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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

The educational process has been an important part of this country since our founding fathers first stepped off the ships and started a new life. The pioneers continued to move westward and educate their youth. Reform-minded individuals set out to improve our educational process. These educated individuals soon developed wondrous items of technology. Individuals educated by dedicated leaders in the field of education made those technological advancements possible. These leaders developed qualities, which were continually improved into the leadership ideas presented in this reflective paper. We need to expect the best of our students as they attend our institutions. An effective, educational administrator can lead a school to help all youth develop into the leaders of tomorrow.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY

SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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Educational development can have a profound impact on anyone's life. It can be a positive experience, and it can be a devastatingly negative experience. We need to concentrate our efforts on the positive. A good educational experience could help propel students into the world to pursue the dreams they carry with them throughout their school years. A bad educational experience might bring those dreams to an untimely demise. Who are we and what can we do to affect that experience? We are the educators, the surrogate parents, the big brothers and big sisters, and the ones responsible for shaping and molding the leaders of tomorrow.

I decided to get involved in leading a school system because I wanted to be the person shaping the educational process at ground level. At the high school level, an educational leader is like an artist. This person shapes the mind and soul of the "artwork,"

in this case the student, before he/she gets out in the world.

By being in the administrative area of the educational process, a person can oversee the building of these great works of art. What better way to help insure that all students have a positive educational experience, pursue their dreams, reform our educational system, and move our country into the twenty-first century. An administrative leader will help to educate, advise, build up, and create the leaders of tomorrow.

A History of the Educational System

Why do we have schools in our country? This question can be answered without too much thought. Our forefathers knew that for this country to succeed, we needed our citizens to be literate. The Massachusetts Act of 1642 was one of the first laws in the North American English Colonies to require learning. This law, "required that efforts of parents

and master craftsmen who trained novices be monitored to ensure that children were learning to read. . . .” (McNergney & Herbert, 2001, p. 45). We needed our citizens to be educated enough to choose sound and able leaders for our governmental system. Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the leaders in the early revolutionary education movement, wrote about educational topics often. “Our schools of learning, by producing one general and uniform system of education, will render the mass of the people more homogenous and thereby fit them more easily for uniform and peaceable government” (Coulson, 1998, ¶ 3).

However, the educational ideals of our forefathers did not stop there. This country was founded on the philosophies of those dreamers who would go out into the unknown wilderness and start a new and sometimes difficult life to get a better life in return. These pioneers wanted their children to

have a more fulfilled and enriched life than they had. To do this, the pioneers of yesteryears needed to be educated. Therefore, these early settlers began teaching their children.

These early schools may have begun as family schools out in the open air. They may have started in a neighbor's house. The educational process may have reached into the village church or a building in the town-square. The government became more active in the education movement by enacting the Land Ordinance of 1785. "This ordinance provided for rectangular surveys dividing the land into townships of 6 miles square. Townships were divided into 36 lots of 640 acres each (1 lot set aside for maintaining public schools. . . .)" (Commager, 1996, pp. 127-128).

Wherever it started, the idea was planted, and the seed continued to grow. As communities grew, adventurous young adults wanted to start their own lives and live their own dreams. These people moved

to new areas to get a fresh start. As time passed, the educational system grew more important.

Inventors, philosophers, and dreamers made the school system a valuable asset to our country. Because of these people, our schools were empowered to teach our children the ideals, values, and an unmatched desire to succeed in today's world.

Our children needed to be educated in order to match the technological advances, which continued to improve our world. As this cycle continued, the educational system developed, grew, and improved. One proponent of developing the minds of our youth was also an advocate for reform in education. Horace Mann once said, "If we do not prepare children to become good citizens. . . . If we do not enrich their minds with knowledge, then our republic must go down to destruction, as others have gone before it" (Danzer, Klor de Alva, Krieger, Wilson & Woloch, 2000, p. 227). Because of men like Horace Mann, our educational

process has turned into the educational system we have today.

