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A preferred vision for administering K-12 schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering K-12 schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

A few important beliefs have become the cornerstones of my philosophy of education. These beliefs include the need to develop collaborative relationships within the school community, create a positive climate, and to always remember that student learning is the ultimate goal for educators. In order to build the constructive relationships upon which success can be built, a leader must be able to communicate. A school leader who demonstrates communication skills encourages the development of a positive school climate where there is respect and discipline. Educators should enhance the feeling of success, achievement, and caring in a school climate by establishing connections among all stakeholders.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTRATORING K-12 SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

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Victoria L. Connelly

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A few important beliefs have become the cornerstones of my philosophy of education. These beliefs include the need to develop collaborative relationships within the school community, create a positive climate, and to always remember that student learning is the ultimate goal for educators. In order to build the constructive relationships upon which success can be built, a leader must be able to communicate. A school leader who demonstrates communication skills encourages the development of a positive school climate where there is respect and discipline. Educators should enhance the feeling of success, achievement, and caring in a school climate by establishing connections among all stakeholders. Facilitating a climate that encourages academic accomplishments and social development is an important step in ensuring student achievement.

A good leader is willing to work as hard as those being lead. A school principal has many responsibilities. Making changes, being informed, taking risks, and encouraging creativity takes time and commitment. Each student's success and achievement in the school should be the fundamental purpose for every stakeholder, and I feel the principal should be the role model for that goal.

Having reflected on the leadership I have seen modeled, taught, and experienced as a teacher, I can distinguish those qualities necessary to become effective as a school administrator. Reflecting on those qualities using the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) gives a sense of purpose and organization to my goal of becoming an effective principal. The ISSL identify and clarify those characteristics found in good leaders.

ISSL 1: Visionary Leadership

The first ISSL focuses on visionary leadership. It states that a school administrator is an "educational leader who promotes the success of all students facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community" (Iowa Department of Education, 2001, p. 1). Thomas Sergiovanni (1994) further characterized vision as an educational platform that incorporates the school's beliefs about the preferred aims, methods, and climate, thereby creating a community of mind that establishes behavioral norms.

However, if one were to ask a stakeholder within the school district to state the district's mission statement, the individual would probably have difficulty reciting it. In an article by Lew Allen (2001) entitled "From Plaques to Practice: How Schools Can Breathe Life Into Their Guiding Beliefs," problems with vision statements are identified in an attempt to explain why schools tend to ignore these guiding statements. "It seems that everyone agrees that school communities should have some sort of covenant, vision, mission, philosophy, or values to guide their work" (Allen, p. 291). And the truth is, most schools have mission statements. However, what is also true is that most schools tend to use these statements as symbolic posters that are displayed above the drinking fountain in the hallway.

What are the problems with the stated vision or mission statements of a district? Mr. Allen lists five identified problems:

- Most of what is written in a mission statement is so general no one really knows what success looks like.

- Mission statements do not often link desired results with specific teaching and assessment practices.

- Mission statements are too long and/or too complicated.

- Most of the people in the school system had no input into the writing of the mission statement.

- Most people in the school are busy with the day-to-day issues; there isn't enough time to think about values or missions (Allen, 2001, p. 291).

Schools need to clarify their mission statements by making sure the statement holds them accountable. Once the mission statement is in place, there must be dialogue among the stakeholders. The statements should represent what the school truly practices and believes in order to become the catalyst to action. The mission statement must also align the school's work with student assessment, staff development, teacher evaluation, hiring, mentoring, and parent communication. The principal as an advocate for the mission statement is responsible for utilizing the statement to guide the school policies, procedures, and practices within his/her building. In the article, "How Schools Might Be Governed and Why", Seymour Sarason states, "Students benefit when their schools are purposeful places that not only clearly define what they want all students to know and be able to do, but also clearly describe how they are going to bring about these desired results and how they will know if they have succeeded" (1997).

