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A vision of middle level administration : a reflective essay

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A vision of middle level administration : a reflective essay

Abstract

Administration, regardless of its specific place, is never an easy job. Daft (2002) states that leadership occurs among people; it is not something done to people. Another author, Robert DeBlois (2000) says that an effective organization and a good leader rely on the talent, commitment, and leadership of many people in the organization. No one person, good leader or not, can effectively oversee, motivate, recognize, and support every individual within a school community. Being a good leader is no more or less complicated than knowing who you are and what your job is.

A Vision of Middle Level Administration

A Reflective Essay

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

And Postsecondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Wendy R. Cunningham

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Introduction

Personal and Professional History

. As a child I remember my dad teaching elementary school. I wanted to be a

teacher, too. Being a teacher was my driving goal as I worked my way through to

high school and then college graduation. I remember my early years in school

being filled with frequent change. By the time I was in the third grade, I was in

my fifth school due to a series of moves caused by family changes and boundary

changes within one of the districts I attended. These changes were difficult for

me, as I didn't really like change all that much.

However, with each change I was able to adapt and succeed. I moved again

during my seventh grade year from a rural district to an urban district. The

change was a shock to my system. Everything, from the curriculum to the culture

of the students in my classes, was very different and yet my initial goal of

becoming a teacher remained the same. I stayed in that district through my high

school graduation. That summer I enrolled for classes at the University of

Northern Iowa, declaring an elementary education major. It took me five years of

hard work to get through, but I made it. I completed my student teaching in

Council Bluffs, Iowa and remained in the Council Bluffs/Omaha area for six

years.

The first two years after I graduated I served as a substitute teacher in both

Omaha Public Schools and Ralston Public Schools. During a long-term teaching

assignment, I discovered my love for middle school students. Following that assignment, I decided to add middle level certification to my teaching license through the College of Saint Mary in Omaha, Nebraska. After getting my provisional certification, I took a job teaching eighth grade science in an inner city school in Omaha. The job was both wonderful and challenging. The experiences I received through that assignment were priceless and prepared me for another change in my life.

During my third year of teaching I was encouraged by a principal to pursue a masters that would allow me to utilize my leadership abilities. However, I did not know that I really wanted to be a principal. This hesitation caused me to approach a former professor for advice, a move that opened new prospects for me. I was offered the opportunity to come back to the University of Northern Iowa as a full time graduate student working as an assistant to the STORM project in the Earth Science Department. Because of this, I could pursue masters in both administration and science education with reasonable completion times and get experiences not offered to me before. These experiences included working with top educators from across the country on a weather education curriculum design and presenting at national conferences.

The experiences boosted my confidence and professional integrity. When I finished with the assistantship I had an experience to put on my resume that was second to none. The return to Cedar Falls also led me to the decision to stay in

Iowa. This past summer, I accepted a job with Waterloo Community Schools as a sixth grade science teacher.

Professional Observations

Administration, regardless of its specific place, is never an easy job. Daft (2002) states that leadership occurs among people; it is not something done to people. Another author, Robert DeBlois (2000) says that an effective organization and a good leader rely on the talent, commitment, and leadership of many people in the organization. No one person, good leader or not, can effectively oversee, motivate, recognize, and support every individual within a school community. Being a good leader is no more or less complicated than knowing who you are and what your job is. Not understanding the role or taking on more responsibility than necessary, can cause a leader to be less effective where it counts.

Within an educational setting ineffective leadership can be especially disastrous since the goal of education is to create productive citizens and future leaders. Our educational system shapes the future of our country. As parents send their children to school they expect them to receive a quality education. The exact definition of a quality education changes rapidly in our society and over the years, there have been different emphasis on program goals.

