Educational Leadership Platform Statement

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As a future psychologist, I never believed I had much reason to devote thought to developing a philosophy of school leadership. I have reflected on my philosophies of teaching, learning, and education, both as a teacher and as a graduate student, but never from the perspective of the person who runs the school. As I learn more about the Standards for Educational Leadership Programs as set forth by the Educational Leadership Constituent Council [ELCC], however, the more overlap I see between the worlds of school leadership and those of teaching and psychology. A devoted interest in the well-being of children ultimately lies at the heart of all three fields. That is the underlying philosophy upon which I have based both my career and my graduate study, and it has also guided me in the development of my theories on educational leadership.

Philosophy of Education

Of all the many functions and purposes a school can serve, its primary purpose should be the provision of a safe learning environment in which all students are afforded equal opportunity to grow and develop intellectually, physically, and emotionally. To accomplish this, I believe that the students must be provided with the highest quality materials, facilities, and personnel (not only teachers, but also paraprofessionals, counselors, Child Study Team members, support staff, etc.). Of course, these things all come at a price. While it is easy to hypothesize about what makes a high-quality educational environment, it is often the building principal who must figure out the logistics of how to meet such lofty goals. Applicant pools, budget limitations, and sometimes local politics are all factors that educational leaders must learn to traverse in order to provide their students and staff with the highest quality educational environment. ELCC Standards 2.1 through 2.4 are the standards that support this broad philosophy most directly. The promotion of a positive school culture (2.1) boosts morale (and, presumably, performance) among students and staff alike, while an effective instructional program (2.2) and use of best practices (2.3) ensures that the students will be receiving the most current and effective

instructional strategies. A leader who purports to have a strong devotion to education must be as devoted to the education of his faculty and staff as that of his students. Standard 2.4 encourages educational leaders not only to allow for professional development, but also to actively seek out and implement such opportunities, as well as to provide constructive feedback in the evaluation process. Adherence to these standards will go a long way toward helping my philosophical ideal to materialize.

Philosophy for Leadership

One of the basic underlying tenets of special education, particularly the Individualized Education Plan, is that a "one size fits all" approach to educating children does not truly "fit all." Differing student personalities, classroom dynamics, and learning styles must all be taken into account when teachers prepare lessons. While there are certain underlying factors that contribute to "good teaching" - e.g., clear communication, strong organizational skills, etc. - a truly good teacher will also be able to deviate from a lesson or alter his teaching style to some degree in order to meet the needs of his students. The same seems to hold true for educational leaders. Rather than adhering to one set style of management at all times, the ability to alter leadership styles dependent upon the situation at hand seems to be a desirable one. This ability, known as situational leadership, has been demonstrated to be a valid form of leadership. Walter, Caldwell, & Marshall (1980) give the example of the leader who must be task-oriented at times and concerned with social-emotional needs at others. They also cite Hersey & Blanchard's (1977, as cited in Walter et al., 1980) Situational Leadership Theory, which states that leaders should engage in different combinations of task- and relationship-oriented behavior depending upon the maturity of the members of the group in relation to a specific task. Walter et al.'s study of 26 elementary school principals and 48 teachers found that a situational leadership model is beneficial for both organizational productivity and personal satisfaction.

While flexibility in management styles is good to have, there also seems to be support for a common best practice in managerial style. A British study by Barker (2001) indicated that in a

comparison of three different management styles, the most effective (and the only one that produced no negative impact on school climate) was one of informality, in which faculty and students were held to high expectations, and rewards were given for excellent performance. This management style was shown to be far more effective in terms of raising and maintaining morale and academic performance than either a strictly informal approach (in which emphasis was more on friendly relations than anything else) or a more authoritarian approach (in which poor performance was criticized and emphasis was placed on meeting standards).

ELCC Standards 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 emphasize the positive relationships a school leader can cultivate between the school and the community, and I feel that is an equally important part of educational leadership as is cultivating positive relationships within the building. When these relational values are tempered with the managerial practices proposed in 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 and put to practice to achieve the vision that the ELCC expects a leader to help establish and maintain (ELCC Standards 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4), it sounds very similar to the best practice determined by Barker (2001).

Vision for Learners

Students can have the most highly qualified instructors, the most current educational technology, and the most beautiful facilities available to them, but without a sense of personal safety and security, their educational impact will fall far short of expectations. Establishing a safe learning environment is crucial on two levels: a student cannot learn while fearing for his physical safety; this much is evident. I also believe that high-achieving students do so best in an atmosphere of academic or intellectual security. By this, I don't mean that everyone must agree and no challenges ever take place; rather, students must feel safe taking academic risks, asking questions, and engaging in debate without fearing ridicule, either from peers or from instructors. The best way I can see to move toward this goal is to establish and reinforce a strong sense of community among faculty, staff, and students.

