

It All Begins With You

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Jane Clancy sat quietly for the 45-minute presentation by the guest speaker at the "Beginning of the Year Kick-Off" principals' meeting for the Lemon Peel Local School District. Jane had been waiting for this day to arrive ever since she had been handed the keys to Elvira J. Motley School, a preK–6 elementary school in one of the wealthier areas that make up the Lemon Peel district. Although she had nine successful years as an assistant at two other elementary schools, this would be her first assignment as a principal, and she was looking forward to meeting the challenges of leading a reasonably effective school toward recognition as one of the best schools in the district, if not the whole state. She firmly believed that she could accomplish her goal within the next two years, but it would take a lot of time and many long hours. As a result, she was only half-heartedly listening to the presentation being made to the assembled administrators.

The speaker was Dr. David Delacourt, a recently retired principal and superintendent who, as a principal, had done a superb job of taking his school from the status of being a good local school to becoming a nationally recognized "lighthouse" for all schools across the nation. Later, when he became the superintendent of his district, he made use of what he had learned in one school and applied the same vision to a school district with 18 individual schools that had recently won an award by the U.S. Department of Education as the "Most Effective School District" in the United States. Dr. Delacourt noted in his closing comments that the secret to the success of his school and the entire district was really much more simple than most people realized. What he realized one day as a relatively inexperienced principal was that "all the money, all the time spent, and all the hard work" in the world would not transform a school as powerfully as would a much less flashy strategy that did one thing: He believed in the people in his school. That belief fed another strategy that yielded great success for years, and then became the cornerstone for his work as a superintendent. The belief in the people inside and outside of schools leads naturally to the establishment of a powerful foundation, namely community. He ended his presentation

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which included data concerning dramatic changes in a school and district after his philosophy had been translated into action. "I suddenly discovered that I truly believed that no school will ever be better than its people. If you believe that, you will find greatness."

Jane heard the last few sentences and laughed to herself. Her new school was well known as a good school because it had teachers who "knew their stuff." In her mind, all the advice of working to build a school on the strengths of each staff member, teachers as well as classified staff, was wonderful for speeches, but not the way good things will happen in reality. She had her own simple solution to school improvement: Build on your strengths. She would spend her first few months finding out the few exemplary teachers who probably worked in the school and showcase their talents and practices as models for everyone else to follow. And if people did not follow the stars, there would be changes made as soon as possible. After all, her superintendent had made it quite clear that she was empowered to do whatever it took to make sure that her school became as good as it could. And Dr. Delacourt's notions of involving everyone associated with a school as a partner was just so much fantasy that would never have much real pay-off. After all, she was chosen to lead a school, not serve to make people happy all the time.

Points to Ponder

- What is your reaction to this scenario? What if you were a classified staff member at Elvira J. Motley School?
- How would you describe the values of the new principal at Motley Elementary School? Do you personally agree or disagree with her views?
- How do you assess the value of ideas presented by Dr. Delacourt at the principals' meeting?

One of the most important parts of any leader's background and skills is his or her value orientations. As often noted by many analysts of effective leadership in any organization, what the leader believes and his or her values will ultimately define the reality of practice in an organization. Without a clear understanding of what you believe, it will be next to impossible to speak authoritatively about the future direction of your school. Simply stated, if people do not know what the leader believes, how can they follow?

Returning to the opening scenario for a moment, it would appear highly unlikely that the incoming principal of Motley School will be devoting

much time or attention to a sustained effort to create a sense of community in her school. Like many things in the field of education, even with inspiration offered by ardent proponents of new ideas or practice, good practices are destined to die a quick death because there is little or no heartfelt support for the new idea. It appears that Jane Clancy will spend a great deal of time supporting her best teachers, but they may be the only people in which she will invest much time during the next year as she tries to move her school from being *good* to *great*. And it also appears that she has little inclination to involve many other people in guiding her actions.

Points to Ponder

- In your judgment, what might the short- and long-term consequences be in a school where Jane Clancy's perspective was guiding action?
- What course of action would you follow if you were the principal who came to Motley Elementary School after Jane Clancy left?

