Educational Leadership: A Reflective Essay
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by
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Some thirty-three years ago, as a young college graduate with a business degree, immersed in the corporate world, I found a calling greater than a profit-loss statement. With the support of my wife, who is my best friend, I followed my dream to invest my life in the lives of kids on a new mission to be an educator. During my time as a graduate student, classroom teacher, and the last twenty-four years as a secondary school administrator, my focus has always been on what is best for kids. Our vision today at Tullahoma High School is “every class, every day, every kid—all our best.” Our mantra that sets the standard for our students is that we serve “the greatest students in the world.”

My personal values that guide my leadership are to never compromise on what is right, model and expect our best, and try to live a personal professional life of integrity. I understand that the most powerful words in the English language are “I believe in you.” I surround myself with innovative people with positive energy and enthusiasm. Creating a positive learning environment in which students, staff, and community are respected is a challenge that requires teamwork, constant and persistent attention, and people skills. I have never departed from the belief that every kid is special and holds equal importance, regardless of who they are.

Some of the critical incidents that have challenged my values over the years would be to ensure integrity and trust in our organization. While facing the daily pressures of meeting local, state, and federal directives and perspectives based on individual wants and needs, I have found that never deviating from decisions based on what is best for kids lends credibility that
can be achieved in no other way. Ironically, those same challenges reinforce my personal values as there seems to be no limits to the heights we can achieve when being “kid focused” is encoded into our DNA. My role becomes much like the orchestra conductor who is able to lead while finding great pleasure in the “music” our organization produces through the incredible talents of staff, students, parents, and a wonderful community.

In my various assignments as principal, one common thread has always been to lead each school during a time in its history that a climate for change is necessary. Being an agent of change requires courage, timing, and the ability to recognize and draw from the strengths of people to stay focused on the mission in the face of adversity.

In 1990, Community High School in Unionville, TN, was a small school of about 600 students. I was the fourth principal in seven years at the school. The morale of the school and community was low. Teachers were transferring out. The students and community had an historical tradition of pride, but felt like second-class citizens. The building was old and crowded. The school lacked vision and hope. For me, it all added up to an exciting opportunity.

Nine years later, Community High School had undergone a beautiful building construction project, expansion of programs, and, most importantly, become a place where teachers, students, and parents enjoyed learning in a positive, enthusiastic environment with high standards. Commencement exercises became dignified ceremonies. Previously chaotic athletic events were recognized by the T.S.S.A.A. for sportsmanship awards. Teachers from other schools were requesting to transfer into the school. Innovation and enthusiasm characterized every aspect of the organization. All this occurred because of a change in attitude and energy that literally changed the atmosphere.

In 1999, a new challenge came as principal at West Middle School in Tullahoma, TN. I came to a school that lacked technology, direction, cohesiveness, and fiscal stability. Four years later, we were known as the most technologically advanced school in the state. We presented our innovative integrated technology within the curriculum programs at local, state, and national conferences such as T+L National School Boards Conference in Anaheim, CA, and the Tennessee School Boards Association Conference in Nashville. West was recognized as a Blue Ribbon School of Distinction. Our curriculum had been entirely revamped. Our staff operated as
a team with a common vision and common goals. Discipline referrals were down dramatically. The vision I gave our staff was to change the way we teach. Teachers who had looked only toward retirement were energized in their instruction. Several school districts visited West to catch the vision of our integrated technology program. Obstacles, such as funding, were overcome through aggressive pursuit of grants and other fundraising. The teaching staff was constantly energized by the new, innovative ways that technology could be incorporated into the curriculum. West had truly become a 21st century school.

West became known by the mantra “Great things are happening at West!” Teachers and staff operated as a team. People were valued, involved in all phases of decision-making, and genuinely enthused to be part of a great learning environment. Of course, many people were involved in the changes and innovations implemented. But these changes did not happen without leadership. My joy as an administrator is celebrating the accomplishments of others. I create an environment in which people are motivated to grow. Our intentional professional development program was designed to learn and grow together.

In my current assignment as principal at Tullahoma High School, I became the fourth principal in five years. In spite of the various strengths of each principal, the continual changes in leadership had led to instability and loss of vision. The most difficult challenge has been to make a great school better. A staff of talented individuals was operating in isolation. The school was entering what would become a “high priority” designation due to not meeting graduation rate standards set by NCLB. My greatest challenge to date was about to begin. But I have also seen it as my greatest opportunity.

The first order of business was to change a confrontational, negative atmosphere into one of enthusiasm and positive energy. From a reworking of the mission statement to the establishment of kid-focused decision-making and programs, Tullahoma High School has been slowly transformed into a school that has achieved the NCLB graduation rate and is on a path that stands ready to meet the needs of students in an ever-changing society.

In spite of the fact that Tullahoma High has long been known for the accomplishments of high performing students, our challenge has been in how we serve all students. We continually evaluate our curriculum and programs to meet the needs of students with diverse
talents and interests. Our staff is challenged to change the way we teach, integrating technology within the curriculum. Teachers are encouraged to take risks and are bound only by their own creativity and sound educational practice. We have implemented an advisory program in which teachers build positive relationships with students in a caring environment. Academic at-risk students have been provided with increased instructional time and tutoring. Upperclassmen serve as freshman mentors to address the transition to high school. We have established student, teacher, and parent advisory boards to encourage stakeholder input into our decision-making. We began a community mentoring program to address our need to improve achievement in African-American male students. We implemented a program where each teacher observes other teachers on our campus and at feeder middle and elementary schools to learn from one another. Every staff member, including support staff, can recognize any student in our “doing the right thing” program. We celebrate every achievement, no matter how big or small.

When asked about retirement, my answer is always, “Not today, my friend.” I love what I do and am determined each day to make things better than they were yesterday. Overcoming the relentless obstacles always brings satisfaction as I know that I am a small part of the American spirit of achievement through supreme effort. I have enjoyed many experiences—special education teacher, history teacher, coach, assistant principal, principal, director of an educational foundation, 2002 Tennessee Principal of the Year recognition by the Tennessee Department of Education, Chair of the Tennessee Principals Study Council, mentor for Tennessee Beginning Principals Academies, and work for a visionary director of schools and board of education that truly put kids first. Over the years I have received countless cards and notes of thanks from kids, parents, and staff. I cherish each one as they remind me that we often do not realize the impact we have on one another. God has blessed me immeasurable and I give Him all the glory.

Being a recipient of the William J. & Lucille H. Field Award would honor my family and the many friends and co-workers that have shared this road together. In keeping with the spirit of the founders of this award, I commit to continue to invest in helping others achieve their dreams.
Life is great. Education makes it better.