

Statement of Leadership: Belief and Practice

Brenda E. Boggess

August, 2010

My professional path to leadership of a Friends school was unconventional. Teaching in the elementary classrooms of five independent schools, I developed my teaching craft, understanding of school operations, and a philosophy of school leadership grounded in the essential importance of *relationships*, *daily instruction*, *process in decision-making*, *administrative skills*, and *spirituality*. The direct move from the classroom to the head's office has included a steep and exciting learning curve. That leap, however unusual, has informed my belief about what it means to lead and has shaped my practice as a leader.

Relationship builder. I believe that healthy, collaborative relationships are at the core of a successful school. Leaders in schools should be people who are able to have authentic connections with all constituents. One of the greatest challenges for a head of school is to invest in time with the people who are at the core of school life—teachers, students, and parents. I understand why one head reluctantly assigns responsibility for the quality of academic instruction to others or another gradually disappears into her office. Given the demands of the job and the ongoing challenge of doing more with less in an increasingly competitive admissions market, there seems to be less and less time for authentic relationships. Yet, to me, these are vital. The head of school needs a deep and comprehensive knowledge of school life in order to help it thrive and, ultimately, meet over-arching goals such as enrollment, budget, and charitable giving. My view of leadership, formed from “the ground up,” understands that every Board vision or operational goal is best fulfilled through strong and trusting relationships in school.

Educator. The primacy of relationships is perhaps most evident in academic instruction—the core of the school's function and purpose. The Friends school head I am now and want to continue to be is one who prioritizes student learning, teacher professional development, and parent support for the instructional mission of the school. From my own classroom experience as well as working with many extraordinary teachers in a variety of schools, I know the most effective marketing tool is a stellar classroom. One of the ingredients for a stellar classroom is a supportive working relationship between the classroom teacher and the head who proves her credibility as a master teacher. I am not describing a vision of the head who is a classroom teacher first and foremost; instead, I am striving to be the administrative leader in the building who knows the strategic value of high quality instruction, knows how to work with teachers to improve their craft, and is fortunate to draw on a solid base of knowledge and experience to prioritize instruction, demonstrate teaching, and engage in the business of moving teachers, curriculum, and students' academic experience further along.

Process leader. The wise and caring management of decision-making process is central to the effective head's leadership as well as the school community's sense of trust and engagement with strategic initiatives and school mission. Discerning the appropriate process is also one of the most difficult challenges for heads because discernment is not simply an item checked off on an already overloaded to do list. Process relies on people

to succeed, and people in school communities have many agendas, needs, perspectives, ideas, and assumptions about what process is, particularly Quaker process. Engaging in process and remaining open to process is part of the job I love, even as I remain its student. Decision-making can move forward in various ways and it is imperative for the head to discern the most appropriate process. Some decisions are made in the head's office; others require a full and committed Quaker process of consensus. Listening is not only a key administrative talent, it is the way to show respect for people, forge trust, and develop better understanding informed by the community. I know that the toughest and most complicated decisions in school involve people, for instance, hiring, evaluating, or releasing faculty and staff, or counseling students and families whose needs go beyond the scope of the school's mission. For me, transparency is essential in these situations for which process includes: gathering information, articulating the problem, clarifying steps toward resolution, utilizing available committees, determining information that can and cannot be shared, and seeking clarity in reflection and worship. If a leader attends to all of this with a deep ethic of care, people in the school can feel that even difficult decisions have been made fairly, maintaining and strengthening the integrity of the community.

Administrator: As a relatively new head of school, I am learning the value of a strong, professional, administrative skill set. Creating and understanding budgets, strengthening admissions and retention efforts, overseeing effective fund raising and marketing plans, and implementing board policies are all essential ingredients in a healthy school. These have been exciting conversations to enter and skills to learn. My perspective as a relational leader informs all of my administrative tasks and the two have blended appropriately, balancing the creative vision with the concrete reality. Ongoing development of my administrative skill set will be a professional priority for me in the coming years.

Spirituality. Leadership in a Friends school attends to the spirit, reminding the community that spiritual belief, values, and practices in a school are diverse and important. In the busy press of the day-to-day, the head helps make space for spirituality to be discussed, energized, and explored. I use reflection during the school day, often joining groups of students during daily Meeting for Worship, in order to maintain a sense of centered mindfulness in the midst of my work. Knowing that there is that of God in everyone is a key to my own "relentless optimism," a description of my work from someone who I think meant that even in the face of hard realities, I believe in the mission of the school and the people working with me on its behalf. I embrace the *ministry* at the core of *administration* in order to counsel parents, support teachers, love children, and serve the school.