In this chapter, we look at the ways in which your work as an aspiring or beginning educational leader may be made more effective through a review of personal assumptions and subsequent translation of personal philosophy into a broader vision of an effective school. Developing a clear statement of your personal educational philosophy is an important part of creating a culture for successful practice. While it should be clear throughout this book that there is an underlying set of beliefs about the inherent value of working toward the creation of a broad-based community, the choice of accepting that belief system is entirely up to you as a principal. But there is an absolute value to be found in a leader sharing an individual philosophy as a part of action planning and vision building that will make even a very good school better.

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT EDUCATIONAL PLATFORMS

The educational leader's platform, developed by Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007), is a model designed to help professional educators assess their views in a straightforward manner, akin to the platform statements made by political candidates in an election campaign. The major difference between a politician's and an educator's platform is that the latter is

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Practical Tips

Preparing a Statement of Personal Values

There is a great deal of research indicating that effective leaders are clear about their personal values, beliefs, and assumptions. Many school districts across the United States now ask applicants for administrative positions to include a statement of personal beliefs along with a letter of application and the district job application form. Here are some tips to assist you in preparing a statement of personal values:

- **Be honest.** The statement of personal views is not an academic exercise. It should convey your own most important beliefs about schools, students, and schooling. The more honest you make the statement, the more helpful it will be for the school district and also you to determine if the job offered is the job you want to do.
- **Provide examples.** Actions speak louder than words. Remember that for every statement you write about your personal beliefs, an interviewer might ask for a concrete example of how you have actually behaved in a way consistent with your espoused beliefs.
- **Seek the counsel of a trusted friend or colleague.** Before submitting your written statement of values and beliefs, you should ask someone whom you trust to read your statement and critique according to the question, "Is the person described on this paper the person I appear to be in reality?"

structured to communicate the educator's deepest and truest beliefs, attitudes, and values, even if these are contrary to the sentiments of the voters and other members of the public.

There is no single, perfect format for an educational platform. For example, Barnett (1991) suggested that a platform may consist of a written statement which articulates an educator's views on issues ranging from desired student outcomes to preferred organizational climate to expectations for community involvement in schools. Sergiovanni and Starratt's model (2007) for formulating an educational leader's educational platform includes 12 major elements. Ten of these deal with general educational themes, and as a result, they can serve as the basis for any professional educator's platform. The last two are linked more directly to the role of a formal school leader.

The platform questions proposed by Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007) are excellent prompts to help any leader carry out a comprehensive personal reflection on a number of issues that are related to what constitutes "quality" in a

principal's mind. However, as someone who is preparing to start an administrative career, or one as an assistant principal or a beginning principal, you probably have so much on your plate at this time that reflecting on so many ideas and issues is not likely an activity that you want to tackle right away. In the following section, brief excerpts from platforms written by principals and teachers follow each "plank" of what are really some of the key issues that you might wish to include in a platform early in your career.

1. The Major Achievements of Students This Year

The major achievements I would hope to have my children display by the end of the year include both academic achievements and personal achievements. (Teacher)

2. The Leader's Image of the Learner

Children are unique. Therefore, their ability to acquire and retain new knowledge and skills is unique. (Teacher)

Educators see students as individuals who want to gain knowledge or understanding through study, instruction, and experience. Adjectives that describe the learner are responsible, enthusiastic, inquisitive, attentive, hard working . . . and the opposite of each objective as well. (Principal)

3. The Leader's Image of the Teacher

Teachers with a clear mission have a deep underlying belief that students can grow and attain self-actualization. Teachers believe that they have something of significance to contribute to other people, especially students, and believe with every fiber that they can "make a difference." (Teacher)

Since teachers work directly with our children, I expect that teachers can do many things, from modeling commitment to high standards and moral values, to being a dispenser of knowledge and translator of culture, to being a friend, adviser, and counselor. In short, I believe that teachers can and often do work miracles. (Principal)

4. The Preferred Teacher-Student Relationship

The relationship established between the teacher and the student has a profound effect upon the child's ability to function and learn to his or her optimal level. . . . It is important for the teacher to understand that each child is unique and that a teacher's expectations for one student might not be the same for other students. (Teacher)

