



## Envision

“I will take the blue one,” I thought to myself. Prior to my start date, I was asked to select a chair for my new office. I decided on a beautiful, blue leather high back chair. At the time, I did not know why I selected the color blue. From what I could remember, every principal I ever had over my 20-year career always had a black chair. I had never seen a principal with a blue chair; yet somehow, I was drawn to the blue one. The moment I laid eyes on it, I knew there was something special about that blue chair. It was a different shade of blue, not ocean blue or royal blue, but a dull blue that stood out in the catalog. When the chair arrived, it was what I expected. It was comfortable, it made me feel important, and it gave off a sense of peace.

When I arrived to work at Fitzsimons High School early the morning of November 1, 2003, I sat in that blue chair. I started to wonder about my journey to this place, in this seat, and in this position—a principal with a big fancy office, a beautiful, blue leather chair, and a private bathroom. How did I get here? It was always my dream to be a great teacher, but being a principal far surpassed my vision of myself growing up poor in the same neighborhood where this school resided. Ironically, my grandmother owned a home directly across the street from Fitzsimons, and my family church, Trinity African Methodist Episcopal was on the corner. My family had belonged to that church for approximately 135 years.

Fitzsimons High School had changed over the years. It was once a junior high school. Then it became a middle school, and in 2002, it began its transformation into a gender-separate high school. It would have two separate schools in one building—one for young women, and one for young men. Each school would have its own principal. I was the principal for the young women at Fitzsimons.

I was feeling proud of myself when I was suddenly interrupted by girls screaming “Get her, get her!” followed by thumps, and then more thumps. I jumped up out of my chair and quickly opened my office door. I saw multiple girls and their families fighting each other. There were a lot of people fighting. Crazy fighting. . . . I could not believe it was girls, high school girls and women. It was like a gang fight, a street brawl, but it was inside of the school. Hair and blood were on the floor. It was a terrible sight. I quickly charged into the fight in an attempt to stop them from beating each other to death. In my effort to stop them from fighting, I grabbed the arm of one girl in the midst of her attempt to pound on another girl. She looked at me in a very hateful way and yelled, “Get the F--- off of me!” I did not release her right away. I held onto her arm firmly. She said again, “Get the F--- off of me.” This time, I released my grip, because I thought to myself she must have me confused with someone else. Then I remembered that today was my first day as a principal, my first day as a principal ever. After working as a classroom teacher for 20 years, I had left to join Fitzsimons as a new teacher coach in September 2003. Two months later, I was named principal. My boss, Mr. Clayton, told me privately when he assigned me to Fitzsimons to be a teacher coach that there would be plenty of opportunities for advancement. I guess he was right.

How could she know that I was the principal?

After releasing my grip, I waited for the police to assist me in getting the fight under control. Once everything had calmed down, I announced for all the classes to come to the auditorium immediately. Before anything else could occur, I had to let the students and staff know that I was the new principal. Over

the public address system, I asked every teacher to escort his or her classes to the auditorium. “Are you sure you want to do that?” asked one of the teachers. I did not answer her. I just made my way to the auditorium. As I stood on the stage, I could not believe my eyes. It looked like a scene from the movie *Lean on Me*, but worse. Students were running down the aisles and jumping over seats. The teachers did not know where their students were in the auditorium. The students were loud, using an excessive amount of profanity, and yelling at the teachers for trying to make them have a seat. They simply refused to be redirected. At that split second, I understood what the teacher was implying when she asked, “Are you sure you want do that?” By the way they entered the auditorium, you could tell that they had not been to the auditorium in a long time for any kind of meaningful program. The teachers, most of them first-year teachers, did not know what to do. They made no attempt to bring their students to order. They just stood, staring and waiting for the next huge fight to break out the way it had happened moments before near the main office. I froze, and stared out into the crowd from the stage. Holding the microphone, I murmured quietly, “What in the world did I get myself into?”

Instead of looking at the students, the teachers stared at me as if to say “She must be crazy for taking the job as principal.” I wondered if any of them thought I was some sort of savior. Many of them seemed to want to burst into tears.

