

Irvin L. Scott, Ed.D.

LEADING
with
Heart
& Soul

30 INSPIRING LESSONS
of Faith, Learning, and
Leadership *for* Educators

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“Having worked alongside Irvin, I can attest to his deep and abiding commitment to transforming the lives of students, educators, and communities. He’s remained true to that commitment in multiple parts of the education sector. Through story and with powerful and accessible prose, this book allows readers behind the curtain of his personal and professional life to better understand how educators bring their whole selves to building America’s future through its children.”

—**John E. Deasy, Ph.D.**
President, Bezos Family Foundation

*“Scott’s *Leading with Heart and Soul* is, without question, a gift of knowledge. Brilliantly weaving together both the Sacred and the secular, Scott’s text is a must-read for aspiring and current educational leaders.”*

—**Travis J. Bristol, Ph.D.**,
Associate Professor of Teacher Education and Education
Policy, School of Education,
University of California, Berkeley

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for Educators**

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I dedicate this book to my lovely wife, Kisha. My life, career, and impact are indelibly intertwined together with her. I have been an educator for 33 years, and on December 15, 2023, we celebrated our 33rd wedding anniversary. Without God and Kisha, there is no Irvin Scott: husband, father, grandfather, minister, teacher, choir director, non-profit leader, principal, academic superintendent, chief academic officer, foundation executive, professor. . .tbd.

But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called *thee* by thy name; thou *art* mine.

—Isaiah 43:1 (KJV)

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Preface

When I first started writing *Leading with Heart and Soul* in 2019, the world was normal. “Normal” is a funny way to put it; the world was as chaotic, beautiful, and unpredictable as it has always been, but the chaos and unpredictability existed at their normal levels. Like the world, my life had its own mix of order and chaos, beauty and difficulty. I was living just outside of Boston, teaching at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education (as I still do now), and balancing my work with my commitments to my wife, my three adult sons, other family members, and my church family. By the time I had finished writing, however, the COVID-19 pandemic had begun sweeping across the globe, mercilessly taking countless lives and severely disrupting the lives of survivors. Teaching, of course, is one of the professions that changed the most in the midst of COVID. My in-person classes went online (my wife teaches Math; her classes went online, too), my opportunities to engage in person with the community shrunk tremendously, and my caution around health and safety was heightened. Not long thereafter, a movement

broke out in the United States and elsewhere advocating for widespread reforms related to racial justice. As a Black man living in the United States, the nationwide conversations on race had a direct bearing on me and my family. This movement led to incredible beauty, such as when a multiracial stream of people advocated for justice for George Floyd and so many others. Needless to say, alongside the beauty, chaos and unpredictability spiked in this season to levels far higher than normal.

Because of all the unpredictable dynamics in the world and my own life, as an unpublished manuscript, *Leading with Heart and Soul* got shelved for a few years. Navigating the tumultuous times of the early 2020s took loads of time and energy, and my book project took a back seat. Another major development in my family took up time and energy: we moved from the Boston area back near the Pennsylvania community where I got my start in education. The main reason for this move was so that I could join my siblings in helping care for my elderly parents who face acute health conditions. This meant that my Harvard classes moved to a hybrid model with most of the teaching happening virtually. Interestingly, in this familiar Pennsylvania environment, I was surrounded by reminders of why I chose a career in education in the first place: the high school where I first started teaching, the high school where I became principal, my former students who had begun their own careers and families, the parents and community members who would attend school events, my own parents who supported my career in countless ways—all elements of the stories I wrote in the manuscript sitting unused on my computer's hard drive.

Often, these reminders came in the form of casual conversations with people like Will Winder, my former student and current barber. In one conversation with Will, my manuscript jumped off the shelf and into the forefront of my mind. Will was reminding me of the dramatic impact my teaching, choir directing, and general role modeling have had on his life and the lives of so many students. He was telling me that I should tell those stories publicly. I told him about the book I had written and the troubles I had faced in getting it published. Will encouraged me to pick my manuscript back up and find a way to get it into the hands of a publisher and make these stories available to former students, current parents, educators, and people throughout the world. Will's words were not the only reason *Leading with Heart and Soul* is now in print—I had encouragement from my wife and sons, mentors, friends, and countless others—but I credit Will as the one who motivated me when I had lost momentum for this project.

