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A Personal Perspective of Education

“I thought Marvin was smart enough to know better.” These were the words of my grandfather, an educator, upon hearing that I had chosen a career in education administration. Indeed, I watched him, my grandmother-librarian, my mother and three aunts - all teachers, holding a multitude of educational positions over a lifetime. In my youthful wisdom, I was sure that this was not for me, and I ran from my legacy as fast and as hard as possible. However, after two years in pre-medical studies; after earning a degree in radio, television and film; after owning and managing a picture frame shop and floral design service for six years; and after declining an offer to become a partner in an interior design business in Beverly Hills, I finally chose to pursue the career that was so obvious for my background.

Growing up with a grandfather who was a school superintendent for more than twenty-five years in the same district, as well as in two neighboring districts, I was keenly aware of the trials of the office. Of course, the fact that as a child I would rub the back of his bald head removed the mystic of the job and made me realize that with all of the accolades, this CEO was merely another human with another job. The fact that his district that he had worked so hard to build was destroyed as a testing ground for the civil rights war of the sixties and seventies presented the reality that the job could tear out the heart of the man and his family. The fact that he remained, until his death last year, one of the most respected and reputed members of the community enforced for me the nature of the job as a public servant responsible for molding the lives of the students, the parents, and the entire community. The reality of such pervasive responsibility scared me away from the profession as a teen-ager and early adult.

My educational experiences gave me some unique insight into some of the challenges that our children face in school. As a first grade student from a family that valued education, I was basically the teacher’s assistant being placed in the hall each day to teach the lower performing students to read. My teacher knew that I could catch up with the work that she was teaching with my mother’s help and with very little effort. In the second semester of second grade, I was moved to a private academy with a group of peers who had been together since pre-K and had been studying Spanish and other advanced coursework for the entire time. To say that I was behind is a severe understatement, and I acted out to avoid being the ‘stupid kid’ and was sent home every day until the end of the year. I had no idea that the frustrations I felt were preparing me for the empathy, patience, and understanding that would be necessary to help students, teachers, and parents make accommodations for all children to have opportunities for success. It was the behavior modeled by my parents and grandparents as well as the dedicated and capable teachers in elementary school that helped me to catch up and to become one of the top students once again. This same behavior in my daily activity has helped the students and their parents with whom I have worked over the years.

Spending my middle and high school years predominantly at a college preparatory school gave me an excellent academic background in a broad range of the curriculum. By the time I was moved in my senior year to Jenks, Oklahoma, I had already taken Chemistry and Physics, Trigonometry and Pre-calculus, two years of Latin, three years of advanced composition and literature, and three years of history. Therefore, I became completely submerged in extra-curricular activities. As drum major of the band, officer for science club, choreographer for school musicals, lab assistant for Chemistry, and so forth, I began to further develop my leadership skills and to realize the strength that accompanies facilitating as a team member rather than managing by ultimatum.

Owning and managing my own business offered a variety of challenges regarding budgets, management, efficiency, and so forth. I had experienced many of these situations as a retail manager during college, but when I became the owner and the concept of the final ‘buck stops here’ found my door, I developed a renewed sense of responsibility. For six years I was in the driver’s seat and was forced to shoulder the blame for any indiscretions or inadequacies in my business. This included financial decisions as well as public relations decisions. I was the person inevitably responsible for making every customer ‘happy’ – even the ones who were determined not to be happy with anything. Because of this experience, I feel a deeper sense of not only accountability to students and parents, but also obligation to the community - the taxpayers who foot the bill for our public education system. I realized that every dollar counts and that with proper management, one dollar can sometimes equal two or more. It merely requires creative and responsible supervision.

At the encouragement of my dear wife, I decided to ‘try education’ as a substitute teacher. For the first week, I was assigned to an elementary special education class, and I was ‘hooked’ immediately. After substituting every day for a couple of weeks, I was assigned to an elementary behaviorally challenged class that served sixteen of the south-end elementary schools in the inter-city district of Jackson, Mississippi. These students, kindergarten through fifth grade, had been suspended or expelled for a minimum of twenty days from their home schools. Needless to say, they were each a challenge. I enjoyed the class so much and was able to facilitate positive change in so many students, that I was hired for the remainder of that year and for the next year and a half as the instructor for this group. My class was called the Positive Action Center. While there were some who disapproved of the fact that these ‘bad kids’ were receiving any form of positive reinforcement, the board supported the program for a time and the students flourished.

