

Visioning: The Principal's Perspective

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The ability to develop and implement a school vision is now viewed as a core competency for school principals. Since being highlighted as an ISLLC performance standard, it has received increased attention in the educational leadership literature and principal preparation programs. This article summarizes recent findings regarding the perceptions of South Carolina principals toward the visioning process and their role in that process. Issues regarding its development, use, and effect are addressed. The importance of specific vision attributes and limitations are also discussed. Implications for preparation programs and the professional development of school principals are considered.

The ability to develop and implement a school vision is now recognized as a core competency for school administrators. As boards of education, parents, and community groups get more precise in their expectations regarding educational outcomes, it is imperative that school principals respond with an equally detailed vision for their schools. This may be a particularly challenging task at the secondary school level where a variety of embedded political factors and significant economic interests come into play. Those responsible for designing and implementing educational leadership preparation programs must continue to enhance their visioning expertise and align their curriculum with the performance standards as practitioner needs emerge.

Visioning skills can no longer be viewed as the special province of a few particularly insightful leaders. Vision statements and their associated plans can no longer be considered in isolation. The visioning process must now be ongoing and include a variety of stakeholder perspectives. Virtually every secondary school principal must now regularly demonstrate the futuristic thinking, idealistic attitude, and imagining skills required to develop, articulate, and implement a well-conceived school vision. While building a school vision is widely viewed as a team endeavor, the principal risks being viewed as out of touch or out of date if he or she does not play a prominent role in developing and promoting a compelling school vision. Further, it is the principal who will be held accountable for any failure to move a school toward the improved future envisioned by its constituents.

The ability to envision and articulate what others cannot has long been viewed as a valued leadership quality. Defining a compelling and positive outlook of the future has also been considered an important leadership asset. The increased emphasis on preparation standards has propelled visioning skills to the forefront of our thinking regarding leadership development. To recognize the new prominence given this skill area you need only review the work of highly regarded authors on the subject of leadership, recent studies of successful school districts and the findings of the professional organizations seeking to develop more uniform standards for preparing school principals.

Bennis and Nanus (1985) were among the early proponents of visioning as a key strategy for successful business leaders. In *Becoming a Leader*, Bennis and Townsend (1994) elaborated further on the subject and provided illustrations of its successful use in the private sector. Covey (1989) stressed the importance of linking personal visions with organizational visions and the powerful personal effect a leader's vision can have on others. The capacity for capturing the

attention of followers and energizing the organization through a well-crafted vision is also cited by those specifically addressing educational leadership. Fullan (2001), when discussing the role of change, noted that leadership in business and education have more in common than before and face similar challenges. His inclusion of an energizing moral purpose as one of his core leadership components lends further support to its increased importance in education. In *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner (1995) provided a thorough analysis of how the visioning process contributes to effective leadership and outline the specific attributes of a compelling vision.

A recent study of four Texas districts experiencing academic success with children from low-income homes and with minority children highlights the importance of leader beliefs in determining the academic success of school districts (Skrla, Schenich, & Johnson, 2000). A shared mission and a leadership focus on changing beliefs as well as practice were identified as common themes in these districts. A consistent and commitment-backed message regarding student achievement led teachers to succeed in districts with diverse student populations. Leaders in these districts adopted a moral philosophy and devoted themselves to embedding that philosophy into the organizational culture. Their commitment to replacing a model of deficiency schooling with a vision of academic success was apparent to the research team.

The Interstate School Leaders Licensing Consortium (ISLLC) standards provide evidence of the enhanced role vision plays in the development of school leaders. Charged with identifying common standards for principal and superintendent preparation programs, ISLLC cited vision as a performance standard and detailed the skills, knowledge, and dispositions associated with it. Thirty-seven states have now modified their administrative certification programs to align with these standards (Murphy & Shipman, 2000). The Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards used by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) also identify vision as a core competency. Textbooks and materials on the principalship are being modified to align with the ISLLC standards and virtually all include emphasis on creating and implementing a school vision. Personal observation also supports this perspective. During a recent panel discussion at the University of South Carolina, a panel of practicing school principals noted the importance of having a vision seven times during a 90-minute question and answer session with aspiring school administrators.

