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A vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

When I first entered the administration program, I remember thinking that when I finished classes, I would be prepared to become a successful administrator with the wealth of knowledge I had gained. As the time draws nearer, I see that experience, talking to other professionals, and the knowledge that has been afforded me, all balance out as guides for the near future. The knowledge I will have gained from this program will be only a part of my knowledge base. By this I mean, it is important that one does not see oneself as having all of the answers, but rather sees oneself as growing and learning on a continuing basis. Knowledge, skills, and beliefs are equally important components in developing leadership. Knowledge, whether specific bits of information or broad generalizations, are keys to effective decision-making. Knowledge also provides the foundation for the skill development needed to carry out goals. However, it is my values and beliefs that are the most important because decisions are first governed by a person's beliefs and, to a lesser extent, his/her knowledge. Stated differently, I believe that it is one's values and beliefs that drive one's actions, so I continually look for information to help build my foundation for leadership. In doing so, I hope to stay abreast of new trends and methods. It will be important to continually focus on administrative skills, one's vision, leadership style, and role in communication.

A VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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Denise R. Aalderks
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As I reflect on becoming an administrator, I find that my parents had a great deal to do with my decision. At one time, both of my parents were educators, so a great deal of our lives revolved around the events that took place at school. As a result of those events, I observed the positive impact they had on others as well as the rewards one could receive from the profession.

After my first two years in the classroom I saw the rewards of teaching but felt that there was something more. As a result of lengthy discussions with my father about his position as Superintendent of Schools I found myself engrossed with the responsibilities, obligations, and commitment of an administrator and realized this was an area I wanted to know more about. He convinced me that a strong administrator was able to make a larger difference in student learning than a classroom teacher. I revisit those discussions often as I reflect on my intentions to become an elementary school principal.

When I first entered the administration program, I remember thinking that when I finished classes, I would be prepared to become a successful administrator with the wealth of knowledge I had gained. As the time draws nearer, I see that experience, talking to other professionals, and the knowledge that has been afforded me, all balance out as guides for the near future. The knowledge I will have gained from this program will be

only a part of my knowledge base. By this I mean, it is important that one does not see oneself as having all of the answers, but rather sees oneself as growing and learning on a continuing basis.

Knowledge, skills, and beliefs are equally important components in developing leadership. Knowledge, whether specific bits of information or broad generalizations, are keys to effective decision-making. Knowledge also provides the foundation for the skill development needed to carry out goals. However, it is my values and beliefs that are the most important because decisions are first governed by a person's beliefs and, to a lesser extent, his/her knowledge. Stated differently, I believe that it is one's values and beliefs that drive one's actions, so I continually look for information to help build my foundation for leadership. In doing so, I hope to stay abreast of new trends and methods. It will be important to continually focus on administrative skills, one's vision, leadership style, and role in communication.

Administrative Skills

An administrator's personality can be as important as formal areas of training in developing a base of knowledge. To provide leadership, I must use a variety of skills. These skills will include being empathetic, encouraging, and participating in the decision-making

process, helping teachers work collaboratively, and defining and communicating the school's vision. Teschke (1996) reports, "Effective principals model the values and behavior that provide the necessary stability and directions for their schools" (p. 10).

First, I will need to be empathetic. One way this can be achieved is to approach improvement efforts and problems from the perspective of other persons. Communication often fails when one does not understand how others view things. Therefore, it is important to first and foremost be perceptive and concerned with people.

This value becomes extremely important as I discover what is happening throughout our school building. Too often administrators believe they have an accurate view of their staff, but their views are limited. A principal cannot possibly perceive all that is happening in every nook and cranny of the school building, for organizational reality is complex and subjective. This reality is a product of the different circumstances and points of view of each staff member.

Second, one of my most important responsibilities as an administrator will be to encourage and facilitate the decision-making process of others! To accomplish this I must encourage others to take risks, experiment, and not be afraid of failure. Teachers want to be part

of the decision-making process when it comes time for planning and implementing change. Teachers are the ones most affected by change, and they are in the best position to identify obstacles and design strategies for dealing with change.

Next, as a principal, I will constantly be involved in decision-making. In doing this, I will act when I have synthesized information so that my decision will coincide with the school's goals; I will research topics of discussion, and the belief system of the school.

