Leading a middle school into the 21st century: a reflective essay

Abstract
It needs to be stressed that a middle school ought to be regarded as a general education school. This means that the curriculum should not be limited. "The middle school should deal with widely shared concerns of early adolescents and the world they live in, rather than the narrow interests of academic or vocational specialization." I strongly believe that every community has much to offer in regards to helping teach the youth of the community. A curriculum for a middle school needs to be developed around this thinking. "Teachers need to emphasize the strengths and interests of each student in offering opportunities to become involved in student-initiated projects, school improvement projects, and community service."

Programs can be set up within the community where the school and community work hand in hand. The middle school children need the chance to see what is offered within a community. In order for such programs to be developed, the principal needs to believe in the importance of the community.
LEADING A MIDDLE SCHOOL INTO THE 21ST CENTURY:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Jeffrey A. Barry
May 1997
This Research Paper by: Jeffrey A. Barry
Entitled: LEADING A MIDDLE SCHOOL INTO THE 21ST CENTURY
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

March 13, 1997
Date Approved

Robert H. Decker
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

March 14, 1997
Date Received

Dale R. Jackson
Coordinator, Educational Leadership Program

3.14.97
Date Received

Michael D. Waggoner
Head, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
I remember when I was a child, my friends and I would sometimes talk about the year 2000. To consider what it would be like was like reading some futuristic comic book. We would not really guess what life was going to be like, though; we talked about how old we would be - in my case, 42 - and about what we would be doing, where we would be living. Of course, many of us, like most boys, wanted to be married to beautiful women and living in fancy houses in big cities. As a thirteen year-old in 1971, the year 2000 and the age of 42 seemed incomprehensible. At that point in my life, I had no idea what a computer even was, let alone knowing how to use one, and I had no idea that I would some day become a teacher. To think that the new millennium is just around the corner is really quite amazing to this old farm boy who used to dream a lot. Now that I have nearly completed my Masters in Administration, I have new dreams to consider.

On Becoming An Administrator

Today, looking at the whole picture, the last three years have really gone by quickly. But while I was under excruciating, mental pain during certain classes, I wondered how I got myself into this.

After talking to a few colleagues about an upcoming Master’s of Administrative Program that was going to be starting on the Iowa Communications Network in the fall of 1994, I decided to attend an informative meeting held in Council Bluffs in the spring of that year. The Harlan School District had recently instituted a policy in which teachers needed a master’s degree to advance on the pay scale. There would no longer be a plus-36 column that gave a person the same pay as someone with a master’s degree. Therefore, I knew that if I was going to stay in the educational field, which I
planned to do, I needed to get a masters degree. Even though I was not really planning on becoming a principal, I figured this type of master's offered more possibilities than one in English. The three-year program seemed manageable with classes being offered every Monday night in the ICN Room at Harlan High School and very convenient since the high school is only four blocks from my house. Also, there would only be one class each semester with two in the summer. Although the program sounded pretty good, I was very skeptical about becoming a student again, and I was concerned that I would not be able to handle the brain work involved in an administrative program.

Now, it is nearly three years since I first attended that informative meeting in Council Bluffs. I am very happy to say that I have endured twelve different courses thus far and have even survived the brain work involved. I have even done quite well with a GPA over 3.8. I am also happy to say that I have decided to pursue the profession of administration. I have wondered what changed my mind; after all, I was originally enrolled in the program simply to get a master's and move up on the pay scale. The answer was the professors and people I have come in contact with over the past three years. Many of these people have influenced me in different ways and made me look at things in a different light. I just hope the light shines on me in my future endeavors.

Courses and Professors

Throughout the administrative program, I have had five different professors in thirteen different classes. In any program, there are always going to be some good and not-so-good classes and professors. This program has been no different. I have learned a great deal in most of the classes and thoroughly enjoyed most of the professors.
Dr. Jackson, the first instructor in Introduction to Educational Administration, had us keep something that has proven to be very beneficial, a journal. Keeping a journal was part of the grade in this particular class, and he suggested that students keep it updated throughout the program, writing our thoughts about what we were learning and how we were feeling. Being an avid journal writer to begin with helped, but having Dr. Jackson assign this right from the start of our program was very beneficial. I have done a good job keeping this journal updated for all of the classes. Hopefully, it will help me for this reflective essay.