The events that took place between the writing and publication of *Leading with Heart and Soul* have made the book's contents even more vital. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted children and educators in ways that are still being understood. Given the isolation and disconnectedness the pandemic has caused among school-aged students, school systems need strong, compassionate, relationally oriented leaders now more than ever before. Likewise, today's movement for racial justice has amplified a call to tear down racial inequities in education, and it has also brought difficult conversations about race and ethnicity to the forefront of many discussions in classrooms and

administrative boardrooms. Through stories from my thirty years in education, *Leading with Heart and Soul* channels the wisdom I have received from my peers and elders, the insights I have gained through experience, and the faith and sense of calling that have sustained me through my career, making these lessons accessible for today's leaders both in the field of education and in other fields. One of the most important contributions this book makes to today's tough (and often divisive) conversations is its focus on hearing students and teachers, understanding their struggles, activating their strengths, and elevating their voices. Will Winder is proof: past and present students' voices have power, and so do the voices of parents, teachers, and community leaders. *Leading with Heart and Soul* is the story of one educator's trajectory through several spheres of educational leadership, but it aims to call out the stories of the leaders of today and tomorrow, inspiring these leaders to run toward challenges like COVID and racial inequities and be a part of the solution. New, complex challenges and barriers will continue to arise and get in the way of students succeeding. New, servant-hearted leaders must arise to break down these barriers and champion holistic student well-being.

Introduction

The Power of Stories

Toni Morrison once said, “Teaching is about taking things apart; writing is about putting things together.”¹ For the past 30 years, I have been a teacher, preacher, leader, husband, and father. I have held leadership roles in Pennsylvania classrooms, schools like Harvard, school districts like Boston Public Schools, and influential organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. I have taught people of all ages in classrooms, churches, and in my own home. However, one role I have not played until now is the role of an author. In the wisdom of Morrison’s words, I am pausing from the world of deconstruction—taking things apart—and moving to a place of reconstructing the past 30 years of my personal and professional journey. I have learned an important lesson over the past three decades: every person has a story worth telling. At a basic level, to be human is to listen to one another’s stories.

¹Robert Lee Brewer, “7 Toni Morrison Quotes for Writers and About Writing,” *Writer’s Digest*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.writersdigest.com/online-editor/toni-morrison-quotes-for-writers-and-about-writing>.

Stories are central to my work and my writing. One of my early writing tasks was an assignment for a college class where I had to interview my grandfather, who is one of the best storytellers I know. I hopped in my used Monza and drove half an hour to interview Grandad. I arrived at his front door, where he greeted me with his customary great-big hug, his whisker-filled face up against mine. Grandmom's greeting was just as warm and jovial, complete with a thorough wiping of her hands on the ever-present apron as she walked to greet me. After a simple but more than filling meal, I took out my tape recorder and began to ask Grandad a series of questions. He answered every question, and many of his answers came with a story filled with vivid imagery. He would close his eyes a bit as he spoke, accessing his stories from a place that was still very much with him. All he had to do was peek into the past to find them still there to greet him, memories painful and pleasing alike. The power of story transported my grandfather and me into times long past, and through these stories I gained wisdom that was not available to me in my own experience.

Likewise, the purpose of this book is to transport readers into my story, passing along the wisdom and insight I have gained through experience. The stories contained in this book pull on different heartstrings—some are tender and warm, others are perilous, and still others are heart wrenching. Some stories are from my younger, more inexperienced years, others from my older, wiser phase of life. These stories span the breadth of my 30-year career in education, from the classroom to the tables where big-picture decisions are made among administrators and

foundation leaders. Not only that, but they display my role as a simple husband, father, and community member trying to love and serve others. Consequently, the stories are varied, but they all center on one thing: loving and serving the people around me, especially my family and the students under my care in my professional roles.

My flaws and shortcomings feature prominently in these stories, and most of my successes are the result of humble acceptance of help, collaboration with other good-hearted people, my practice of faith, and my tenacious desire to see young people thrive. My desire in telling my stories is not to tout my successes nor to dwell on my failures. My purpose is certainly not to relay dry teaching theories without practical application. Rather, my aim is for my stories to connect with readers and inspire them to write their own. Yes, to physically write down the stories of their lives or even share them with others verbally—but I'm aiming at more than that. My goal is for people to read these stories and be roused to go out and make a difference in the lives of students, families, schools, organizations, and entire communities. If writing is putting things together, then my desire as an author is to encourage readers to put together their talents, resources, and passions to build a narrative worth recounting, a narrative that centers on loving and serving others.

The Power of Quotes

Early in my career I sat beside my colleague, Deborah Jewell-Sherman, who showed me an interesting communication strategy she uses as a leader. Deborah had

recently become a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education after working as a teacher, principal, central office leader, and district superintendent for Richmond Public Schools. At the time, she and I were co-leading a principal training session for school leaders from across the United States. As she prepared to close the session, she was searching for a quote that would capture the essence of everything the participants had experienced during the session. She pulled out her phone and began to scroll through a list of quotes that she had been compiling for many years. Finding and reciting a fitting quote, she facilitated a moving, memorable closing. It was almost as if she had used the quote to snap a photo of the training, like a freeze-frame the participants could store in their minds that would remind them of what they had learned.