History

In the very early 1900's, dropout rates grew and society saw a need for a more
·practical education; this time later became known as the Progressive Era.
Students were encouraged to enrolled in courses, especially at the secondary
level, based on their future plans (DeBoer, 1991). Following the early years of
this movement came a push by Horace Mann for compulsory education laws,
which were instituted in the 1920's (Kneller, 1967). This law decreased some of
the high early dropout rates seen at the beginning of the century and kept students
in school much longer than before. The next movement followed the end of
WWII. At that time the public believed that too much time was being spent on
curriculum that lacked relevance. The new program, called life adjustment
education, focused on vocational training with a common core of subjects at the
secondary level. This movement lasted a relatively short time though. After the
launching of Sputnik in 1957, the use of traditional subjects with an emphasis in
science and math became the desired curriculum and the National Science
Foundation was established to improve this aspect of education (Rutherford,
2002).

In the past 15 years, we have seen even more challenges occur in education
with the publishing of *A Nation At Risk*. Currently we are challenged by the *No
Child Left Behind* legislation passed by President Bush in 2001. Administrators
and school leaders need to be cognizant of these changes so that they may create

and maintain a school environment that supports the needs of the students, parents, and community. Now, more than ever, quality means much more than the traditional reading, writing, and arithmetic. Society demands more. Educational leaders must now build a community of learners capable of helping all children reach educational success. Within this paper, I will address the six standards of educational leadership: vision, instruction, organization, collaboration, ethics, and politics.

Visionary Leadership

Building a Vision

A visionary leader is one who begins with a personal and professional vision of education. With this in mind, a good vision, though structurally sound, is constantly changing as the shape of education and the community changes. Along with this vision, knowledge of educational goals and research is a must. Without this knowledge, educational leaders are unable to build accurate professional visions that provide the basis for their communication and negotiation abilities. A productive, effective principal is always looking for opportunities to bring parents, teachers, and other staff members into leadership positions (Sebring & Bryk, 2000). I recently read a list of ABC's for motivation. In these ABC's Thomas Parish (1999) said that a vision, which is envisioned, is more readily achieved. When everyone involved with the school has a stake in creating the vision, that vision will be a more powerful force within the

community. The more involved outside persons and groups are in the vision of a school, the better the system. Making the vision visible to all the stakeholders, through both words and actions, is the only the beginning. People cannot live up to a vision or expectation unless they know what it is and come to believe in it.

I recently sat through a presentation by some Irving Elementary School staff members. As they talked about their STARS program, it struck me as something that would work very well in a middle school also, as it promotes basic expectations for students and staff in a building. STARS is an acronym that is posted all over the school and promoted by all of the staff. The S stands for 'strive to do your best'. T is 'treat people and property with respect'. A encourages students to 'act in a trustworthy and responsible manner'. R asks that you 'reflect on your actions'. The final S invites students to 'show a cooperative spirit' (Irving Elementary School, 2003). This acronym supports their school vision and overall behavioral management program. Having a solid basis, such as the STARS program, is necessary for an attainable school vision. Once all of the stakeholders in a school know and believe in a common vision, then the administrator needs to provide suitable resources and support to carry it out.

Supporting a Vision

With this in mind, let's examine the difference between equity and equality. A strong administrator believes in equitable, quality education for all students and will do everything in their power to ensure that it is available to their students.

What is equitable between two schools is not necessarily equal because the tools necessary to achieve the same goal may not be identical. In fact, it does not even mean that every school must have the same vision. Equity is more than equality. It requires that all persons be given an equal chance to succeed through the provision of resources necessary to their situation. Some schools may require materials where others have the materials but need staff training in how to use them.

<div align="center">Instructional Leadership</div>

<u>Child Development</u>

Instructional leaders are those who promote and support the success of students within the instructional setting. They understand student development, motivational strategies, instructional assessment, and technological goals. According to Piaget, students develop at slightly different rates but within a relatively consistent framework. Piaget's suggests four stages of development, sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational, from birth to the early teen years (Rice & Dolgin, 2002). The timely progression of a child through these stages was once believed to be fairly consistent from one child to the next. Some researchers now argue that the rates of change might vary more than previously believed and that some people may not even reach the upper levels of development. However, none disagree that there are apparent stages in a child's development. Through this research we can discern approximately where

a group of students the same age might be and use that knowledge to improve educational practices.

