is management. My definition of management is to have strong interpersonal communications with the staff, parents, students, and community members. My philosophy aligns with the ISSL standard number three which

states, "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" (Wilmore, E., 2002, p. 52). My management style will be approached as that of a team leader to build staff consensus and positive morale, which will be maintained through effective and open lines of communication.

Principals must be able to create positive and effective relationships with others in the school in order to promote the vision and mission of the school. Principals cannot be stuck in their offices to push paper everyday and expect their schools to run themselves. "Engagement with others is the only way to exercise leadership" and administration without engagement implies a stagnant relationship (Rebord, R., 2003, p. 24). Unfortunately, ". . . principals find themselves devoting nearly all of their time to management responsibilities, because many of the issues demanding their time are unanticipated" (Kowalski, T., 2003, p. 29). This last year my principal felt compelled to stay in his office to complete paper work. This is a common "mistake that some principals and superintendents make when they assume their position is isolating themselves from those they supervise" (Rebord, R., 2003, p. 24). He was constantly stressed about interacting with the staff while he tried to complete his own assignments and his stress eventually infected the staff. Without realizing it, he lowered the morale of the building because he made unilateral decisions.

Part of the management process includes building consensus among the staff. An effective administrator must know when to build consensus and when to be unilateral. There are certain decisions that must use “consensus and majority decisions” especially when “the decision has to be approved by all the participants in order to make it work” (Smith, R., 1995, p. 11). One way to build consensus is through teamwork. “Team work is an excellent way of getting things done, but there has to be consensus among everyone involved that by working together better decisions can be made” (Smith, R., 1995, p. 9). Creation of a behavior management system would be an example of a time to take a team approach to build consensus amongst the staff. Those faculty members involved with the system would feel a sense of ownership in the decision making process and are more likely to implement the behavior management system positively.

I have been fortunate enough to be apart of a team building process where consensus was the overall goal. As a teaching body, we were to design a plan for transportation routes for our school. We broke out into our grade-level teams for discussion and then we came together as a whole staff to discuss our ideas. Many of the teachers had similar plans which made the whole staff discussion easier. Our principal guided the staff through some questions and we designed a plan that we could all support and effectively implement.

The other end of the management continuum was where our principal made some curricular decisions without consultation from the staff. That made

me realize consensus helps teachers feel they have a voice with what happens in a school. There are certain times where “. . . the management process must involve consensus and recognize that colleagues need to be able to *co-determine* what happens in the school” (Smith, R., 1995, p. 5). An effective principal knows when the proper time is to build consensus and when to make a unilateral decision.

The formation of consensus can build staff morale. Once teachers see that my vision is to include them in the decision making process, then they will know that I value their opinions. “The next step in preparing oneself to be an effective administrator is to adopt an approach to motivate one’s colleagues to attain the educational vision that has been jointly developed” (Palestini, R., 2003, p. 58). An educational vision and mission must be jointly developed through the consensus process which would in turn, build staff morale. All staff members need to be included in the vision and mission process so they feel apart of the school community and they feel valued as a person. Once the staff feels valued, then they will be more open with each other and more eager to share their ideas. Teachers and staff will interact in a positive way that would build the culture of the school which would in turn improve the morale of the building:

Finally, the management system must establish in personnel a willingness to work as part of an empowered team in which members are valued for their own worth, work together in a caring and cooperative manner, and are held accountable for their performance (Marple, J., 2002, p. 31).

The willingness to work will come through the consensus process which will foster a positive learning environment for the staff and the students.

In order to foster consensus and build staff morale, a principal must have strong communication skills. They must be able to effectively articulate the vision and the mission of the school while “. . . maintaining a suitable teaching and learning environment, to develop school goals, and to inspire others to achieve these goals” (Kowalski, T., 2003, p. 4). A school staff should know exactly what a principal values and what their expectations are. The only way to effectively pass along those goals is through positive communication. Principals must let their staff know what they value and what they expect from others in order to cultivate a positive school climate.

