

Socio Political Platform

As a teacher and a soon to become school leader, I have been given a tremendous responsibility to ensure that students are being provided with the best education possible. The past few years, in education, have been difficult ones given the economic troubles that the United States has faced. Our country’s educational institutions are drastically underfunded, but we must press on, making the future of education even better than it was before—embracing our passion for education and learning!

Social & Economic

The achievement gap in the United States continues to grow and is of great concern to all school leaders and educators. The NAEP (National Assessment of Education Progress) reports that the average 8th-grade minority student’s scores are about the same, or close to the average white 4th grade student’s scores. Also, females are found to have scored higher than males in both grades. In addition to this, close to two out of three African-American and Hispanic students are reading below grade level by the 4th grade and by the end of high school, African-American and Hispanic students perform about the same on assessments as white 8th-grade students. Cordeiro and Cunningham (2013) add to this discussion of the achievement gap by making the point that, “Many if not most of these children live in high-poverty urban school districts where conditions mirror inequalities in those aspects of schooling, early life, and home circumstances that research has linked to school achievement” (p.48). It has become clear that several of the children who make up the growing achievement gap are concentrated in in low-income schools. Low income schools and their number of poor students have been projected to grow even more in the near future due to the decline in middle-income families, as the number of wealthy and poor households increase.

I have witnessed an increase in student poverty within my own school and classroom. Our school’s leaders and educators are working hard towards building support for families and students who fall into this subgroup and we are beginning to see a positive change. Payne further supports our school’s approach to the increase in poverty by stating that (1995), “The key to achievement for students from poverty is in creating relationships with them” (p. 32). Research studies have shown that mentoring relationships increase educational achievement by increasing student attendance, improving students’ odds of attending college, along with developing better attitudes toward school.

Political

Most if not all educational leaders would like to improve the quality of education for underachieving students, but sometimes politics can get in the way of trying to implement educational reform. Boykin and Noguera (2011) state that, “Opposition to policies and practices that might make it possible for districts to reduce academic disparities—such as reducing tracking, expanding access to rigorous subjects such as algebra and physics, and providing academic support so privileged students are not set up for failure—often comes from the parents of high achievers” (p.181). These parents of high achievers often fear that implementing these educational reforms will lower standards and reduce the overall quality of education that their children receive.

I have personally witnessed how politics can influence educational decisions. The school that I currently work for, Oregon Connections Academy, is an online virtual charter school, which was almost forced to close due to Senate Bill 767. This Bill almost caused all online charter schools, in Oregon to go offline for two years, but parents and students formed a committee to support and lobby for virtual schools. This committee protested and shared personal accounts, of how virtual education has made a significant change in the quality of education that their children receive. I believe that without this parent and student created group that our school would have been forced to close. They were extremely influential in swaying the votes of Salem’s representatives.

Equity

As educators we face great challenges in today’s schools in ensuring that all students have the equal opportunity to learn. Unfortunately, schools have long been set-up in a way that mirrors society’s inequalities. It’s our duty as teachers and educational leader to change this. Cordeiro and Cunnigham (2013) further add to this point by stating that, “Instead of equalizing people, schools reproduce the inequities that separate them” (p. 269). Being aware of these inequalities that exist is the first step towards making changes that will produce equitable outcomes for all students. This is why school leaders and teachers need to become data and equity audit experts in order to be able to pinpoint the specific areas of need within their schools.

In closing, despite all of the obstacles that school leaders and educators face, we can make a difference by being aware of the politics and policies that affect and surround educational decisions. It is also our social duty to be student and family advocates for under-represented groups. We need to use our expert knowledge of the educational scene, or environment to be the change that we wish to see.