Something else that was very good about Dr. Jackson was that he was well organized and let everyone know exactly what was expected - not only in his class, but in the entire program. He also got students started on their practicums. At this point, the idea of a practicum seemed a bit premature, but it set the groundwork and got us thinking down the road, which now I think was good. Since I have been involved in Strategic Planning and Needs Assessment in the Harlan School District, I have had many opportunities for my practicum experience. I have done some administrative work organizing and guiding students and parents to Washington, D.C., and meeting and discussing various topics with district board members and administrators has also given me valuable experience.

Probably the toughest class for me was School Law, but it may have been the class that really made me work hard and realize that I could gain much from these graduate classes if I studied a great deal. As a principal of a school, I may not have to know every law about schools, but I had better know the laws that pertain directly within a building - such as locker searches, suspensions, expulsions, fighting, drugs, and alcohol. Many cases intrigued me, and many
scared me. One case in Florida illustrated a national mood toward litigation. One fall after class, a thirteen year-old left his public junior high, went to his grandmother's backyard, and hung himself. "In the aftermath, McLaughlin Middle School officials expected school wide shock and questions of why. What they did not anticipate was a $2 million lawsuit filed against them by the child's mother" (Bounds, 1994, p.1). The boy's mother charged school officials with a civil-rights violation for not helping prevent her son's suicide. What has happened to the days when parents backed school personnel? Now, when something happens to children, the parents accuse someone within the school of being in the wrong - and sometimes pursue litigation. Dr. Else, the instructor of School Law, and Dr. Decker, an instructor in three other classes, strongly stressed many times to document anything and everything that goes on in the building. That is advice that I will try to always remember.

Of all the courses in the program, the one that I feel was most beneficial and really made me start thinking like an administrator, was Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction. This was, in my opinion, the first class that contained the "nuts and bolts" of being a principal. The Supervision and Evaluation class was very practical and real, not as abstract as the curriculum class. There were excellent discussions within our group and the other sites that were quite interesting. Dr. Decker, the instructor, did a super job of getting discussion started where appropriate and stopping it when appropriate.

Nuts and Bolts of Supervision and Evaluation

Three important areas of study in this course were A) learning styles, B) teacher evaluation techniques, and C) qualities of effective administrators. Of course, there are many areas within a school that a principal needs to be aware of, but these three might be as important as any.
Learning Styles

I had many times heard people talk about learning styles, but I did not actually know much about them. I was also curious about mine. In Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction, Dr. Decker spent valuable time explaining the four styles, and students took a survey to find out what theirs was. After learning about the differences in the four styles, I was not surprised to learn that I am a Type Four Learner, someone who is enthusiastic, adaptable, social, and a risk taker. I do like action, I am outgoing, I like to be a front runner, and I like to act on visions that I have. As a leader of a school, it will be important to know the type of staff that I am working with, their styles and strengths. More importantly, as a leader of teachers, I need to make the staff aware of the importance of knowing the students and how best they learn. "Principals must ensure that schools attend to different student learning capabilities and create settings that reflect a diversity of methods, technologies, and styles" (Foriska, 1992, p.16).

Teacher Evaluations

Many of the points Dr. Decker brought up about teacher evaluations were exactly what I believed. For example, it is believed that teachers should not be evaluated on a number system but instead with adequate or inadequate or satisfactory or not. A one-time evaluation is probably not very valid. The principal needs to stop by every classroom periodically. There has to be a feeling of trust built up before the evaluation process occurs. Something else that I feel is very important was stated in "Ten Commandments for Successful Teacher Evaluation" by Carolyn Chirnside (1984). "Immediate and direct feedback to staff members must be provided. A positive comment at the conclusion of the observation and open communication during the post-observation conference would assure teachers of the evaluator's interest in
their professional growth” (Chirnside, 1984, p. 43). The last time I was evaluated, which was a couple of years ago, the principal went over the evaluation more than a month later! Since then, he has not even come into my room to sit and observe what was being taught. I do not want to be that type of principal.