<u>Motivation</u>

Developing student motivation within the school community, whether it is intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, is also vital to education. Intrinsic motivation comes when we value something to a point that it acts as our incentive. We would all like the attainment of a good education to be enough incentive to motivate students. Pragmatic thought, however, leads us to conclude that no matter how much we would like that to be, it is most often not the case. In education, it is commonly believed that intrinsic motivation is something that students need to develop. I personally believe that it is sometimes necessary to use extrinsic motivators until students have developed the intrinsic motivation necessary to support higher educational goals.

One instructional motivation program that I have been introduced to is Jostens Renaissance. The Renaissance information declares that Renaissance is not a program but a process that encourages academic excellence, improvement, and citizenship. Target areas for Renaissance include: increasing student attendance, improving overall academic performance, increasing graduation rates, and creating a positive, safe school environment. In Renaissance schools, administrators have reported positive progress in areas such as: grades, test scores, attendance, and discipline. One of the standards of the Renaissance

program is the involvement of parents and local businesses through the use of recognition and rewards that recognize academic achievement and improvement (Jostens, 2003). This type of program not only provides for student motivation but it fosters an atmosphere of cooperation in the community.

Staffing for Instructional Success

Teachers in the school are responsible for the delivery of instruction and assessment. It is not the principal's responsibility to know the specifics of all the curriculum and assessment methods for every content area. However, it is up to the administrator to support this process in a way that will benefit the most students. Administrators need to be available for support and to build support structures for new teachers entering their buildings. Through this support new teachers can develop good habits of teaching and learning within their classrooms. New and more experienced teachers need to be provided with professional development opportunities that enable them to grow with society's diverse needs and technological advances.

Todd Whitaker (2003) has identified two ways to improve a school significantly. He says that a principal must first get better teachers. When hiring teachers successful principals must have a concise view of what they are looking for in a teacher. Hiring teachers that share the same philosophies and ideas as the school and its vision is necessary for continued success towards its goals. Pairing those new teachers with an experienced, effective teacher in a mentoring situation

can strengthen this tie to the school's vision. The second tool advocated by Whitaker is to improve the teachers that are currently in the school building.

Strong staff development and positive faculty meetings can help to meet this goal. All teachers want to do well and most will practice what they have learned. It is up to the educational leader to make sure that teachers are equipped with the right tools. My own experiences lead me to believe that strong professional development opportunities can reinforce a teacher's desire to be more than average. Professional development can and should leave the teacher with a feeling of excitement and a desire to apply what they learned. It is that excitement that improves teacher performance in the classroom.

Outside of the regular classroom needs, administrators should be cognizant of students' special needs whether they are learning disabled or talented and gifted. Opportunities for student growth need to be available both in and outside of the classroom. These opportunities may include but are certainly not limited to: athletics, student clubs, before/after school programs, tutoring, mentoring, and support groups. The more students involved with school programs the more likely students are to find success. Sometimes the motivation to succeed comes from outside the classroom, but that does not mean it stays there. That same motivation can transfer itself back towards the classroom and the opportunities provided there. The creation of a strong school environment can make that transference much easier and more successful.

Organizational Leadership

Building Organization

· Organizational leaders provide an effective, safe, and efficiently run

environment for their staff and students. They are knowledgeable about

procedures and issues relating to school environment. District leadership drives

many of the school's policies, procedures, and curriculum, but the principal is the

person responsible for communicating and implementing them within the school

building. State and federal governments also have guidelines governing

education that the principal must adhere to.

A policy that has been popular in many schools, but sometimes difficult to

have in the face of state standards and national legislation, is local control. This is

something that Iowa has tried very hard to keep despite the growing push toward

state mandated testing. Local control sometimes goes beyond that of district

control to building level control, especially in some of our larger, more diverse

school districts. A study on Chicago school reform (Phi Delta Kappan, Feb.

2000), shows significant improvements in student achievement with the

implementation of the district's decentralization plan. Of course, a critical factor

in this plan was quality leadership by the principals in the schools. A second

factor was the strength of the parent-dominated Local School Councils (LSC).

