



The New School Year: An Opportunity to Commit to a Shared Vision

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The evidence is clear. The most effective principals have a clear sense of vision and purpose. They know themselves and their personal ethic. They also recognize the importance of vision to guide their work with teachers and other school personnel.

A “clear, strong and collectively held vision” was identified by the North Central Regional Laboratory as one of the six critical components of an effective school.

Your Personal Vision

The frantic life of a high school principal rarely provides time to step back and reflect on those beliefs that shape and guide your personal and professional life. Yet being clear about those personal beliefs that shape your work and relationships with people is essential.

The beginning of the school year can be a good time to stop, reflect, and identify those things that contribute to your personal vision for your school. Often this introspective process leads to a recommitment to the core values that led you to being a principal.

Preparing a written statement of personal vision provides an opportunity to think about the words you use, to consider their nuances, and to grapple with balancing multiple values and priorities. One principal I worked with described writing a vision statement as “the most challenging thing I ever wrote. But also the most valuable.”

A four-step process for thinking about your personal vision includes reflecting on your own personal and professional life, identifying those things of greatest value, and using these insights to write a personal vision.

Process for Developing a Personal Vision Statement

Step 1: Think about your personal and professional life. Make a list of what you would like to achieve and the contributions you would like to make.

Describe what it looks like and feels like. For example, hovering in a hot air balloon over your life, imagine it as successful as it might be---what would you see, what would you feel, what would you hear?

Step 2: Consider the following things about what you have written---relationships, personal interests, and community. Examine each item in your list to ensure that it still fits.

Step 3: Develop a list of values. Identify the most important values in your life. Once this is done, review the list and rank them from most to least important. Remove the least important. Re-rank if appropriate. Check for relevance with your earlier list. Eliminate any item that is not relevant.

Step 4: Use the items from the first three steps to develop a statement of personal vision. Review and edit the statement as often as needed until you believe it accurately reflects who you are and what you want to be.

Adapted from: **Williamson & Blackburn (2009). *The Principalship from A to Z*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.**

Developing your own personal vision is not easy. Because it reflects our core beliefs about our work and our lives, preparing a statement of personal vision can be challenging. However, work on a personal vision, or ethic, has been described as one of the most important things a leader can do. It helps one to become clearer about what they value and about what is most important in their school.

Vision Letters

It is also important for teachers and others who work in your school to think about their personal vision. The beginning of the school year is a good time to invite teachers to reflect on their own personal vision. Barbara Blackburn (2005), in her book on classroom motivation suggested a way for teachers to consider the sort of classroom they want to create. Teachers were asked to write a vision letter to a colleague about the new school year.

A Teacher Vision Letter

Ask teachers to imagine that it is the last day of school. Write a letter or e-mail to another teacher describing the past year: all that students accomplished, how they changed, and what they learned.

One principal I know asks his teachers to write a vision letter at the beginning of every school year. Throughout the year he provides time for teachers to talk with one another about their vision and to reflect on progress making it real. This principal says, “The vision letters are a concrete way for teachers to think about the sort of year they want to have and to plan for making it happen.”

Another principal asked her teachers to write her a letter. She used the letters when talking with teachers about the new school year. Her emphasis was on supporting the teacher’s vision and talking about how their personal vision relates to the vision for the school.

Creating or Recommitting to a School-Wide Vision

Effective principals recognize the importance of working with their school community to develop, nurture and sustain a collectively held vision for their school.

Every school I’ve visited has a mission or vision statement. Many, however, are out-of-date and rarely used to set goals and priorities, allocation of resources, or make decisions about school programs. Even the clearest statements need periodic review. A review allows you to adjust the mission and vision based on up-to-date information about students and their needs. A review also allows the staff “to recommit to the school’s core values and beliefs” (Williamson & Blackburn, 2009).

Process for Developing a School Vision Statement

Activity 1: What are the things people are pleased with and frustrated about at this school? (Designed to get the issues on the table.)

Activity 2: Invite the group to consider the values that should guide the school. You might ask, “As we begin planning for our future, what values are most important to you as we create our vision statement?” (Use of “I believe” statements focus on the important things.)

Note: A helpful approach is to have the group read some common things. For example, information about developmental needs of students, future trends, information about recommendations for schools at that level. Often professional associations (NASSP, ASCD) have useful resources. Shared readings create a common base of information and are particularly useful to minimize the barriers between teachers and parents where parents often defer to teachers as the “experts.”

Activity 3: Ask the group to respond to the following. “Imagine it is the year 2012. We have been able to operationalize our beliefs. What does our school look, sound and feel like? Describe the vision.” (Helps to identify the target the school will work towards.)

Activity 4: In work groups develop a draft mission statement to be shared with the larger group. (Development of multiple models promotes discussion, clarification and consensus building).

Activity 5: Share the drafts, ask questions and seek clarification, and seek consensus on a statement. Plan to share it with the larger school community for feedback and comment.

From: **Williamson & Blackburn (2009). *The Principalship from A to Z*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.**

Vision is one of the most important components of an effective school. Being clear about your personal vision, and working with others to be clear about the vision for your school, helps you and your faculty balance competing demands and make decisions based on your collective vision for your school.

Suggested Reading About Vision

There are lots of good books that describe one’s personal vision. The following examples reflect clear values and beliefs about life and work. They provide interesting insights into how other leaders articulate and actualize their personal vision.

Behar, Howard, (2007). *It's Not About the Coffee: Leadership Principles from a Life at Starbucks*. New York: Penguin Group.

Kidder, Rushworth (2003). *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living*. New York: Harper.

Pausch, Randy (2008). *The Last Lecture*. New York: Hyperion Press.

Online Resources

An online guide to writing a personal vision statement

http://humanresources.about.com/od/success/a/personal_vision.htm

Creating a Personal Vision

<http://www.management-issues.com/2007/5/3/opinion/creating-a-personal-vision.asp>

Franklin Covey's Tool for Creating a Personal Mission Statement

<http://www.franklincovey.com/msb/>

National School Boards Association framework for creating a vision statement

<http://www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/cav.html>

Advice about developing a vision statement from Total Quality Toolkit

<http://www.becal.net/lc/vision/visionstatementadvice.htm>

Toolkit for Creating a Shared Vision – Includes sample exercises for use with your school community.

<http://mdk12.org/process/leading/vision.html>

Tips for Creating Vision Statements

<http://www.growthconnection.com/Creating-Vision-Statements.htm>

Related Research Briefs (Available at www.principalspartnership.com)

Balancing Personal and Professional Roles

Goal Setting for Administrators

References

Blackburn, B. (2005). *Classroom Motivation from A to Z*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education (www.eyeoneducation.com).

Shapiro, J. & Stefkovich, J. (2005). *Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making in Education* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Williamson, R. & Blackburn, B. (2009). *The Principalship from A to Z*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education (www.eyoneducation.com).

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