Fourth, I believe it is my job to help teachers work collaboratively, because far more is gained through cooperation than competition. When a spirit of collegiality prevails, students benefit, because their teachers share their best ideas, cooperate on projects, and assist on another's intellectual and professional growth. Collegiality will prevail when communicating, motivating, and trust all have flourished among teachers.

How is collegiality achieved in a school staff? I will provide frequent opportunities, both formal and informal, for staff to talk about the practice of teaching and learning. Staff members also need to be involved cooperatively in planning, designing, and evaluating curriculum. Through this involvement the staff teach each other.

Finally, it will be critical that I define and communicate the school's vision. This can be done by articulating the purpose, goals, and intended outcomes of our efforts. When communication is effective, schools will have an awareness of their purpose and an active commitment to achieving their vision (Krug, 1993).

Vision

I feel as an educational leader it will be important to concentrate on building a collaborative culture through a clear and sound vision, not by charging forward with unclear agendas. Agendas for change can be difficult and often cause friction among administrators and staff. Schools are cultures and cultural change is complex and difficult. Change in the culture of schools stresses that reform is an ongoing process that is grounded in day-to-day experiences. To build a collaborative work culture, I must foster vision-building. When doing this, it is important to stress lifelong teacher development that involves inquiry, reflective practice, collaboration, and technical skills (Fullan, 1992). Visioning is the capacity to conceptualize and communicate a desired situation or state of affairs, which induces commitment and enthusiasm in others. The vision will not only provide the agenda and set the expectations, but it will

also give a sense of direction for achieving the desired outcomes (Patterson, 1993). The keys to my vision are creativity, communication, and commitment.

Fullan (1992) believes effective leadership is shaped and developed by understanding and appreciating a culture based on collaboration where the vision is developed together and not forced on people. For example, it will be important not to impose my vision but to develop a collaborative working vision that will help our staff deal with innovations. I will be flexible and open to change but will hold steadfast to my beliefs and values and will mark them for leadership.

My vision has become more focused through clarifying and affirming my values and beliefs. As principal, I will be part of a web of environmental, personal, and in-school relationships that combine to influence and facilitate organizational outcomes. I must have a clear picture of the school, community, faculty, and student body.

DePree (1989) feels it is very important for leaders to ask the following questions about their followers: "The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers. Are the followers reaching their potential? Are they learning? Serving? Do they achieve the required results? Do they change with grace? Manage conflict?" (p.15). In other words,

he believes leadership is an art, something to be learned over time, not learned simply by reading books.

Leadership

The effective leader is one who has developed a personal vision of what good educational programs look like and what his or her role is in achieving them. Therefore, I must enable others to reach their potential. Spillane (1989) says that teaching cannot be professionalized without strong leadership. There are a variety of successful leadership characteristics such as two-way communication, sensitivity, enthusiasm, and organization which help create an atmosphere receptive to change. One way to encourage others to be leaders is to build on their special gifts and special strengths. The desire to improve and grow is what makes or breaks a professional.

Since oral-auditory interaction makes up so much of our communication in schools, I will give a great deal of attention to listening. It is important that listening be intentional and sincere because one needs to concentrate fully on what is said. Promoting two-way communication that is accurate and sensitive will promote more involvement and enthusiasm for the school environment by students, parents, and staff.

The principal is the individual who is directly involved in every aspect of the school's operation and is thus the primary figure in determining the school's quality and character ("Standards for Quality," 1991). My actions will need to reflect my values and beliefs through my attitudes and conduct which will indicate the core of the school's operations and expectations. My responsibilities will extend beyond the classroom into the community, particularly with regard to parents, students, civic leaders, other building administrators, and the school district's central administration.

Effective leaders must also be able to take risks and stand firm in their aspirations for student success, regardless of the price they may pay. Doing the right thing may not necessarily make one popular. At the same time, there is an appreciation for those trusted administrators who make every effort to include people in the decisions that affect them and who are genuine in their desire to make their school a place where people want to be.

Leader of Leaders

To be an effective principal, I will empower my staff to be leaders. Sergiovanni (1994) says that effective principals preach and teach, they encourage, they help, and sometimes they even yell and tell.

But mostly, he feels effective principals serve and help others become leaders.

"Proficient principals encourage and develop the leadership of others" (NAESP, 1991, p.6). As schools move toward change, meet new challenges, are faced with more legal issues, and provide more services for students and community, I believe teachers must be directly involved in the leadership process to insure success. I believe that any time ownership is felt by those most directly affected by decisions, success is much more likely to occur. This applies to curriculum development, learning new instructional strategies, as well as facilitating programs within a school.