The interpersonal relationships that occur and the bonds that are formed between teacher and student are special. . . . Students look up to educators with admiration. Educators who give praise and encouragement might be the only positive influence in some students' lives. It is not surprising that strong bonds and relationships are formed. (Principal)

5. The Preferred School Climate

An atmosphere of trust and safety must be created within a classroom. Within this environment, each child's unique needs and interests can be met. (Teacher)

The school climate is affected by educator attitudes, how staff members relate to administration, the amount of collegiality that exists, teacher-student relationships,

(Continued)

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(Continued)

and school-community relationships. I believe that attitudes might be the key to a positive climate. (Principal)

6. The Purpose or Goal of Leadership in Schools

The focus of educational leadership should be to maximize children's learning. This is accomplished by directly improving the quality of a teacher's instruction within the classroom. An educational leader, therefore, is a person whose responsibility and desire are to help teachers and capitalize on their strengths. (Teacher)

I think the real goal of an educational leader should somehow be to identify the strengths that people have and build on those. If people make mistakes and need help, that should also be a part of the educational leader's role. Dealing with mistakes can be done in a way that promotes growth and professional development. (Principal)

None of the excerpted statements found in the platforms of several different teachers and principals are the right or correct things to say in statements such as these. And the format for the platform provided is but one to engage in this exercise. Others who have engaged in the platform preparation process have written their beliefs in ways much different than the model shown here. The purpose of developing and sharing platforms is not an exercise of doing a single written activity and then leaving it alone. It is meant to be something that promotes ongoing dialogue in a school so that everyone can gain insights into the values that are present and that may drive different practices and approaches by members of the school community. For example, in the illustrated platform statement of both the teacher and the principal, it is evident that there is strong consistency of the image of the principal and other leaders taking on the responsibility for providing professional development. Other similar insights might be derived from reviewing individual statements of belief.

Points to Ponder

- As you read over the examples above, what might a reader of these individual statements believe about the mission of schools where the authors of these comments worked?
- Would the school implied through the collected values be the kind of school in which you would like to work?

A NORMATIVE USE OF A PLATFORM

The exercise of platform development described so far suggests that there is a value to be derived in school by simply asking people to think about personal values (Daresh, 2007). By the way, it should be noted that the discussion of personal values is not something that may be limited to the teachers and the campus administrators. Everyone who works in a school may be encouraged to share their values and beliefs about any or all of the enumerated areas included in a platform.

The purpose of this book in total, however, is to suggest that there are characteristics of a particular approach to schooling that call for underlying beliefs to exist, particularly by the leader. Simply stated, as shown in the opening scenario of this chapter, if you believe that there is no real value in creating a sense of community in your school, it will not happen. In this case, there are still no right or wrong things to believe. But there is a need to realize that a normative value exists here.

As you read over the kinds of issues that must be considered if a leader wants to develop a school community in a most positive sense, you must reflect on your personal responses to each item. Like Jane Clancy, you may think that being a good principal is quite compatible without any emphasis on bringing people together.

What Value Do You See in Creating a School That Functions as a Community, or Even as an Extended Family?

There is little doubt that there are increasing calls for effective organizations of all types—schools, businesses, hospitals, and so on—to adopt philosophies that indicate that they are functioning more effectively because they have chosen to follow the advice of ardent recent contributors such as Peter Senge (1990), Roland Barth (1990), Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998), and many others. Each of these authors have suggested that when effort is spent in any organization to create a sense of community through the intentional focusing of resources of common goals, the result will always be increased productivity of members of the organization and, ultimately, high degrees of performance. That is the theory and fundamental belief of those who, like the fictional Dr. Delacourt in the opening scenario, propose that schools should adopt models of community learning.

While there are many true believers in the world of learning community development, there are many, perhaps including yourself, who are not quite as enthusiastic about this approach to improving practice in schools. There are those who truly believe that the principal of a school has much more to do than spend a great deal of time trying to bring

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people together. As the principal in the first few pages of this chapter observed, there is a lot more to do than jump on some bandwagon.

What Is Your Attitude About Parental Involvement in the School? Is There Already Too Much Opportunity for Parents to Be Active Partners, or Not Enough Opportunity Available?