The schools of today are being required to envision the schools of tomorrow. Legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act is attempting to reform the nation's public school education system so that all students are proficient in reading, math, and science. Many contextual and futuristic issues need to be considered in preparing a vision or mission for tomorrow's schools. Accountability, student achievement for the diverse school populations, the empowerment of parents, teachers, and principals are just some of the goals that need to be addressed when considering future trends. Therefore, every school must have a well-articulated vision and mission that is embraced by all stakeholders.

<div align="center">ISSL 2: Instructional Leadership</div>

One value that is foundational in ISLL 2 is the principle of effective instruction for improved student learning. ISSL 2 states "a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and professional development" (Iowa Department of Education, 2001, p. 2). Instructional leadership seeks to improve student learning. Current research has the potential of increasing the understanding of how various teaching strategies can improve student learning. Brain research has provided strategies based on an understanding of how the brain learns best. Differentiated instruction involves offering several different learning experiences in order to meet the diverse needs of each individual student. Professional development focused on these two concepts related to teaching and learning will

make a difference in student learning and achievement when implemented in the classroom.

Differentiated instruction, according to Tomlinson (1995) in "How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms", is a student-centered approach to learning where the teacher, based on student needs, designs multiple pathways to content, process, and product (Brimfield, Masci, DeFiore, 2002, p. 14). Differentiated instruction reminds teachers that learning occurs when curriculum and instruction fit each individual. It shifts the emphasis from teacher instruction to student learning. Effective differentiated learning environments have some key characteristics. Setting learning goals, making choices, and connecting the curriculum with students' experiences and interest will make learning much more likely to occur. Heterogeneous grouping provides an encouraging and challenging environment for all students. Strategies for flexible grouping can include pre-assessment, prior knowledge, interest, learning styles, and student self-selection. Learning can be maximized for each student if appropriate materials and tasks are provided to allow for varied levels of learning.

The belief that all students can learn is the entire purpose of education. Brain research and other studies show that there is predisposition in all children to learn. Every student in every school has proven this predisposition to be true. Research has helped educators to better understand how the brain works. With that knowledge, educators can design instruction to match how the brain learns best. Pat Wolfe describes three types of strategies that assist students in "learning broad concepts that are embedded within rigorous, relevant content"

(2001, p. 133). The first strategies include activities, such as mnemonics, that help students recall important information. The second group of strategies uses manipulatives and simulations to make connections between remembered facts and the understanding of concepts. The third, most powerful group of strategies increases retention, understanding, and the students' abilities to apply the concepts they are learning. These strategies provide "explicit examples of application and then has students generate examples of when and how a concept might be used in another area" (Wolfe, 2001, p. 134).

Differentiated instruction and brain research realize the importance of learning environments where student achievement is cultivated through rich, varied experiences by caring, competent educators. Stephen Levy states in *Starting from Scratch*, "If children recognize that we have seen their genius, who they really are, they will have the confidence and resilience to take risks in learning. I am convinced that many learning and social difficulties would disappear if we learned to see the genius in each child and then created a learning environment that encourages it to develop" (Levy, 1996, p.8).

Professional development is necessary for differentiation or brain research to be effectively implemented in a school program. Teachers need to be given training in grouping, learning centers, peer coaching, and classroom management. If the school culture and instructional program are to be conducive to student learning and professional development, then connections must be made to the teachers' and students' environment. Life experiences and past learning are the foundations upon which future learning is built. Brain research

and differentiated instruction both establish foundations for developing classroom teaching strategies that ensure success for all learners.

ISSL 3: Organizational Leadership

Organizational leadership is defined as an "educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment (Iowa Department of Education, 2001, p.3). Restructuring or reframing the organization of the school to enhance learning and teaching is an important component in organizational leadership. It may involve providing for smaller classes in the school environment, assigning mentors for new teachers, or empowering multiple teaching teams.