These councils had the power to hire and fire principals, were asked to participate

in parent recruitment, and played a significant role in obtaining assistance and

cooperation of area agencies. Thus, the spirit of communication and cooperation between the principal, school staff, and LSC was crucial.

Learning Community

With all of the regulations, legislations, and best practices to keep track of, good principals must organize their staff in a way that best supports the school. By doing so, potential problems within the school can either be avoided altogether or identified and worked through before they interfere with the local, state, and federal guidelines. A strong organizational structure also creates more of a learning community as opposed to a learning corporation. When people feel that they have a measure of control over what is happening in their environment they are more likely to make a strong, positive contribution.

The learning community I appreciate most at the middle school level is the teaming approach. A team usually consists of a teacher from each of the core content areas, the special needs teacher, and special teachers that rotate in and out as their courses are offered. This approach is not an easy one for smaller schools whose middle school teachers also teach high school classes, however, in the larger schools it fosters a small school atmosphere that can be very beneficial to students and teachers.

One study interviewed the director of the Michigan Schools in the Middle program at Central Michigan University, Peggy Gaskill. Gaskill says that teaming allows teachers from several disciplines to work with a defined group of

students, building personal relationships and a sense of community. She goes on to say that teams won't function well unless time is set-aside for teachers to do team planning (National Education Association, 1999). Providing for common planning time allows teachers to share ideas and strategies that can make a positive impact on students. This also allows for cross-curricular instruction with problem-based situations to facilitate student growth and understanding. Dana A. DeRouen (1998) supported the teaming approach when she said that forming family units, with a group of 100-150 students having the same group of core teachers, was an effective method for helping children cope with the isolation they may feel as they enter middle school.

<div align="center">Collaborative Leadership</div>

<u>Schools and Community</u>

Collaborative leaders work with the family and community members they serve in an effort to take advantage of its resources and interests in providing its children with a good education. They believe that schools are a part of a larger community and that the family is an important part of a child's education. Communication is a key issue for a collaborative leader. With our schools being placed in the media spotlight on a more regular basis, knowing how to communicate with the media is a skill a principal definitely needs to learn. Dianne Burgess (2000) advocates three rules of thumb when a principal deals with the media: keep the communication truthful, keep your public-information

office informed of any media dealings, and have faith in your employees. An

ongoing relationship with family and community members is built on foundations

of trust and honesty strengthened by the sharing of ideas. This communication

and cooperation is necessary to achieve high goals. As our society changes,

effective communication of education is becoming more and more important.

Collaboration does not just involve the school and its outside community.

Sincere collaboration also involves those working inside the school. Giving

teachers a chance to collaborate is an important tool in developing innovative,

constructive instructional methods in your school. The following is a quotation

by Whitaker (2003) that really brings home this idea of collaborative teaching and

learning.

> This collaboration among classroom teachers is one of the most basic
> and effective ways to improve instruction. Remember, our goal is to
> help all teachers be as good as our best teachers. A logical place to start
> is to give everyone a chance to observe and learn from quality. When
> we use our most effective teachers as positive role models, we multiply
> their productivity and help others maximize their talents. What's more,
> we raise the level of respect that other staff member have for our best
> teachers, which in turn enhances their influence throughout the school.
> (p.41)

At one time, society was inclined to implicitly trust schools to do what was

best, but that is rarely the case anymore. People are getting more involved and

more concerned as society and big business pay more attention to the educational

levels of its workers. Around the world, people are beginning to compare

educational systems for content knowledge, effectiveness, and growth. For

specific individuals or groups interested in staying involved with the educational process, the principal is the main contact person, beyond a specific teacher. If the relationship is to be supportive and effective it must be believed in and nurtured by all parties.

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leaders act with integrity and fairness as they support the success of all the students and staff under their control. They have the responsibility of helping people grow and develop to their full potential. In order to do this, they must give them the skills, information, tools, and authority necessary to act independently (Daft, 2002). Not everyone views the word *control* positively but truly effective principals believe that they are responsible for their school, thus they have some measure of control over what occurs even as they allow for staff and student independence. They understand the purpose and ethical basis of the educational system and value a diverse school community. Administrators must make many decisions on a daily basis. Some of their decisions are not black and white issues. In order to make some of the tougher decisions, they need to have strong moral and ethical principles to guide them.