The vast majority of schools across the country indicate that they welcome visits from parents and other members of the community. In effect, they tell people that they are always happy to see a mother or father who takes time to come to a school to see how a child is doing. In fact, schools often advertise their willingness for parents to feel at home in their local schools. Often, there are signs posted on the front doors of schools saying things like, “Welcome, Parents! This is your school.”

Events in recent years make it less likely that anyone, even a parent, can simply walk through the front door of a school and start walking around the halls, or walking into a classroom completely unannounced. From large suburban high schools like Columbine High School in the Denver area to tiny village primary schools such as the one in Dunblane, Scotland, many schools have faced the terror of unwanted intruders walking in and killing teachers and students at random. These are dangerous times, so even schools with a strong commitment to active parent involvement are more reluctant to simply allow complete access to the school. And increasing pressures at every level of schooling for increased attention to student achievement mean that it is less and less likely that teachers will simply keep their classroom doors wide open to any family member who simply wants to “watch what’s going on in my child’s classroom.” Restrictions on access to any noneducational personnel are common.

But the practical need for security is not the issue that you need to consider before adopting a perspective consistent with community learning. The fundamental issue concerns whether or not you, as the principal, believe that parents are partners in the educational process of their children. There is a big difference between having “Meet the Teachers” or “Back-to-School” nights where parents are invited to come to the school cafeteria for cookies, punch, and polite introductions once a year, promoting a sense of the school valuing input from people who do (or should) arguably have the highest interest in what is taking place in their local schools. “Parental involvement,” as measured by attendance at occasional meetings, is far different from parent engagement in the life of a school. As principal, you (and your values, beliefs, and platform) have a lot to do with choosing among possible answers to this issue.

How Important Is Broad-Based Involvement in Decision Making That Has Implications for Policies and Practices in All Parts of Your School?

Since the early 1990s, every state has mandated that school districts and individual schools create site-based councils, committees, and other groups that enable teachers, parents, and administrators to meet on a regular basis to make recommendations for the improvement of schools. This is a vague description of the actual conduct of these groups once they are created. In some cases, site-based councils are active and integral parts of the decision-making process that affects the lives and practices of teachers, students, and administrators of schools in a way that is consistent with the needs, interests, values, and beliefs of local neighborhoods, attendances areas, villages, or other areas of a school system. Operationally, however, local site-based groups often simply meet periodically to appear as if the state mandate for groups to gather is addressed. Not much occurs other than more opportunity for a few people to talk about what is going on in their local school.

The choice of how to make effective use of decision-making groups, whether mandated by state law or simply by local tradition, is largely a matter of your values and platform. Do you really believe that the activities and priorities of a school will be clarified and enhanced by involving people with diverse interests and attitudes to gather periodically, or do you have the attitude of one principal I knew who was anything but supportive of broad-based involvement when he observed, “I believe in shared decision making. As the leader here, I make all decisions and then I share them with anyone and everyone.” The choice, again, is yours.

What, If Any, Is the Appropriate Amount of Involvement of Non-Certificated or Classified Staff in Your School?

Jane Clancy, the new principal at Motley Elementary School, clearly answered this question when she decided that her focus for school improvement would be to work exclusively with teachers. Not all teachers, necessarily, but rather the “best teachers.”

If Jane’s goal as a school leader is simply to increase the perceived effectiveness of her school by raising test scores, she probably has a reasonable strategy: Make certain that the most experienced and skilled teachers focus on improving one indicator of effectiveness, devote all available resources to help achieve that narrow goal, and you will probably succeed.

In reality, however, there is much more to the creation of an effective school than increasing scores on a statewide standardized achievement

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test. While volumes can be filled with alternative descriptions of potential images of “good schools,” there are many additional goals that can be followed in creating an effective educational experience for young people. And the way that you can begin to decide the proper goals for your particular school may be to “pick the brains” of more than those who are certified or licensed professional educators. Believe it or not, that list may include your clerical staff, security personnel, instructional assistants, food service workers, and even your custodial staff. While these individuals may not have college degrees or certificates from the state department of education, they have insights into what can be done to help children. Many of your “invisible” staff members have worked in schools for many years longer than you (or many other “official” educators on your team) have. In addition, they not only have ideas, they also have ways to add to the quality of learning experiences for your students. We know of one school where the head custodian regularly takes on the challenge of working with groups of high school students who are never likely to fit in with the traditional behavior of what might be expected of proper students. Kids who are turned off to schooling might be reeled in if an alternative vision of teaching could be found. To put it simply, there are many educators in your school—if you choose to find them and include them.