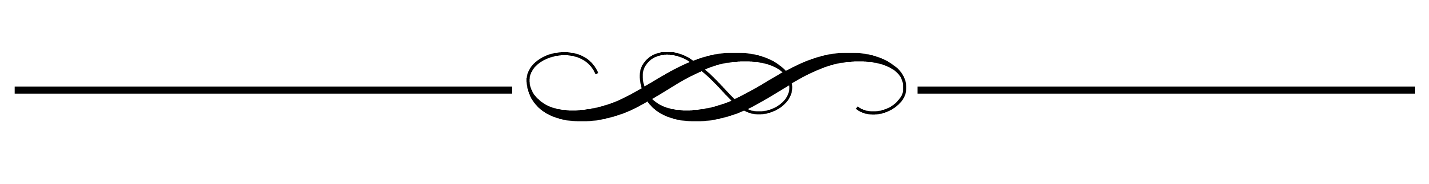
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Visionary Leadership Platform

Every great and well known organization has a mission, a statement, a reason for being, a purpose, or a vision. This shared mission, collection of beliefs, or vision is what drives and motivates successful organizations to achieve and succeed. As an educational leader, the process of creating a shared vision for staff, students, and families is paramount in building a unified foundation for success. According to Conzemius and O’Neil (2001), “Goals, values, missions—and vision—are what help keep educational organizations focused on the critical factors that will determine whether students succeed or fail” (p.19). There are three main components to consider and include, while constructing and creating a prosperous school vision. They are school culture, teacher collaboration, and data based decisions, all of which should primarily focus on “what is best for students”.

School culture must be positive, embracing and supporting the vision of the school. When this is done well, the vision cannot only be seen, but felt by all. Physical actions play an enormous role in communicating what people believe and who they are. Frattura and Capper (2007) support this idea by stating that, “We believe that when the adult behavior within an environment is positive, it will positively affect system behavior, which in turn will positively affect student behavior” (p.83). Positive behavior and beliefs are contagious. It is known that people will perform at their best when they are in an environment where they feel valued, encouraged, supported, and trusted.

Another important factor that greatly contributes to school culture, is teacher collaboration. Teacher collaboration is essential in promoting a shared vision and building a positive school climate for all students and families. Stainback and Stainback (1996) discuss the importance of teacher collaboration by stating that, “no single educator has all the skills necessary to meet a diverse population of students, which then necessitates collaboration among educators with a broad array of expertise to meet the needs of all learners” (p. 38). Teacher collaboration is fundamental if schools are to meet the diverse needs of all learners.

To add to this, teachers and school leaders need to consult the data and research in order to make informed decisions about which outcomes are best for supporting and ensuring equitable student learning and achievement. Fraturra and Capper (2007), make the point that, “data collection and analyses are critical for raising consciousness about the inequities in schools and for making decisions about what actions to take to ameliorate these inequities” (p. 56). It is clear that teachers and school leaders need to become data experts, so that they can be able to consult, communicate and evaluate the data in order to raise awareness about equity strengths and areas for improvement.

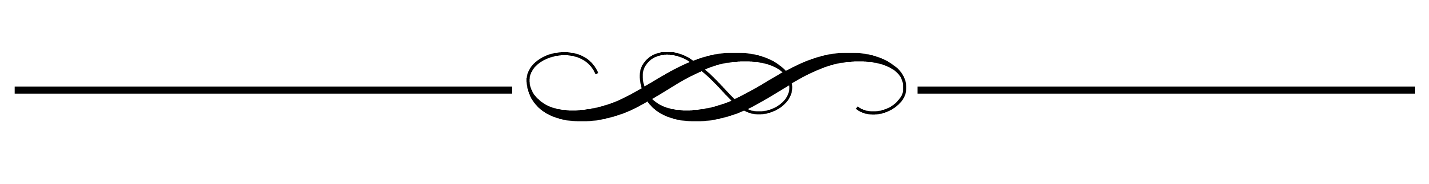
In summary, several school visions and mission statements encompass common core values and beliefs on educational practices and on how to raise overall student achievement, but these statements mean nothing if there is no “heart and soul” behind them. Visions may not be exactly the same for everyone, but they do share common goals, and a common foundation, which creates a sense of unity and a sense of purpose. When people truly believe and embrace purpose and meaning in their lives—they can accomplish anything!