“A principal is a leader only when the teachers and staff members recognize and accept her as the school’s leader. No one is a leader without a following” (Rebore, R., 2003, p. 24). My staff will recognize me as a team leader because I plan to incorporate them and their ideas into a shared vision of an

effective school, which is a critical element of my management style. This will not happen over night, but it will happen through a gradual change process that includes strong written and verbal communication of my values and expectations. “The management philosophy should support a quality improvement process that encourages everyone in the organization to define and to continuously pursue quality, all day every day, and with every act and decision support the organization’s achievement of purpose” (Marple, J., 2002, p. 29). My management philosophy will encourage everyone in the school to do their best and to work together for the focus of our school, which is the academic success of our students.

Mentoring

An essential critical element to have as an effective administrator is to support and foster the learning environment of the school. One way to promote that scholarly culture is to provide mentors to beginning teachers and to be a mentor for the staff. An administrator may not be able to provide all the support a new teacher needs, whereas, “mentors know how to listen, be nonjudgmental, and provide useful feedback and modeling” (Fibkins, R., 2002, p. 125).

Administrators may not have the necessary time and flexibility to work with new teachers that veteran teachers may have, especially a veteran teacher on the same team as a new teacher.

My role as a mentor for the staff is to have an open door policy where I am available to answer questions, to provide feedback, and to provide support. Since I will evaluate the staff, my role as a mentor is more of an advisory role, “principals cannot, in the strictest sense of the word, serve as mentors, since a mentor cannot be responsible for, nor be involved in the evaluative process” (McEwan, E., 2002, p. 144). In my opinion, that would be a conflict of interest. I can however, help a beginning teacher by “be[ing] a visible presence in the classroom of new teachers during the early weeks of the school year” (McEwan, E., 2002, p. 148). This way they could see that I am here to help and am genuinely interested in how they perform in the classroom.

The bottom line in the educational system is the students. Our whole reason for teaching, administrating, and mentoring is to educate the youth of today to run our country for years down the line. The mentoring process is a supportive tool for beginning teachers. Mentors have the unique ability to “. . . help their mentees fine-tune their professional skills, enhance their grasp of subject matter, locate and acquire resources, and expand their repertoire of teaching modalities” (Portner, H., 2003, p. 8). This is great on-going professional development and correlates with an apprenticeship type system that has worked for years. On the job training and learning from mistakes is sometimes the best way to learn.

“The major goal of a mentoring program should be to help every teacher be highly skilled, self-aware, inclusive, energetic, and creative, and to carry a zest for teaching into the classroom every day” (Fibkins, W., 2002 p. 32). We need teachers who are innovative and who pique the interest of students so students succeed academically and personally. Through reflection of the teachers in my elementary years, I realized many of them were intelligent and they enjoyed teaching. They were energized and could not wait to share their knowledge with me and they made learning fun. Those same innovated teachers were creative and they made me feel welcome in the classroom. Many mentors know these traits of good teaching and can help pass on their knowledge to their mentees, which has a greater impact on students since they will reach more students through shared ideas.

Teachers, unfortunately, do not automatically come out of college knowing how to teach. Many have a good idea of the whole teaching process, but until a teacher has their very own classroom and faces the daily challenges that teaching offers, then it may be difficult to fully understand. Therefore, we all need people with which to share our ideas and discuss our day. A great listener is someone who understands what we do on a daily basis and can have compassion.

A mentor is a great resource person who fits that profile, “we learn that those who are mentored will earn more, will become more actively engaged in the subject matter, are more likely to win awards or continue with a course of study, and can more easily make the transition from being passive consumers to being colleagues” (Reinarz, A., 2001, p. 8). In order to have a successful mentor-mentee relationship their needs to be a framework of open communication to help support that relationship.