Linda Lambert in her book, *Leadership in Empowered Schools*, defines some of the problems with traditional schools. "The efficiency and accountability movements have place heavy emphasis on outcome and performance measures. Sacrificed are the students' opportunities to grow and mature naturally" (1998, p. 10). Cushman states in "Why Small Schools are Essential" (1997) that a school within a school program has a positive effect in that it can provide for a stronger identity among its students and may be autonomous in its vision, culture, environment, and administration. Whereas, VanderArk (2002) in "Personalization: Making Every School a Small School" identifies four ways to divide the students into several 'small schools' in order to personalize a school organization. The author advocates implementing: houses and teams, large

blocks of instructional time, small student-teacher ratio, and advisors or advocates for the students.

The small school environment could be established in school within a school programs. These programs allow the students to develop "a sense of family and the classrooms become something more than typical school classrooms; they become homes and very few discipline problems exist" (Lambert, 1998, p. 11). Creating this type of structure facilitates individual growth and the development of independent learners. The students are in a safe, non-threatening environment that will allow them to find self-esteem and success in a more nurturing environment.

The mentoring of new teachers can have many benefits for the school system. It is recommended that a mentor spend about 10-14 hours with each new teacher per year. This time could be spent in conferences, observations, sharing journals or articles, and informal visits. The new teacher's relationship with his/her mentor is philosophically different than the relationship this new teacher has with an evaluator. The teacher-mentor relationship is one of safety allowing the new teacher to take some risks. There is no fear that any information could be used against them for evaluation purposes. New teachers have someone they trust with whom to share their strengths and weaknesses. Their mentors provide assistance and acknowledgement.

The organization of the school should also allow for teacher and staff empowerment. Building the leadership capacity of the school district means that there is a more decentralized authority in the school buildings. Teachers should

collaborate in the goal setting and the decision-making processes in the building on school improvement teams. There should be ample opportunities for inquiry and reflection. These school improvement teams require principal support, team member commitment, and a system that supports educational teaming.

ISSL 4: Collaborative Leadership

The fourth ISSL describes the importance of working together collaboratively with the community for the benefit of students and their families. ISSL 4 states, "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources (Department of Education, 2001, p. 4). Educators have a responsibility not only to educate the students, but their parents and the community members as well. To gain support for the reform and changes needed to make education more meaningful, parents and community members must understand their role in the development of productive and successful schools. Parents and the people of the community are valuable resources that must not be ignored. Educators need to listen first and then make the decisions that will bring reform to their school districts. Schools need parents who understand the needs of the school. Parents and the community need schools that understand the needs of the students, their families, and the community. Collaboration is the key to success.

In an article written by Heather Voke (2002) entitled "Engaging the Public in Its Schools", it was reported in two recent surveys (Public Education Network,

2002) and (Education Week, 2002) that 80% of Americans continue to regard

education as a top priority. However, David Mathews in his book, *Is There a*

Public for the Public Schools?, contrasts this finding by concluding that "as much

as Americans feel a sense of duty to support public schools, they are torn and

ambivalent, and many have begun moving way from them, in spirit if not if fact

(1996, p. 9). Voke discussed a number of possible reasons for the public's lack

of involvement with educational issues.

- Increase in the number of citizens over 85 years of age, and a decrease in number of Americans with children in the schools
- Media portrayal of schools
- Increased demands on schools...today's schools are expected to ensure that all students—regardless of culture, language, ethnicity, gender, or disability—achieve high standards. When evidence shows schools do not achieve goals—there is an erosion of trust.
- Public education is viewed as just another commodity—consumers seek out other providers when they are not satisfied with the product they are getting
- The organization of the public school system itself is to blame—decisions about schools were delegated to the professionals. These professionals limited public involvement in the decision-making process. The public has little opportunity for involvement in education beyond paying taxes and voicing complaints to administrators or school boards. (Voke, 2002)
- "Staff interactions, attitudes, and the physical appearance of some schools may signal that the community is not welcome." (National PTA, 2002, p. 154)

Therefore, schools must take action to collaborate. Schools need to send

the message that they are responsive and receptive to the community's

involvement and concern. One great opportunity for collaboration within the

community is the recruitment of parent and community volunteers to assist with

activities in the school. Volunteers could be invited to observe a classroom until

they are comfortable and feel prepared to work in that classroom. Schools could

also provide parent and community volunteer training classes. Networking with

parents of students, friends, neighbors, community groups, and other school and community groups provides multiple opportunities for collaboration.