Definitions

This prominence in the literature, preparation programs, and among practicing school administrators led to an investigation of the principals' perspectives on visioning in South Carolina. Kouzes and Posner (1995) have defined a vision as "an ideal and unique image of the future." Visioning skill has been defined as "the capacity to create and communicate a view of the desired state of affairs that induces commitment among those working in the organization" (Bennis, 1984). These definitions formed the basis for seeking to better understand how principals view this performance standard and how we might best prepare them.

Methodology

A directory of school administrators was obtained from the South Carolina Department of Education. One elementary school principal, one middle school principal, and one high school principal from each of South Carolina's 85 school districts were randomly selected to constitute

the sample group. Of the 255 surveys that were mailed, 153 (60%) were returned. The vision statement was addressed in the first section of the survey. The vision development process, and the principal's role in the process were addressed in the second section of the survey (see Appendix).

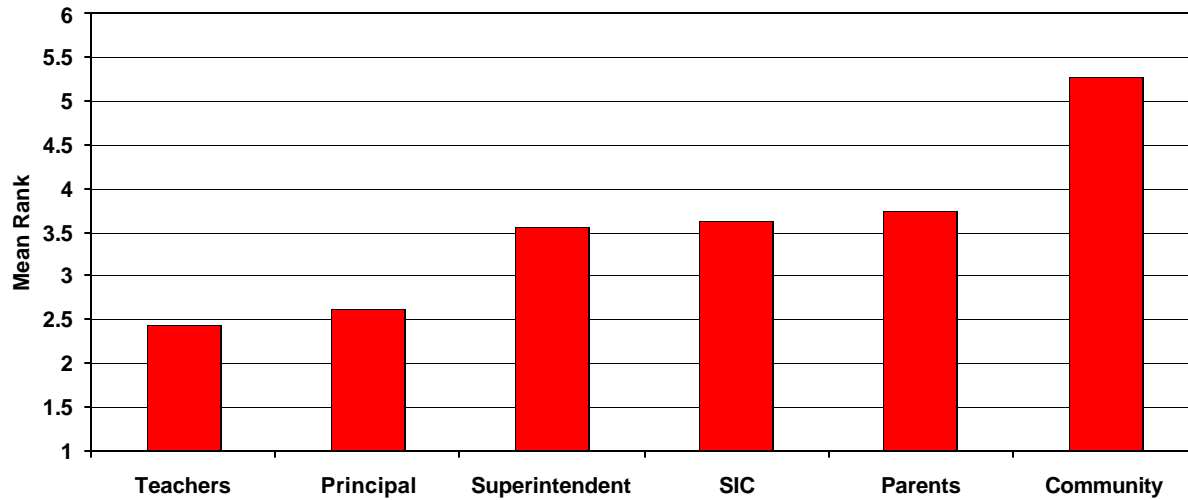
The survey items were determined through discussion with practicing school principals after a review of the ISLLC and ELCC vision performance standards. The survey data was tabulated using SPSS software. The results describe how visioning is currently viewed by practicing South Carolina principals and provides some insights regarding the challenges faced by those seeking to prepare school leaders through performance standards. The descriptive nature of the statistics allows for a broad application by those seeking to improve preparation programs for school leaders.

Results

Ninety-nine percent of the South Carolina schools reported having a written vision statement. A majority of those vision statements (66%) were developed while the current principal was at the school. Most principals (70%) reported a close connection between their personal vision for the school and the school's vision statement. When asked to assess how closely the school vision reflected their own personal vision, 46% indicated very closely and another 48% said rather closely. The willingness of people to participate was viewed as modest, with 14% indicating people were very willing and 8% indicating people were unwilling. The frequency of personal attention to the vision ranged from daily (14%) to never (6%). Most indicated they address the school vision weekly (28%), monthly (34%), or yearly (18%). Only 12% believed the vision had a significant impact on the performance of faculty and staff, while 10% believed it had virtually no effect. Principals generally played a limited role when developing the vision. Most described their role as facilitator (68%) or peer participant (24%). Only 8% served as chairperson of the committee which developed the vision. Fifty-two percent indicated that they were highly involved in communicating the vision to stakeholders once it was developed.

Though taking a relatively low profile during vision development, principals still viewed themselves as having a significant effect on the process. Principals ranked themselves second only to teachers regarding influence on the visioning process. The three internal stakeholder groups--teachers, principals, and superintendents--were ranked most influential and the three external groups were ranked less influential. Figure 1 summarizes that influence through mean rank scores, for the six stakeholder groups typically involved in the process. Men ranked the superintendent's role in visioning as substantially higher in importance than women did.

