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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

In Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction, we constructed a top ten list of desirable leadership behaviors: 1. Open door policy 2. Empathetic 3. Confident 4. Reassuring 5. Knowledgeable 6. Energetic 7. Consistent 8. Patient 9. Humorous 10. Optimistic. I believe that all of these are vital links to aspire toward, however, knowledge is the one attribute I needed to focus on.

Our society is ever shifting and we will always be in the catch-up mode. Schools have long been a pillar of strength in communities. School is where you grow up, mature, and develop an identity. This is not going to change. Students are still going to get all of these things from schools; it might look different than what mom and dad experienced, but it will happen.

As a principal, my job is to make sure these things happen as smoothly as possible. My job is also to have everything in place, so that every child that comes through the door has what he or she needs to get a good education.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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As I thought about creating this paper, I knew I would have to take a trip out to my favorite place to think. Palisades State Park is a scenic stretch of land on the Cedar River, five miles from my hometown of Lisbon. The flood of 1993 changed the sculpture of the riverbanks and to my benefit, it left an enormous rock on the water's edge, a perfect place to recapture past thoughts.

I decided to visit there and re-visit some old visions I had as a young person.

My father grew up on a farm and dreamed of being a social studies teacher and a coach. When presented with an opportunity to attend State Teachers College and play baseball, he opted for the much-needed money that the factory offered, as well as the lady in his life, my mother. Considering the incredible circumstances they have given to their children, I cannot complain about his decision. My parents have always held education in high regard, but not to the point of suffocation. My father has always been involved with our sports teams as kids and my mother was one of the parents that teachers could count on being there to help. My mother was the salutatorian in her high school and my sister climbed the ladder one notch in 1977 as she was the valedictorian of Lisbon High School. All of these positive strokes were important, but the main thing I had going for me as a child was the fact that I always knew my mom and dad were there and would support me. As an educator, the term value is often questioned, or the lack there of in today's children. I was extremely fortunate, I learned from day one that you work hard to get anywhere in this world and that

was the bottom line. I remember a stretch where my father was working two factory jobs at one time. He would get home from one in time to take a few hours nap and then punch in at the other job. I remember asking him why he was doing this and he simply told me that we needed the money to pay bills. That one piece in time was the only time that he did not come home and play whatever sport was in season with me. My mother yelling that it was supertime usually allowed him to sit for the first time that day. Supertime in our house was a time to reflect on the day and also to catch “hell” if you messed up. It was also a time to be together and share my mother’s incredible food. Life would not have been normal for the five of us had we not been together, and to be honest, I miss this section of life; I can not picture me being who I am if I would have somehow missed out on this. Learning to respect people and yet being competitive was the only way a Conner could be and several thousand delicious meals was quite the reinforcer.

My sister was the first college graduate from either side of our family. I always knew I was going to attend college, but I had a dream of being a professional baseball player first. Three reconstructive knee surgeries changed my plans and I knew I would be a teacher and coach. Athletics were such a huge part of our family, almost to the point of insanity. Mom had a way of deflating my dad, brother, and me when we thought an all out wrestling match over the sports section was totally appropriate. Oddly enough, we would split the sports

in three sections and the next fight broke out when one of us had to read a continued article and needed someone else's section. This thirst for competition followed me onto the baseball field. After my surgeries, we decided that I could play baseball, but nothing else. On occasion, I would question a call and was never very good at losing. I have always gotten particularly upset when someone did not do what they were supposed to and it affected the outcome. I might add that I have always been my biggest critic.

