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A preferred vision for administering elementary/ secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary/secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

I have decided to become a principal based primarily on what I have observed during my high school years and while teaching. I have witnessed administrators who did not do a very good job, and I have also observed and worked for administrators who do a superb job. Qualities that I have noticed in good administrators include: being fair; consistent; punctual; honest; a listener; and seen by the students, faculty and community. These administrators are also very good in public relations. These seven traits of good administrators are some goals I am trying to develop as I become an administrator.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY/SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

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

James C. Cline

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This Research Paper by: **James C. Cline**

Entitled: **A Preferred Vision for Administering Elementary/Secondary Schools:**

A Reflective Essay

In the fall of 1997, I began work with children in a public school district. Given the large part of class to overcome differences from the past, school and students, especially are a very interesting group.

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

Dale R. Jackson

March 11, 1997

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Becoming a principal is something I never really considered when I became a middle school math teacher in the fall of 1989. I like to work with children because every day is different. Even the first part of class is sometimes different from the last part. Middle school students especially are a very interesting group of adolescents. I have seen more students cry over the break-up with their boyfriend or girlfriend than I have seen cry over failing a test. I also really enjoy sports and coaching has given me the opportunity to be involved. I have coached different levels of boys and girls basketball, junior high football and high school tennis. The biggest problem was time consuming. I was not very involved in it. When I took my first teaching position, after graduating from the University of Northern Iowa, I did not plan on staying at that school district very long. However, during the first year I met my future wife, who was also a teacher, got married, and we decided to stay in LeMars to raise our family of two boys. During my eight years of teaching, I have worked for two principals. The assistant principal is a woman, who does the job of assisting the principal very well. She is not a leader, but is a person that teachers seek out for a resource when the principal is not available. She does very little with discipline. Her main duties are to take care of the morning announcements, teacher evaluations, and with arranging individual educational plans (IEP) for students and parents. The principal, on the other hand, is a strong leader. He is consistent, punctual, honest, and caring. He has gained much respect from the teachers, students, other administrators, parents, and from the community. I have witnessed administrators who did not do a very good job, and I have also observed and

worked. These two have taught me about dealing with children, parents, and other teachers. Being honest with yourself and others, along with giving your opinion are a couple of suggestions they have made to me.

During my second year of teaching, my assistant principal suggested that I get into education administration. Wow! Me become a principal? Going back to school was the last thing I wanted to do, let alone, become a principal.

In my fourth year of teaching I decided I did not want to teach for the rest of my life. I did want to stay in education and coaching, so I looked into school counseling. The biggest problem was with commuting. I was not very interested in driving one hour one-way two nights a week. So, I put those thoughts on the back burner.

During an evaluation, a couple of years later, my principal suggested I further my education. He also mentioned education administration. But again, commuting was a problem. Finally, when the opportunity for taking or enrolling in the program came along, with no commuting for me, and the program completely laid out, I knew I could not pass up this career advancement.

The time just before I started working on my masters in educational administration and during the first year, I needed to know why I was doing this. I knew I just did not want my degree, I also wanted to do something with it. This would probably mean I would need to give up my coaching duties. I believe I can live with that. I have decided to become a principal based primarily on what I have observed during my high school years and while teaching. I have witnessed administrators who did not do a very good job, and I have also observed and

worked for administrators who do a super job. Qualities that I have noticed in good administrators include: being fair, consistent, punctual, honest, a listener, and seen by the students, faculty, and community. These administrators are also very good in public relations. These seven traits of good administrators are some goals I am trying to develop as I become an administrator.

When observing poor administrators, I have often felt that I can do a better job than they are doing. There have also been occasions that I would like to have said, why not try it this way, but did not because I thought they might be offended. These are also similar reasons on why I became a teacher. When I believe that I can do a job better than someone else, I want to prove it to them and myself that I can. (Communication, October, 1996). After reading this list and thinking of past administrators, I know I can be better than some of those that I have seen, and will try to work to get to the level of the good administrators. However, I know this will take time and effort on my part. Two thoughts that push me to become a quality educational administrator are: (a) to have the opportunity to be in charge of a building, and (b) to make necessary changes that I believe will better the student's education as of others to responsibly guide the activities and enhance the past. Reflecting back over the past two and a half years I realize that I have been presented with many new ideas and philosophies on educational administration. As a future administrator I know I will not use all of the information that I have received. Instead I need to figure out what I believe in and use that. However, I do know that someday I may come back to the rest of the information and use it for a certain situation. There are many ideas that I remember and will use from each class that I took.

