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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

As teachers and administrators, we need to constantly support each other and appreciate all that we give to our students. We need to realize that in education we will not always meet with success, but we need to continue to look at ways in which to do our jobs better. Principals need to be the people who work to keep their faculties and staff in a positive/progressive direction. Administrators and teachers need to set their own goals, working constantly to achieve them. As you hit roadblocks, you need to find alternatives to get you back on the road. Education is not an easy job. Educators have a great deal of stress in their lives. It is not a job that is always appreciated by others, but one that brings many challenges to those who pursue them. Caring about the people around you is an important goal for all administrators. Being able to listen and help when people are having problems, shows parents, students, and staff that you really care about what they think and do. People skills are, in my opinion, the most important quality that you need as an administrator. These skills will help you find cooperation from others, as you work to achieve the goals you have set. As a future administrator, I see balancing the work that you do as a manager and as a leader as imperative. Being a manager is a necessary part of the job. Being a leader is a choice you make as an administrator. Schools today need more leaders. The challenges that we face on a daily basis are astounding. An administrator's work day never ends, but even with the huge work load, we must strive to be leaders within our schools and our communities . Being an administrator and/or teacher within a school system and working with students on a daily basis , is a privilege few people get to experience. To meet all the needs of our students, is a tough challenge to fulfill. It is a challenge that should be welcome by each of us as educators, as we work to make each student have the success in education that they so truly need and deserve in their lives.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Education seems to have always been an important part of my life. I have spent all of my life in a school setting since the age of 5. The settings have changed during the years, but the overall love for learning, teaching, and now administration have never died. Being a teacher was the main focus of my life for over 18 years. Suddenly at that point, I decided to take a chance at an administrative job that was opening in our system. The job was to be half time teaching and half time administration. At that point in my life, I was ready for a new challenge and, yet, not really ready to give up teaching. It proved to be a perfect mix for me. For the past seven years, I have continued in my role as an administrator and a teacher. Through this experience, I have been able to work with wonderful, experienced administrators and learn from them. They have opened new worlds in education to me. That experience along with taking classes in secondary administration has shown me many new, important, and exciting facets to being an administrator.

Long hours, stress, constant deadlines, personality conflicts, teacher issues, board problems, superintendent requests, parent demands, as well as making sure that you have a school that is truly educating students and showing growth can be an overwhelming job for any administrator. As a principal, however, you are expected to overcome all of the above plus do teacher evaluations, budgeting, lead, manage, oversee secretaries, custodial, and kitchen staff, and be at evening meetings and sporting events. You need to be fresh and prepared for anything that will happen each day. Knowledge on

educational laws in your State, the local district rules and regulations, and your school's policies must all be familiar.

I have learned that being a principal is hard work and time consuming. I have also seen that the true key to a school's success lies with the principal.

Personal Characteristics

One of the best characteristics I bring to the job of an administrator is the ability to work well with other people. I have been on numerous committees and team projects and have never had problems working with others. I enjoy working collaboratively to find answers to problems that the school is encountering.

Communication is another strong point that I bring to an administrative job. Good written and oral communication skills are a must for a principal. I am best at one to one communication because I like the ability to be able to listen closely to what the other person has to say without outside distractions. I am a good listener, which has proven to be a valuable characteristic, in dealing with students, staff, and parents.

Caring about the people around me and encouraging them to work to do their best is one of my constant goals. A friendly smile or a written note telling them that they have done a good job are high on my list of important priorities. When teachers or students, go out of their way to do more than the minimum that is expected of them, taking the time to let

them know that it has been noticed is imperative. Making people feel necessary and important to the system is an essential part of an administrative role.

Organization is another strong characteristic. I take the time to organize my work and make sure that I am not forgetting to accomplish my goals. I am not a clock watcher, and I work each day until I have completed the goals I have set for that day. Sometimes this means that I do not leave until late in the evening, but I believe that being an administrator takes a great deal of time and effort to accomplish all that is set before us.

Values, Beliefs, Philosophies, Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes

Student Needs

Schools have changed a great deal from the one room school houses of the past. "For most of our history as a nation, preparation for citizenship has been the primary goal of public schooling. Only since Sputnik has concern for academic achievement eclipsed the focus on character and citizenship" (Schaps & Lewis, 1998, p. 23). Today's schools teach more to the whole child. This means teaching them not only the academic information, but all the skills they will need in their lives in order to succeed in the real world. This is a huge task, but parents, students, and the community expect schools to achieve it. "Motivation, curiosity, and insight are certain to be much greater when children need information or skills to solve problems that have meaning to them" (Slavin, Madden, Dolan, Wasik, 1994, p. 11).