The recruitment of volunteers is only part of this process. However, by tapping the vast resources that parent and community support offers through volunteering, the educational possibilities are endless. Partners and volunteers may help with grant writing, school improvement committees, student achievement, or after school programs. School/community partnerships also help to provide the foundation for the trust and credibility necessary between school, home, and community.

ISSL 5: Ethical Leadership

An ethical school administrator is "an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 5). The fifth ISSL denotes the importance of the values and morality needed in today's schools as well as the need for ethical leadership. American schools reflect the societal crisis that exists in current society. The breakdown of families, the lack of civility in everyday life, the greed of the wealthy in contrast to the poor, and the portrayal of violence and sexual activity in the movies and television are factors shaping children found in today's classrooms. The 1992 report of the National Research Council says the United States is now the most violent of all industrialized nations. What do these factors mean for today's schools? The need for social education has refocused public schools on America's earliest educational

beginnings that the purpose of schooling was to prepare students for productive citizenship.

Today's schools need to understand that academic performance is strongly correlated to the social climate of a school. "These days parents and politicians are pushing our nation's schools to produce better-educated students who can pass standardized proficiency exams" (Aronson, 2000. p. 99). Instructional leaders must ethically change schools from stressful social climates to more accepting ones in order to increase student achievement.

School leaders demonstrate ethical leadership and the importance of good character by modeling. A personal and professional code of ethics identifies the school leaders who "walk the talk". The leadership of the school demonstrates the importance of good character by implementing character education programs, endorsing the ideals of respect, responsibility, and trustworthiness. Character education will affect the ethics of all school personnel, the students, and their parents. However, character education is not an event; it must be part of a change process in the social climate of the school. The focus of the social climate of the school reinforces another goal within the standard: expect others in the school community to demonstrate integrity and exercise ethical behavior.

In the book *Nobody Left to Hate* by Elliot Aronson, he offers two major strategies that students can be taught in order to better appreciate each other. First, Aronson suggests "teaching youngsters specific ways to gain greater control over their own impulses and how to get along with others so they can resolve interpersonal conflicts amicably" (2000, p.17). The second strategy

involves the structure of the classroom. Classroom experiences can promote cooperation rather than competition by motivating students to listen to each other and help each other. Children can be taught in such a way that provides opportunities for them to pull together and work cooperatively with one another, thereby, making every student socially included.

An instructional leader can use these same strategies with the teachers and staff of a school. Opportunities for staff to work together collaboratively, to listen to each other and to help each other creates the atmosphere of inclusion rather than isolation. Learning teams can be the vehicle that drive this collaborative effort. During this learning journey, teachers and staff are given the opportunity to cooperate and learn from each other.

School leaders must be ethical in their dealings with students, staff, and the community. Modeling respect and compassion, school leaders provide opportunities for cooperation and collaboration among all stakeholders in the school community. Ethical behavior cannot be superficial; it must be the kind of respect that develops when people work together toward a common goal.

ISSL 6: Political Leadership

A political school administrator is "an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 6). The sixth ISSL defines a school community as belonging to a larger community, not only the city and its surroundings, but the state and

country as well. The political leader understands the role of the school in all of the contexts in which it operates.

A school leader has a responsibility to the community and its representatives serving on the school board. Therefore, administrators must respect and work with those responsible for operating the school system. Keeping school board members informed on activities, student achievement, resources, and data ensures that there is accountability.