These classes have helped me start thinking about what being an administrator is all about. I believe an administrator needs to be very proficient with leadership skills, school and community relations, and with the latest trends in technology. It also means being prepared to facilitate, to direct, to delegate. It does not seem to be a dictator. It also means being prepared to lead before they are.

Leadership
 Admin: To be a good principal a person needs to be a good leader. Understanding the characteristics of a successful leader is very important for administrators. The characteristics include: sensitive, loyal, self-confident, consistent, enthusiastic, firm, sincere, interested in the improvement of the group, tries to avoid envy, and gives the benefit of the doubt to their co-workers (B. Decker, personal communication, October, 1996). After reading this list and thinking of past school administrators in my life, it is understandable to see the difference between good and bad administrators. The more characteristics of a successful leader an administrator can possess, the better they will be and their school.

Leadership
 I believe the definition of a leader by Guthrie and Reed (1991) best describes what one is. They said: "A leader is an individual who accepts the authoritative expectations of others to responsibly guide the activities and enhance the performance of the organization" (p. 10). Leaders, Guthrie and Reed (1991) believe, understand that internal change is always present, along with external factors that continually change and effect the organization. Successful leaders have a vision. They have an idea of what their organization should be like and are willing to take the steps necessary to achieve this vision. I have seen too many principals sitting at their desk during the day playing on the computer or doing a

Successful leaders know how to motivate and inspire those who work for them. They care about the success of the organization. Successful leaders also invest a lot of their time into the organization (Guthrie and Reed, 1991). To lead means to facilitate, to direct, to delegate; it does not mean to be a dictator. It also means being prepared for situations before they occur. Administrators need to make sure they are proactive instead of reactive. Administrators need to have a crisis management plan in place. This plan, which every faculty member should have a copy of, helps everyone know what to do during an emotional time (i.e., death of a student). If an administrator has such a plan, this can help eliminate the chaos that may go with a crisis. Along with the characteristics of leadership, knowing what an instructional leader is, and the process administrators need to take to lead a change are very important skills of being a principal. These concepts can help a principal make their school a successful one. (Alexander & Alexander, 1992).

Instructional Leadership is used to do the following for due process: (a)

The book, Instructional Leadership: How Principals Make a Difference, by Andrews and Smith (1989), presented four qualities that principals need to develop to be an instructional leader. They are: (a) to be a resource provider, (b) an instructional resource, (c) a communicator and (d) a visible presence. The latter I feel to be one of the most overlooked characteristics of principals. Students and staff need to see administrators in the hallway, classroom, study hall, lunch room, recess, and even at some of the extra-curricular events. I have seen too many principals sitting at their desk during the day playing on the computer or doing a school lawyer's phone number.

crossword puzzle. Principals/administrators need to be seen throughout the day by everyone: *more, on such opportunities to talk to the class and the employees of*

Wing. As for a resource person, an administrator needs to be very familiar and updated on all the legal issues that affect schools. Three of the most important practices that I shall keep with me as I become an administrator are: (a) inform the school lawyer whenever there is even the slightest possibility of something illegal happening, (b) document everything that is said and done, and (c) make sure that I know the district policies. *ing are. These qualities are what administrators need to look for.*

Another concept that is very important is procedural due process. This refers to when a person is deprived of his life, property or liberty, then a constitutional procedure needs to be followed. The United States Supreme Court says that procedural due process is when: (a) the person is given proper notice of their offense, (b) the person is given an opportunity to be heard, and (c) the hearing must be done fairly (Alexander & Alexander, 1992). *ing.*

Minimally, schools need to do the following for due process: (a) *notification* notification of changes, (b) opportunity for a hearing, (c) adequate time to prepare a rebuttal to the charges, (d) access to evidence and names of witnesses, (e) *hearing* hearing before a impartial tribunal, (f) representation by legal counsel, (g) *opportunity* opportunity to present evidence and witnesses, (h) opportunity to cross-examine adverse witnesses, (i) decision based on evidence and finding of the hearing, (j) transcript or record of the hearing, and (k) opportunity to appeal an adverse decision (B. Decker, personal communication, October, 1996). Again, this is a lengthy process, but administrators need to know this along with accessing the school lawyer's phone number! *and problems that administrators are faced with.*

An instructional leader is also someone who has a significant impact, for better or worse, on student opportunities to learn in the classroom (Donmoyer & Wagstaff, 1990). Administrators do this through scheduling, developing policies and rules, hiring and supervising the personnel, coordinating pupil services, managing staff development, and budgeting.

