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Douglas M. Spahn
University of Northern Iowa

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What I Believe About Leadership and Education: A Reflective Essay

Abstract

One of the most important decisions an educational leader must make is whether or not to become a "reflective practitioner". A reflective leader is someone who takes the time to think about what has transpired or what steps should be taken tomorrow. Reflective leaders think before they act and are proactive, not reactive. A reflective leader takes responsibility for making tough decisions and is willing to admit error. Reflective leaders do not act impulsively or overreact to a situation. Instead, they carefully consider all possible options and decide on a course of action. Reflective administrators continually think about instruction and ways to promote and enhance student learning in their schools. Reflective practice recognizes that there is no one best way in planning educational programs. The decision making process needs to respond to a number of features that define the event to be decided. Different situations and thinking styles, different goals and purposes, different motives, different problems, and different desired outcomes will result in a choice of different strategies. The purpose of reflective practice is to match the most appropriate decision making strategy with the current situation.

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

And Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

By

Douglas M. Spahn

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Dr. Robert Decker

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Robert H. Decker

2/16/07

Date Approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Victoria L. Robinson

2-16-07

Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

2-16-07

Date Received

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

I believe that each child is a unique individual who needs a secure, caring, and stimulating atmosphere in which to grow and mature emotionally, intellectually, physically, and socially. All children have the potential to bring something unique and special to the world. As educators, we help children to develop their potential by believing in them as capable individuals and allowing them to discover who they are.

My teaching style has been modeled after some of the excellent role models I had as teachers during my school years. An elementary school physical education teacher always made sure class was exciting and kept class moving. The high school government teacher demonstrated that the classroom environment could be loose, but still have excellent classroom management. Finally, my high school football coaches taught the importance of setting goals, working hard to achieve them, and to never quit something you started. Without the time and efforts these people put in for me, teaching would not be the career I am in today. A career in education provides an opportunity for continual learning and growth. One of my desires as an educator is to instill a love of learning in my students, as I share my own passion for learning. There is a need for compassionate, strong, and dedicated individuals who are excited about working with children. Teaching is a lifelong process of learning about new philosophies and new strategies, learning from the parents and community, learning from colleagues, and especially learning from the children.

Investing time in students, allowing them to express their opinions and nurture their ideas by providing an environment that is safe, supports risk-taking, and invites a sharing of ideas. Students are very observant about how teachers motivate them and put

the extra effort to make their lessons more interesting. The interaction time for students and teachers can be greater than with their own parents. This does not diminish the importance of parental guidance but at the same time puts a lot of responsibility for teachers to impart leadership principles in their students. Leadership is an essential component to building successful schools and communities.

Educational leaders must put ethics first when making decisions. If unethical decisions are made for short-term gain, you will lose in the end. Let your beliefs guide you in the many decisions you must make during the school day.

Educational leaders also need to surround themselves with the best people they can get on their staff. If able to attract the brightest, most dedicated, most talented people, they will move the school forward. Always utilize their skills, ideas and creativity because your staff members are your greatest asset. Then show the staff you value them personally. Research shows that a good personal relationship with a direct supervisor is the key for retaining your best and brightest. Never withhold praise; tell them why you value them and recognize their contributions.

Educational leaders must be trustworthy, fair in their dealings with others, impartial. We must always “walk the walk, and talk the talk” because actions will always speak louder than words. Effective leaders do not ask others to do what they can not or will not do themselves. This will help build the trust of your staff members, the leader can not lead if others will not trust them.

Finally, the educational leader needs to develop win-win solutions. The school community will only grow if you can provide valuable services that help students succeed. In the meantime, you must help your staff achieve their goals, and the school will continue to grow. A win-win approach means you create solutions and services that support the best interests of your students, your staff and the school. If any of these elements are missing, growth will not take place. We can not shortchange one element to the benefit of the other.

Making a bigger impact in people's lives is one of the main reasons why I want to become a principal. A principal has the ability to affect more of what is going on in the classroom and the entire school community. I am already a positive role model and a good leader for children, and now I would like to be a leader for the teachers, as well as a manager for the campus. Principals have become responsible for building collaborative partnerships between teachers and parents, implementing programs that connect home and school, and creating inroads with community agencies. An important skill for being a principal is getting along with people, and this skill was instilled by my parents. My mother is a very loving person and would do anything in her power to help another person out. My father taught me that you can learn a great deal about a person by just listening to them. He always told me, "You learn a lot more by listening."

