

APRIL 2018 BLOG

THE PRINCIPAL: CHARACTER, COLLABORATION, COMMITMENT



This blog was written as a direct result of reading David Brooks's column, "Good Leaders Make Good Schools" which I will summarize below. The column topic reminded me of previous notes and publications that I wrote about school leadership.

For example, several years ago, I published an article in the *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education, and Development* (September 2000, Vol. 39, Issue 1) titled, "Leadership for Character Education Programs." I suggested school principals and program leaders should be visionaries, missionaries, consensus builders, knowledge sources, standard bearers, architects, role models, communicators, collaborators, resource providers, and evaluators. For each responsibility, I offered commentary about the "what and why."

Elsewhere, I described two views about character and leadership.

One was that of Zenger and Folkman (*The Extraordinary Leader*) who made a clear case that "**Character** is the center pole, the core of leadership effectiveness."

The other was a summary of the Turknett Leadership Group's "Leadership Character Model." Their view is that "Leadership is about **character** – who you are not, what you do." Their model includes three core qualities as the keys of leadership character:

- 1) Integrity [honesty, credibility, trustworthy];
- 2) Respect (empathy, lack of blame, motivational mastery, humility); and
- 3) Responsibility (self-confidence, accountability, focus on the whole, courage).

www.turknett.com

Current research about school principals is exciting and informative. The Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org contains more than 70 publications about school leadership. In my readings of a few of the reports, I found evidence that effective principals establish **leadership teams**, led by the principal, assistant principals, and teacher leaders. Team members shared responsibility for student progress.

Another discovery (at least for me) was that effective principals encourage **collaboration** "paying special attention to how school time is allocated." Another study reported that, coupled with **collaboration**, "principals who rated highly for the strength of their actions (**commitment**) to improve instruction were also more apt to encourage the staff to work collaboratively." Note this important finding, "When principals and teachers share leadership, teachers' working relationships with one another are stronger and student achievement is higher."

Now, all of this information is what I call “in-house stuff.” My point—the public knows little about these significant findings. Thus, it is left to journalists and the media to bring this important information to the public, especially parents, board members, and community leaders.

David Brooks did this in his column, “Good Leaders Make Good Schools” (NYT, 3-12, 2018). In brief, this is what he wrote.

If you want to learn how to improve city schools, look how Washington D.C., New Orleans, and Chicago are already doing it.

Restructuring schools and increasing teacher quality don't get you very far without a strong principal.

How do they do this he asks? His answer, “They build a culture...set by their behavior” (character).

He also notes that “it takes five to seven years for a principal to have full impact on a school....When you learn about successful principals, you keep coming back to character traits they embody and spread: energy, trustworthiness, honesty, optimism, determination, and promotes a collaborative power structure.”

In bold type he writes a key finding from researchers who studied principals in 180 schools across nine states and concluded, “**We have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in absence of talented leadership.**”

Brooks concludes, “We went through a period when we believed you could change institutions without first changing the character of the people in them. But we were wrong. Social transformation follows personal transformation.”

The question for current school principals posed by Baruti K. Kafele, an award-winning former urban principal in New Jersey: “***Is my school a better school because I lead it?***”

His answer:

“It's my strong belief that to lead your school forward, you must consider this question daily. To answer this question affirmatively, you must be absolutely clear about who you are as the school leader, what your mission is, what purpose drives your work, and how you envision the future of your leadership and school. These characteristics determine who you are, what you're about, why you're about it, and where you are going. They serve as a mirror for why you do this work in the first place. You must lead your school with the confidence to say, ‘Yes, my school is, in fact, a better school because I lead it.’ And when you do, students win.”

<https://www.sandiego.edu/soles/character-education-resource-center/>