I have heard from three or four different principals, mine included, that when they became administrators, they intended to visit classrooms quite often. They found that it was easier said than done. Their daily responsibilities of lunch duty, phone calls, and minor discipline problems, they said, took up too much of their time. I’m sure that will also be the case for me, but I want to make time for classrooms a top priority.

Leadership Behaviors

Something else that Dr. Decker covered in Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction was behaviors and qualities of successful administrators. He had students first list what they personally thought were positive behaviors. Next, students compared their lists at individual sites. Then the lists from all four sites were compared. Lastly, students discussed comparisons of their lists with the ones that were in our packet. Of course, I may be biased, but I felt that the pleasing leadership behaviors matched my Type Four mentality quite well. After all, I am a dreamer of visions!

Seriously, though, I feel that Type Fours are very caring people who want others to also feel good about themselves. As a leader, that does not mean a principal should walk around all day patting people on the back, but I do feel it is much more important to point out good things that are happening instead of just the bad. It is important to remember that failure is not fatal, and a person can achieve what he or she conceives. As a principal, I will need to try and
bring the best out in teachers. “Outstanding teachers are those teachers who teach with passion. They bring curriculum to life. They look forward to each day with unbridled enthusiasm and vigor. Outstanding teachers embody the art of teaching by recognizing the heart of teaching” (Connors, 1992). I feel principals have the power to instill that kind of belief in their teachers if they believe that teaching is an art that begins in the heart.

The Beginning of Beliefs and Feelings

In my nearly fifteen years of teaching, I have taught students from grades seven through twelve. I have taught various aspects of language arts from grammar and usage to novel units, speech, and media. First, I was in a small, 7-12 school in Yutan, Nebraska. The average grade was 30-35 students. In my first year, I had six different subject areas to prepare! Thinking back, I wonder how I ever survived. I guess I did not know any differently. At Yutan, I found that I enjoyed the middle level students more than high school students because of their energy, honesty, and eagerness to learn. After six years in that school and many Iowa jokes, I was ready for a change. A job became available at the middle school in Harlan, which was near my hometown and a nice-sized town, so I jumped at the opportunity. I was not only glad to be back in good old Iowa, but also in a school with only middle level students. The more I have worked with the age of students in a middle school, the more I have been glad of my decision. With the experience I have had, working with a variety of teachers and principals, and researching the elements of a true middle school, I feel I am ready to lead a middle school into the 21st Century.

Beliefs of a True Middle School

"The middle school movement, although still 'new' to many school
districts across the United States, has been around for many years, as a tool for
desegregation, to cope with expanding enrollments, and to meet state funding
requirements" (George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane, 1992, p.3). The
idealistic view of a true middle school has teachers who are aware of the
developmental needs of students, they prefer to work at the middle level, and
have received special training to help them better communicate with their
students. This, obviously, sounds too good to be true, but I feel with time and
effort, it can happen.

Teachers and Curriculum

"Middle school teachers can not just learn about appropriate curriculum
for middle level learners by being told what to teach; they must do the exploring
and planning to really make it work" (Erb, 1991, p. 24). Many educators would
stress the importance of curriculum in a middle school, which I feel is also
important, but it must start with the teachers. They not only need to know the
best methods to teach their students, but they need to know how to deal with
this age of student. One way to find out what students expect from their
teachers is to ask. One survey found, "The top three personal characteristics of
teachers were (1) willing to listen, (2) are respectful toward students, and (3)
accept students as they are" (Buckner and Bickel, 1991, p.28). A teacher may
be a great educator, but s/he may not be for this level and the type of children
s/he is dealing with; s/he might be better suited for high school students.

"Teacher education programs traditionally have prepared teachers either for
elementary or secondary education" (Spence, 1991, p.43). It is going to take
more than me to change that fact, but when hiring teachers, it will be important
to see what type of training they have, and if they are really prepared for middle
level students. Spence adds, "States have allowed both groups, elementary
and secondary teachers, to be certified to work with middle school students, even though, in most cases, neither group was specifically prepared for middle school students” (p.43). Before hiring someone, a principal can do some background work on the prospective employee, but with teachers already employed, it will be more difficult. Staff development days spent on curriculum and teaching methods would help, and observations and discussions with teachers would also shed some light on how well the teachers are reaching their students.