Moral leadership requires many characteristics. Leaders must know themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, and what they stand for. They must have the courage to be nonconformists and to stand up for their beliefs (Daft, 2002). This can be difficult in a school system, whether it is large or small. In

both cases, school leaders face enormous pressures to get along, fit in, and be exactly like the model perceived as 'the best'. But often, leaders must take risks to achieve their best successes; sometimes trial and error must be used to solve problems. Courage allows leaders and principals, to act or direct others despite their own fears or uncertainty. When failures do occur, and they will, moral, ethical leaders will accept their own responsibility and create a plan for learning from it and moving beyond it.

The most effective principals will use their core beliefs to guide their decisions, distinguish right from wrong, and define a vision for their school. A principal having strong moral and ethical principles is only effective if those principles are acted upon daily. Fulfilling administrative duties while acting with integrity, commitment, and persistence will result in a supportive community. It may even result in administrators being given the benefit of the doubt when bad decisions are made (DeBlois, 2000). A principal, who doesn't 'walk the talk,' will not inspire others to do so. In fact, if a principal does not 'walk the talk,' it can cause a break down within the school community. Whitaker (2003) put it this way; everyone can remember a time when someone in a leadership role treated us inappropriately. No matter how long ago it happened, or how often that person treated us well, we don't forget that one time that they did not. Staff members who don't trust and look up to their leader will be uninspired and/or leave the school community for a better situation. Students will not perform to their

abilities and can often become rebellious. On the other hand, a leader who is fair, sensitive, and trustworthy can inspire excellence and that excellence, gained through the inspiration of a leader, builds careers. Principals are known and defined both in and outside their district by the success of their school.

<div align="center">Political Leadership</div>

A political leader is one who understands and is involved in all political aspects of education in an effort to promote the success of the students. They understand that education is the foundation of a democratic society and economically prosperous nation. In an effort to maintain the highest standards within their school community they stay involved in forming new policies and in using existing policies to protect students. These policies are communicated and used within the school to support good teaching and learning. The policies must also be communicated to the parents and community members as it pertains to them through the involvement of parents and community members in the educational process.

In an effort to foster parent/community involvement, schools have developed parent-teacher councils. These councils work with the school to accomplish a great number of things. The downfall of some of these groups, however, is that there is a lack of participation. It is up to the principal to foster these organizations and provide for a comfortable sharing of ideas that will bring more people into the group. Glass (1999) interviewed Amina Rachman, special

assistant to the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, who said that both schools and students benefit when parents know what is going on in school and can support the teachers. This sharing of information will actually work to counteract suspicion and negative reactions to what is happening in their child's school.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

Whitaker (2003) has identified characteristics of more and less effective leaders in his book that I have found especially accurate. He declared that more effective principals view themselves as being responsible for all aspects of their school. They see themselves as the ultimate problem solvers. I have worked with principals that followed this practice. They made a conscientious effort to stay involved with the school and the leaders they had fostered. The end result was a school and staff that remained connected by common goals. In schools with less effective principals, this connectedness was not present. Without this connectedness, fostered by a strong principal, schools tend to be just classrooms within a building. There is no team building within the school, let alone within the broader school community.

The time for passiveness in education has passed. Societal changes have increased the pressures that school leaders are facing. In our society, students are getting more diverse, businesses are demanding better trained, higher quality workers, and funding is remaining the same or decreasing. These changes have

resulted in the demand for higher standards and greater accountability (Neuman &

Simmons, 2000). Education has become more of a business in today's society

and the best wins. Because of this change, our educational system and its

leadership must follow suit. Unfortunately, the resources are not always abundant

and schools must do without some of the things that they may want/need to

provide the highest quality. In an effort to impact learning, leaders must inspire

their staff, students, parents, and community members to work together to strive

for the highest quality and quantity of educational opportunities.

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