There are many changes going on in our educational system today. Because of this, I have a unique opportunity to help teach, reform, and lead much like Horace Mann did long ago. This reform movement, championed by leaders like myself, will effect not only my daughter's educational experience but the educational experience of every individual who walks into our building or school district.

Leadership Qualities

What does it take to become a good leader? A leader needs to listen, facilitate, motivate, be a time manager and a financial manager, have consistency with all aspects of the job, be diplomatic, and be a role model (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993). Does a person develop these qualities overnight? No, it takes time. Not all good leaders have each one of these qualities. They may be stronger in one area than in another.

However, I feel that without some of each one of these qualities, a person is going to struggle to run an educational system.

Keeping the Vision

A leader needs to be the keeper of the vision.

"Although the principal can and should not be seen as the sole instructional leader of the school, the principal is the keeper of the vision" (Speck, 1999, p. 13). Every school needs to have a purpose or mission statement. It is the responsibility of the administrator to keep the students, staff members, and community focused on this goal. "There is simply no way to achieve educational excellence in a school where purposes are blurred, where teachers and students fail to communicate thoughtfully with each other, and where parents are uninvolved in the education of their children" (Boyer, 1995, p. 15). It has to be a team effort when it comes to developing the vision for the future of the school. "It is

important that the principal share his or her vision of academic success for the school in terms that parents, teachers and students can understand" (Cross & Rice, 2000, p. 63). However, the principal is the guiding force of this goal for educational improvement.

I would make sure, when developing or reevaluating a vision statement for a school, all stakeholders are involved in the process. Utilizing a School Improvement Advisement Committee can do this. This committee would consist of community members, both support staff and regular staff, students, and administration. Together, we could develop a vision statement that would make the community proud.

Lending an Ear

Throughout a school year, there are many opportunities for a person to be a listener. Student problems, teacher complaints, parental pressure, administrative meetings for implementation of new

programs, meetings on state mandates, and sales people are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to listening. A leadership position in a school is more than just telling teachers what to do and the disciplining of students. A leader needs to listen to what his staff is telling him about what is going on in the "real world," the classroom. "If teachers have questions or concerns, an effective principal will answer them or find someone who can. If teachers have ideas about how to make things better, an effective principal will listen to them and seriously consider their ideas" (Welch, Lindsay & Halfacre, 2001, p.59).

Telling the staff what to do without listening to their concerns before, during, and after implementation of new programs can be a devastating mistake. Many leaders forget that it is much easier to tell someone what to do than it is to do the task. A fellow teacher told me one day, "Don't forget what it was like to be a teacher when you become an

administrator. Listen to our concerns" (L. Langlitz, personal communication, Feb. 18, 1999).

By listening to community members, staff, and students in the building, I would be more in touch with what is happening in my own school. I would want to make sure that my door is always open and people know how to get in touch with me in the event they just need to talk. Although I value my time with my family, a leader should be available to discuss problems with people if the need arises.

Counseling the Students

Many times a principal is called on to be a counselor. Students need to feel that they have a voice in what goes on in their lives. To some degree, I would have to agree with this. A student needs to feel appreciated and important.

Principal Bill Meyers agrees. "People do not always expect a principal to solve their problems," said Meyers, principal at Lincoln Elementary School in Sterling, Illinois. "Many times, they just need someone who will listen to

their concerns. An effective administrator knows when it is appropriate to shut up and just listen". (Hopkins, 1999, ¶ 8)

By listening to students and acknowledging even the trivial statements, they feel important, and the educational environment is improved.

Everyone wants to feel as if they are important. I feel it is the job of the administrator to make sure this happens. By talking with students in the hallway and acknowledging them and their accomplishments, a leader can help them gain confidence in themselves. It is important not to single out one person or group of people to talk with more than others are. A leader must communicate with all students in the school and find interests and likes of the students that are not involved in activities, as well.

Facilitating Leadership

There are other instances where an administrator is called upon to be a facilitator. Staff meetings, in-service days, and conflict resolutions can be an

important place for this type of person. "The principal serves as the facilitator for professional development activities, arranges for outside consultants, and coordinates the logistics for school wide professional development" (Payne & Wolfson, 2000, p. 19).