What Is the Appropriate Role of Agencies, Businesses, and Other Members of the School Neighborhood That Do Not Necessarily Have a Direct Stake in Your School?

“One of the greatest challenges we face in the United States is how to do something about the horrible condition of public education in this nation.” Ridiculous hyperbole? Inaccurate? In our judgment, the answer to these questions is “Yes.” I fully continue to believe something that I have believed throughout my professional career, and that is, despite the fact that there are some schools in trouble, the vast majority of public schools in this country do a remarkably good job of educating most children, most of the time. That is because most of the people who work in most of the schools are committed to ensuring that all children learn. But for the past 20 years or so, the state of American public education has been identified as a key talking point by politicians, ranging from local city council candidates to state office holders up through presidential candidates. It seems that public-school bashing has been developed as a regular message. And following on the heels of the bashing often come “solutions” from private corporations. Jack Welch of General Electric writes a book and provides significant financial support for the New York Leadership Academy to prepare new principals. Bill Gates provides millions of dollars

to support the improvement of high school education—after he writes a book. The rather powerful statement seems to be, “If only the school people would listen and learn from private industry. . . .”

Given this background, it is not surprising that many educators—teachers and administrators—are somewhat resistant to anything that suggests that schools should open their doors to the private sector. The numerous descriptions in negative terms have built walls between schools and many groups in their external communities. But the fact is, schools must connect with the outside world for many reasons. First, politically, public schools cannot alienate themselves from agencies that pay high taxes in many communities. Second, at least one function of schools is to prepare students for work in the future. It is critical to maintain effective working relationships with those who will eventually be called upon to employ our graduates. Third, and perhaps most important, there are many things to be learned by listening to insights of those who do not work in schools each day. This does not mean that everything every business representative touts must be adopted as absolute truth to “fix” schools. But as noted with the issue of involving noneducators within schools, it is worthwhile to talk with others to gain new insights. Again, however, the choice must be yours as a principal.

There are, no doubt, many additional issues that you might wish to consider in terms of your personal values, attitudes, and beliefs about practices that may have a direct impact on what is going on in your school.

Points to Ponder

- In your view, what are the greatest advantages associated with remaining open to the concept of developing community within a public school?
- Would you move forward with an effort to implement a sense of community in a school in which you serve as a principal (or hope to serve as a principal)?

RETURNING TO MOTLEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

What if Jane Clancy had not decided to turn off the model of community development for her new school? For example, had the opening scenario ended by saying that Jane was greatly impressed by Dr. Delacourt’s presentation, and that she decided that she was sold on the idea of creating community at Motley Elementary School, what steps might she take to begin to use this concept as she moved in?

The remaining chapters of this book will attempt to answer these questions. Some background regarding the development of the recent

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focus on school community building will be given, but perhaps more important for you as a principal will be the ideas that will be raised in chapters that deal with increasing communication with the private sector, parents, and your own internal school staff. Regardless of the information provided, do not lose track of the fact that any direction that a school follows will only be successful if the leader commits and supports the vision. It all begins with you.

POINTS FOR PRACTICE

- The foundation for all efforts to bring about necessary change and improvement of school practice is derived from the values of the school and its staff.
- The only way in which good things will happen in schools is if people in schools value that good things will happen.
- As the leader of a school, the principal—whether a beginner or a veteran—must set a tone in the school where discussions of values take place regularly and all points of view are honored.
- A powerful tool for promoting discussion and sharing of values is the educational platform activity.
- While sharing platforms is a very useful activity, it must be followed by commitment and action. Simply saying what you believe is only the beginning of an ongoing process of reflection that leads to positive outcomes.

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