Each day is unique for the principal, bringing with it a new activity or challenge to face. All of these responsibilities are exciting to me. My motto is to live each day to its fullest, making the most of the days we have. Some days will be better than others, but we need to make the most that we can of each day we are given.

In our competitive society it is essential for students not only to receive a solid education, but to work with a teacher who is aware of and sensitive to their individual needs. I am such a person and will always strive to be the best educator that I can be, whether in the role of teacher, coach, or administrator.

Reflective Practice

One of the most important decisions an educational leader must make is whether or not to become a "reflective practitioner". A reflective leader is someone who takes the time to think about what has transpired or what steps should be taken tomorrow. Reflective leaders think before they act and are proactive, not reactive. A reflective leader takes responsibility for making tough decisions and is willing to admit error. Reflective leaders do not act impulsively or overreact to a situation. Instead, they carefully consider all possible options and decide on a course of action. Reflective administrators continually think about instruction and ways to promote and enhance student learning in their schools. Reflective practice recognizes that there is no one best way in planning educational programs. The decision making process needs to respond to a number of features that define the event to be decided. Different situations and thinking styles, different goals and purposes, different motives, different problems, and different desired outcomes will result in a choice of different strategies. The purpose of reflective practice is to match the most appropriate decision making strategy with the current situation.

Research shows that being a reflective administrator produces better results, and eventually, a much more efficiently run school. Dewey (1933, as cited in Black, 2002, p.153) described reflection as a way of "being a teacher"- a "holistic approach that

involves solving problems with one's heart as well as one's mind." Reflective practice is a crucial element of that art form that integrates or links thought and action with reflection (Imel, 1992). Reflective practice is the key to understanding the link between the knowledge that is gained about a particular situation and the making of the most appropriate decisions in light of the available information. Reflection is at the heart of effective educational practice (Thomas, 1998 and Black 2002).

Leader of Change

With focused reflection, comes the possibility for change. The building principal is the leader of educational change, meaning he or she must be not only the leader of students, but the leader of teachers as well. After spending a sufficient amount of time in the classroom, most principals are comfortable leading students toward the beacon of success. Sadly to say, that same level of comfort often decreases when the time arrives for the principal to guide their staff through the learning that is necessary to maintain school improvements. However, there is research suggesting that without the principal's ability to encourage teachers to further their education, becoming an advocate for life-long learning, schools can become educationally motionless.

There are many ways that a teacher is able to further his or her education. Teachers must make a commitment to take greater control of what they do, including responsibility for themselves and others. They must see themselves as learners, continuously working to develop new understandings and improve their practice through ways such as reading professional literature, participating in study groups, and peer coaching (Borko et al., 2000). Teachers must also be willing to continually monitor and adjust learning environments and teaching practices to optimally improve them for their

students and themselves as professionals. They must take time to engage in high-quality professional development to develop instructional strategies to meet learners' needs (Moats, 1999). Integration of theory and practice must be evident in classroom implementation for new learning to take place (Burke et al., 1996).

Offering these educational tools to the faculty is the responsibility of the building administrator, especially in the area of professional development. In an article by Backus (2000), one principal was quoted as saying,

We value outside experts who help us refine our practice. But we also take important steps to ensure that we associate ourselves with the right experts...I don't want a glamorous packaged program that takes all the decision-making out of the hands of teachers (p. 311).

Too often, teachers find themselves in a professional development session where the "experts" are talking at them rather than to them. If collaboration is truly vital to the vision of the school, the staff must be empowered by using ideas derived from the people in the building. Who else knows the students' learning needs better than the teachers do? Backus (2000) states, "Every instance of reaching out occurs because we believe it will enhance the instructional knowledge of our staff".