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Ethical Leadership Platform

Possessing, modeling and maintaining a strong code of ethics is essential for an educational leader, especially since his or her actions will be constantly examined and evaluated by their community, colleagues, and students. Strong ethical leaders stand for and believe in a code of ethics. Cordeiro and Cunningham (2013) point out that ethical school leaders possess, “the common values of honesty, integrity, due process, civil and human rights, and above all, seek students’ well-being” (p.18).

Placing students first, means being an advocate for students, even when it comes to possibly having to challenge laws and policies that are inconsistent with best educational practices and do not hold the best interest of students. In seeking out the best interest of students this also involves a responsibility and commitment to justice, fairness, and providing the best optimal and equitable learning conditions. In order to achieve this, ethical leaders must maintain professional standards and strive to improve the educational system through the use of research and professional development.

Furthermore, to achieve and create an excellent learning environment and school culture, ethical leaders must commit to serving and caring for others before themselves, placing others’ needs before their own—their teaching staff and their students. Displaying this level of care and thoughtfulness is what establishes a strong rapport and strong relationships. Caring about people is what gives an organization a soul, and promotes a family-type culture. Bolman and Deal further support these thoughts by stating that, “One person’s compassion and concern for another—is both the primary purpose and the ethical glue that holds a family together” (p. 403).

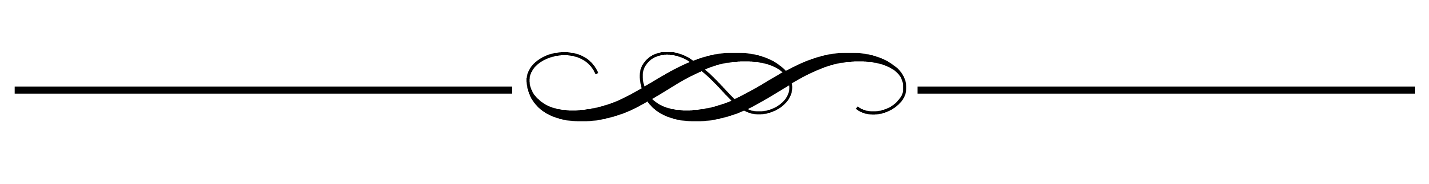
In addition to this, ethical leaders must implement, model and promote high personal standards of good practice. Cordeiro and Cunningham (2013) share that, “Standards of good practice include being conscious (aware and informed), encouraging dialogue, modeling and being reflective” (p.17). Exercising these personal standards of good practice, provide a way for self reflection and self improvement. Self reflection is a valuable tool that can be used in the process of critiquing oneself. It can also provide insight into examining situations from a variety of perspectives.

In conclusion, effective ethical school leaders place the needs of their students and staff first, build a culture of care, and hold themselves accountable to high personal standards and beliefs. They are reflective practitioners, seeking and striving for ethical excellence not only from themselves, but from their teachers and students, as well.

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Inclusive Practices Platform

Today, in 21st century schools, school leaders and educators have the challenge and profound responsibility of providing all students with an educational experience that will ultimately bring them to achievement and success. Increasingly diverse classrooms and high demands for student achievement have brought the practice of inclusive teaching to the forefront. Inclusive education not only impacts students, but society as a whole. As Salend and Duhaney (2007) note, “High-quality inclusive education is an issue of social justice and important to developing the human capital that is needed in today’s societies” (p.148).

Administrators must be strong “advocates for all children,” advocating for the rights of all children. School leaders and teachers need to become empowered advocates, ensuring that all children are receiving needed services and promoting inclusive school practices. According to Villa and Thousand (2005), the most effective ways to implement and facilitate inclusive practices as a school leader is by the following essential steps: (1) Build consensus for a vision of inclusive schooling, (2) Develop educators’ skills and confidence to be inclusive educators through ongoing professional development, (3) Create incentives (time, training, responding to concerns) and recognition, (4) Reorganize and expand human and other teaching resources, and (5) Plan for and take action to help the community see and get excited about a new vision.

