

Leading Schools of Excellence in Academics, Character, and Social-Emotional Development

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In the 21st century, students' character, social-emotional skills, and academic competencies will define school excellence. This article describes characteristics of visionary leadership for such schools based on settings already characterized by strengths in EQ + IQ = Best Leadership Practices for Caring and Successful Schools. Core beliefs underlying visionary leadership are presented as well as key practices of visionary leadership in action, including how to create contexts that engage schools in building empathy through moral action and service and how to fill schools with opportunities for student goal setting, decision making, and problem solving. Examples illustrate how leading schools that prepare children for the tests of life and not a life of tests is a vision truly worthy of pursuit.

Visionary leaders look at education in the 21st century with a new definition of excellence. They see schools that are focused not on preparing students for a life of tests, but rather preparing young people for the tests of life (Elias, 2001). They have accepted and integrated data from brain-based research showing the essential role of emotions in learning and that the soul and spirit of children is not a touchy-feely irrelevancy to the instructional process (Brandt, 2003; Kessler, 2000). Visionary educational leaders must look beyond school success and embrace the goal of life success, of helping children become active and committed citizens of their classrooms, schools, families, communities, and workplaces. They aspire to schools of excellence in academics and in character and want their schools to have side-by-side banners that read Blue Ribbon Schools (or Star Schools, etc.) and National Schools of Character.

How can such changes in education happen? Fortunately, answers can be derived by examining school settings in which changes are taking place already. In a recent book, *EQ + IQ = Best Leadership Practices for Caring and Successful Schools* (Elias, Arnold, & Hussey, 2003), educational leaders who have helped schools attain excellence in social-emotional development of children shared their stories. EQ, or emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), refers to

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the set of skills necessary for effective social interaction and for classroom success. These skills comprise what educators have referred to for decades as “the other side of the report card” (Elias, Wang, Weissberg, Zins, & Walberg, 2002) and include emotional recognition and regulation, self-control, goal setting, social responsibility, empathy, problem solving, conflict resolution, and skills needed for leadership and effective group participation.

Recent research in emotional intelligence, brain-friendly learning, and social-emotional influences on learning and performance has shown that social and emotional competencies are an integral part of academic success (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2003). The conceptualization of the EQ + IQ connection makes clear that the organizational climate influenced by educational leaders is a necessary condition for that success. When children are given systematic, evidence-based opportunities to build their social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, a more positive environment for learning is created. There is a concern not only for safety and freedom from violence but also with the exercise of positive character in how students treat one another, staff members treat one another, and staff members and students treat one another. As a result, learning is seen as a partnership and a mutuality, rather than a highly competitive activity with a small number of clear winners and a vast number of losers. SEL competencies are valued as the keys that unlock the doors of opportunity and illuminate pathways of accomplishment. As opportunity replaces discouragement, learning becomes more valued by more students; this, in turn, leads to more risk reduction, asset building, and greater attachment and engagement in school. The ultimate outcome is improved performance in school and life.

This model is supported by a growing body of empirical evidence. For example, Caprara, Barbanelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, and Zimbardo (2000) found that changes in achievement around grade 8 could be better predicted from knowing children’s social competence 5 years earlier than from knowing their academic achievement in third grade. Mitchell and Elias (2003) had similar results, predicting third-grade achievement most strongly from social competence in second grade in an urban sample. Elias (2003) has gathered additional evidence supporting the way in which the climate set by school leadership and the opportunities for development of SEL skills that are provided to the schools as a whole lead to broad educational benefits.

It would be difficult to find an educational leader who would not defend the view that all children have certain developmental rights: to grow up knowledgeable, responsible, nonviolent, drug free, and caring; to acquire the inclination and skills to be productive contributors to their schools, families, workplaces, and communities; and to take on the responsibilities of being participatory citizens of a democracy. The issue should not be framed as a choice between intellectual versus social-emotional development (IQ vs. EQ)

or academic versus inter- and intrapersonal skills. There is a “both-and” reality with which all schools must now grapple, and doing so successfully is the hallmark of the kind of visionary leadership described here. Experienced administrators recognize that retreating to the seemingly easier, safer, and more straightforward task of focusing on academics may seem like a pragmatic necessity, but it will not result in the schools that children need and deserve (Elias, Arnold, et al., 2003).