A supportive framework begins with choosing an appropriate mentor. “Mentors should be people who are known and welcomed, bearers of gifts, not grief, someone who knows the sounds and smells of the classroom without abandoning the reality that a teacher’s day involves many different and demanding responses: confrontation, care, deflection, encouragement, reprimand, and more” (Fibkins, W., 2002, p. 34). It takes a special and knowledgeable person to give up some of their time to work with new teachers and to be willing to put in the necessary time to foster a positive relationship, “. . . it is imperative that mentors take time to build a trusting relationship with their mentees at the start of their relationship” (Eckerman, D., 2000 p. 21). Once a mentor is in place, then the mentor and mentee need to build a relationship built on open communication, “open communication is necessary to build trust, but trust is necessary for open communication to occur” (Eckerman, D., 2000, p. 25).

Trust is a two way street and it needs to be cherished by both parties involved. The mentee needs to believe in and trust that the mentor is knowledgeable. It is the mentor's role to "advise and guide them on how to take care of the nitty-gritty aspects of classroom life that, if unattended to, will create mischief" (Fibkins, W., 2002, p. 49). The mentee needs to acknowledge the years of experience a mentor has and to be open to new ideas.

On the other hand, a mentor has to know when to let the mentee spread their own wings in their classroom, "valuing differences and supporting mentees as they learn to develop their own skills and talents is a critical aspect of the role of mentors" (Eckerman, D., 2000, p. 13). This may be hard for some mentors, but teachers learn best from trial and error. We are not all the same and what works for one person may not work for the other. As long as there is mutual respect and open communication, then people can accept differences more easily.

One of the critical roles of a mentor is to provide feedback for the mentee, "effective feedback includes a description of the behavior in objective and non judgmental terms and a suggestion of what would be more effective, especially if the behavior has a negative impact" (Podsen, I., 2000, p. 75). Most educators like to know how their performance is viewed in the eyes of their superiors. In my personal experience, I have not come across a single person who has not wanted some type of feedback about their performance. We mostly want to hear what we are doing well and we want the feedback to be specific so it has a bigger impact.

An effective mentor knows that “positive feedback can be a powerful motivator when it is specific and behavioral” (Podsden, I., 2000, p. 75). It is much easier to motivate someone with positive comments versus negative.

We educators need to keep in mind if it were not for our students, then we would not have a job. It is true that “children are our greatest natural resource” (Fibkins, W., 2002, p. 33). Children are our future and they will help operate our country in a few short years. Mentors have an awesome role to reach out to more students by positively influencing new teachers. They need to keep in mind that the ultimate reason behind their efforts in mentoring is to improve student learning (Portner, H., 2003, p. 75). We are all here to work together and to improve our society through education. One of my main roles as an administrator will be to help foster a learning culture for new teachers and the staff.

Visionary Leadership

My fourth critical element for exemplary educational leadership is visionary leadership. An effective leader encompasses many strong, but necessary skills. My goal to become an exemplary leader is to articulate a shared vision that fosters a positive climate in the school building which permeates throughout the school district and surrounding community.

Throughout our three year program we have heard over and over again that visionary skills are extremely important to become an effective principal. I have often thought there were many other qualities that were more important than

visionary skills, but have since concluded there is a reason why vision is listed first in the ELCC standards (Wilmore, E., 2002). Vision is one of the key elements to a successful school and it all begins with an effective principal who has “a strong belief about what their schools can be” (O’Hanlon, J., 2004, p. 4). A principal needs to evaluate the current situation of a school to determine if the school has a strong vision. Maybe the school is extremely successful, in which case, the principal would need to continue to foster the success of the school and look for ways to become even more successful. Or maybe, the school is struggling in many areas due to poor leadership in the past. This leads me to my next thought of “is leadership the critical element in the level of success a school achieves” (O’Hanlon, J., 2004, p. 1)? My answer is a heartfelt yes. Principals set the tone very quickly in a school through their actions and words, but they need to be able to see, or have a vision, of where the school needs to go next.