School leaders and educators need to shift their approaches and thinking from attempting to “fix” the student to changing or modifying the curriculum and environment. It was once believed that students who required special instruction, such as English Language Learners, had to leave their mainstream classrooms and peers, so that they could receive one-on-one instruction and learning, but research has now concluded that this is not required to meet a diverse learner’s needs. Instead, research has found that this practice does more harm than good. Leaving students within their mainstream classrooms and with their peer groups is more beneficial, especially when teachers practice flexible grouping strategies employing large group and small group instruction, based on student learning needs, interest and content areas (Wong & Snow, 2000).

I have seen the benefits of carrying out inclusive teaching within my own online classroom. Being a virtual educator allows me to support and tailor learning to each student’s individual needs because I am able to spend more time conferencing, modifying, and adding supplemental support programs to their daily learning schedules. The majority of my time is spent on conferencing with students and their learning coaches; while in these conferences we discuss student goals, areas of strength, areas to improve, student interests, and learning styles. From these conferences I am able to use this valuable information to adjust and “personalize” each student’s learning experience. For example, I recently created a block schedule for one of my students. He prefers to learn and focus on one subject a day, since transitions are difficult for him and cause him to become easily distracted. Another student of mine has great difficulty with writing assignments due to a recent hand injury, so I allow them to express what they learned through guided discussions within my LiveLesson classroom. This is just a small picture of how flexible and accommodating virtual education can be for a student, but I feel that it’s amazing and empowering for our school staff and students to be a part of promoting and implementing inclusive educational practices. It is very rewarding to be able to individualize a student’s education in a way that is meaningful and beneficial to them.

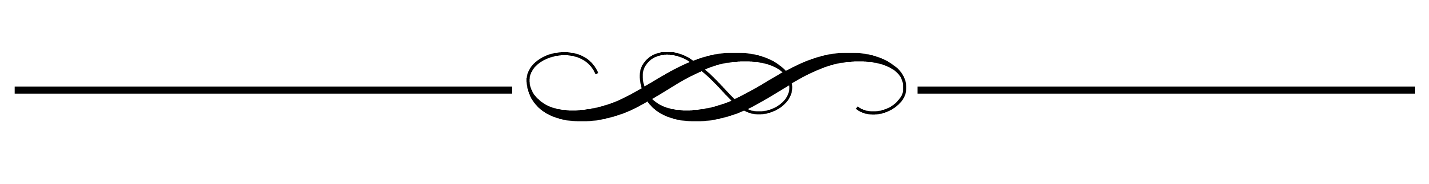
When reflecting on current research and results related to student achievement, it is apparent that instructional methods and materials should be designed with flexibility and diversity in mind, so that all learners are appropriately supported. Professional development and collaboration focused on inclusive practices is vital in providing educators with the knowledge and resources that they need to strengthen their teaching strategies in order to meet the ever growing, diverse range of student needs.

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Instructional Improvement Platform

In today’s modern, fast paced environment, school leaders are expected to be very knowledgeable, multifaceted, and well-rounded in several areas. Cordeiro and Cunnigham (2013) acknowledge these new expectations and demands placed on school leaders by explaining that “The traditional focus on management, organization, staffing, resources, and maintaining a safe, clean well-managed, disciplined school today is only half the story; the demand now is for a new kind of leader focused on instructional leadership, school improvement, and student achievement with an emphasis on high academic standards and expectations” (p.9). An area of great concern for school leaders and educators that will be further examined and discussed is the area of instruction. Instruction and learning needs to be meaningful; the ultimate purpose of teaching is to create lifelong learners. In order to achieve this goal, educators must teach learners how to: (1) acquire important information and skills, (2) make meaning of that content, and (3) effectively transfer their learning to new situations both within school and beyond (Wiggins & McTighe, 2008, p. 36).