In the fall of 1980, I entered the University of Northern Iowa. Fully intent on becoming a teacher and coach, I took five full years to graduate. Looking back, I had some definite attitude adjustments that needed tending to and they got full service without any huge setbacks. I cannot say enough about this place and what it did for me as a young man coming from a small town. It was here that my goals began to materialize and that I was subjected to people who loved their occupation. I will never forget Dr. Jackson Baty! He gave me one of the adjustments I so dearly needed. I was in one of his education courses and happened to sleep in during a couple of his classes. One morning he asked me to follow him to his office and he let me know what he thought of me in no uncertain terms. I sat there like a little boy and the next week he took over as my advisor. He had a tradition of having a get together at the end of each of his classes and it was during this event that I had the privilege of meeting his wife. I do not think I have ever been complemented as genuinely as I was when she sat

me down and told me that her husband had a keen interest in me because I reminded him of himself in his younger years. This had a profound effect on me. This put the pressure on me to use the skills I was learning and to get with it. This was a wake-up call that bridged my upbringing with an identity I was trying to find.

Upon graduating from the University of Northern Iowa in May of 1985, I accepted a driver education position for the summer and started my education career. It seems like yesterday that I walked into the garage with my first paycheck for teaching. My dad and two of my uncles were skinning fish and they said, "You got that much for sitting in a car?" My dad winked at me and said, "He earned it fellas." I could not have agreed any more since I had already been chewed out by an upset mother and nearly been killed several times.

The last 14 years I have been an employee of the Cedar Rapids school system. I have had the fortune of being at Jefferson High School as well as my current setting of Roosevelt Middle School. With all of the trials and tribulations that come with being a teacher, I have to say that I love it anyway. I absolutely cannot imagine that any other line of work could give me the inner glow that teaching has given me. Seeing a "project" walk down the aisle to be married, seeing that young lady win homecoming queen, or maybe, hearing that tough kid saying thank you; I cannot possibly measure these moments that I have been lucky enough to participate in. I can sustain a smile for hours after seeing an old

pupil and reliving a delicious bite from the past. I am proud to say that it is not just athletes that come to visit me, but my old math students as well.

Looking out at the river, I tried to remember why I wanted to become an administrator. Making more money was definitely one of the reasons as well as the idea of being the boss. Not to say that these factors are not relevant, but my thinking has changed. I started working on my degree in 1990. I have had some personal turmoil in my life and continue to be burdened with my daughters living in Florida. I cannot afford to teach down there, so the ability to be an administrator took on more meaning. After a five year span, I decided that completing my masters would serve me well. I have really been pleasantly surprised with the experience. My maturity level as a human being, as well as a teacher, has afforded me the positive gains I am seeing in myself since returning to the University of Northern Iowa last fall. I cannot count the times that I drove home mumbling to myself, "I did not know that." If I never spend one day as an administrator, I am a better teacher because of the coursework I have taken.

As a head wrestling coach, I did not want to just change things, I wanted to make significant changes for the good of the cause. During my six year run as the head wrestling coach at Lasalle High School in Cedar Rapids, I was successful at accomplishing that. I took over a poorly run program and turned it into a perennial contender. We were fortunate enough to have successful teams as well as individuals. It was no secret to me, that what they needed, was an organized

way to work harder than they had ever worked before. I gained valuable insight into working with people and changing their expectations for themselves and others. The unity we had between coaches, athletes, parents, and school was just fantastic.

I want to be an administrator for the challenge I am currently feeling. I am confident that my family roots, education, professional experiences, and abilities will combine to allow me to be a successful administrator. I do enjoy teaching and coaching, but I know I can make a much larger impact on the educational organization that I will be employed.

In this paper, I will outline what I feel to be relevant issues facing me as an administrator. I have chosen the following areas to focus on: Political Implications, Curriculum, School Environment, and Administrators Responsibility.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

I think I had my biggest eye-opening experiences while working on my practicum requirements last fall. I could not believe all of the political tidbits I was so unaware of or had refused to become aware of. It is so common for teachers to hold the belief that the principal can wave a magic wand and make problems go away. One of my days working alongside our administration, I learned the necessity of knowing the guidelines and what a mess you could put yourself in without this information. I had responded to an altercation and

escorted two boys to the office. I assured them that they were looking at a three-day suspension. One of the boys happened to be a special education student and had been suspended out of school several times. He was given a one day in school suspension because students in special education can only be suspended a maximum of ten days out of school. Communication with staff is vital, many teachers believe the administration is not enforcing the rules with students, when in reality, they have their hands tied. I felt that heat, but I was on the other side of the fence this time. I was thankful for the experience.