One area of instructional leadership that needs attention is supervising and evaluating staff members. An administrator needs to first understand what the qualities of effective teaching are. These qualities are what administrators need to look for when evaluating the staff. This includes the staff, parents, students and administrators. Goldhammer (as cited in Pajak, 1993) presents five stages of clinical supervision. They are the preobservation conference, observation, analysis and strategy, supervision conference, and post-conference analysis. A new administrator needs to be sure the district has a policy for evaluating themselves and the staff. If not, implementing one should be a top priority. Through my course work I was able to get an idea about how principals may decide on policies. I did research on grade retention and if it works. What I was looking for is that in our middle school students can fail a quarter, semester, and even the whole year with no consequences. I wondered if there was a solution to this problem.

What I found is that retaining and tracking does not work for those in middle school/junior high and high school (George, 1993). As for elementary students, the evidence reported that achievement of retained students is worse than those that are promoted (Shepard & Smith, 1987). This work is time consuming but it helps to answer questions and problems that administrators are faced with.

Change is to make a change. In order to lead an administrator needs to know how they do. Successful administrators need to understand and cope with continual changes that occur internally and externally to the school. How change is handled by administrators is directly related to the success or failure of the school (Guthrie and Reed, 1991). Find out who they are and get them on their side. Observe. If an administrator wants to make a change in a particular area in their building then there is a process that they should follow. The process starts out by having the administrator discuss in small, informal conversations the idea they want changed with those that it affects. This includes the staff, parents, students and administrators. Two ways to keep the superintendent informed are to send them a copy of anything that is sent to your staff and to "whisper in the king or queens' ear".

(P. Krysinski, personal communication, June, 1996). The latter refers to Micropolitics is about power and how people use it to influence others and keeping the superintendent informed of ideas that are being considered for change by talking with them in informal settings. A person needs to get some support from others before they try to make a change. and have strong feelings about, but what is so often unspoken and not easily observed (p. 219).

Barriers that get in the way of administrators during the change process
The best advice on how to make a change is to not do it alone. Try to get others to back your idea first. Tell them that it is not something new, but instead it is similar to something that they are already doing. Administrators need to realize that this process takes time.

Because of the possibilities of these conflicts an administrator needs to know the community, school district and building they are in charge of. To know these three means to understand what changes have taken place in the past, how everyone reacted to each change, and who administrators want on their side when relations is very important for administrators to understand. I believe the

they want to make a change. In other words, an administrator needs to know how they do things around here (B. Decker, personal communication, July, 1996).

To understand where the power is in the community refers to micropolitics. There are different voices for different issues. It is very important for an administrator to find out who they are and get them on their side. Once an administrator understands how things are done around the community, they can start to make changes. This type of change process should take at least three years. The first year to observe, the second to plan, and the third to implement (B. Decker, personal communication, September, 1996).

A definition that was discussed on micropolitics that I believe best describes this is from Blase (as cited in Donmoyer, Imber, and Scheurich, 1995).

Blase wrote: Micropolitics is about power and how people use it to influence others and to protect themselves. It is about conflict and how people compete with each other to get what they want. It is about cooperation and how people build support among themselves to achieve their ends. It is about what people in all social settings think about and have strong feelings about, but what is so often unspoken and not easily observed (p. 219).

The best advice on how to make a change is to not do it alone. Try to get others to back your idea first. Tell them that it is not something new, but instead it is similar to something that they are already doing. Administrators need to realize that this process takes time.

School and Community Relations

Another area that administrators need to develop is school and community relations. The difference between school-community relations and school public relations is very important for administrators to understand. I believe the

definitions reported by Cutlip (as cited in Drake, 1988) best summarizes the differences: He believed that school-community relations has a direct link to students. Its purpose is to improve and enhance opportunities of learning for students, which in turn improve their achievement. School-community relations are not controversial. Their activities are geared toward a school working with parents or volunteers or to establish partnerships.

