LEADERSHIP PAPER

Today, Leadership seems to be on the tip of everyone’s tongue. It is an incredibly fascinating topic and quality leadership is incredibly important to an innumerable list of things that affect our daily lives. Of particular interest is the leadership in our public sector. In our globalized economy and increasingly interconnected world, effective public service leadership is incredibly important to the success of our nation moving forward. One public service challenge that is in desperate need of quality leadership is our nation’s public education system.

Our public education system is perhaps our nation’s most important institution. Public education helps to nurture the democratic ideals of our founders, it shapes tomorrow’s leaders, deeply effects commerce and the economy, and provides a framework for the meritocracy that defines our country’s self-image. Our public education institutions touch every citizens lives and in one way or another touches every institution, organization, government, structure, and building in our nation. Thus, it is critical that we ensure it is of the utmost quality and is as effective as possible. This is the challenge for public service leaders.

As a result of the importance that public education has in our lives, the necessity of facing the challenges that threaten to undermine the quality of our public educational institutions is clear. There are many challenges, but what appears to be the most critical is a lack of funding for schools, a need for more effective teachers, and a desperate need for parity in the quality of schools whether they be urban, rural, or suburban. This is a challenge for the public sector and it is one that can be solved by strong leadership.

This paper will address the challenge of public educational institutions first by applying the two leadership concepts of “creating a vision” and “setting the tone” and analyzing the
challenge through that lens. Then, using the leadership strengths that I have identified in class: Democratic leadership, interpersonal skills, and building cohesion, I will present a plan that I could personally take to address the leadership challenge.

When looking at the themes for this course, there are two leadership concepts that apply best to the problem of confronting the challenges that face the American public education system. They are “creating a vision” and “setting the tone”.

Creating a vision is critical in any organization because it guides people’s behavior. According to Peter Northouse, “a vision is a mental model of an ideal future state” (Northouse p.109). In essence, a vision offers a picture of what is possible. In the case of our public education system, creating a vision is critical. It is clear to all that there are many problems in our education system. What is less clear is what exactly needs to change, what values should be followed, and what is the road map to success. A leader must emerge who can provide a compelling vision to be followed. Therefore, we must analyze the challenge of public education through the lens of “creating a vision” and develop an idea of what our values are and thus, what needs to change in education.

Our public education system was first conceptualized by America’s founding fathers, who saw the need for an educated populace to promote the longevity of the democracy that they had created. Channeling the ideals of the enlightenment, the founders envisioned an equitable system that was free to all students, rich or poor. In this system students would learn of the western values of democracy and human rights, as well as math and science. This system would not only educate our progeny, but prepare them to take up the torch of democracy.

Today, we hold many of these same ideals. Therefore, our values for our public education system continue to be that all students should attend without charge, all should receive an
equitable education, the quality of their education should be unparalleled, and thus it should prepare all our progeny to be successful as they transition from childhood to adulthood.

In order to achieve the values that we have set as goals, there are some changes that need to be made. Over the past two centuries, public institutions have managed to stay free of charge for all students. However, because the quality of some schools is lacking, private schools have emerged to fill the void. In order to ensure that our public schools keep pace with these tuition-charging schools, some changes need to be made. Speaking broadly, more funding needs to be appropriated, more attention must be paid by government, and increased community support should be encouraged. In order to ensure equity, government should do more to assist failing schools by focusing on the issues that face the community around them, encouraging quality teachers to serve at these low-performing schools, and ensure that they have the funding to compete.

While these suggested changes are broad, they provide a vision for educators to look to. Because a vision is simply a mental modal of an ideal future state, it is important for a leader to emerge who can develop a road map that will guide our education system towards the vision we set based on our public education values.

While it is critical to initially create a vision, once it has been developed, a leader must set the tone. This means that they must provide structure, clarify norms, build cohesiveness, and promote standards of excellence. This will ensure that group members will work effectively together (Northouse p.129).

With respect to the challenge of public education, when a leader provides structure, this is the roadmap, or blueprint that will lead to the realization of the goals set for public education. Also in this context, when clarifying norms, a leader will emphasize how to behave during the
process. For example, a leader could emphasize collaboration, teamwork, and listening to all opinions. This would ensure that the best possible solutions for the challenges of public education are found and implemented. This can lead to the leader building cohesiveness. This is what holds groups together and in the context of public education ensures that a unified plan is being enacted. Finally, by promoting standards of excellence, the leader expresses and implies expectations (Northouse p.134). With respect to facing the challenges of public education, by promoting standards of excellence, the leader ensures that the solutions developed to face the challenges of public education will not only allow America’s education system to be great, but further, to be unparalleled in the world.

Over the course of the semester, three leadership strengths have emerged when I have engaged in self-evaluation during professional development exercises. They are democratic leadership, interpersonal communication, and building cohesiveness. Democratic style leadership is based on an assumption of theory Y. It has been my tendency to work with my subordinates and trust them to be capable to do quality work on their own. With this there is much more equity amongst members of the team (Northouse p.56).

Interpersonal skills are simply people skills. These skills allow a leader to more effectively work with subordinates, peers, and superiors (Northouse p.89). I have shown the ability to be socially perceptive, to have an understanding of emotions, and to have the ability to handle conflict.

Building cohesiveness is a part of the leader’s job to “set the tone”. Cohesion is a sense of “we-ness” that a strong group often feels. Cohesion allows group members to express their personal viewpoints, give and receive feedback, accept differing opinions, and feel comfortable doing meaningful work (Northouse p.132). When I am leading a group, building cohesion is very
important to me and that seems to have been reflected in my scores on the professional
development exercises.

Not only are these my leadership strengths, but they are also very applicable to the
challenges that face public education. The first step that I would take in order to address the
challenges that face public education would be to begin doing research on pedagogy and
education policy. It would be important to try and learn from experts on these subjects. In this
situation, I could use my interpersonal skills.

As I gain knowledge, I would continue to use my interpersonal skills to develop a grass
roots campaign to improve our education system. This would require me to be socially
perceptive with respect to members of the group. Also, it would require me to use emotional
intelligence to help convey my views and understand others emotions. Finally, I would have to
be able to handle conflict within the group. If developed effectively using my interpersonal
skills, I would next set out to build cohesiveness within the group. As expressed earlier,
cohesiveness is a special connection that is developed within a group. This contributes to
member’s appreciation of the group. Thus, they will be more willing to listen to what other group
members have to say and will be more dedicated to the group (Northouse p.132). Building group
cohesion will be critical in this scenario, because education policy can be incredibly divisive.
However, if there is a commitment to communication and a commitment to the cause, the grass
roots campaign could be unstoppable.

The final step in this process will be to utilize my democratic leadership skills. Once the
grass roots campaign has become more solidified and develops a common mission and voice, it
will be important to continue to lead it towards its goal of influencing American education
policy. The best way to do this is to utilize a democratic style of leadership. Those that are
involved in this campaign will only take part because they are already passionate about the issue. Therefore, there is little need to attempt to further influence them to complete tasks. It will be important to assist each subordinate so that they achieve their goals. Thus, a more collaborative style will be developed within the organization. Leaders will work with subordinates and everyone’s ideas will be valued.

If these three steps can be taken, I believe that a strong movement could emerge with a real chance to influence education policy in America. If adopted, we can begin to confront the challenges that face our education system and we can begin to restore our institutions to match the values that we established so many years ago with the founding of our free, democratic nation.
WORKS CITED