I focused my attention back to the students and tried to regain order in the room. I kept saying, “Young ladies! Young ladies, please take your seats.” Using a demanding tone, I said, “Teachers, please stand near your children.” I kept repeating that over and over until my voice echoed loudly over theirs. Then, in a harsh, bold tone this time, with my patience wearing thin, I said, “Sit down and close your mouths, or you will leave this auditorium and spend a few days at home with your parents.” I did not know whether my tone or my threat got their attention. I signaled for the police to come into the room and remove anyone who would not sit down. Soon, the noise died down. There was still faint talking, but I could be heard over their voices. I said very

loudly, boldly, and proudly to them all, “In case you do not know who I am, I am Mrs. Wayman, and I am your new principal.” The children started to laugh and were totally uninterested by my announcement. They looked at me as if to say “So what?” The title “Principal” meant nothing to them. Why?

The teachers, on the other hand, did not know what to think. They had started the first two months without a principal, and because I had been working as a new teacher coach in the building, I knew they were accustomed to doing whatever they wanted to do, when they wanted to do it. While they were all still digesting the news that I was the new principal, I proceeded to list my expectations for their behavior and what they would learn in school. Then, suddenly, a young girl stood up in the rear of the auditorium and shouted, “Miss, Miss!” I tried to ignore her because she was yelling completely out of turn. She was loud and out of her seat. Despite my desire to ignore her for speaking out of turn, she continued to yell, “Miss, Miss!” Finally, our eyes locked. We stared at each other and she said again, “Miss, Miss!” this time adding, “Why do you keep calling this a school? **This is not a school.**” I stood there speechless. I repeated her statement to myself over and over again. There it was, summed up in five words. This is not a school. That is what I was thinking when I walked up on the stage and looked into the audience. I could not figure out where I had seen this scene before. Then I remembered my own high school auditorium in 1976, in a school not too far from this one. That was when I first encountered the disparities in the educational system in Philadelphia for myself. We sat in the auditorium waiting to get our rosters and class assignments, and it was total chaos for a very long time. It was not what I was used to, coming from a school outside of the poverty-stricken area that I called home.

I quickly processed what she had shouted. (**This is not a school!**) Then, I responded by saying, “I am calling it a school because it is a school.” She said, in a much softer, concerned voice, “No, it is not.” I asked the young woman, “Then what is it, if it is not a school?” “Just a place to hang out,” she replied.

Everyone started screaming and laughing in loud agreement. For them, school was a place to hang out. I digested this with horror. I wondered if they ever took the time to look around the neighborhood when they walked to school. Did they understand that a good education could improve their quality of life? Why couldn't they see opportunity in their school? Why were they unable to see their school as a school?

After that exchange, I sent everyone back to class. I returned to my office and sat in my new, blue leadership chair, and started asking myself some questions. Why did the word "Principal" mean nothing to them? Why did they see school as a place to hang out? More importantly, why did they not see that education could change their lives? I had so many questions that needed answers. As I sat in my blue leadership chair praying that another fight did not break out, I could not forget the young girl's question, "Why do you keep calling this a school?" More importantly, I could not forget how she answered her own question, "This is not a school."

I sat in that blue chair, and closed my eyes. There it was, the catalyst to all of the problems in the school: the reason for all of the violence; the reason for the school being given to an educational management company to manage for low academic performance; the reason why 70 percent of the teaching staff were a combination of first-year teachers or first-time teachers to the school; the reason why they could not find a principal, and solicited a new teacher coach to be principal in the middle of the school year. Fitzsimons was not a school.

The more I thought about it, the more outraged I became. I was mad at everybody: mad at the students for fighting; mad at their parents for helping them physically fight, but not fighting collectively for their children to be properly educated; mad at this place that had not been properly managed, so it had to be managed by outsiders; mad at the principals before me who allowed this place to get so out of control that the students now did not see it as a school. Then I remembered that I was the one who agreed to be the leader of this failing organization. I knew

many of the facts before I consented to lead. I knew it was low-performing and dangerous, and I still chose to lead it. So, I realized that I had no one else to blame but myself for making it my responsibility to make this “place to hang out” into a school. The problem was now all mine. And I knew I had to save this organization because there was too much at stake. As a leader, I had to face the brutal fact that if I failed, hundreds of children would be uneducated and doomed to live in poverty. And if you had ever lived in poverty, as I had as a child, you would not want that life for anyone. So I made up my mind that I had to make that school a school.

A student created the vision for the school going forward on my first day as principal. It was my job as a leader to make that vision a reality.

### Thinking About Your Leadership

Clear vision and owning the responsibility to achieve that vision is the job of a turnaround leader. Before going into battle, a turnaround leader must know what he or she envisions for the organization before forming a shared vision.

**Examine Attentively:** Your vision for the organization you are leading.

#### Questions for You:

- What is *your* vision for the organization?
- Can you articulate it to others without hesitation?