On the other hand, school public relations, is aimed at providing information so that community members can become knowledgeable about the schools and support their system. However, some people see this as a negative approach. They feel that educators should not try to manipulate people's attitudes (Drake, 1988).

School and community relations is a program that schools should use to get the parents, community, and businesses involved in the school. This can also be referred to as school-community collaboration. Marburger (as cited in Crowson, 1992) suggests an angle of this that he referred to as an open school approach. In this approach schools need to: (a) create a school that is open, helpful, and friendly; (b) encourage parents formally and informally, to comment on school policies and to share in some of the decision making (i.e., strategic planning); and (c) get every family involved, not simply those most easily reached and pay special attention to parents who work outside the home, divorced parents without custody, and families of minority race and language.

I also agree with this approach. People, that is parents, other community members, and businesses want to help the schools educate the students. They all have a strong interest in them. When the students graduate, the businesses may

need these students to work for them. Also, society does not want to support them through some type of welfare. Therefore, these people want to help the schools and it is the duty of the administrators to use all the possible community resources they can. Henderson's (as cited in Swap, 1993) research indicates that when parents are involved, student achievement improves. I was given the opportunity to develop a school-home collaboration plan for LeMars Community Middle School with two other colleagues in the class School and Community Relations. This gave me the opportunity to see the process, including research, that an administrator may need to go through to obtain a good school-community relationship. It is time consuming, but the rewards that the students can receive and see when others get involved in their education is very beneficial to all involved.

A school improvement plan is another way for schools to develop quality partnerships with the community. I will try to develop such a plan when I become an administrator. Of course, only if there is a need for one, after I better understand the district. There are three main components of a school improvement plan. The first one believes that the school district, working with the community, needs to set in writing, the general goals and expectations of what they want their students to have to be successful in tomorrow's world. It was mentioned that there are federal and state plans available, but for a school improvement plan to be the most successful, it needs to come from the community. This could be done through a series of town meetings which includes parents, business and labor personnel, along with students, teachers, and administrators. This could include

parent advisory committees, but to get the best, the whole community needs to be involved. It was also suggested to get the community fired up for a districtwide improvement first, then if needed, the district could branch off into a more specific area (i.e., technology).

The second component of a school improvement plan is to construct an educational plan or program that will help the students meet the expectations that the district and community set forth during the first part of the program. This can be done during the community meetings. However, small committees are probably best for the situation.

These first two components can take anywhere from five to eight years to complete. The plans that are laid out should be districtwide. In all districts these plans could be broken down to building plans.

The third component should be an ongoing one to report the progress of the plan. How the plan is working and how well the students are doing are a couple of questions that need to be answered.

The school I teach in is working through this improvement process. We refer to it as strategic planning. The third component is where our district is and it seems to be making a difference for our students and staff. I did not work with the first component, but have been involved with improving the math program during components two and three.

Schools across the nation are pushing for an increase in the amount of technology their school has. This push is coming from our society. They want our students to be current on all the latest and newest technology advancements in

order for them to keep up with other nations. Also, the use of technology is pushed in our schools in order for our students to be competitive when they are looking for a job (Cuban, 1995). Bond issues, increased taxes, business donations, and federal and state allocations are ways in which schools are finding the funds necessary to purchase their new technology equipment. The personal computer and fax machine are two technological advancements that have probably had the biggest impact on our schools. Administrators need to be careful with technology and how it is brought into and used in their school. One of the biggest things principals need to be aware of when implementing new or different technology in their building is teacher in-service. If a district is looking to upgrade their current technology then a Techno Scrogan (1989) reported that most of the teachers today have little or no training in the use of the new technology that is in their school. This report went on to say, that if technology is to have an impact in schools, teachers will need more training, along with a clearer vision of what technologies are available, when they should be used, and why they make a difference. I agree with what Scrogan reported. I will be sharing these with their faculty.