We present a few examples from leaders whose focus has been to balance students’ EQ and IQ. Often, school principals exercised this leadership, although in some cases other school administrators such as superintendents, heads of schools, or administrative consultants were the prime movers. Indeed, the tasks of visionary leaders are many, and in truth, they are beyond any single individual. Leadership responsibilities must be distributed, and ideally each staff member will see that the mantle of leadership touches everyone who is entrusted with the care of children. However, the superintendent and the principals have special roles in setting the agenda for leadership and serving as its catalysts. They must have a shared mission to be visionary forces in nurturing the school community. They must recognize and communicate the wisdom and needs of children and listen carefully for the social–emotional health of the school culture. Although parents, teachers, other educational staff members, and stakeholders share responsibility, the superintendent and principals must take the lead in defining, articulating, and implementing a vision of a school community of sound character and academic excellence. What is important to note now is that sufficient examples exist to inspire and empower educational administrators to act as visionary leaders.

An Overview of Core Leadership Beliefs in Schools of Sound Character and Academics

In model schools of sound character and academic excellence, principals see the roles of champion of vision and instructional leader as intertwined. They recognize the synergistic power of a vision of infusing social–emotional and character education concepts, principles, and strategies throughout the instructional program and helping everyone understand the relationship between social–emotional well being and academic success. They recognize that sound classroom structure and function are based on a foundation of caring relationships and that such relationships are nurtured among all school staff members, students, and parents (Blankstein, 2003). The foundation is set amid a school culture that values and respects children. All decisions are guided by a fundamental question: How will decisions affect children and their social, emotional, and cognitive development? As a result, the social–emotional well being and academic success of children become the focus of the school’s vision, which is relentlessly pursued by all school staff members, students, and parents.

Comer (2003) has said that children do not learn character as much as they “catch” it from the adults around them and the way adults set up experiences for them and interact with them. Therefore, it becomes vital for students to have a stake in their learning outside traditional academic disciplines. Model schools of sound character and academic excellence are filled with a comprehensive and interconnected array of challenging and motivating programs and activities which help students recognize that they have a vital stake in their learning and that they are among the decisionmakers in their school. Daily lessons in all academic classes engage students in higher cognitive thought, divergent thinking, and self-reflection. Explicit instruction in SEL complements the academic program. CASEL (2003) has determined that such instruction needs to be in place in schools from kindergarten through grade 12. CASEL recently completed an extensive analysis of programs that purport to build SEL skills. The report, *Safe and Sound*, identifies 20 “SEL.ect” programs that meet stringent criteria and have been implemented successfully in several schools. Many of these are at the secondary school level.

Visionary principals know that curricula alone do not produce learning in children. They challenge teachers to take the tenets of SEL and apply them throughout all aspects of the school day. They weave SEL skills into academics, group work, lunchrooms, physical education, and into the way classroom management takes place. Furthermore, instead of having teachers see these as abstractions, visionary school leaders challenge and encourage teachers to recognize the integral relationship between educational theory and practice. In a constructivist learning environment based on concepts and principles of SEL, teachers attend to multiple intelligences, interdisciplinary planning, cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, and problem solving. Such an approach respects the abilities and interests of all learners, invites them to be a part of the decision-making process, and motivates them to succeed.

It is also important to embrace the new pedagogy supported by brain research. Students function better and learn more effectively when they are encouraged to have clear, positive goals and values; when they are able to manage their emotions and make responsible decisions; and when they engage in setting goals for their own learning while also pursuing the academic goals that must be reached to function well in society (Elias et al., 1997). Giving students opportunities to help direct their learning and to make decisions about their own education and the climate and programs of the school reflect a school culture of caring, respect, responsibility, and achievement. When principals and staff members are willing to see through the eyes of students and to kindle students’ spirit and joy as part of the learning environment, they are moved to create instructional programs that encourage them

to make connections and create meaning through reality-based and project-based activities.

In the kinds of schools that seek to meet the challenges of excellence in both academic and social-emotional domains, the idea of schools as learning communities of character (Novick, Kress, & Elias, 2002) has moved beyond rhetoric. School leaders now see that their buildings can be renewing, exciting places for both students and adults. Learning is focused not only on tests but also on what learning allows students to do in the world. Therefore, visionary leaders recognize the roles of teachers, parents, and community stakeholders in making schools current and meaningful. They understand that the opportunities for a child to be guided in his or her actions by ethical sensitivity and to reach social, emotional, and academic goals are enhanced to the extent to which the school, parents, and community collaborate. Collectively, they model caring and moral behavior. The guidance offices, medical office, and main office are hubs of activity where caring staff members and students interact for everyone's well-being. These are not places where people mainly go when they are "sent." Administrators, teachers, and other education support staff members trust and respect students and exude boundless optimism. In such a culture, the classrooms, schools, and communities are safe havens for students and nonthreatening sources of partnership for parents. Even the principal's office is a welcoming place for all.