I am fairly sure that at some point in my administrative career I will be involved with the task of acquiring support to build new school buildings. According to the U.S. Department of Education, we need to build 6000 new schools over the next ten years just to keep up with the rising enrollment (Moseley-Braun, 1998). This, combined with modernization costs of existing structures, will take a large sum of money. As an administrator, it will be my job to know what my school needs and to communicate these needs to all involved.

As an educator, I have always felt most comfortable basing decisions on the best interest of kids. A number of times I have heard, “you just can’t do it like that Dan.” My master’s work has helped to enlighten me and to attain a visual of the political implications that dictate many decisions. As an administrator, I feel that I must continue this continual learning and pick battles big enough to matter, yet small enough to win (Kozol, 1991). I am not suggesting

that I lose my aggressiveness, I just believe that I need to become more selective in the issues that I should take a stand on.

CURRICULUM

It has been written, that there are five general principles for developing learning experiences (Tyler, 1949). 1. Appropriate practice, 2. Satisfaction, 3. Success, 4. Multiple approaches, and 5. Multiple outcomes. Appropriate curriculum is an integral component when trying to satisfy the above conditions. As noted by the year, 1949, educators have long been identifying different approaches and theories. Our world is much different than it was in 1949 and our schools have new problems and new demands when trying to provide for the optimal learning experience for one and all. As we near the new millennium, it has become apparent that society has become overwhelmed with technological advances and this creates concerns for our schools. Advancements in technology are occurring so quickly, keeping up with them is proving to be nearly impossible (Rodriguez, 1997). Another large issue effecting curriculum is the students in our classrooms. Many of them come from a variety of countries. R.H. Decker (personal communication, April, 1998) spoke of visiting a school and seeing a large number of foreign students working on low level learning tasks. My school has the same situation. I recently welcomed a young lady from Mexico into my classroom; she knew little English when she entered school. How do you develop

a curriculum that can handle everything? How do we meet the needs of everyone?

It is my theory that the successful curriculums in today's educational settings will come from a shared decision making model implemented by competent administrators and competent teachers. I plan on using my staff to help in this regard. I do not have the expertise to make all curriculum decisions by myself. Later, I will give another reason as to why I will solicit teacher input.

Wherever I start as an administrator, they will have specific curriculum set in place. My job will become more interesting when I either feel a need to change an existing program or add one. I want my teachers' support, as well as their input, as to what we want. Good information is a necessity. There are countless sources of companies, programs, studies, suggestions, and success stories. As a team, we will educate ourselves as to which path we feel would be of most benefit to our student body. Firsthand observation of a desired program is a definite plus. During my years at Roosevelt, I have seen this take place. We have had visitors from other districts spend a couple of days with us and gather pertinent information to assist in their school's transition to middle school philosophy. Although it takes more than a few visits to get a complete grasp of a situation, it is much more valuable than reading about it. Clearly, the magnitude of the curricular change and the resources you have at your disposal, will be of significance as you move to enhance your curriculum.

I think that support for curriculum change has to be with you, to some degree, before you start the actual process of change. Knowing your school's current philosophies is imperative if you wish to make a smooth transition or for that matter, getting people to even consider it. As mentioned above, getting your teachers involved in the process is a must. All too often, schools forget that parents are such a vital link to the successes and their input is crucial. As Meyer, Delagardelle, and Middleton (1996) noted, while parental support will not guarantee successful reform, the lack of support from parents can sabotage even the most well intentioned project. Some schools head off these problems by including parents in the whole process. Personally, I think this is wise for large-scale issues such as changing from junior high to middle school. I also believe it would be appropriate to include parents when wholesale changes within a specified discipline are on the docket. I do not think, however, that parents are a necessary commodity for every curricular change. What is necessary, is the communication to them that indeed there will be a change and the reasons for doing so. Many people appreciate being informed versus being surprised.