Collaborative Leadership

Collaboration between the administration and the teachers give the school the best possible opportunity for success. In Whitaker's (2003) book, *What Great Principals Do Differently, Fifteen Things That Matter Most*, he states, "I am convinced that teachers do the best they know how. If we want them to do better, we must help them improve their skills and master new ones". There will always be an exception to the rule, but generally

speaking, teachers do the best they can with what they have. Most professional educators take their job seriously. However, not all teachers have the necessary tools to meet the needs of every student. Some teachers have the ability to work well with the top level learners, challenging students in every aspect and helping them to understand material which they could not previously comprehend. Other teachers shine with the most reluctant of learners, finding a teachable moment in every class period. They possess a unique gift of being able to break down the most impenetrable barriers of education, which is truly amazing. One of the many problems of education is that the teachers rarely have time to interact with each other regarding constructive sharing of ideas. A reflection by Whitaker (2003) states, "When I realized that others could learn from my superstar-teachers too, getting other teachers into their classrooms became an essential tool. After all, who better to teach the teachers than those with the best skill?" (Whitaker, 2003). This is one of the best ways to promote good instruction, letting other teachers see it.

The Backus article (2000), *I'm Always Posing Questions*, she states, "Principals need to take responsibility for teaching learning. The teachers in my school are my learners. As principal, it is my responsibility to help them learn, grow, and succeed" (Backus, 2000). The principal needs to model the vision that he or she has formed for the rest of the school. Continuing his or her own education to become an administrator is a good start, but it can not end there. McGough (2003) suggests that "...principal's learning is personality-dependant, informal, experience-based, and peer related". Is learning as a principal any different than learning as a teacher? The simplicity of the statement creates a wide-ranging constant for true education. Every learner has their own unique style of

information retention, which is formed by their own personality. The educator's goal should be to empower the student to process their own thoughts. Too often, we try to force students to rehearse and restate information, thus losing hope that the pupil may someday become the teacher. Personality is a critical aspect of learning, so rather than ignoring this fact, let us embrace it. We need to get educators to treat "...learners as self-directed clients" (McGough, 2003). As the building principal, once you can plant the seed of self-exploration, it will lead to a self-centered, personally driven educational experience. As a learner, I can attest to the fact that self-driven educational experiences are, by far, the most gratifying kind. Encouraging staff members to be receptive enough to want to learn is not an easy task. Barth (2000) is quoted in his article on *Building A Community of Learners* as saying, "When I visit schools, I find them populated with two quite distinct groups. The first group is the educators who are learned." He also stated, "We have certification and degrees. We are anointed. We've done it. We're finished. The second group is the learners. These are the students". The principal's job is to model to the teachers exactly what the teachers should be modeling to the students. As the world constantly changes, it is essential that we are ready for these changes as they are being made. Nothing does a better job of preparing you than education.

A huge sign on the door of a school in East Lyme, Connecticut, quotes Eric Hoffer: In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists".

Managing school change and improvement is one of the most complex tasks of school leadership (p. 108).

As Fullan (2001) points out, school leaders need to understand the change process

in order to lead and manage change and improvement efforts effectively. They must learn to overcome barriers and cope with the chaos that naturally exists during the complex process of change.

As challenging as motivating your staff can be, this is essential to a school's success. The road to a successful learning community can be demanding, but by following the vision of the school, the rewards could be one of the greatest experiences of the administrator's career. This is attainable by using reflective decision-making practices and upholding the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL), standards all administrators should know and understand.

The ISSL Standards and Leadership

Reflective decision-making and the ISSL standards correspond quite well, it is difficult to have one without the other. As the visionary leader in the first standard, principals must be able to help their schools develop a clear, shared educational vision, as well as make sure that they are headed in the right direction. If decisions are not based on past experiences, the school may be lead toward an unachievable goal. It is essential that all of the decisions are harmonious with the school's vision, and it is the responsibility of the principal to reflect back on the impact that past decisions have made on its learning community.

In order to be an effective instructional leader in the second standard, administrators must teach staff members how to be reflective practitioners as well. To maintain a positive school culture, principals need to help their teachers keep current with the latest school research, constantly seeking better ways to succeed, and continually encouraging the staff to become life-long learners. Reflective practice provides the

principal and the teachers with the data they need to report the effectiveness of their work. This allows staff members to self-assess their work and make adjustments according to their results. This information is very beneficial and needs to be periodically repeated for best use.