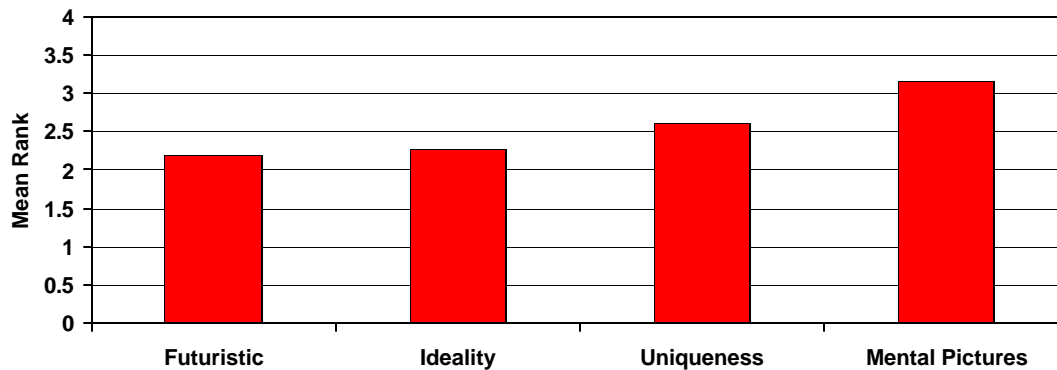
Figure 1. Effecting development of vision.



Note. 1 = Most important, 6 = Least important.

Sixty-two percent indicated that the vision statement was very clearly written while only 1% thought it was not. Perceptions regarding the clarity had a moderate to strong correlation with perceptions regarding how much the school vision reflected their personal vision ($r = .681$). Principals were also asked about the relative importance of the vision attributes. Those attributes presented by Kouzer and Pozner (1995) are futuristic, ideality, uniqueness, and creating mental pictures. The futuristic attribute was viewed as most important followed by ideality, uniqueness, and creating mental pictures. Figure 2 summarizes the mean ranks of the four attributes.

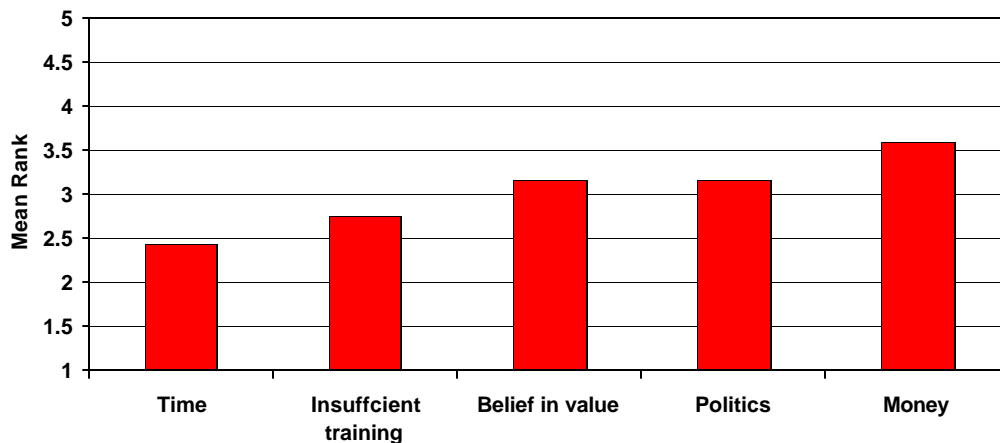
Figure 2. Importance of vision attributes.



Note. 1 = Most important, 4 = Least important.

Perceptions regarding the value and limitations of the visioning process were also addressed. There was widespread support for including visioning as a performance standard in training and development programs for school principals. Seventy percent indicated it was a very valuable skill and only 4% indicated it had little value. The lack of time and lack of training were ranked as the most significant limitations. Money was ranked the least significant limitation. Figure 3 summarizes the mean ranks of the limitations as perceived by the principals.

Figure 3. Limitations on visioning process.



Note. 1 = Most important, 5 = Least important.