Keeping the discussion going in the right direction in order to come up with a sound solution is the job of the facilitator. "A principal must lead by walking, talking, and facilitating conversations about students' work, including their successes and their failures, with teachers, students, staff, parents, and others in the community every day" (Speck, 1999, pp. 12-13).

A facilitator needs to guide staff members through an informal learning process that is meant to increase teacher effectiveness in the educational process. "The principal helps orchestrate some of the teacher informal learning through strategic assignment

of classrooms and lunch periods, through conversations with teachers about what other teachers are doing in their classrooms, and through modeling or describing (from classroom observations) effective teaching at faculty gatherings and meetings" (Payne & Wolfson, 2000, p. 20).

Being an administrator also means facilitating the school itself and keeping the institution on task and focused on its mission statement. "Most importantly, the principal is the school facilitative leader who brings together all the stakeholders in the school community to help create a learning community for students, teachers, staff, parents, and the community. The principal makes the difference in the learning and lives of all who come in contact with the school" (Speck, 1999, p. 15).

I believe it is the job of the leader, to not only lead the educational development of the district, but to help in the development of more leaders as

well. I can do this by having staff members facilitate team meetings on a rotating basis. The students can get involved by organizing and developing various activities for the school through a student leader organization or student council.

Motivation

Once a leader has implemented a new program, he/she then becomes a motivator. The principal needs to sell this program to the staff, the community, and the school board. "Motivating people, including the school community, is an important part of the leader role that calls for interpersonal and group skills" (Speck, 1999, pp. 18-19). The principal needs to convince stakeholders the program will be the best for the school. How to do this can be difficult. "People can be forced by circumstances to follow a boss; but to be willing followers, people must feel that they matter to their leader" (Welch et al., 2001, p. 58).

Many people respond to different types of motivation. Some are motivated intrinsically, while others need only a "gentle nudge" in a certain direction before they become excited about the new learning technique or change in the educational process. "Most teaching faculty are in the classroom because they found satisfaction in their own experiences as students" (McDaniel, 1994, p. 27). Still others hold out until the end and ask before doing a task, "What's in this for me?" These extrinsically motivated individuals will be a challenge for all leaders. Extrinsically motivated individuals are motivated by factors that "are external to performing the task and are administered by someone [sic] else, e.g. wages, fringe benefits, promotions, recognition, praise" (Nguyen, 2001, ¶ 3).

It is important to be a good motivator. A leader can motivate individuals by recognizing their accomplishments in various ways. A simple note left

in a staff member's mailbox or a message listed with other school announcements are two ways to notice students or employees. Another way is to leave a sticky note on the desk or place a picture in the school newsletter to acknowledge a person's accomplishments.

I also believe that respect has a lot to do with motivation. If someone respects you, they might be motivated enough to work on a new program the school has implemented. "An effective leader ensures that the reasons for different tasks are understood and efforts have meaning and values" (Welch et al., 2001, p. 58). Being a good motivator is an important part of being a leader, but having the respect to motivate can take you even farther.

Time Management

It is important to become an effective time manager. "The manager role for a principal includes preparing, planning, organizing, carrying out, and

directing overall school operations as well as monitoring an evaluation process for continued improvement of the school" (Speck, 1999, p. 19).

However, an administrator needs to be flexible, too. There are many activities going on in a school at any one time. It becomes important that a person understands the time involved. "School leaders must first of all be skillful managers. . . . Whatever else a district may want from its leaders, managerial skill is essential; without it, no school leader will last long" (Smith & Piele, 1996, p. 15).

Meetings, staffings, and teacher observations are just a few of the activities that will take up an administrator's time. The unscheduled events that an administrator deals with are the ones that seem to take up most of the time during a day. I was talking with John Vandeweerd, a former principal in our school district. He said, "No matter how well you have your day planned out, something comes up that will change

your schedule" (J. VandeWeerd, personal communication, 1999). An administrator needs to be able to complete his work, yet be flexible with the day's events.