It was increasingly evident during my time in elementary that in order to really make a difference and to have the freedom to really ‘serve’ children and their families, I needed additional training. For this reason, I began graduate education first in guidance and counseling, then in school psychology and education administration. For about two years, I pursued these ends while working in part-time capacities in several districts, and I graduated with my two masters degrees on two consecutive Saturdays. The simultaneous training offered a unique perspective into the workings of the education – a service profession. I developed a keen awareness that many of the arguments in education were communication problems in nature – basically a case of ‘the right hand not knowing what the left hand was doing.’ For this reason, I believe that it is largely the responsibility of upper administration to facilitate interaction and professional development opportunities for specialists not only in their own areas of expertise, but also in more cross-training. Thereby, they may have a greater appreciation for each other and the parameters of each person’s responsibility. Both my Master of School Psychology and my PhD cognate studies in guidance and counseling have offered me a better understanding of the data-driven best practices for supporting such a remedial program in schools.

During my ‘tour of duty’ as principal of the school at Mississippi State Hospital I dealt primarily with children and adolescents who were court-ordered to the facility for assessment and evaluation. Repeatedly, I faced trials that grew out of a lack of understanding and mutual respect for the various departments as well as the professional and ethical obligations to the patients. There is such an abundance of talent and intellect that remains untapped because there are too few leaders dedicated to teambuilding and to fostering a unified effort among the stakeholders. Because of the ‘turf battles’ between medicine, psychology, and education, patients’ success was often compromised. In other words, disharmony in a service organization such as a school is not only limiting to the success of the employees but also detrimental to the well-being and success of the students. A leader who is dedicated to opening the lines of communication and to providing opportunities for all of the involved publics to taste success and reinforcement creates a refreshing spirit of solidarity that is contagious. With such leadership, education may flourish.

As curriculum coordinator at Velma Jackson, I was part of one of the most extensive interdisciplinary and multi-focused magnet programs in America. However, I experienced the challenges that come from upper level administration who do not share the same breadth of understanding regarding the connectedness of the academic specialties. As an affiliate of the National Academy Foundation whose mission is “to strengthen the preparedness of the American workforce,” our program was dedicated to making research-based decisions with a high probability of improving the students’ basic skills while providing a global perspective and enhancing their higher-order thinking skills. By hands-on active learning in a format that provided a region specific application and that is interdisciplinary in scope, students successfully absorbed the information while building the skills to succeed in the workforce or in post-secondary education. Some of the greatest challenges came from those who did not understand the complexity and therefore, were scared to allow the freedom necessary to fully implement the design. Administrators must have a broad enough understanding as well as the self-confidence to allow and to encourage all members to grow and to achieve new heights.

As I have progressed through the ranks of building, district, and state educational leadership, I have learned much. Effective communication is one of the most valuable tools available to educators, yet it is sadly one of the most under-employed. When considering the challenge of leading an organization, especially a school district, the buy-in of all publics involved is paramount. Therefore, the same principles of marketing one’s product apply to selling the stakeholders the product of quality education. As in product development, formulating a clear picture of the needs of the consumer is imperative. By forming focus groups comprised of a diverse representation of needs, data may be collected and compiled. At the same time, there is a great opportunity for the dissemination of information as to program position, program goals, and the challenges of aligning the two. As representatives from all publics or stakeholder groups are allowed to discuss basic concerns and to hear district-wide considerations, they become ‘educated’ to the broad picture and aware that there are many perspectives to be considered for any decision. In every civilization, when communication has been facilitated between special interest groups, a civil degree of mutual respect has soon been achieved. This respect for others and their needs usually allows people to be more aware and hopefully more sensitive to the organizations responsibility to all members. The result is optimally a spirit of teamwork that encourages players to be patient with strategies which may not necessarily be their priorities. Instead, they may accept these ideas as priorities of teammates in the game to provide the best services to all members.