It needs to be stressed that a middle school ought to be regarded as a general education school. This means that the curriculum should not be limited. As George (1992) point out, “The middle school should deal with widely shared concerns of early adolescents and the world they live in, rather than the narrow interests of academic or vocational specialization” (p.90). I strongly believe that every community has much to offer in regards to helping teach the youth of the community. A curriculum for a middle school needs to be developed around this thinking. “Teachers need to emphasize the strengths and interests of each student in offering opportunities to become involved in student-initiated projects, school improvement projects, and community service” (Ornstein, 1992, p.2). Programs can be set up within the community where the school and community work hand in hand. The middle school children need the chance to see what is offered within a community. In order for such programs to be developed, the principal needs to believe in the importance of the community. The principal also needs to develop a schedule that is conducive to a grade level team concept where curriculum can be developed as a group for specific grade levels. If one is not in place, I will do everything in my power to see that it is implemented.
Interdisciplinary Teaming

For many years now, I have believed that the teachers in each grade level needed time to meet. There are often too many other committees meeting before school, and too many teachers who coach or have other activities after school, so the best way for teaming to happen is during the school day. This year, I am happy to say, we have an extra period in the day to allow time for "teaming." One of the elements of a true middle school is interdisciplinary teaming. Meeting as a seventh grade team every other day allows for teachers time to plan. George (1992) pointed out, "An interdisciplinary curriculum satisfies many definitions of a good curriculum: curriculum as the sum total of all the curricular and co-curricular experiences of the middle school - as a means of providing a variety of experiences, programs, practices, and settings" (p.70). The team concept is not meant to be a "gripe session" about children, though. "Team teachers meet regularly to discuss the curriculum and the children, and to plan interdisciplinary lessons" (Berla, Henderson, and Kerewsky, 1989, p.14). Interdisciplinary lessons could be a variety of things, and this is an ideal time to work with or within the community. Team planning time is one vital clog of a true middle school, and by changing a schedule, time can be allowed for it to happen.

Cooperative Learning

The middle level years are a unique time for young adolescents. Their bodies are rapidly changing as well as their minds. Some of these adolescents are quite mature; others are at different stages. Teachers who use cooperative learning practices in their classrooms can effectively blend the various levels of maturity. "Cooperative learning is developmentally appropriate for meeting the needs of middle grades students and can function as a viable element in the
middle grades” (Jones, 1990, p.12). This style of teaching may not be for every teacher or for every unit of study, but for the middle level students, it can work. It is another way to build for the students’ future. “Cooperative learning also requires students to get to know and work with classmates of different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds, setting the stage for requirements of adult work life and for citizenship in a multi-cultural society” (Shevin, 1994, p.184). However, cooperative learning is not just a group study period where the brightest student tells everyone else the answers. It needs to be a learning experience where students can learn to work as a team, much the same way computer companies have teams who work together to solve problems and develop ideas. When I become a principal, I will strongly urge the teachers in my building to use cooperative learning. Hopefully, they already are.

Developing a Vision

Over the years, many educational experiences and people have influenced my beliefs and visions. I have always found it rewarding to discuss my opinions and visions with administrators. I decided to take it a step further by having several administrators fill out a questionnaire for me.

Administrator Questionnaire

A few weeks ago, I asked six principals to fill out a questionnaire for me. There were five questions asked that dealt mainly with their thoughts and feelings about their position. I wanted to get a sense of what principals felt were the positives and the negatives of their job. The following is a list of the questions:

1. What do you find is the most challenging aspect of your job?
2. What is the most rewarding part of being an administrator?
3. Is there any one thing that is very frustrating about your job?
4. Knowing what you know now, would you become a principal again?
5. Is there any specific advice that you could pass on to me?

The answers from the five principals who returned the questionnaire were quite intriguing - yet not surprising. I actually looked at the not surprising aspect as good. Many items they discussed, such as the everyday management of time, the discussions with parents, and the many meetings, I knew were part of the job. I also anticipated a couple of answers in regards to the most frustrating aspect of the job. Three people mentioned teachers - whether it was teacher/student conflicts, teacher/parent conflicts, or just plain teachers not doing an adequate job. As all the principals pointed out, the students were the losers in all situations.