I equated knowing where to head next in a school without a vision to buying a first home. Yes, I saw many flaws in my new home, but most importantly, I saw what my home could become. Then came setting goals of what needed to be accomplished to set a timeline. I made sure to share my thoughts with other family members and friends. Many people suggested other improvements which enhanced my own ideas. Through careful reflection, I was able to incorporate my ideas with other ideas to create a solid plan to work on my new home.

This same thought process will benefit me during my first principalship opportunity. “Highly effective principals are able to look at low-performing or even failing schools and envision what they will look like after the mission has been achieved” (McEwan, E., 2003, p. 42). I was able to look at my house and see the potential. Through hard work, along with others, we achieved my personal mission to improve the house. I will use my background knowledge from my home buying experience along with other similar visionary experiences and apply my skills to my future job as a principal, “constructing a personal vision requires background knowledge” (McEwan, E., 2003, p. 39). I do have the background knowledge to use my visionary skills.

My role as a future principal will be adventurous. I will rely upon the staff to help move our shared vision forward and continue to make progress, “leadership is about what leaders and members do together” (Noonan, S., 2003, p. 15). Together we create our own vision, together we promote a strong positive climate, and together we will empower each other to make positive changes. I have learned throughout my research that “effective leaders work with others to accomplish goals” (Noonan, S., 2003, p. 16). I have also experienced the need to have a cohesive group that works on the same common goal. If a group is not cohesive, then the common goal often varies greatly from one person to the next. This creates disorganization and a loss of vision. The principal will need to pull people together on a shared vision that everyone can contribute to in order for the

school to be successful, and ultimately, for the children to be successful. The whole staff needs to work together and to support each other.

A key component with visionary leadership is to have an effective principal that has “an un unwavering commitment to the growth of the people in her school” (O’Hanlon, 2004, p. 39). The people in a school include anyone who walks through the halls of the school because each and every person plays a role in building the school climate and helps the school succeed. This encompasses staff, students, parents, volunteers, and various organizations that use the facility. All of these people need to feel and see where the school is headed. Anyone who walks through the front door of the school should feel the positive climate we have all built together. I want people to view me as “the effective principal [who] creates an atmosphere in which students and staff can flourish” (O’Hanlon, J., 2004, p. 4).

I currently provide a constructive atmosphere in my classroom where students flourish and will continue to accomplish my goal of a positive environment in a school building. “The climate of the school is in many ways an extension of the principal’s personality. It takes on the feeling, tone, and appeal” (O’Hanlon, J., 2004, p. 3). My classroom has proven to be an extension of my upbeat personality. Another way to promote growth is through curiosity. As a teacher, I try to help students become curious about their learning so they take more ownership and become life-long learners. I will use this same technique as

a principal since “effective leaders strive to keep open minds and cultivate an organizational environment that encourages curiosity” (Daft, R., 2002, p. 174).

Curiosity is a great motivator to accomplish a group’s shared vision.

“The principal sets the example” is another simple statement of what an effective principal does (O’Hanlon, J., 2004, p. 3). My plan is to set the example by using my visionary capabilities to pull a staff together to achieve our common goals. Another plan is to use the philosophy that “effective principals never ask their staff to do or complete any task they would not take on themselves” (O’Hanlon, J., 2004, p. 3). I currently lead by example in the classroom by never asking my students to do something that I would not do myself. It would be unfair and it shows a sense of superiority which does not foster a positive environment.

In the end, my goal is to be known as a strong leader that listened to others and who was able to build consensus amongst their staff through a common vision for the success of a school. I also want to be known as “a principal who sincerely cared about all members of the school community and who was engaged in their learning” (Ackerman, R., 1997, p. 75). An individual who can pull a group together and help them build harmony to stay motivated on their shared vision is an effective principal.

Conclusion

The cultivation of a supportive community within a school happens over a period of time. The principal is the captain that leads the staff in the direction that fosters the educational mission and benefits the students. The critical ways an effective principal pulls a staff together is through strong community relations, strong management skills, supportive mentor programs, and inclusive visionary skills. I am inspired to go "out there" to put forth my best effort to become a successful administrator.

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