I will discuss the third component (effective teachers) under a different heading.

R.H. Decker (personal communication, February, 1998) advised our class to not make any dramatic changes during our first year in a school. I think this is sound advice. As a principal, I need to find the pulse of the school and attempt to

figure out the micropolitics that are present. It is with this information that I will base my plan and chart a course.

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

My perception of school environment includes several areas. A school's physical appearance, climate, student expectations, and faculty/staff expectations are all integral components. It is my belief that the total package, of a particular educational setting, can be judged by its environment. Without entering a classroom, a person can begin to draw conclusions. If I were a stranger, what thoughts or perceptions might I have as I entered this building? Are the restrooms clean? Is there a sense of order and discipline or does it seem a little too loose. Do the children appear to have direction as I see them in the hall or are they just standing around? Do they seem comfortable in their setting? Are there teachers or other faculty around? Do the children seem to be interacting with the adults? I want to work in a school where positive answers to the above questions exist. I have been in hundreds of schools and I always leave with an impression of some sort. Many of my visits have come through athletics so I made presumptions about the place without seeing a second of teaching. Right or wrong, people get a gut feeling about a school and this perception becomes their reality. As an administrator, I want to do what I can to develop a healthy school climate; a climate that will reach out to kids and let them know they are in a safe, effective

learning environment. As Shen (1997) noted, for some students, schools are the only safe havens in their lives.

School climate is an ever-changing factor in the lives of people who work and learn in schools. Much like the air we breathe, school climate is ignored until it becomes foul (Freiberg, 1998). How do you go about manufacturing a positive school climate? I do not plan on waiting until something is wrong before I give attention to school climate. Day in and day out the students come into a building; wanting to receive an education; wanting to take a positive step forward in their lives. They need to be held responsible for a large piece of their education and to be held accountable (Fitzpatrick, 1994). My school adopted the program of discipline that Jim Fitzpatrick (1994) has on the market We implemented “Developing Responsibility in Schools” last school year in hopes of turning some negative trends around. We have a rather challenging clientele due largely to socioeconomic status. Many of our children come from broken or dysfunctional homes. Nearly one-half of our children are on free/reduced lunches. Our discipline methods were not working and the staff and administration seemed to be locking horns instead of working together. The Fitzpatrick model was given to us through staff development in hopes of gaining better ways of dealing with discipline problems. The main emphasis is the concept of giving the student the ownership of their problem. Guiding them through a self-reflection of their chosen behavior was different for a lot of teachers, including myself. The

purpose was to get a value judgment from the student. Is what they are doing helping them? Is it against the rules? When a student makes a value judgment, the student takes ownership and accepts responsibility (Fitzpatrick, 1994). I have seen some positive results from this system, however, I do not feel our school bought into it with the intensity needed. Some of this may be do in part to the district rumor that all of our schools will be asked to use the Boy's Town method (Father Flanagan's Boys' Home, 1981). I favor a mixture of the two that would allow for children to take ownership for their behavior as well as teaching them the proper behaviors to use. Regardless of what is going to be used, I believe that getting students to the realization that they have control of themselves is vital to achieving a positive climate.

All of the things I have mentioned under school environment have a degree of importance, but the classroom is where the most important agent lives; the teacher. It is my belief that a school could have all the physical amenities, best curriculum, involved parents, and great kids, but a poor teacher would have an adverse effect on the whole process. By the same token, I think a good teacher can overcome less than ideal conditions yet make a difference. I read an article about a young teacher in Oakland, CA. who is making strides with his students despite teaching in a poverty stricken neighborhood (Ruenzel, 1998). He talked about his battles with expectations and how he is waging his war. Teachers need to have high expectations for themselves and in turn have high expectations for