Communication needs to occur among the school community concerning trends, issues, and potential changes in the context in which the school operates. The State of Iowa has recently required every public school system to report student achievement progress and be accountable for the student learning goals stated in the district's Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP). School improvement requires that all stakeholders are committed, informed, and actively working for the achievement of these goals.

Administrators also have a responsibility to communicate with legislators and to remain informed on political issues and decisions that will affect their schools and communities. With the recent No Child Left Behind legislation, this need has become more apparent that ever before.

Personal Professional Vision for Administrative Practice

Knowledge of the ISLLC standards has enabled me as a potential administrator to develop a set of essential beliefs. These beliefs and new learning have allowed me to connect these standards with my values as an educator. I feel prepared to respond to the demands and responsibilities of the

principalship. As the leader of the building, I will be the role model from which many in the school community can exemplify. I will inspire the teachers, staff, students, parents, and the community to work together to provide an education that creates lifelong learning and results in student learning and achievement for each and every student.

My vision for administrating the school includes several goals. These goals include:

1. Utilizing and continually improving my skills as an instructional leader to help all children succeed

2. Understanding and nurturing the school culture and mission

3. Working to effectively manage the school organization for optimal learning

4. Establishing interpersonal relationships with all stakeholders to develop respect and cooperation

5. Having an effective communication plan that allows for collaboration

6. Taking time to reflect and self-analyze my role as a school leader in order to build on successes and learn from difficulties

As an instructional leader I will frequently visit classrooms and observe the instruction of the students. Talking to teachers, departments, and learning teams will provide information about the effectiveness of the curriculum and the strategies being used to teach it. The focus on student achievement and success will determine the effectiveness of the school improvement plan.

It is necessary that as the school leader I have an understanding of the school culture and climate. My vision of how I can make this happen includes

becoming familiar with the context of the school district and reviewing the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan and other pertinent data. Learning about the successes the school district has experienced in the past will enable me to understand the current expectations of my role as principal in the school. The mission of the school should be the focus and direction I need to take as its instructional leader.

As the principal, it is my responsibility to ensure that the school is effectively managed. My organizational management plan includes learning and examining student and teacher schedules, reviewing and becoming familiar with the school facilities, and knowledge of student transportation. The student and teacher handbooks should reflect the policies of the building, and I need to understand these policies explicitly. As the building principal, I hope to facilitate the operation of the school effectively by effectively managing the current budget and allocating resources in a way that positively affects student learning.

Developing effective relationships with those I come into contact with as a principal is imperative. I need to build trusting relationships with all stakeholders if I am to be a constructive leader. My vision is to have frequent meetings with certified and non-certified staff. The use of school improvement teams can facilitate shared decision-making and help to gain insight about how to best implement the goals and mission of our school.

I plan to communicate with everyone in the school community by creating opportunities for all stakeholders to become involved. This communication plan must function in a way that allows for communication to come not only from the

leadership. Communication must work both ways. With the use of focus groups, learning teams, and frequent communication strategies, I will gain the perceptions and information from all stakeholders necessary to create a climate of trust.

Lastly, I have learned the importance of reflection. As the leader of the school, I need to critically examine and assess myself. One quote I have heard often says, "What gets planned, gets done." I need to plan on taking time to reflect on my life, both professionally and personally.

My vision for being an administrator is focused on improving learning for all students. As Stephen Covey (1994) said in the book, *Put First Things First*, "Vision is the fundamental force that drives everything else in our lives. It empassions us with a sense of the unique contribution that's ours to make. It empowers us to put first things first, compasses ahead of clocks, people ahead of schedules and things" (Covey, Merrill and Merrill, 1994, p. 116). My focus as an educator has always been student achievement. I now feel prepared and confident to serve children and their families as an educational leader who embodies the knowledge, dispositions, and performances associated with the Iowa Standards for School Leaders.

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