All of the principals were very adamant about why they were principals - because of kids. They all stressed that the students are the most valuable resource, and all emphasis should be placed on them. Dr. Decker and other professors have also stressed that very fact many times in our program.

Something else that has been stressed in our program and by all of the administrators was the fact that, as a leader of a building, people will always question what you are doing. A person has to stand by his convictions and beliefs. It was also pointed out that it is important to listen to others and ask for advice when it is needed. One middle school principal mentioned something that I feel is very important. "Remember - when others ask you a question, they have already spent some time thinking about their question and
probably a solution. If the question is truly important, you should also devote some time to think - no snap answers” (Dick Cuva, personal communication, January 6, 1997). I have learned that listening is indeed a very important trait to have as a principal, but principals can not be expected to know everything.

One thing that really surprised me about the questionnaire was that no one mentioned anything about evaluations. I am not sure if that is positive or negative, but I am curious why. In my opinion, teacher performance should be a major priority to the building principal. If the most important resource of every community is the children, should there not be the best possible teachers preparing those children for the future?

As a follow-up to this questionnaire, I will ask why evaluations of teachers were not mentioned. Maybe it was an oversight with the questions asked, or maybe there is inadequate time to truly know how teachers are performing. I have read the responses of these principals numerous times already and hope to get more responses in the weeks to come. I do not want to copy the beliefs of others, but I do want to use the working principals' insights to my advantage.

Beliefs and Visions

I have been in education long enough to know a great deal about the profession, but I have also been around long enough to know that there is a great deal I do not know. I have to admit that it is frightening to think of myself as the one who is supposed to know all the answers and make all the right decisions. I believe it is very important to have visions of what I would like to see in my building. These are some of the important items I will need to know:

1) teacher meetings - where should they be held and how often? With the principal I presently have, there are meetings every other Thursday morning from 7:30-7:50 A.M. The meetings are held in the large study hall, and usually
there are no treats. My belief is that every three weeks would be enough. In many cases, the information being covered at meetings could be covered in memos. Also, as Dr. Decker has said before, and I agree, there should always be treats. Lastly, I feel the meetings should be held in teachers’ rooms where possible. Too often, teachers are caught up in their own little worlds and do not even know what other teachers’ rooms look like, let alone what great things are being taught. I would rotate the rooms and have every teacher tell one great thing that is happening in that classroom.

2) self-evaluations - I would like to have every staff member videotaped and do a self-analysis of how he or she is teaching. If possible, I would like to see all of these with the teacher’s permission and talk about strengths and weaknesses. I now realize (after Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction) there needs to be a release form signed by the students before they are videotaped, but that could be arranged. I strongly believe that it is a great learning experience to see yourself in action.

3) student videotapes - If it is not already being done, I would like to see the school district where I am to start “student videotapes.” These are videotapes that could start as early as kindergarten in which the kids have two or three things videotaped throughout the year and then have the videotape passed on to the next teacher. One thing that would be a requirement would be for each student from kindergarten to 12th grade to read orally to show their reading improvement over the years. This would be the best gift a senior could receive!

4) conferences - Again, wherever I go, there might be certain things that I would like to see already in place. We are trying a first this spring quarter; we are having student-led conferences. In my opinion, the traditional way we have
been doing them for 100 years is in the dark ages. Students showing their work in portfolios or folders to their parents is much better and has been tried and proven successful in numerous school districts across the state.

5) scheduling - As I mentioned earlier, I strongly support team planning periods. If it is not in place where I go, I will strongly urge it to be implemented. I do not mean for teachers to have only one free period, and it is the same time as other team teachers but are able to meet and still have their regular planning period. It is a great way for building cohesiveness on a grade level basis and for having the time to plan interdisciplinary units of study.

6) homerooms - should there be time allowed, or should they be cropped? I have seen homerooms used in many different ways in my career, and to be quite honest, I do not think I have ever seen them used effectively. The usual questions are 1) When should homerooms be held during a day - at the beginning, middle, or end of the day? 2) How long should they be - 10, 15, 20 minutes, or more? 3) What should happen in a homeroom - announcements, games, studying, or just talking? 4) Why do schools use up time that is often not well used?