their students. I can not recall any great teacher or coach in my life that did not expect something good to happen. Setting goals and working your tail off to reach those goals is so important. This is not enough; a good teacher has to possess several other qualities to be successful. Commonalities of good teachers include integrity, organizational skills, professionalism, competency, and adaptability. A great teacher has to be student-accessible and have an ability to relate to children. I believe they need to be able to communicate on the student's level while gently tugging at them to come up to theirs. Effective teachers reported that they "come alive" when they step in front of the classroom (Tauber, Mester, Buckwald, 1993). I like it when I see teachers going after their student's attention. With all of the competition, teachers have to realize the interactions they have with students is where it is at. It does not stop in the classroom; teachers need to be involved as sponsors and coaches when possible. This adds so much to the overall learning experience.

Children like to smile, even when they do not want to; I believe humor is such a powerful medium. As Wallinger (1997) noted, humor is one of the most promising but least understood instruments in the educator's toolbox. I think kids should have some fun at school and learn that laughing at appropriate times is great for morale. This humor in no way comes at the expense of learning, if handled correctly. As Liu (1997) noted, research shows that positive

student/teacher relationships have great potential for improving academic and social/emotional environments in the school setting.

In the movie “A Family Thing,” Robert Duval tells a story about a man that has had some misfortunes in life, but remains optimistic in nature. He shares the thought that happiness is nothing more than having something to look forward to. Teachers have the potential to bring this about. If there is a sense of good will in a classroom, students will be happy and look forward to attending that class. The more at ease you can put a student, the more apt they are to have a successful learning experience.

ADMINISTRATOR’S RESPONSIBILITY

As I began my master’s work, I remember wondering if I already knew what I needed to know. Could I effectively run a school if they would let me skip the coursework? Having spent my lifetime within school buildings, had I not witnessed enough to handle a Principalship? No. I might have handled it, but I would not have known what I was doing or what to expect. I would not have been an effective leader.

In Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction, we constructed a top ten list of desirable leadership behaviors: 1. Open door policy 2. Empathetic 3. Confident 4. Reassuring 5. Knowledgeable 6. Energetic 7. Consistent 8. Patient 9. Humorous 10. Optimistic. I believe that all of these are vital links to aspire toward, however, knowledge is the one attribute I needed to focus on. How

would I oversee curriculum? How would I create a good school environment? How would I hire teachers? How would I evaluate them? How would I ensure a good product would exit my school? Knowledge is the key and the other nine characteristics are preferable traits to exhibit while on the job.

Murphy and Pimental (1996) noted:

A skilled principal is one who creates a safe, orderly, and inviting place to teach and learn; works effectively with individuals; manages time, facilities, and resources responsibly; and above all else, develops an academic program that serves all children well. (p. 74)

As one might surmise, these tasks are intertwined. I have not witnessed a principal in action who was not performing a literal juggling act. Being the leader of a school dictates that you do what you can do when you can do it. During my practicum work one day, my principal asked me to construct a review of a certain teacher. I recall thinking it was no big deal, but I never did do it that day because I was swamped with student discipline problems. This experience helped reinforce the concept of shared decision-making. I really can not imagine trying to do everything that needs to be done as well as making every decision on curriculum and other things. To be honest, I have trouble imagining getting everything done even after delegating or receiving assistance. The complexities of the modern day administrative requirements suggests not only accepting help, but actively incorporating it for the benefit of the school.

In athletics, many successful coaches agree that one of their reasons for success was the surrounding of themselves with good assistant coaches. I sure did. I wanted people who knew my system and knew what I believed in. I was always lucky enough to have ex-wrestlers that wanted to coach under me. They knew my philosophies and held many of the expectations that I had shared with them during their competitive days. Most of all, they knew my vision. They could relate to the athletes and help make it our vision.

I know this experience will benefit me as an administrator. I am not suggesting that running a wrestling program is the same as leading a school, but I feel that the lessons learned in one arena can greatly enhance your effectiveness in another.