In the beginning, schools were only for those who could afford private school or tutors. Today, schools are there for every child. Laws have been made that ensure that every student attends school and gets an education. Educating students from diversified backgrounds, makes education for all a difficult task. It means as a principal you must be able to relate to all the people within your school. There is a need to understand their culture and background. "By modifying curriculum and instruction and by addressing expressions of racism, schools can help students move beyond tolerance to acceptance, understanding and celebration of racial and cultural differences" (Parks, 1999, p. 15). It places a great deal of responsibility on the administrators of the schools, because it is their job to develop a curriculum that will meet all their students' needs.

The main goal that everyone expects from schools is that students are learning. Students are the ones who ultimately do the learning and growing. "Effective school learning requires good teaching, and good teaching requires professionals who exercise judgments in constructing the education of their students" (Porter & Brophy, 1988, p. 74).

Students must put in a commitment of time and quality into their education in order to meet the goals of learning. John Carroll (1963) has shown that the amount of time that is needed for each student to learn, however, is a huge variable. Perseverance plays a key role in learning. The amount of learning that takes place is due to the time actually spent and the time needed to learn. It is our job to give each student the time

he/she needs to reach his/her own success (p. 723-732). Getting all students to put in the necessary effort to succeed in school is a huge task. "Each student is different. Each child has individual needs and personal factors that are motivational. No two students are motivated by the same learning activity to the same degree" (White, 1997, p. 64).

It is our job as educators to learn how to help all of our students. This means learning to teach to their various styles of learning. It means changing the way that we have taught in the past and look for new ways to reach our students. All of us have our own style of learning, and we tend to teach in the same way, but this does not help students who do not learn in this way.

As a principal, I would use McCarthy's (1997) 4Mat System. In it teachers learn to include all four types of learners in their lesson planning and strategies. Type one learners learn by listening and sharing, making personal connections and need to know why. Type two learners need to have structure and formal learning. They need details and facts. These learners are thorough and industrious. Traditional classrooms are for them. Type three learners like immediate, useful learning. They are the practical, hands on learners. Type four learners make connections and want to tell immediately. Being recognized is important to type four learners. They are action orientated, loud, and talk when others are talking. As instructors and educational leaders, we need to be sure that we are reaching all of these learners (p. 46-51).

Leadership

"Leaders engage with followers in seeking to achieve not only the goals of the leader, but also significant goals of the followers" (Owens, 1998, p. 204). Principals need to be leaders. They need to understand leadership from many different perspectives. Leadership means that these people need to be able to think. They must discover new ways of doing their jobs. Due to the fact that student demographics, family structures, school structures, and technology are all changing, it is imperative that as school leaders we have the capacity and drive to change, also.

A task focused leader initiates structure, provides the information, determines what to be done, issues the orders, promises rewards for compliance and threatens punishment for disobedience. The follower-focused leader solicits advice, opinions, and information from followers and checks decisions or shares decision-making with followers. The . . . task focused leader uses his or her power to obtain compliance with what the leader has decided. The follower focused leader uses his or her power to set the constraints within which followers are encouraged to join in deciding what is to be done (Owens, 1998, p. 226).

I see my leadership style as people-oriented, but I also place a great deal of importance on the task-oriented style. I know that there is a problem that exists between balancing the need to accomplish tasks and meeting individual human needs in the school, but I feel that through knowing that this is a style that I want to improve on I will work to make it happen. In a study conducted by Ohio State University, it was found that leaders whose behavior was high in both task-orientation and people-

orientation were generally viewed as effective (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 225). I also plan to be democratic in my decision making but I realize that at times it will be necessary to use the authoritarian approach.

The power of leaders is voluntarily granted by followers who accept the leader's influence and direction by shared agreement, no matter how informally the agreement is arrive at. Leaders do not wield legal power vested in an official office, rather they exercise power that followers have willingly entrusted to them (Owens, 1995, p. 201).

Although I would like to spend most of my time on instructional leadership because the need is so great, I realize that most of my time will be taken up in management duties. This is due to the fact that administrative work has many time constraints and is fragmented in nature. Principals are also more likely to be evaluated negatively or lose their jobs for being poor managers than for being poor instructional leaders (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 231).

My leadership style will include a great deal of reflective practice. Through the journalizing in our courses, I have seen the value of being able to think about why others or myself are doing things the way they are. It gives me time to look at other ways that the situation could have been handled which may have been better so that the next time the problem occurs I will know how to handle it. It gives me a chance to look at things objectively and without criticism from others.

My main goal as a principal will be to make sure that student learning is going on in every classroom. This will be done through

frequent visits in the classroom along with discussions with teachers to look together at ways to improve their teaching.