Although there seems to be a disconnect between leadership style and classroom action, I see parallels based on Doyle's (2004) examination of community-based leadership styles. Doyle posits that community building administrators look to empower their staff and are open to alternative ideas, and they create an atmosphere of collaboration and free expression of conflicting viewpoints. They also seek to stimulate inquiry and support dialogue and critique. Educators who wish to cultivate the next generation of critical thinkers take this same approach. The connection between administrator and learning style comes when we examine the relationship between administrator and teacher: when a leadership theory is put into practice, educators change their actions to follow suit. In that sense, ideally, a more community-based management style engenders more critical thinking in the classroom, which can only benefit the learning process. This speaks not only to ELCC Standards 1.1 through 1.4 (develop, articulate, implement, and steward a vision), but also to the promotion of a positive school culture (Standards 2.1 – 2.4) and fair action with the intent of helping all students succeed (Standards 5.1 – 5.3).

Vision for Teachers

Over the course of my teaching career, I have heard several administrators refer to themselves as "the teachers' support staff," and I think that's actually an astute observation. While not many people consider principals and vice-principals to be "support staff" in the same sense as secretaries and paraprofessionals, they do serve the vital function of supporting teachers in terms of professional growth, discipline, and the hopefully rare confrontations with parents. While ELCC Standards 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 all speak indirectly to teachers (they address more culture and curriculum than the teachers themselves), Standard 2.4 speaks strongly to the need for school leaders to actively support professional development initiatives for school personnel. This could mean seeking out relevant opportunities for staff, approving leave time to attend workshops, or paying for related travel and registration costs. This emphasis on growth and improvement connects strongly to Doyle's (2004) thoughts on establishing a

culture of critical thought and reflection. Encouraging teachers to think about how they teach and what they could do better or differently can only benefit the organization.

Vision for the Organization

Doyle (2004) provides a compelling argument for creating a culture of collaboration, inquiry, and openness of ideas. Her ideas, as outlined above, seem to align well with ELCC Standards 3 and 4 in terms of effective management of operations and resources and, if taken to the next logical degree, incorporating the resources found in the surrounding community. In contrast, Barker (2001) tells of several examples of poor leadership, one of which is Hillside School, in England. Hillside suffered from the poor leadership of a Mr. Wake. Mr. Wake was curt, if not rude, with his staff, gave little to no specific direction for tasks he wanted accomplished, and refused to engage in any innovative practices for his school. Barker uses the example of Mr. Wake and others to demonstrate a common underlying theme: schools with disengaged, inflexible, and authoritarian leadership often experience a drop in morale that is felt by every member of the school community, from teachers all the way to the students. It is believed that this low morale resulted in poor academic performance across the board. In contrast, when these leaders were replaced with leaders who held high expectations but also rewarded achievement and generally kept a positive approach, both morale and performance improved (Barker 2001).

Beatty (2000) also makes a strong case for at least acknowledging, if not engaging in, the emotional component of leadership. Her interviews with school leaders suggest a strong emotional component to working in the education field in general, but specifically in leadership positions. Although her research is not conclusive, she presents the idea that more explicit attempts to attend to this emotional component in professional support and growth may lead to the type of positive school climate addressed in ELCC Standards 2.1.

Method of Vision Attainment

Having a vision for a school is of little value without an accompanying "road map" of action and benchmarks to guide progress; it's one thing to set the goal of raising standardized test scores, but quite another to figure out exactly how that will happen. Doyle (2004) would suggest that even before a vision plan is established, effective leaders will conduct a dialogue with their faculty and staff to get a broad sense of the direction in which the collective group would like to go, and then work that into their own plans for the school. Case in point: former vice-principal and principal Dr. Lisa Brady will be returning to Hunterdon Central Regional High School as its new superintendent this summer. In our April and May faculty meetings this past year, Dr. Brady asked all department supervisors to administer a survey that polled staff for, among other things, what we felt was most important to the future of the school, what we felt was least important, and what issues needed most urgent addressing. While I think many of my colleagues were put off by the idea of "more paperwork", I appreciated her effort to re-connect with her staff and solicit our input for the creation of a shared vision statement for the school.

Another way to encourage staff investment in vision attainment is to establish a Shared Decision Making committee. Such a committee could consist of representatives from all facets of the school community: administrators, teachers, secretaries, custodians, paraprofessionals, and even parents and students. This committee could act in an advisory capacity whenever major policy- or vision- based decisions need to be made. The decision would still ultimately be up to the principal or building administrator, but this type of committee is one way of allowing the building leader to maintain the sense of community input as he stewards the shared school vision. ELCC Standards 2.1 and 4.1 call for promotion of a positive school culture and collaboration with families, and this sort of committee empowers all represented members of the school community.

References

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