Through my leadership I hope to see that the common bonds of the staff are maintained and strengthened. This can be done by honest and open relationships. It is very important that I communicate effectively. Students, staff, parents and community will form a perception of the school by the image I project, both verbally and in written communication.

Leader of Curriculum and Instruction

Numerous studies have confirmed that the key element in a quality school is the principal's leadership role in ensuring an excellent instructional program. The principal is ultimately responsible for the quality of the instructional program in the school.

But, a principal is no longer expected to be the absolute instructional expert at his/her school. Effective principals know about and understand teaching and learning theory, and they are knowledgeable about the latest educational trends. Principals must function as leaders of leaders in this component of the school program. Teschke (1996) suggests: "Principals are facilitators of the process to preserve an environment in which there is excellent instruction" (p. 12).

Instruction is the main goal of the elementary school, and the job of the elementary administrator is to facilitate that instruction. Harchar and Hyle (1996) indicate that it is the instructional leader who leads the teachers, the students, and the community in creating their combined vision of an excellent school.

Effective instructional leaders facilitate teachers' professional development. This is important because just advocating it is not enough to accomplish the task. As principal, I must play an active role in initiating, guiding, and supporting professional development if it is to succeed.

One of my goals will be to provide the leadership needed to improve and/or maintain student performance. I will have to expose teachers to new ideas. Veteran teachers can be paired with new teachers to rejuvenate each other. Novice teachers can benefit from veteran

teachers' experiences. At the same time, new teachers will share their enthusiasm about the profession.

It will be important that I hold teachers accountable for student learning and give them immediate feedback. Teachers should be praised and given positive reinforcement whenever expectations are met. Coaching and modeling by an instructional specialist and me will also be important.

Knowledge, skills, and beliefs are all important components in developing instructional leadership. Knowledge, whether it be specific bits of information or broad generalizations, is the key to effective decision making. Knowledge is power; it provides the foundation for the development of skills needed to carry out our goals. But it will be my attitude and beliefs that perhaps will be the most important, because they are what will move me to action. Harchar and Hayle (1996) stress the importance of this by stating that it is excellent instructional leaders who help bring schools up to the high standards our children deserve, our communities demand, and all educators strive to achieve.

Again, an effective leader is one who has developed a personal vision of what good educational programs look like and what his/her role is in achieving them. In addition, by modeling his/her values such as trust and caring, the effective leader enhances the development of

a climate of collegiality and a community of leaders and learners. An effective leader is knowledgeable about educational trends and provides support for the staff while helping each individual to maximize his or her own strengths by ensuring an environment in which risk-taking is supported. Finally, Teschke(1996) states: "The effective principal is the steadying influence, the systems thinker, the communicator who guides the school toward its vision. He or she is the leader of leaders" (p. 13).

Communication

The public's view of its schools is based on many factors: the quality of the teaching, the achievement of students, the physical condition of the school, and especially the communications received from the school. As principal, I will play a key role in facilitating both the quantity and the quality of the communications that come from the school.

Most school communications are one-way. They are intended to get the message out through newsletters, bulletins, and form letters. It will be important that I think of different ways to get feedback. The feedback could be as formal as an opinion survey, or as informal as a discussion with parents at a PTA meeting, or a chat with a staff member in the teachers' lounge.

An important element of an effective school communications plan is that it is continuous. One way I plan to do this is with a regular schedule of communications through a monthly newsletter. Through this newsletter I hope the public will feel informed and develop trust in what the school is doing.

To lead a school successfully, Price (1996) suggests:

Effective leaders must be skilled in oral and written communication, have the ability to speak frankly and directly on an issue, hold high expectations and a belief that all students can learn, and be able to listen carefully and understand both the content and feeling behind what is being communicated. (p. 20)

A major factor influencing the school climate is how the principal communicates and interacts with staff. Teachers and staff members should be encouraged to talk openly and freely about their concerns. Having a philosophy of fairness and open communication, and insisting on listening to everyone's concerns is important. Covey's (1989) fifth habit of highly effective people is: "Seek first to understand and then to be understood" (p. 235).