Practices to Implement Visionary Leadership

Figure 1 summarizes the core beliefs underlying visionary leadership in schools previously mentioned and also presents key practices seen in examples of visionary leadership articulated in *EQ + IQ* and accounts of implementation of SElect and related programs documented by CASEL. Although the practices listed are not exhaustive, they are both feasible starting points and a foundation for building further sustainable efforts at integrating academics with social-emotional and character education in schools.

Create Contexts That Engage Schools in Building Empathy Through Moral Action and Service

Leaders of schools that seek a balance of EQ and IQ recognize that empathy is one of the most essential, but oftentimes neglected, attributes of students today (Elias, Arnold, et al., 2003). As Comer (2003) implied about character, school leaders recognize that empathy is not best conveyed through formal instruction. Rather, empathy is best developed in a context of social responsibility (Berman, 1998). Student involvement in setting goals and making responsible decisions for their own learning extends beyond academic and cocurricular programs because involvement goes beyond self.

Figure 1. Essential Principles and Practices of Visionary Leadership in Schools

Core Beliefs Underlying Visionary Leadership

- There is synergistic power of a vision of infusing social/emotional and character education concepts, principles, and strategies throughout the instructional program and helping everyone understand the relationship between social/emotional well-being and academic success
- Explicit instruction in social–emotional learning (SEL) necessarily complements the academic program
- There is a new pedagogy supported by brain research that must be fully integrated into educational practice and the culture of the school
- The opportunities for a child to be guided in his or her actions by ethical sensitivity and to reach social, emotional, and academic goals are enhanced to the extent to which the school, parents, and community collaborate
- Education involves preparation of students for the tests of life, and not a life of tests.

Key Practices of Visionary Leadership in Action

- Create contexts that engage schools in building empathy through moral action and service
 - Fill schools with opportunities for student goal setting, decision making, and problem solving
 - Use current events, good and tragic, as opportunities for moral action
 - Create structures in schools that foster closer learning relationships
 - Support and empower teachers and distribute leadership roles
 - Respect, value, and actively welcome parents and the community into schools.
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Students behave more responsibly and respectfully when given opportunities for moral action and community service.

For the past 12 years, students at Benjamin Franklin Middle School, Ridgewood, NJ, have used their daily, live, student-produced television program, Benjamin Franklin Broadcast News (BFBN), as a forum for showing their world to the school community. Each morning, for more than 2,000 consecutive shows, BFBN has broadcast to the entire school and to the community via the local cable network. In 1990, 15 students, the school librarian, and the two house administrators (the assistants to the principal) gathered to design a new elective course for students in eighth grade. For 3 months, the teachers observed and mentored as the children worked cooperatively to conceptualize the show, design its format, build the set, write the script, and air the first show. The students and staff members respected and supported each other and sensed that they were a part of a unique initiative—designing a new course—which focused on their world. Through the process, the students became partners in defining a vision for their school. Today, more than

three-fourths of Franklin's eighth-grade students participate in producing the show, and every student in the school (grades 6, 7, and 8) appears on the show at some point during the year. Since BFBN has become a vital part of Franklin, all of the students continue to influence and define the vision for the school community.

Provide Students With Goal-Setting, Decision-Making, and Problem-Solving Opportunities

In schools in which EQ + IQ share priority, students are responsible for setting personal goals and working to achieve them at their own pace. They play a role in initiating and organizing comprehensive and inclusive cocurricular programs in which every student is encouraged to participate, and in turn every student is valued, respected, and encouraged. Students design peer-mentoring programs within or between schools (e.g., a student-directed program to facilitate the transition from middle school to high school).

Every school activity and event can become an opportunity to learn and to share one's learning with others. Through vehicles such as a student-operated school store, radio station, Web site, and bank, students offer their services to peers and to the community. Other powerful vehicles for such learning are for students to create public service announcements (PSAs) that can be shared with the help of the municipal government; write feature stories for local newspapers, radio, and television stations; and develop school and local community newsletters.

At Franklin, students create and broadcast PSAs and feature stories that focus on the ways in which students serve the community. For example, working cooperatively on location (e.g., in the school, throughout Ridgewood, or in surrounding communities), in the studio, and in the editing room, students create a PSA on the effects of bullying in the middle school. They conduct research, tape interviews, and edit the final product. The PSA is assessed authentically through self-critique and by comments from classmates, teachers, and parents. The broadcast of the PSA provides an opportunity for students to identify an issue that is meaningful to them. They initiate and direct their learning based on the reality and experiences in their lives. A PSA on bullying becomes a reflection of their concern and an opportunity to take constructive, positive action in addressing a social-emotional issue. As a result of their work, the students gain mutual trust, respect, and a sense of self-worth knowing that they have tried to make their school a more caring, nurturing place.