Conclusions and Implications

The survey results provide several insights regarding principals' perceptions of visioning and raise several issues for those involved in preparing school leaders. Elementary, middle level, and high school principals viewed visioning as an important core competency. However, their view of the process and its potential for influencing beliefs and instructional practice is limited. Visioning is still perceived as an "in house" activity done by "school people" for school purposes. The rankings regarding effect, involvement, and benefits of visioning all ranked internal groups most important. This is particularly noteworthy in South Carolina where each school has a statutorily required community school improvement council whose mandate includes involvement in school planning activities. It also fails to meet the vision performance standard regarding the involvement of the greater school community. Expanding the thinking of school leaders to more fully include the community's perspective is a significant challenge for those preparing school leaders. The principals' beliefs regarding the role of external stakeholders in planning activities substantially affects the framing of the vision and its resulting effect on student achievement. Until principals expand their perspective to more fully include the greater community, those groups will have only a minor influence over a process that can significantly influence the school's future. Broadening leaders' perspectives regarding the scope of the process and making it more inclusive are worthwhile goals for those involved in the preparation and professional development of school leaders.

The importance of a personal commitment to the vision, while emphasized in the leadership literature and research studies, is not practiced by a substantial number of principals in South Carolina. Over one-third (34%) were not present when the vision was developed and 24%

bring attention to it yearly or not at all. It is hard to imagine a school vision substantially affecting student learning when the school principal only addresses it annually, or not at all. Administrative preparation and professional growth programs will have to focus more on the importance of personal involvement, commitment, and modeling a strong vision connection if school leaders are to maximize its value and use it to change organizational beliefs and impart instruction.

Principals recognize the limitations time and insufficient training have on the process. The allocation of time and training, however, are largely within the control of school leaders. To ensure an effective vision, principals and those that prepare them are going to need to dedicate more time and training to those activities that foster the skills and attitudes that lead to greater involvement. Training focused on team building, goal setting, and long-term planning will help develop the necessary skills. Promoting democratic governance and the continuous examination of beliefs and practices will foster more visionary leadership attitudes. Preparation programs will need to address in greater detail the performance aspects of the programs.

The principals agreed only in part with the Kouzes and Posner (1995) emphasis on specific attributes of an effective vision. They concurred with the importance of conveying futuristic thinking and the sense of an ideal school. Establishing uniqueness and creating memorable images were viewed as less important. Uniqueness and memorable images are the more subtle vision attributes that help bring a school vision to life in the eyes of others and connect it to individual visions. Unless educational leaders are willing to invest in developing the mental images and inspiring language associated with compelling visions they will not be able to create a vision that fulfills its potential for affecting school improvement. The ability to make an abstract image of the future appear real by using a positive and future-oriented leadership style is the key ingredient in determining the success of a school principal. Preparation programs can help by emphasizing a broad perspective, significant personal involvement, and the inspirational aspects of a vision when designing the planning components of the educational leadership curriculum.

Recommendations

Principals generally view a vision as a product, not a performance-enhancing process or an opportunity to expand ownership in school planning. They are aware of the importance of having a vision for the school, but have not internalized the value of the enthusiasm, commitment, and academic effect it can have. Those responsible for preparing school leaders need to find ways to help “breathe life” into a vision and expand principals’ frame of reference regarding its value. The following recommendations should help accomplish this:

1. Expand the perspective of aspiring principals regarding the concepts associated with visionary leadership. Present the vision performance standard as an ongoing performance-enhancing process and a crucial core skill, not a written end product. The widespread use of visioning techniques in the performing arts will provide many good illustrations.
2. Build individual and team visioning skill-building opportunities into leadership preparation classes. Individual reflective exercises can stimulate the creative and imaginative thinking associated with visionary leadership. The collaborative refining and

editing of individual ideas requires the integration and connection skills necessary to lead with confidence on this performance standard.

3. Address the major obstacles--time and training--and illustrate how they can be overcome. It may require the reordering of principals' priorities and the changing of some their own beliefs as well as the beliefs of others. As noted by Fullan (2001), that is what effective school leaders do. The Texas study of successful school districts illustrates that some rethinking of the principal's role may be necessary (Skrla et al., 2000).
4. Present an inclusive visioning model. Multiple catalysts are required for a vision to be powerful enough to effect student achievement. While the principal and staff members will likely remain the most influential stakeholders in the process, others farther from the actual practice of instruction are required to keep the message constant and highlight a widespread commitment to it.

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