Standard three covers organizational leadership. Organizational leaders make data-driven decisions by having knowledge of research-based theories and concepts. They also need to be aware of local policies, along with state and federal laws. The ability to make the right decision at the right time is a key aspect to organized leadership. Once you create a vision and begin the challenging task of stewardship, organization becomes the common tool to success. Without the ability to make decisions based on reflective research, the principal runs a high risk of routing the school in the wrong direction.

As the collaborative leader in the fourth standard, the principal has an excellent opportunity to model this skill for the people on staff. As the staff is empowered with the ability to be reflective practitioners, a community of independent professionals is created. When teachers graduate from college, they come from programs that have been based on theory rather than personal observations about students (Hare & Pepper, 1999). Real teacher development could not exist solely through the study of theory, but rather requires application with children. This collaboration gives the administrator the advantage of utilizing the fellow teachers, who are advanced in the skill of reflective practice, as well as a resource for modeling the practice. Hearing sound words of advice from a colleague can be easier to hear than from an administrator, and they could be more apt to apply it to their discipline. With the researcher and the practitioner working

together, since they are usually the same person, we have created meaningful change in contexts of practice (e.g., classrooms, after-school programs). Our multiple efforts to reform are now focused to address one major concern at a time (Baumgartner, et al., 2003). This does, however, have a temporary down side. "Developing reflective practitioners requires substantial training, additional resources, and large doses of trust (Fien & Rawling, 1996). The administrator has to have the trust that his or her staff will follow through with the personal reflection after the additional resources have been supplied. With the limited funding that most public schools are provided, this poses a problem with getting the program started. Change takes time and money, two things that school districts often find difficult to part with. Another problem that may arise is that the "researchers usually find themselves in the dual intellect roles of advocate and critic" (Baumgartner, et al., 2003). This works as a double-edged sword. Can the teacher, as creator, diligently build what they will ultimately dissect? It takes a very secure individual to truly judge one's own work.

Reflective decision-making is more than just a means of improving classroom instruction. The ability to make ethical decisions will also be directly affected. "Reflective practice involves using ethical and contextual considerations in professional decision-making rather than making such decisions on the basis of habit, intuition, impulse, and tradition" (Fien & Rawling, 1996, p.16). The modern-day administrator needs to promote ethical decision-making. Data-driven decisions, based on reflective research, give administrators the ethical support needed to organize, collaborate, and pursue his or her school's vision of successful education. "Reflective practitioners are

aware of the impact on others and the society of their work...and the moral and ethical consequences of their decisions and actions” (Fien & Rawling, 1996, p.12).

As the ethical leader that the fifth standard describes, the building principal has a moral responsibility to make decisions with the best interest of students in mind. We are essentially asking our teachers to prepare the leaders of tomorrow with the cognitive skills to answer these questions: “What is going on here? How did this come to be? How could this be different? How might I alter it?” (Brady, 2004, p. 281) Are not these the same questions that we, as educators, should be asking ourselves every day? I believe that the administrator who reflects on his or her own decisions and asks the same of their staff is doing what is right for the students and the community. Reflect-for-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action is beneficial to all social classes and a multitude of careers.

Reflective research can be applied to the sixth standard as well. In the political arena, failure to make sound decisions can cripple one’s professional credibility. Portraying one’s self as a leader, grounded by educated decision-making, will help create the platform that is necessary in building a sturdy career. Once the personal choice has been made to join the administrative circle, it must be realized that every decision, both personal and professional, will be observed and judged by members of the school and community. That is the essence of political savvy. The more trust and respect that is earned from others in the field, the easier it becomes to acquire a principalship. Without the political favor gained by effective reflective research based decision-making, the road to an administrative position may be a long and tiring journey.

The important thing to remember is that change cannot be forced onto a staff, even when the change may be warranted. Thorough research, guided reflection, and a compassionate administrator can lead to positive student achievement. Using all of these tools in the arena of education helps administrators create the learning community conducive to strong education and bright futures. The actual configuration of these learning communities has changed over the years, but the true concept of learning has remained the same.

The Role a Leader Takes in Improving Learning

The days of the one room schoolhouse have long since passed. Although most agree that the comfortable rural school system was beneficial, the world has become a much smaller place. Yet this small place is now home to much larger communities. With the increase of population and housing expansion, city limits are getting larger, and students are being faced with much greater diverse educational challenges. Higher demands have been placed upon the urban school systems as well as their teachers and administrators. The teaching staff is faced with adapting the curriculum to accommodate a more culturally diverse student body; the responsibility of taking more classes to further their education for license renewal; and providing proof that they are meeting the growing state-wide standards through a portfolio and complex evaluation process.