Whether through television, radio, print, or other media, successful projects are those that are reality based, project based, rooted in the instructional programs of their schools, and focused as much on the process of learning and creating a shared product as they are on the content of the completed work. They provide a setting in which students apply the concepts and princi-

ples of SEL, which enhance academic achievement. Empowering students to produce and broadcast a live television show demonstrates the extent to which administrators and teachers respect and trust students' thoughts, values, and interests.

Students gain a sense of community and mutual self-worth as they work cooperatively in planning special events. Dances, concerts, musicals, plays, spirit nights, and athletic events give students opportunities to enhance their social-emotional skills. Participating in gift drives for needy children, working with Habitat for Humanity, or mobilizing relief efforts in response to a sudden local tragedy are examples of ways students strengthen their commitment to others and bond them to the larger community. Serving others is an important effort in achieving the vision of a caring school community.

Use Current Events as Opportunities for Moral Action

Students also respond well to authentic contexts in which to take deeply moral action. Visionary leaders are not afraid to depart from the standard curriculum to respond to local, regional, national, and international events of great significance. Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, students across the nation demonstrated their concern for the victims through a variety of humanitarian efforts. In some schools, these activities were carried out at a deeper level, extending for a long period of time and becoming integrated into the fabric of learning. Visionary leaders see, in these situations, the opportunity to deeply affect students with the power they have to take moral action.

Students at Franklin were engaged in just this way. Because the Village of Ridgewood suffered the loss of several of its residents, the events of September 11 had a profound impact on the school community. Almost immediately following the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in nearby New York City, teachers, parents, students, and administrators mobilized to take action. The schools' fundraising activities and efforts to comfort the families in the Village were similar to those in many surrounding communities. The students responded with courage, conviction, and confidence. Because the infusion of SEL throughout all instructional programs had been a part of the school's vision for years, responding to the needs of the community was already an inherent and integral part of the school culture.

Throughout any given academic year at Franklin, students engage in a variety of explicit instructional activities on SEL. Typically, teachers offer these activities during the daily Period One/Academic Skills class. In addition, teachers in all subject areas explicitly and implicitly include SEL concepts, principles, and strategies in their lessons. Although the collapse of the World Trade Center and the loss of lives were devastating to the students, they gathered strength from their friends, classmates, and teachers. They

had a strong sense of social consciousness and an awareness of their responsibility to help others. Their swift, focused, and heartfelt efforts reflected a caring, sensitive, compassionate, and loving school community.

Create Structures in Schools That Foster Closer Learning Relationships

To create structures in which to nurture caring relationships, many schools are organized into smaller units (e.g., houses and teams) that enhance curriculum coordination among academic subjects and provide a supportive environment for students. This kind of organization enables teachers to work more directly with fewer students, to determine more easily their strengths and needs, and to design effective, individualized strategies (Pasi, 2001). In addition, schools often address the special needs of students through a collaborative model in which full-time special needs teachers are assigned to teams of regular education teachers; all of them work together seamlessly for the well-being of all students.

There are other ways in which schools have reorganized to promote academic excellence by engaging students in supportive, caring relationships. CASEL identified schools that have some form of space (e.g., Social Decision Making Lab, Solution Room, etc.) in which students can go when they need a place to think about and reflect on situations of concern for them. In addition, these were also places where students could seek problem-solving assistance for issues ranging from math problems they could not solve, bullies they could not deter, Mother's Day presents they could not figure out, or headaches they could not get rid of. Different staff members are involved in such settings, as well as volunteers from the community, such as senior citizens or college students. Leaders who establish such spaces in their schools are creating a climate in which support is easily accessed, and services are not reserved only for threshold levels of problem severity (Elias et al., 1997; Poedubicky, Brown, Hoover, & Elias, 2000).

Support and Empower Teachers and Distribute Leadership Roles

Leaders of schools with EQ + IQ success recognize the vital role that teachers play in the school culture and acknowledge the contributions they make to the social-emotional well being and academic success of students. One important manifestation of this understanding is when principals visibly recognize the accomplishments, strengths, and needs of their staff members. Celebrations and other forms of recognition are common in schools with visionary leadership. Valuing and nurturing staff members enhances the culture of the school.