I plan to be a leader that people can trust. It is only through trust that people will support and follow you as a leader. It will take time to develop this trust in a new school but through listening, caring, and helping teachers, I believe that trust can be developed. Confidentiality must also be an important part of my principal's job.

I see myself as a collaborative leader. As a collaborative leader, I possess the qualities of being able to listen and communicate. I believe in risk taking, not only for myself but also for the people who work for me. I think that mistakes help us to grow and only by taking risks and trying new things will we improve ourselves. Other people will be willing to take risks knowing that mistakes are viewed as learning experiences.

Being able to meet as a group to look at problems and find alternative solutions and make decisions together as a team is my idea of ideal leadership. In doing this, I am making others feel that they have ownership in the decisions that are being made. This leads to cooperation for all those involved. Through using consensus for the decisions that need to be made, I will be developing consensus decision making groups rather than using a win-lose approach which never meets with success. In this leadership style, I am empowering others with the power to make decisions. It also means that I must be flexible and adaptive to others ideas.

At the very start, Mosher and Purpel suggest, the supervisor should emphasize to the group a respect for the processes of discovery and change through open communication that is based on trust and mutual support. The supervisor should invite teachers to share their feelings and thoughts, and then model careful listening and a sincere interest in understanding the perspectives of others" (Pajak, 1993, p. 68).

Management

Management is an imperative part of being an administrative leader. Managing my time will be one of the biggest challenges that I will face. I must be able to organize my work setting priorities for the order of the tasks to be completed.

Administrative work is characterized by many brief encounters generally of several minutes or less in length . . . administrative work is fragmented, the administrator deals with many different issues during the course of the day, but sees few of these to immediate completion. Work occurs at an unrelenting pace with one interaction followed in immediate succession by another (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 215).

To manage time, I must be proficient in time management techniques.

As principal, I must manage students, teachers, curriculum, the budget, and the overall running of the school. It will also be my job to decide the budget allocations for the school. It is through this process that I will be setting the school's priorities and needs. I must use these resources of money to the best benefit of all of my students.

A safe learning environment must be provided for all children. Learning and teaching cannot occur without a safe environment. This means that we must let students know our expectations of their behavior

and have strict consequences for those who do not perform the behavior we have set. In many of our schools, we must now have policemen working in our buildings to help maintain the standards that we have set for a safe school. As a principal, violence or threats of violence will not be tolerated. It will be my job along with the other administrators and staff to be sure that drugs and alcohol are not present in our school. Gang activity will not be allowed within the walls of the school. It is imperative to have an orderly environment within any school. Parents, administrators, and teachers need to work together to continue to preserve our schools as a safe environment. We need to be constantly working toward the goal of no violence in our schools.

All staff, administrators, and students need to know what to do when a crisis occurs. As a principal, I would be sure that a crisis plan was in place in my school and that everyone in the building knows how to respond to it.

The typical administrator certification program does not devote specific attention to shootings, suicide, terminal illness, and natural disasters--events that are not to be expected in the course of an ordinary school day. In these turbulent times, however, the astute administrator does not question whether a crisis will occur, but when it will occur, how serious it will be, and what the response should be (Lichtenstein, Schonfeld, & Kline, 1994, p. 80).

Teachers

It is important that if we expect our students to continue to learn and grow that we also have that expectation for all of our teachers. It is necessary to provide opportunities for all staff to continue both personal

between a teacher and his/her students. Students need to feel wanted and accepted in every class that they attend. "Students benefit more from caring, compassionate educators who respect them as individuals than they do from raised standards" (Urban, 1999, p. 70).

Our schools and administrators, need to be working to make our students better prepared for the world of work. We need to be teaching more vocational skills so that students can find success in their jobs after high school or college. Students need to have the social skills to get along with and work with people in the workplace. They also need to have the intellectual skills to be able to perform the duties of the job and be able to think critically to solve the problems they encounter on the job and in life.

"To thrive in our mediated culture, children must learn to become competent, critical and literate in all media forms" (Thoman, 1999, p. 50). Technology has changed how all things are being done in our schools. It has made learning a lot more interesting and far more realistic. Being able to see people in other areas through the ICN labs and interact with them is a great learning tool. Through the internet, having the ability to get information from all over the world has added vastly to the learning possibilities of our students. Technology has expanded the learning classroom. As technology continues to change daily, administrators are constantly being challenged to learn about and incorporate new technology knowledge into their schools. "Our goal must be to help

learners control the interpretation of what they see or hear, rather than let the interpretation control them" (Thomam, 1999, p. 50).