When one considers leadership style, most frequently the challenge of balancing management with supervision immediately comes to mind. Through my responsibilities in retail, I learned firsthand the pitfalls of merely employing a style of management as well as the benefits of supervision. I believe that if we are in the business of molding lives for success and prosperity, this behavior begins with the manner in which we supervise employees of the organization. My style in the most basic sense involves clear and consistent communication of expectations, personal modeling of behaviors that are congruent with my expectations for my team, consistent monitoring and positive feedback, and assistance toward meeting the goals. I hold to the thought that if our country is to recover from the current teacher deficit, we must make every effort to save the teachers who demonstrate potential. However, I believe that we owe it to the taxpayers who subsidize us, the school employees who work hard to perform well, and the students who will be our leaders of tomorrow, to be consistent in leadership. This means the embodiment of a style that will promote and support good job performance while being strong enough to relieve the responsibility of those who do not comply with efforts to improve. It has been my experience that such a style fosters a strong work ethic among the majority and thereby, successful outcomes for students.

It is my personal opinion that just as the principal is the instructional leader of a building, the superintendent is the instructional leader of the district. I think that this is evident in examining the leading districts across our country. The highest performing student populations usually are in district with upper-level administrators that are aware and dedicated to quality education and quality schools. All too often, we are finding that administrators who do not fully understand the connection of a strong program of curriculum and instruction paired with consistent and correlated staff development are managing districts that are sadly underachieving. In a time when there are a multitude of extracurricular and supplementary obligations, we cannot forget our primary responsibility. This responsibility is the academic preparation of our students to become productive citizens upon graduation whether in post-secondary education or in immediate entry to the workforce. It seems that the streamlined training programs of the past few years have produced many educators who may be well versed and capable in their specialty area while extremely limited often to the point of incompetence in other areas. Educators must understand the importance of transitioning and connecting learning from elementary to middle, then to secondary and finally to post-secondary education and training. When a superintendent possesses a full understanding of curriculum, a working knowledge of the responsibilities of all areas of educational employment, and an awareness of the importance of the developmental appropriateness of strategies for all levels of service, there may be a higher level of confidence. This leader will make informed decisions that are in the best interest of building quality education for all of the students served. Without such knowledge one cannot predict success because the ship is basically sailing without a captain.

I often share that I have great doubts as to whether the teachers I had in school were aware of the information that I would need to know for success in today's world. In a time where knowledge is doubling at such a rapid pace, I know that we do not know all that our children will need for success tomorrow. In evaluating my education, I believe that the strength came in the fact that my teachers consistently taught me and challenged me to think, to communicate, and to be aware of how to find the information that I needed. They also built for me a belief system or confidence that I can learn and succeed in anything that I choose. Public education must move away from the mass produced, quick-fix, memorize and spit back methods of education that have prevailed in recent years. We must develop classrooms that meet a diversity of learning styles with a repertoire of instructional strategies that promote higher-order thinking through constructive response. This intellectual form of education must be paired with a global awareness that will allow our children to compete in a more connected international marketplace than we can imagine and to be confident that they are as capable and qualified as any to succeed. Their confidence must be reality-based to avoid the hostilities that have come from social promotion and graduation of students who realize too late that they are not prepared. If we do not rise to the occasion and meet these new demands, I am concerned that public education soon will be replaced with privatized programs.

While one of my strongest beliefs is that not a single teacher in my background knew what I would need to know to succeed in the twenty-first century, almost all of my teachers contributed to building in me a high level of self-confidence and to fostering skills of higher-order thinking. When combined, these abilities will allow me to succeed in any endeavor. As educators in a world that is doubling in information every thirty minutes, we must build the same skills in our learners of today so that they may succeed as the leaders of tomorrow. I guess I would have to answer my grandfather by saying that "Indeed, I was smart enough to know better," but called to do none other than to live the legacy of being a strong leader in education promoting discipline, knowledge and children. In the simplest words of Whitney Houston, "the children are our future," and we must "teach them well and let them lead the way" because they are our legacy.