

2000

## A vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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### Recommended Citation

Curtis, J. Lewis, "A vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay" (2000). *Graduate Research Papers*. 372.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/372>

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## A vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

The administrative leader not only has responsibilities for his/her own actions, but is equally responsible for the actions of many others including teachers, students, cooks, secretaries, teacher associates, and custodial staff. All of these workers are under the administrator's direct supervision, which makes it nearly impossible for him/her to know what everyone is doing, when they are doing it, and why they attempt to do it. However, what seems like such an enormous task is also the reason that administrative leadership is so exciting and challenging.

I will highlight what I perceive to be the critical elements of being an effective school principal. In doing so, I hope to share my values and philosophies of education, and share with you my vision of a quality school.

A VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,  
and Postsecondary Education  
University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

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by  
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May, 2000



Administrative leadership has become a monumental task. The administrative leader not only has responsibilities for his/her own actions, but is equally responsible for the actions of many others including teachers, students, cooks, secretaries, teacher associates, and custodial staff. All of these workers are under the administrator's direct supervision, which makes it nearly impossible for him/her to know what everyone is doing, when they are doing it, and why they attempt to do it. However, what seems like such an enormous task is also the reason that administrative leadership is so exciting and challenging. The occupation of school principal is under such an intense public magnifying glass that only skilled professionals and passionate educators dare enter the field.

I will highlight what I perceive to be the critical elements of being an effective school principal. In doing so, I hope to share my values and philosophies of education and share with you my vision of a quality school. My vision is

based on my years of teaching experience, growing up in a household of educators, my educational experience as a student, many readings and reflections, and my relationship with other professional educators. Certainly, there will be many roles and responsibilities of the principal that I might overlook, for it would be difficult to mention all of them. I will, however, share my belief that being a school principal is the single most invigorating and important job one can encounter.

### Responsibilities of Schools

When a child starts school, any time at the ripe old age of three or four, some parental responsibilities shift from the parent to the school (*in loco parentis*). Giving the child an education is the most obvious responsibility that the parent entrusts to the school. Many other areas of importance have become the responsibility of the school. Among these are nutrition, health and physical fitness, discipline, and sex education, as well as social and moral development. Our

schools are being asked to do more and more with fewer resources available to them.

Societal changes have confronted our youth at every corner. Single parent homes, which used to be a surefire way to failure, have now become the norm in our society. The number of single parents has reached a staggering 12.2 million as of 1996 (Coontz, 1997). Single parent families are certainly not the most prevalent problem which children face. Abuse, both drug and sexual related, are rampant in our society. Guns in the hands of children have not only become worldwide news, but have killed far too many innocent people. Increased hours in the workplace, lack of commitment to children, and not living up to parental responsibilities have added to the amount of time children spend at school rather than at home with their families. All of these things have placed a heavy burden on the shoulders of principals and teachers. Not only do we need to care for the children longer, but we must also attempt to answer their many questions and

concerns about their life and the future. Cracking through the shell of societal problems is no easy task and will certainly continue to be an obstacle well into the new millenium.

As Speck (1999) points out, "The principalship has evolved into multidimensional roles: leader, educator, manager, and inner person" (p. 5). It is important that the principal, as the leader of the school, understand these roles and perform them effectively. Under the principal's guidance, and with the expert work done by teachers, the school can accomplish its job of educating our youth.

#### Elements of Being an Effective Educational Leader

Being the educational leader of a school and community is an enormous responsibility. There are so many components that go into being a leader. Phillips (1992) sights many qualities and strategies that the great Abraham Lincoln possessed and incorporated during his tenure as President of the United States. Honesty, integrity, and compassion are some of the qualities that an effective leader should possess.



Circulating among the workers, being decisive, setting goals, seeking results, and influencing people are only a few strategies that leaders should incorporate into their routine.

As an effective leader, I will need to be a great communicator. I believe in the power of words. I believe that a positive word of encouragement or praise can go a long way. "The power of a thank-you (note or otherwise) is hard - make that impossible - to beat" (Peters, 1994, p. 28).

Building relationships is another vital component to being an effective leader. As a school principal I would build relationships with my faculty and staff, the students in our school district, parents and family members, school board members, alumni, the superintendent, and concerned community members. The ability to build an influencing relationship in which others will be willing to pursue a common goal is extremely important to the principalship. I believe that building these types of relationships would be a strength for myself as leader.

## Educator

The role of educator is one that principals with a strong teaching background cherish. I cannot imagine a teacher turned principal not valuing their role as an educator. Educating young children is the primary reason that I entered this profession. As a principal, my role as educator will be expanded to adults. Not only do I want to help children learn to become responsible young adults, but I want to help adults learn more about what we are doing at school.

I believe a critical component to being an effective principal is to be an effective evaluator of teachers and staff. Building on strengths and improving or eliminating weaknesses in curriculum and instruction are vital to the improvement of education. As a building principal, I will be only one of the instructional leaders for the school, but I will allow teachers "to use their instructional expertise and enjoy the opportunity to share in leadership" (Speck, 1999, p. 131).