One middle school in Oregon calls the homeroom "house." There is an assortment of 20 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders in a homeroom. Homerooms there emphasize ways to get recognition for positive actions. There is a monthly Super Teddy Selection in which each teacher/advisor and his or her advisees select the person from their house who best exemplifies a particular characteristic. One month it may be for best "sense of humor," the next for "most creative," or another month "most helpful" (Rubinstein, 1989, p.329). After students have been selected, their names are turned into the office, and award certificates and pictures are posted near the office. Each
month someone different is chosen. This is the type of homeroom I would like to see in my building. I would not only like to see positives stressed, but I would like to see a mixture of ages in each homeroom and a connection for cross-age tutoring. Plus, I would want teachers to have the same kids throughout their middle school years to gain more unity. Rubinstein (1989) adds, “Results have shown students enjoy coming to school because the atmosphere is remarkably congenial, cooperative, and informal. There is also a mutual trust developed between staff and students” (p.329).

7) **technology** - an area that is changing so rapidly that a school can not afford to forget. I would hope that most schools are as updated on technology as Harlan, but that might not be the case. I believe there needs to be at least one computer lab, and two if possible. Every teacher needs to have his or her own computer in their rooms, too, and if more are possible, great. I also feel that there needs to be an in-house technology fair to show what the experts know in the building. It would also be very valuable to have someone come in for an in-service to show something like virtual reality or anything else relatively new that would intrigue and tease the teachers to want to know more. I will definitely make sure that new, expensive computers are not just collecting dust on teachers’ desks.

8) **discipline** - there must be a firm policy in place. I will stress, like all of the principals I have had, for the teachers to handle trivial discipline problems before getting me involved. Anything of a serious manner, I will need to know immediately. I will also stress that disrespect will not be tolerated by students or teachers. Being fair and consistent travels a long way, too. I must also always document everything!
9) **school and community** - a school has to sell itself and work hand in hand with its community. As Dr. Jackson stressed in School and Community Relations, collaboration, partnerships, and integrated services are very important in building solid relations with the public. My first order of business would be to find out as much as possible about the community and its people. I would want to explore ways of building bridges if they are not there, and if they are, I would want to find ways to strengthen them.

I would like to institute what another school in Oregon has done recently. They are letting their middle school students experience the world of work right in school with a job program. What started as a program for special needs students grew to all abilities because of the success and program growth. “In the beginning, we created a handful of cafeteria jobs and paid our workers minimum wage” (Yatvin, 1995, p.52). As mentioned earlier, it started for special needs students but spread to all students. The program also changed from money to tokens. Yatvin (1995) goes on to say, “In changing our mission to career education for all students, we decided to provide the full range of jobs that require different levels of skill, responsibility, and initiative” (p.53).

This is a brief example of how a school was capable of doing so much more for its students than teaching basic math and grammar. Plus, I can envision businesses in the community taking an active role in helping to develop jobs. A program like this also allows for an awareness of the community as well as citizenship.

**Conclusion**

As I mentioned earlier, upon starting this administrative program, I never envisioned myself as a principal. Now things are different. Not only can I see myself as an educational leader in a middle school - I believe it! It would be
naive of me to say that I am not scared or nervous at the thought of what lies ahead, but if I was too unsure of my capabilities, I would stay in the classroom. As one principal stated, “A teacher can touch the lives of his or her students, but a principal has the means of touching the lives of all students.” The thought of that excites me! I want to do more than be confined to one classroom. I want to touch more students’ lives. I will need to remember the two bits of important advice that I learned from a professor and advisor, Dr. Robert H. Decker. “Be able to see around corners and do not make any fatal errors.” Also, I will need to be a good listener, establish firm, yet fair discipline, and be open and honest with everyone. I hope that I can be all of the above and more. I also hope that I can keep a sense of humor. If I can not learn to laugh about certain things that come up, days could become awfully long. It will obviously not be easy being a principal, but I am ready for the challenge. I am anxious to lead a middle school into the 21st Century.
References