Staff morale results from open and honest communications, whether with conflict, policy matters,

procedural matters, encouragement, or reprimands. There are four elements that I feel characterize healthy communications when interacting with staff orally or in writing: honesty, attentiveness, clarity, and consistency. The message that can be conveyed through these elements can be sent though written or face-to-face encounters.

While written communication has an important place in administering a school, a memo does not replace sharing a good story with a colleague in the hall or telling the cook how much you enjoyed the apple cobbler. I believe that brief face-to-face encounters foster staff morale and make the school environment a pleasant place to work.

A final type of communication with staff is a person's body language, which sometimes speaks louder than words. I feel that it is very important that as an administrator I make an effort to send positive messages to my staff. This can be simply done by a smile, a laugh, a firm handshake, or a pat on the back to accentuate the message I am trying to convey.

In addition to modeling good effective communication, the principal must have the ability to (a) write messages clearly and concisely for their intended audiences; (b) utilize facts and data and determine their value in communication; (c) use current

technology to communicate; and (d) demonstrate skill in nonverbal communication (National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 1991).

It is also important for principals to support staff, students and parents. Halsey (1996) shares what a teacher once told her: "The principal sends us all birthday cards, leaves us notes in our classrooms, and takes great pleasure acknowledging our successes. She works as hard educating and rewarding us as we do educating and rewarding the students" (p. 25).

School and Community Relations

The importance of parent involvement in our schools is often recognized. Parents are encouraged to visit the classroom and observe their children learning. Unfortunately, sometimes the wider community and the key role it can play in helping us reach our educational goals is overlooked.

As principal, it will be important that I use every avenue available to get out positive messages about the school to various constituencies in the community. The messages I send need to be tailored to different audiences; parents, senior citizens, business groups, and taxpayers in general. At the beginning of this program, I felt a school newsletter was the primary source of communication between home and school, and its

purpose was to inform. Kindred, Bagin, and Gallagher (1984) wrote that schools should use not only newsletters to inform the public but news releases, radio and television programs, brochures, and person-to-person programs.

Simkins (1996) suggests ten easy ways to involve the whole community in the lives of our schools. One way is to start a key communicators network. Key communicators are people in the community who agree to stay informed about what is going on at the school and to help with rumor control. He suggests targeting individuals who are not parents of current students, who have a reputation for being trustworthy and responsible, and who are likely to interact with many people.

Using annual events to create ongoing involvement of clubs and groups is another way Simkins (1996) suggests to involve the community. Also, he proposes asking community members to help assess student work, establishing award programs sponsored by local groups, involving community members in school governance, looking for special projects that offer partnership opportunities, organizing a campus watch program, eating together as a community and/or staff, and finally making good use of news media.

There are various approaches to communicating with the community, and all require considerable planning and

follow-through. Simkins (1996) points out the importance of a school's mission, vision, goals and needs. I will need to begin with the approach that works best for the school where I am employed. As I gain more experience, I will try other strategies, but involving the community in the life of our school will pay many dividends!

Conclusion

When I walk into my office the first day as an administrator, I'm sure I will have feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. I will not question my ability to handle the responsibility of managing the school and to have positive relationships with staff and students, and to deal with parents. However, to increase my success as an administrator, I have developed a personal image of effective leadership. I have a vision for effective performance. In this paper I have developed my professional philosophy that describes important attitudes, values, and beliefs that I have regarding the fundamental nature of schooling, learning, and leading.

To add in my success as I begin as an administrator, I will find a mentor. As Daresh and Playko (1990) state, there may be no more powerful form of instruction available than the one-to-one relationship that develops between a mentor and a protege.

When I enter into the arena of administration, it will be important that I remember that everything can not be learned or done in one day. Patience will be a key to success as this new job is sure to be filled with a bewildering array of assigned tasks and responsibilities. In addition, the beginning of any school year is sure to be filled with a variety of jobs that will keep any principal, novice or veteran, running at full speed to get the building open and ready for the first day of school.

Several experienced administrators have stressed the importance for setting priorities. They feel the key to surviving the first few days on the job is to have the ability to sort through all the things that beg for attention and decide what comes first.

Above all, the success I will have as I start in school administration is based on my belief that I belong there and am the best possible person for the job I was hired to perform.

Throughout my graduate studies my mind has continually been stretched. If at the completion of my master's degree, I never become an elementary principal, I will not regret the time and money spent on my education. The opportunity to reflect upon who I am as a person and as a professional educator has been invaluable.

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