District leaders are operating in an environment of ever shifting priorities. . . In the 50's, school management roles could be defined by the four R's: race, resources, relationships, and rules... Today, district leaders must concern themselves with a host of different concerns: the four A's—academic standards, accountability, autonomy, and ambiguity and the five C's – collaboration,

communication, connection, child advocacy, and community building (Jackson, 2005, p.196).

With all of these expectations on the table, building principals are being faced with more and more responsibilities in addition to a plate that was already overflowing! The twenty-first century urban administrator is required to undertake a realignment of duties. From the administrator's point of view, modern day school reform has initiated a necessary approach of delegating many former school principal responsibilities to the teaching staff. What was once a teacher's dream of shared decision-making has become an administrative reality.

A building principal's time is valuable, yet limited. As a visionary leader in charge of school reform, the urban principal must empower the staff to assist with decision-making. Without empowering the staff to assist in decision-making that will directly affect their area of interest, it is nearly impossible to meet the demands of every issue that needs to be attended to.

Staff led decision-making is best accomplished first through staff development. In the last five years research shows that staff development is crucial in this age of educational reform. Providing the necessary funds to help teachers grow into confident decision-makers is in line with many of the ISSL standards. Standard Two (being an educational leader) and Standard Four (being a collaborative leader) both exemplify the importance of staff development. However, as stated by Jackson (2005) in her article, *Leadership in Urban Public Schools*, when budgets shrink, professional development is treated as an expendable luxury to be sacrificed on the chopping block of balanced budgets. Therefore, factoring an allotment for staff development into the annual budget

should be a priority of administrators at the building and district levels. Without it, the school vision may lack the stewardship required to see it through its entirety. The building principal needs to depend on their staff for educational leadership and support. Education through staff development is an efficient way to aid in building community amongst the staff and a positive learning environment.

The concept of school reform is so common, the implementation so arduous, and the sustainability so rare. What can a building principal do in order to sustain positive reformation? Sustainability, like many other characteristics, can be learned. Fink and Hargreaves (2003) state, in their article *Sustaining Leadership*,

Leaders need to develop sustainability by the way in which they approach, commit to, and protect deep learning in their schools; by the way they sustain others in their efforts to promote and support learning; by the way they sustain themselves in their work, so they can persist with their vision and avoid burning out; and by the way they try to ensure that the improvements they bring about will last over time, especially after they themselves have gone (p. 682).

They add, “The promise of sustainable success in education lies in creating cultures of distributed leadership throughout the school community, not in training and developing a tiny leadership elite” (p. 684). Without the building principal making the effort to relinquish some of their power, urban school districts will not flourish.

Once a building principal has empowered the staff, they need to display what Fullan (2001) calls “the constellation of characteristics that all effective leaders have: unwarranted optimism, enthusiasm, and energy”. If an administrator does not go fishing with the right bait, collaboration becomes monotonous, organization becomes a chore,

and the vision is lost. All the standards in the world can't resuscitate a flat-lined staff if the leader does not provide the life sustaining elements used to spark the motivation in others.

When the administration and teachers are on the same page, things begin to click. It is important that the principal is making sure that the curriculum work and that the departments are composing in alignment with the state and district standards (Cordeiro, Cunningham, 2003). This upper level direction can be the difference between hard work and time wasted. Keeping your teams focused is a difficult task, one that can be eased by considering what type of individual you are inviting to be part of your staff.

When all staff come together to turn their vision of reform into reality it will be clear that school leadership is not the sum of its individual leaders. "School leadership is a system, a culture and schools are places in which principals, teachers, students, and parents should all lead" (Fink, Hargreaves, 2003, p. 656). Hynes and Johnson (1997), in their article *Teaching/Learning/Leading: Synonyms for Change*, state they believe "teaching, learning, and leading are synonymous." This declaration embodies all that the future of educational reform should behold.

