



INTRODUCTION

My interest in educational vision began almost a decade ago as I was teaching a course on organizational change to a group of veteran teachers. One of the assignments asked them to design a school based on their own educational visions.

As the process unfolded, they reconnected with the ideals that had brought them into the profession, ideals they had pursued quietly but hesitated to discuss publicly. Experience had taught them that school reform was about politics, not education, and the best they hoped for was the occasional small victory within the confines of their own classrooms.

They found the assignment stimulating and sometimes moving but expressed doubt about its practicality. This was, after all, a classroom exercise; in the messy real world, there was a formidable gulf between stating a vision and actually implementing it.

I didn't have a satisfactory answer to these questions, and my own questions increased as I saw schools grappling with an unwieldy "vision process" in which committees of teachers, parents, and administrators labored to produce a formal statement that expressed their hopes for the future. The statements were often eloquent and soon adorned bulletin boards, newsletters, and annual reports. Yet, despite the utopian rhetoric that often surrounded the process, few schools seemed to be transformed by this exercise. Today, school leaders continue to use the language of vision when communicating with the public, but the underlying attitude often seems to be, "Been there, done that."

Just another passing fad? It may appear that way, but the organizational literature—in business as well as education—says otherwise. The consensus is clear: in today’s turbulent environment, organizations cannot survive (much less prosper) without a well-focused vision for the future.

The problem is that the concept of vision has always been somewhat fuzzy around the edges. Sometimes it is described as the brainchild of brilliant thinkers, powered by intuitive, almost mystical glimpses into the future. At other times it is treated as the product of committees, methodically developed by patient, logical thinking. While proponents of vision tend to be evangelical in their enthusiasm, they are not always helpful in providing specific directions; the attractive rhetoric often seems disconnected from the everyday realities of running a school.

This volume is an attempt to clarify the issues surrounding vision by providing a basic conceptual framework. What is it? Why does it matter? How is it developed? In addition to discussing what researchers in education and business have learned about vision, I have also included some concrete exercises and activities for school leaders who wish to develop or renew the vision for their schools. These activities should be treated as starting points (or simply as food for thought), not as essential steps.

Like most Clearinghouse publications, this volume is a work of synthesis, designed to report on the existing literature rather than to create new theories. However, as with every synthesis, personal judgments and interpretations are inevitable. In the attempt to formulate a coherent picture from diverse sources, I may have seen implications or made connections that the original authors did not intend.

This is especially likely when the topic is vision, which is not backed by the kind of rigorous experimental studies that most people have in mind when they say, “Research shows....” The vision literature is an uneven mixture of enthusiastic advocacy, generic advice, and insightful analysis that does not easily lead to grand conclusions or simple formulas.

Thus, the material in this book does not confront school leaders with unequivocal demands to do things a certain way. Rather, it challenges leaders to think about purpose and possibility, and to ask, “Why are we here?” and “What should we do about it?”

Finally, I have a vision for this book: that it will provide school leaders with perspectives and knowledge that will help them fulfill their own visions. It's important for me to know if I've succeeded, so I invite you to let me know how this book did or didn't do the job. I can be reached by mail in care of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, or via e-mail at llashway@aol.com.