In order to achieve this goal of creating an environment that promotes the meaningful exchange of knowledge and the true essentials behind the process of learning, there needs to be a change in how student achievement is measured. Student achievement needs to be measured by student growth, in all areas—not just in test scores. Educators need to focus more on actual authentic artifacts and projects that display a student’s in depth knowledge or mastery of a subject area. A majority of students are beginning to suffer from the lack of authentic learning that is taking place within schools. Primarily, due to the fact that schools are more concerned with their students’ test scores than they are with building and creating lifelong learners. Test scores are important and should be taken into consideration when planning and creating instruction, but they should not be the ultimate purpose or guiding force behind instructional design or curriculum selection. Several studies have shown that an exclusive focus on testing has led to a narrowing of the curriculum and heavy emphasis on test preparation in large numbers of schools, and these tendencies are having a damaging effect on teaching and learning (Haney 2004, Irvine 2003, King 2005).

This is why it is imperative that school leaders staff their schools with “scholarly teachers.” Scholarly teachers practice scholarly teaching, which is best described as a reflective practice informed by research, the outcome of which is improved teaching and learning (Hunt et al, 2009). Scholarly teaching is purposeful and analytical, involving the evaluation of current educational research, using this research to determine which teaching methods and strategies are to be implemented in order to best meet the needs of the current educational environment. Scholarly teachers are skilled in maintaining careful records, evaluating and assessing, and reflecting upon results. Scholarly teachers are also able to adapt, being flexible, making adjustments where necessary, in order to fit learners’ needs, without compromising desired outcomes or results. It takes time and experience to become a scholarly teacher, so it is vital that school leaders provide and support learning opportunities for their staff to become “scholarly teachers” through professional development, peer mentoring, collaboration, and communication. I love this discussion! Why not say it’s one of your beliefs in your opening paragraph?

Professional development and collaboration is crucial for student success and achievement. Research has found that among the many variables influencing student achievement, such as parental support, student motivation, peer influences, etc., the quality of instruction that students receive may be the most important because it is potentially the easiest to alter or modify (Darling-Hammon & Richardson, 2009; Good, 1987; Silva, 2010). Reflecting on these findings, it is clear that educators need to be equipped with current best practices research and have the knowledge to navigate through curriculum, being able to identify instructional goals and develop appropriate instructional objectives based on the needs of all of their learners. Professional development also needs to be highly focused on improving learning opportunities for all students by encouraging ongoing meaningful collaboration with colleagues, allowing teachers to develop pedagogical skills that will enable them to successfully deal with diversity (Hunt et al., 1999). Excellent educators are aware and know first-hand that instructional decisions must take into account the readiness levels of all learners—their learning styles, interests, and abilities. Research shows that when instruction is broken down into a more personalized approach, making it a meaningful exchange for all learners, then and only then can learners “actively construct” meaning and this place where meaning is constructed, is the place where “real” learning is achieved (McTighe & Brown, 2005).

In my own teaching career I have been able to be a part of meaningful exchanges of knowledge—knowledge and skills. Knowledge and skills that will not only be used in school settings, but that will be used for years to come even after graduating from school. The most memorable of these learning experiences, was when I explained and modeled for my class all of the necessary questions that they could use when trying to approach a problem. We were working on a writing assignment. I didn’t realize the “real life” application or connection until a student raised their hand and shared that they had used our generated list of questions and the exact same brain storming map, the day before to approach a problem that he was having with fixing his bike. He said that it helped him to arrive at a solution for his problem of figuring out what was wrong with his broken bike. I was so amazed and ecstatic that my student had shared his “real life” connection with the rest of the class. This was authentic learning at its best--students making learning meaningful, students making concrete connections to the world around them!

In summation, school leaders and educators have a very complex and crucial role in providing students with an education that will not only meet test scores, but one that will meet the demands of daily life--of adulthood. School leaders and educators must become partners in professional development, and promoting scholarly teaching practices, along with creating instructional practices and strategies that will encompass all learners and their ability levels. In addition to this, a different perspective must be implemented when measuring student achievement. A more authentic approach to measuring student achievement and growth in learning needs to take place if learning is to be made a meaningful process to all who are involved. Deal and Peterson (2009) further support this idea by stating that, “Unless America changes its course and focuses on the meaning more than metrics, our schools will never realize their full potential” (p.31).

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