The Leader of Service

When the term "service" is brought to mind, I am quick to think of my car hoisted up in the air at the local garage with a grease laden mechanic turning torque wrenches and dripping sweat. Although very few people in the school district are turning torque wrenches for a living, all of them are sweating, not just from the lack of air conditioning, but from the hard work that it takes for a school district to deliver the service that is asked of them. Really a school district is just that, a service. Unlike a mechanic, our finished

product is not a rebuilt engine that should be able to go another eighty thousand miles. Our product is an educated young adult that will not only be prepared and poised for life's adventures, but also able to improve and expand upon the gifts that we have already given them. The complexities that make up our school system are very similar to most major companies in this country. To run a school efficiently, the building administrator has to do things much the same as any company president.

As the building principal, you are the CEO of your building. Each department that you have in the building provides a service, and each service in the building is equally important. One of your key responsibilities is getting your staff to believe in that concept because everyone likes to feel that what they do matters. In the school system, what everyone does matters, even those who are often overlooked. For example, I have yet to see an undernourished child do well in the classroom. "Hooray", for the food service workers! Thanks to the school nurses and the custodial staff that keep our schools healthy and sanitary. The success rate for students suffering from illness is incredibly low. Never in my life as a teacher have I ever seen a student learn who was not in attendance. Bless the bus drivers and the mechanics at the school garage for getting the students to school safely. As the building principal, it is your responsibility to see that each and every cog in the educational wheel is in balance with the rest. If one department in the school feels more important than others, the system breaks down, and the service that we are trying to provide is sub-par. If the building principal wants to promote their school vision, they must see to it that the communication necessary to keep harmony within the building is a forerunner on their list of priorities.

It is extremely important to make sure that every department is working at its highest level. Remember, ultimately the buck stops on the principal's desk. When the building does not run efficiently, the superintendent does not blame the secretary. One of the biggest errors that administrators often make is that they add responsibilities to people that have more important tasks that they have been trained to do. For example, in the article *Principal and Counselor Collaboration*,

Many principals...assume that counselors should perform a variety of tasks which...take counselors away from the very task for which they are uniquely trained, ie. Coordinating special education, building master schedules, performing clerical work relating to student records

As the leader of services, you have to remember that the boss can not do it all by themselves. They need to delegate. It is essential to not only the success of the principal but also to their sanity. The office assistant is going to be one of their greatest assets. They must make sure to utilize that person the proper way. He or she can schedule for you and let you know where you are going next, but the principal is the one that needs to make sure that where they are going is helping them accomplish the school vision. In an article by Capelluti and Nye (2002), they state,

One characteristic of the principalship is that other people often determine where a principal is to be, what he or she should wear, and what he or she should say, but if you're going to be a principal, your going to have to learn to stay in control of your professional life. As the principal, I need to be the keeper of the vision, the leader of the journey, and that my calendar should be a tool – not to keep other people happy but to keep me and the school on track to be successful (p.142).

One of the best ways to keep that vision is have an efficient system of organization. The most precious commodity of any leader is their time. In order to be the most efficient leader of services as possible, building administrators need to prioritize. Something as simple as the flow of paper across the principal's desk is manageable with the proper system. In Furman's (1999) article *14 Ways to Make More Time for Leadership*, he states that the "TRAF IT method" may be the way to do it. "TRAF IT" is an acronym for a four-step process for handling mail. "T" stands for "throw it out". "R" stands for "refer it to someone else on staff". "A" stands for "act on it". "F" stands for "file it" (Furman, 1999, p. 43). At the end of his article, he finishes by saying,

Yes. The final responsibilities of a high school principal are overwhelming, but that's the job that you have accepted. Because of the demands of the job, you need to take care of yourself both mentally and physically, be happy, and enjoy your life." "How you manage your time both on and off the job will be a decisive factor in your quest for excellence and happiness (p.44).

Standard Four, collaboration, and Standard Two, school culture, are the two most effected standards. Collaborating gives the faculty a sense of community. It is that sense of community that creates the positive school culture that allows the administrator's vision to flourish and the students to succeed. With the entire staff, "principals work together to analyze achievement results, set targets for improvement, share best practices" (Young, 2001). Whether fixing a car, managing a restaurant, presiding over a major company, or leading a school, each of these businesses are service oriented. If schools fail to produce worthy product, everyone loses. With collaboration, the service

that schools provide can be one that the whole community can be proud of, not just the principal.

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