I did a research project on the effects of technology in our schools and I found many of the same results. I found that teachers need time and money in order to try different software packages and to talk with others who are currently using technology in their classroom (O'Neil, 1995). A lack of support from administrators has hindered teachers' quest to involve technology in their classroom (Cuban, 1995). I will be sharing these with their faculty (i.e., informal conversations and administrative team meetings). During these times I

I also found that technology by itself does not improve test scores. Instead teachers need to use it as a supplement to what they are already doing (Brunner & McMillan, 1994). But once again, if the teachers don't know how to use it, it will not do any good for the students.

Administrators need to support and even provide incentives for those staff members who take courses on technology (Sturdivant, 1989). Our school compensates us, up to a certain dollar amount, when a faculty member learns more about how technology can be used to help our students. This can be done by taking classes or visiting other school districts and talking to their staff about what technology instruments they are using and how they are useful.

If a district is looking to upgrade their current technology then a Technology Improvement Plan could be used. This improvement plan could include school and community people. By getting the community involved, businesses may be able to donate funds or even the hardware to the school.

Administrators need to lead by example in implementing technology. If they use it, teachers usually will too. Administrators also need to keep current on the latest trends and share these with their faculty.

This concludes my reflection of the knowledge and concepts that I have received through the classes that I have taken. I have received enormous amounts of information. All which will be part of the library in my principal's office.

Vision

I believe my first year as a principal will be quite a learning and informational one. There will be times when I will be seeking information (i.e., informal conversations and administrative team meetings). During these times I

will probably need to ask many questions to get a good idea of how the school does business. I do not have to agree with everything that is said, but I do need to pay attention and figure out the dynamics of the district. This will allow me to figure out how to make, if needed, any changes that need to be made.

Guthrie and Reed (1991) pointed out nine functions of a school administrator. They are: organizing, leading, budgeting, decision making, evaluating, coordinating, staffing, planning, and communicating. I do have an idea about each one, however, I will still need to learn how the district expects me to handle each function. Also, how each one is exactly done and what channels I must go through to make sure each function is carried out correctly (i.e., budgeting).

During my second year, I will want to become a little more vocal at meetings making suggestions and giving my opinion where I feel I can. I will still need to be cautious somewhat, so that I do not overstep my still relatively new, administrative position. Also, during this year I may be trying to get a plan organized on a change that I see may be needed. I will want to make sure that I get the staff knowledgeable of my ideas, along with any other influential people, who have power in the school district.

The third year is when I believe I can start being vocal in giving my opinions and beliefs. Waiting this long will give me the opportunity to get my feet wet and to let others have the opportunity to know me. As for my overall philosophy on educational administration, I am sure this will be an on-going process. However, I will now share some ideas that I will want for our building. I will note here that if our new building is currently not

doing something I can support, I will not make an overnight change on a major issue (i.e., technology use). My philosophy will also depend on what our building contains. I will be certified to be an elementary, middle, and or high school principal. There are different needs for each level. For example, if I am an administrator of an elementary building, discipline will probably not need a lot of emphasis.

For my philosophy, I have outlined six areas of emphasis. They are in no particular order, and they are not all inclusive.

1. I believe each teacher should control their classroom discipline.

However, I do believe there should be an overall building policy. I would want to work with the staff to develop one.

2. I want to have a general idea of what teachers are doing in their classrooms. Nothing specific, but if sixth-grade math students are working on adding and subtracting fractions, I want to know. I plan on developing a form that each teacher would fill out and get to me by Monday morning of the upcoming week. This form, I hope, will take no longer than five minutes to fill out.

3. I believe that parent and community involvement is very important for the students. They want to come to our schools to volunteer, why not let them. Whether it is in study hall, home economics or social studies class, I want to get them involved.

4. I want to utilize technology to its fullest potential. This will put pressure on me to make sure the staff is in-serviced and that the building has proper equipment. However, I do believe this to be a very important educational tool that students enjoy using.

5. I want to make sure that I am very knowledgeable about all district policies and the master contract. I believe this is helpful when staff or students need to know something then I can easily assist them.

6. I want to be seen throughout the day, especially in the classrooms. I want to stop in see what my staff is doing, how well the students are working and maybe even teach a little.

I believe my philosophy is similar to the characteristics of an instructional leader and successful leader that I mentioned earlier. Being consistent, enthusiastic and interested in the improvement of the school are three of the characteristics that I will emphasize the most. I believe I can be a productive leader, once I am given the opportunity.

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