I have never forgotten this moment. With a few simple words, Deborah was able to leave the training participants with a sense of deep meaning. Amazingly, the words she shared weren't even her own. Someone else spoke or wrote these words, and they shared them in a different time, for a different audience, and with a different purpose. But Deborah skillfully reframed those words to illustrate what the training was all about. In that moment, she made the quote her own.

The takeaway for me was profound: leaders learn in video, but they lead in snapshots. The work of leadership happens through thousands—perhaps millions—of micro-actions, reactions, interactions, and decisions, much like videos are made of infinite numbers of still shots. There is no way we can ever know, track, or remember each

component. Consequently, part of effective leadership is synthesizing these individual experiences into a coherent whole and then distilling a memorable lesson from it all. This is why quotes are so useful. They have a way of helping leaders synthesize their experiences and make sense of their circumstances. Quotes can highlight the substance of an episode from a person's life—a chapter in a person's story—and succinctly communicate a lesson, emotion, or deep truth from this episode. Not only that, but quotes can capture truths, feelings, and experiences shared in common by entire groups of people, helping everyone involved to make sense of things and move forward with more wisdom. Once a leader can do this, that leader is then able to apply this learning to future experiences, thereby shortening the learning curve in similar situations.

My career in education has been full of experiences and interactions, many of them complex and difficult to endure, but most of them fulfilling and life-giving. Writing this book is like compiling an album of snapshots that encapsulates the video of my career. Each chapter centers on three quotes—one as the chapter title and two in the chapter text—that speak to vital lessons I have learned over three decades of leadership. Some of these quotes are from well-known figures. Others are from important people in my own life such as family members and coworkers. The Bible is the source of some of the quotes. Some quotes are even anonymous. But each quote represents a deep truth I have gained through experience. There are 30 quotes in total, representing the 30 years I have worked in education. The stories I share in this book are organized around these 30 quotes.

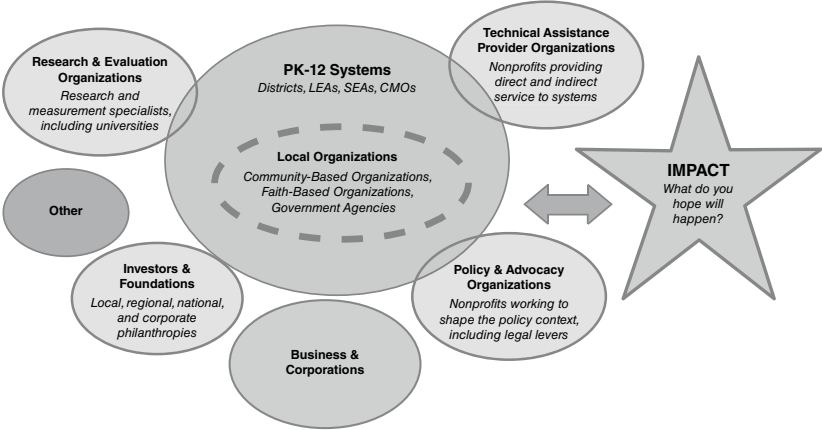


Figure created by Irvin L. Scott. © Irvin L. Scott

The Education Ecosystem

While my 30-year vocational journey has always centered on education, I have played several different roles within the broader system of educating our nation's children. As a schoolteacher, I did the hands-on work of teaching my students English. As a principal and district superintendent, I empowered teachers and resourced entire schools to better serve students. As a foundation leader, I partnered with other dedicated individuals to help enact programs and policies that have impacted millions of students, teachers, schools, and districts. Currently, as a graduate school professor, I pass my knowledge on to the next generation of educators. Not all of my roles in education have been my paid occupation. I fathered three sons who, between the three of them, spent decades as students. This means that my wife, Kisha, and I played the role of parents in the world of preschool-through-twelfth-grade education, navigating our children's back-to-school supply lists, class schedules, syllabi, and homework, not to mention helping three growing males navigate the complexities of existing and thriving in the world, with all their identities in tow. I even played a role as member and leader in a faith community, leading a gospel choir in the high school where I taught English. The roles I played were varied, but in all of them my focus remained the same. There was one set of questions I asked myself over and over again. I asked these questions in different ways and for different reasons depending on the season of my life and career, but the essence of the questions never changed: How can I improve learning for students? In my current role, how