In schools with visionary leaders, teachers are empowered and given shared leadership responsibilities. Practices to implement the idea of distributed leadership include administrators who often teach classes to be a

part of the culture of learning and to use a different venue in which to join teachers in modeling sound character (Pasi, 2001). Teacher efficacy is essential, so principals offer specific, creative opportunities for personal and professional growth such as new teacher training programs, career development leaves, administrative internships, short-term and long-term individual and team leadership positions, attendance at regional and national professional conferences, participation in workshops, released time for curriculum development, and summer curriculum workshops. This growth is not kept a secret; it is highlighted. Those who learn then share with their colleagues; in this way, entire school communities come to benefit from the additional resources that each person brings with them.

Respect, Value, and Actively Welcome Parents and the Community Into Schools

When schools view sound character and deep learning as a unit, educational leaders invite parents to meet regularly. However, “invite” is misleading. The true intent is to drag in as many parents as possible, especially those who do not typically attend when invitations are made. The goal is not to show how open the school is, but rather to open the school successfully. Therefore, creative means are used to bring people in, such as having other parents, staff members, and even students do the inviting, as well as principals asking directly. Furthermore, meetings outside the school are encouraged, as are approaches to reach out to parents through digital broadcast and print media. Similarly, parents are valued, respected, and welcomed into the school community. They are vital contributors and participants. Some schools establish parent centers, which serve as the parents’ home in the school. Such centers nurture a sense of belonging to the school culture and reflect a commitment to the important role parents and families play in the life of the school. In partnership with the school, parents plan schoolwide events. They join the school staff members in modeling respect, caring, and responsibility.

In the Plainfield (NJ) Public Schools, a state-designated special needs district, one superintendent hosted weekly television programs about the schools, and did as much radio work and informal speaking in the community as possible. Parents came to know him and feel comfortable with him. It was a process that took years, but it led to unprecedented numbers of parents becoming involved in local and citywide parent–teacher groups, coming to various weekend and evening “academies,” and attending the “parent university” in an effort to improve their own learning. A large part of what attracted these parents is that the superintendent and his principals insisted on candidly and proactively discussing difficult issues in addition to sharing successes. Their work together embodied key foundational values for success in leading parents: it was anticipatory and conducted in a spirit

of mutual trust and respect. They recognized that they shared a fundamental vision and commitment: the nurturing of the social, emotional, and academic well-being of the children. The idea of “educating the whole child” must be reality, not rhetoric (Leverett, 2003).

The partnership extends to community stakeholders, as well. Comer (2003) made it clear that the saying, “It takes a village to raise a child,” is overused but under-implemented. Educational leaders must ensure that local police and fire departments, community newspapers, local private and public agencies and civic groups, and local government officials participate in the culture of the school community. Just as students learn best when they have a role in determining their goals and activities, community stakeholders play a more active, constructive, and positive role in the success of the school when they feel a part of the school culture. When faced with difficult issues and problems, educational leaders at the administrative and school board levels actively and willingly engage the stakeholders in candid, thorough, and honest discussions. As a result, they collaborate in an effort to recognize the need to balance internal and external forces that affect the school community and the community at large. Possessing an understanding of problems and needs, educational leaders share a common vision and a commitment to nurture students’ social, emotional, and academic welfare. Instead of potential confrontation and divisiveness, they seek and work through synergy and cooperation.

One such venue for cooperation is the Laws of Life Essay Contest. This character education program, begun and sustained by the John Templeton Foundation (www.templeton.org), creates a structure through which students can write about the “laws,” or guiding principles, by which they live. This powerful opportunity for reflection included conversations about these principles with teachers, other students, and family members. The community is involved in the process of being trained to judge the essays and then participate in a community-wide celebration of children’s writing. In what is essentially a powerful literacy activity that integrates fully with language arts academic standards, communities become engaged in conversations about character, about how to live one’s life, and the kinds of people students want to grow up to be. Evidence is starting to show that the influence of this kind of program is as powerful as its features suggest (Elias, Bryan, Patrikakou, & Weissberg, 2003; Elias, Ogburn-Thompson, & Register, 2003).

Summary

Visionary school leaders in the 21st century will see that high stakes in schools are not about test scores but about the souls and character of students and what they will do with what they have learned. The greatest threat to communities, culture, and civilization is not poison from the outside but poison from

the inside. If the fundamental shared vision is that of caring for children, then their academic skill development follows without question. But academic skill development cannot exist as a sole value, or even predominate. It is part of a balance, the balance that is essential to healthy human functioning not only in students but also in the teachers, parents, and stakeholders who work to socialize them. This may not be the most popular vision, or the easiest to share and implement, but it is the vision needed by current and future educational leaders. Ultimately, it is a profoundly meaningful and practical approach that serves as the basis for the academic success of students and a force for nurturing and unifying all members of a school community. 🌱

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