As a principal, I will strive to put the best people possible in my classrooms. According to Bracey (1997), teacher preparation comes close to matching the weather as something everyone talks about but does little to change. If this is true then trouble lies ahead. I feel comfortable with the training I received as an undergrad at the University of Northern Iowa. I hope that education continues to promote proper teacher training.

Hiring teachers is much more involved than I ever imagined. In Dr. Else's Seminar, we investigated the entire process, including live interviews. It is not as simple as replacing a math teacher with another math teacher. There needs to be a complete understanding of what is needed. This understanding should come from

a selected group of personnel who collaboratively understand the goals of the school. The principal should facilitate this team-approach. Adherence to proper hiring guidelines will assist in a smooth hiring process that should put the best candidate for the position in place.

It is a fact in schools, that faculty will be ever changing. Some years the principal will have new teachers to orientate, while in other years, none at all. Regardless, I feel that a one-on-one conversation with each teacher should be attempted each fall. It does not have to be a long process and it does not need to be evaluative in nature. I feel that if nothing else, it is a good policy to stay in tune with your staff and give them a chance to stay in tune with your expectations. A little discussion can go a long way in opening up lines of communication and it can also plant seed.

Earlier in this paper I spoke of having a positive climate. How an administrator handles and treats their teachers is critical. If my comment was a positive one, I sometimes shared it with the teacher while other colleagues were in earshot (Marshall, 1996). This goes hand-in-hand with Dr. Decker's advice—Praise in public and criticize in private (R.H. Decker, personal communication, January, 1998). You can do unfixable things by embarrassing a teacher publicly. To get the maximum amount of effectiveness out of a teacher, they need to feel professional and maintain a certain degree of confidence. I have taught in a

school where one of the teacher goals was to stay away from the monster in the office. Needless to say, it helped to produce a negative climate.

Previously, I mentioned seeking teacher input in curriculum matters. I do not expect to have a knowledge base that will allow me to be the expert on every subject, therefore, using the teacher's expertise would be beneficial. Moreover, it gives them a sense of belonging to the overall process of the school. This can add to a teachers confidence and provide many great returns for students. It also shows the faculty that you have confidence and trust in your teachers; very powerful things to have in a school.

Evaluation of teachers has always been kind of difficult to me. As a teacher, I sometimes felt they were looking to find fault with me on something, while most of the time it was an uneventful event. My studies have led me to believe that proper evaluation can be one of the most significant acts a principal can do to positively impact teacher effectiveness. If the principal does not take measures to enhance teacher effectiveness there is a good chance it will not happen. I am hoping to use the Clinical Supervision Model that was introduced in class. This model has the potential to open the teacher up and provide opportunities for the administrator and teacher to have positive dialogue about the teacher's performance.

In a study of successful administrators, Reitzug and Burello (1995), noted three commonalities: 1. provided a supportive environment. 2. facilitated

reflective practice. 3. made it possible for teachers to implement new ideas and programs that resulted from reflective practice. Teachers in a school with these conditions would more than likely exhibit confidence and a love of their job. Better yet, it would be likely that students in a school with these conditions would exhibit confidence and a love of learning.

Students deserve the right to love to learn. I am thrilled that my daughters love to learn. I have always stressed education and incorporated fun things in to learning. They have the advantage, like so many others, of caring parents that dangle that carrot in front of them. As a teacher, I am witness to many children who do not have these advantages. They come to our building unprepared to take on the rigors of a school day. I believe that a majority of my job will be dealing with these students. I will need to assess myself periodically to escape the effects that I have seen on other principals as they waged this war. It is part of the job in public education; every school must provide appropriate resources to meet the need of every child.

Our society is ever shifting and we will always be in the catch-up mode. Schools have long been a pillar of strength in communities. School is where you grow up, mature, and develop an identity. This is not going to change. Students are still going to get all of these things from schools; it might look different than what mom and dad experienced, but it will happen.

As a principal, my job is to make sure these things happen as smoothly as possible. My job is also to have everything in place, so that every child that comes through the door has what he or she needs to get a good education.

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