In evaluating instruction, I do believe it is extremely important to get into classrooms and see what is happening. Informal visits of five or ten minutes is enough to show if quality instruction and learning are taking place. Quality dialogue between teacher and students, probing questions and revealing answers, and an atmosphere of peace and excitement for learning would be simple things I look for on a visit to the classroom. Of course, formal observations and goal-setting are valuable tools in the improvement of instruction and learning. However, I do feel that the informal drop-ins give you just as much to work from as the formal. "Seek casual contact with your subordinates. It is as meaningful as a formal gathering, if not more so" (Phillips, 1992, p. 26).

### Vision

Building a vision is another must in becoming an educational leader. The vision and mission of any school should be developed collaboratively by principal, teachers, staff, and parents. If this vision is built together it increases

its likelihood of becoming the central focus of the entire learning community. Once a central focus is established the pursuit of that goal or vision can begin. By having a vision that everyone can support, the school and community can work together in a cooperative effort with everyone feeling like they had a voice in the development of the vision.

### Manager

“Managerial competence is a clear expectation that districts, teachers, parents, and communities have of the principal” (Speck, 1999, p. 69). This statement should ring loud and clear to all school administrators. The ability to plan and organize work, scheduling classes, handling disciplinary matters, and preparing for the unexpected are vital to the success of a school principal. Once managerial organization takes place, leadership can emerge and be valued by teachers, staff, and community. Without the managerial organization in place, the principal will simply be seen as unorganized and ineffective. Followers will be hard to find if this occurs.

I believe that there are two primary responsibilities of a principal as a manager. One is to develop recurring systems that make a school day, week, month, and year flow smoothly. That is, schedules and systems must be in place for jobs to be accomplished quickly, easily, and cooperatively. Secondly, a principal must be able to “fly by the seat of his pants” when unexpected situations arise. Problem solving and decision making skills are critical for the long-term success of a principal and a school community. In order to achieve both of these, a principal needs a strong support system including his/her teachers, his/her students, his/her parent groups, and his/her own family. “Trust in the principal’s managerial skills is crucial to the learning community environment” (Speck, 1999, p. 73).

### Inner Person

The inner person is the final piece of a successful principal. It is the part that only the principal can judge for him/herself. Acting ethically and honestly, practicing good

habits for health, keeping a sense of humor about the world, and balancing his out-of-school life are essential to developing a successful inner person. All of the facets of the principal as leader, educator, and manager mesh together to help form the inner person. The inner person is what allows the principal to truly enjoy his job and life. A principal who has little job satisfaction does not have his inner person firmly in place.

### Building the Learning Community

As a prospective school principal I believe that building learning communities is at the center of building successful schools.

“Schools should foster learning not only for students, but also for all adults in the community - teachers, staff, principal, parents, and others - creating a community of learners. Building a learning community is the most important and demanding responsibility of the principalship” (Speck, 1999, p. 4-5).

In building a learning community the principal not only enhances the relationship between principal, teacher, and

student, but he adds parents and concerned others to the mix. With united efforts from the entire learning community, schools can manage the problems that society has cast upon us.

In building a learning community the principal must understand that building a culture of collegiality and collaboration are absolutely essential. In order to do this a school organization needs to maintain its own health. The principal sees to it that this organizational health is established and maintained.

Organizational health is measured by many indicators. People in the organization must accept and focus on appropriate goals. Communication within the organization must be adequate, including both verbal and written forms. Collaboration needs to be used which will result in workers feeling like they are growing as professionals. This will create a cohesive staff whose morale is high and satisfaction is abundant. Teachers who are innovative and risk-takers will

be welcomed and encouraged. These same people will help in our decision making and problem solving. (Owens, 1998)

Parent groups are important in the development of a learning community. The ideas of parents should always be considered and valued. I see parents in my school building as being influential and collaborative with myself and my teachers. With the parents' collaboration, success for students is enhanced.

The vision that I have for my school is that it is a place where teachers, parents, and students all show mutual respect. There are conversations and open dialogue about teaching and learning. There is time to share opinions, beliefs, and values regarding education. There is a definite feeling of teamwork. Professionalism and the development of quality curriculum and instruction are at a premium. Questions are always asked about our practices. I see teachers reading about current practices and sharing their feelings and beliefs about them. I see reflection as a tool to open the door to discussions about



what is working and what might work. The community that I want to build is one where anyone who talks about the school refers to it as "our" school where "we" are educating children.

### Conclusion

Education is at a real crossroads in Iowa. There will be many building principals and other administrators retiring in the next few years, and with that comes the opportunity for new, young leaders to step to the forefront and assume an awesome responsibility of leading our schools into the 21st century. I am very excited to be nearing that opportunity. It is a chance for me to help improve the quality of our educational system. That task cannot be achieved overnight, but it can be done over time. Putting theory into practice, talking the talk and still walking the walk, and believing that you can make a difference not only in the lives of children, but in the lives of a community, state, and nation are the ideals that I am looking forward to pursuing as I enter into the field of educational administration.

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