As leaders in education today, we no longer can afford to simply teach students rote memorization. It is now imperative to our students that we teach each of them to develop higher level thinking skills. We must give them problem-solving skills. Students should no longer be sitting at their desks taking notes as teachers lecture to them. In ideal classrooms, students are moving around the classroom, doing hands on experiments, working on computers, engaged in cooperative learning activities, discussing their ideas openly with each other, looking for solutions to the problems they face, and constantly being challenged to go further in their thinking skills. As an administrator, I must be pushing my teachers to use teaching techniques that ensure that meaningful learning is occurring in their classrooms. "By keying teaching and assessment techniques to the diverse ways people think and learn, teachers will be surprised at how much smarter their students get" (Sternberg, 1994, p. 36).

Students need to be able to express themselves clearly and precisely. Incorporating constant writing projects into the curriculum to improve their writing skills is a necessity. Through writing, students will learn to use their creativity and their critical thinking skills. Being able to communicate with others through writing and oral skills, is a must in today's world.

Today's students need to be exposed not only to the basic learning of math, English, social studies and science, but also the fine arts. Opportunities to have these classes in each student's curriculum is imperative. Too many of our students leave school without ever taking a music, art, or drama class. If students are never exposed to these things, how can they possibly learn to enjoy them as they get older? Are they not missing out on some of life's finest things? Have we deprived them of a world they will never know exists? It is our job to be sure that students grow and learn in all directions. "The best schools have the best arts programs. Excellence in education and excellence in the arts seem to go hand in hand" (Fowler, 1994, p. 4).

Multicultural education should be an essential part of every curriculum. Students need to be taught to appreciate their own heritage, as well as that of others. As we continue to become a more diversified society, we need to appreciate the wonderful things the various cultures bring to each of us. "When cultural expectations collide with classroom expectations, the result can be misunderstanding. Discussion among teachers, parents, and administrators can increase sensitivity to students from diverse backgrounds" (Kirmani & Laster, 1999, p. 61).

Supervision and Evaluation

Without supervision and evaluation teachers would not improve. Most would grow complacent with the job that they were doing and soon become stagnate. The purpose of evaluation is to promote personal growth and improve student learning. To do this, I would incorporate a

program that would start new teachers on a formal evaluation process using a model like Joyce and Showers (Pajak, 1993, p. 211). This model would have an extensive introduction to effective teaching skills and incorporate coaching with innovations to develop good teaching methods. Peer mentoring would be an important part of the program along with staff development on effective teaching and a basic orientation about the system. These teachers would be on formal evaluation. Competent and professional teachers would be on growth plans with portfolios to show what they have accomplished. Costa and Garmston's cognitive coaching model (Pajak, 1993, p. 263) with both peers and administrators would be incorporated. Teachers who are in need of assistance would go on a personal improvement commitment plan. Through this program, they would receive assistance from me as the principal. We would look at ways that they could improve their instruction to become better educators of their students. We would work together to achieve success. Whatever place the teachers are at, I would want it to be a positive growth experience for them.

Parents

"There is a growing and indisputable body of evidence that indicates students do better in school when they have interested and involved parents ("Parents are Key," 1997, p. 4A). As an administrator, it is imperative that I keep parents informed about what is happening at school and issue invitations to them to participate in their child's education. "Children will esteem learning when they observe their

parents and other significant adults in their lives placing a high value on education" (White, 1997, p. 47). Brainstorming with faculty members to find ways to keep parents involved in their child's school and incorporating the ones that will work is an important job to be done by the principal. Holding teachers accountable for being in contact with parents is also part of the job of a principal.

A new study by the Education Department says that in two-parent households with what is considered to be a high level of involvement in school and school activities, 51 percent of the children received mostly A's. On the other end of the spectrum, only 27 percent of children studied received mostly A's when the level of school involvement for both parents was considered low ("Parents are Key," 1997, p. 4A).

Students and parents many times have ideas that they feel are better than ours. Parents feel they know what is best for their child. We need to listen to what they have to say and make sure that they know that we care about their position. However, we also need to remember that we are the ones who have been trained to educate our youth. We are the ones who ultimately have the responsibility to make the best choices for students.

Personal Professional Vision for Administrative Work

As teachers and administrators, we need to constantly support each other and appreciate all that we give to our students. We need to realize that in education we will not always meet with success, but we need to continue to look at ways in which to do our jobs better. Principals

need to be the people who work to keep their faculties and staff in a positive/progressive direction.

Administrators and teachers need to set their own goals, working constantly to achieve them. As you hit roadblocks, you need to find alternatives to get you back on the road. Education is not an easy job. Educators have a great deal of stress in their lives. It is not a job that is always appreciated by others, but one that brings many challenges to those who pursue them.

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experience. To meet all the needs of our students, is a tough challenge to fulfill. It is a challenge that should be welcome by each of us as educators, as we work to make each student have the success in education that they so truly need and deserve in their lives.

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