Since starting the administrative program, I have become increasingly aware of the time it takes to be an effective principal. Because of this, it is important to own a planner that lists the dates and times of important events. It is important to be at meetings early and keep to the agenda, to not waste valuable time. I feel that the extra time available could be used to do paperwork that is important to the administrative position.

Financial Management

No matter what business a person is in, a good leader needs to be a financial manager. Schools deal with numerous dollar figures daily. The amount of money needed to educate a child, the transportation budget, the school lunch program, school supplies, and

teacher salaries all figure into the financial management of a school.

Why is this such an important part of being an administrator? Our schools are run through local property tax money, tax money (state-aid) we receive from the state, and grant money we receive from the federal government. "State governments influence public education most notably through taxation and distribution of revenues" (McNergney & Herbert, 2001, p. 220). Because of this, schools are under scrutiny to educate every child without having to raise taxes or decrease the number of academic areas taught, while still complying with regulations that are placed on them from the state and federal government.

"Regardless of what type of federal funding a school district receives, the district is obligated to comply with federal guidelines when spending grant money" (McNergney & Herbert, 2001, p. 220).

Every administrator should know how much money a program will cost. This is part of the position, and we owe it to the district taxpayers to do a good job for the community. I believe that using a site-based budget, for my building, would be an excellent way to track the money that is spent on the various programs within the school. By keeping up to date on federal and state regulations, I can gain a better understanding of the fiscal management of the school.

Consistency in the Position

An administrator needs to have consistency in the position. The dictionary defines consistency as, "Being consistent; action that is always the same or suitable" (Mish, 1988, p. 280). An individual, in a leadership role, cannot get away with treating one problem with one consequence and the same problem, with a different individual, with another consequence. A teacher request for supplies, a trip, even a parental request should be handled with consistency.

An administrator needs to be consistent with the workings and policies of the school. To ensure consistency in the building, it is important to follow the student and faculty handbook. I will use this book as a guide in my decisions. However, I must realize that each situation should be treated on an individual basis and that there might be slight differences in requests that may require different results.

Role Model

Another area important to the role of administrator is that of being a role model. The principal reflects what the school is all about. "The principal serves as a role model, establishing an atmosphere in which all members of the school's organization work to improve the processes and outcomes. In this way, the principal encourages a self-correcting school" (Goldring & Rallis, 1993, p. 140). An educational leader needs to lead by example.

The principal or leader cannot expect something out of any of the staff if he/she, in return, does not expect the same of himself/herself. "When the principal models continual learning, the support staff is more likely to focus on their own professional development" (Payne & Wolfson, 2000, p. 15). To be an effective role model, I must lead by example. I must become the educator that everyone looks up to. If the principal is someone to look up to, the staff, student body, and community will feel a sense of pride. With this pride, the educational process will continue to grow and challenge all those affected.

Diplomacy

It sounds strange that a leader in the educational system must use diplomacy. A diplomatic action defined by the dictionary is, "Skill in handling affairs without arousing hostility: TACT" (Mish, 1988, p. 357). An administrator in today's schools definitely needs to be tactful. Many times

issues come up within the school, which require diplomatic measures. Some of these issues could be teacher hiring, teacher dismissal, purchasing of land for district use, law suits against the district, and dealings with the media. Parental concerns could also be added to the list. It is important that an administrator keep the school district's best interest in mind in all diplomatic issues.

After reflecting on the past several years of being in the administrative program, I have learned how to be diplomatic. It is important to have the staff understand, in any situation that may be sensitive to the school district, that the school should have one voice. That voice should come from the administration.

Conclusion Statement

The educational process has been an important part of this country since our founding fathers first stepped off the ships and started a new life. The

pioneers continued to move westward and educate their youth. Reform-minded individuals set out to improve our educational process. These educated individuals soon developed wondrous items of technology.

Individuals educated by dedicated leaders in the field of education made those technological advancements possible. These leaders developed qualities, which were continually improved into the leadership ideas presented in this reflective paper. We need to expect the best of our students as they attend our institutions. An effective, educational administrator can lead a school to help all youth develop into the leaders of tomorrow.

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