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A vision for the administration of a secondary school : a reflective essay

Abstract

In order to keep a school running smoothly today administrators must be able to perform a wide variety of jobs effectively. The key role that any principal must play is that of a leader. The ability to lead determines how effective an administrator will be in carrying out all of the other roles. The leadership of a school's instructional program is an area in which the principal has perhaps the greatest potential to influence the largest number of people. Through this role one impacts all programs of the school.

A VISION FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF A SECONDARY SCHOOL:

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

———————

by

Steve E. Dodge

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In order to keep a school running smoothly today administrators must be able to perform a wide variety of jobs effectively. Some are more obvious than others. As a high school student one sees the principal doing only a few duties, such as introducing people at assemblies, monitoring the halls or visiting classrooms. As one takes on the role of being a teacher, more duties of the school principal come into view. One is soon aware of the principals role of evaluator and the principals role of organizing and running the school becomes more clear. What a principal actually does becomes even more clear as one begins courses in educational administration.

The key role that any principal must play is that of a leader. The ability to lead determines how effective an administrator will be in carrying out all of the other roles. The leadership of a school's instructional program is an area in which the principal has perhaps the greatest potential to influence the largest number of people. Through this role one impacts all programs of the school.

As a beginning administrator, I will most likely start out in the capacity of an assistant principal. This in most cases means that I will be responsible for discipline in a school. For this reason I have included an emphasis on effective discipline. Discipline often sets the tone for the entire school. Two other areas of responsibility for administrators are curriculum and evaluation of employees. Both of which can be seen as ways to impact the instructional program.

Leadership

My view of a successful principal has broadened greatly as I have progressed through the masters program in administration. I began by viewing the principal primarily as a disciplinarian, now I see the added roles of visionary leader, instructional leader, curriculum coordinator, and evaluator. The primary impact of the masters program for me has been to open my eyes to the many jobs that a school principal must do in order to be successful. The key to carrying out all roles successfully is leadership. This is also one area which has changed greatly in the last few decades. School administrators traditionally relied on the hierarchal style of leadership. Today in order to carry out the many roles of an administrator one must become what is called "a 'strategic executive,' a leader who appropriately blends vision, appraisal, and action" (Guthrie & Reed, 1991, p. 1). One must be able to appraise conditions both internal and external to the organization and than choose courses of action which fit with the organization's vision. In order to have the support system needed to make the tough decisions one must involve others. In order to reach all students one must involve others and in order to build a team concept in a school building and district one must involve others. To gain the needed involvement a new leadership style is required. Today's school administrators must be collaborative leaders. The traditional hierarchal leader will find his or her style coming up short when facing the many challenges of maintaining a successful educational program

today. There is too much to know and do. A leader needs to draw upon the resources of all school personnel and community members by becoming a collaborative leader.

Stephen Covey's (1989) goal of achieving a win-win situation whenever possible fits with the goal of being a collaborative leader. The Institute for Educational Leadership has issued a list of the qualities and skills of collaborative leaders. This document provides key guidelines for effective leadership. In order to be a collaborative leader one must listen and communicate effectively throughout an organization and into the entire community. Bridges must be built between the school and a variety of community organizations in order to find solutions to the difficult issues many schools face today. Such coordination of community services requires vision. Collaborative leaders must be able to see the opportunities presented and be able to take advantage of them. Collaborative leaders are also motivational and empower others to pursue the organizations vision. In order to build a commitment to a common vision collaborative leaders must be skilled at group processing skills. They must be able to improve communication among different groups of people and get them involved and committed to the group's vision (The Institute For Educational Leadership).

If an administrator is an effective leader, that administrator will be able to move the school to become effective at carrying out its mission and satisfying community goals for their educational system. All the knowledge in the world will not make a difference if an administrator could not put that knowledge to work. Knowledge of good practices is

certainly necessary to guide the effective leader but knowledge cannot do it alone. Leadership must exist in order to put ideas to work. Therefore, I feel that leadership skills are the glue that binds together, in a useful form, all the knowledge needed for carrying out an effective principalship.

Instructional Leader

The duties of an administrator varies by school also. My first two years of teaching were at a large urban high school. From my experiences there I did not see the principal as an instructional leader. Each major subject had department heads who performed the role of instructional leader. Plus, there were subject area specialists who advised all teachers of a particular subject throughout the district. With such specialized staff the principal's role as instructional leader was much more limited than what I see the principal doing in the school I am teaching in now. This school is about a third of the size of the first high school. The district does not have department heads or specific subject area specialists to guide teachers. In such a situation I see the principal's role as instructional leader being much more important. I am sure that the principal in the large school gave some instructional guidance to the department heads in their weekly meetings, but at a smaller school I see the principal as having much more of an impact on what is taught and how things are taught.

After taking classes in educational administration my views of the principals role as instructional leader have changed the most. I feel this is because so much of how a principal influences instruction is done

behind the scenes. Through the hiring of staff, the scheduling of students, the evaluation of staff, and the simple act of putting an article about a new teaching method in a teachers box, principals are having some impact on instruction, yet their role is behind the scenes.

I have gone from not recognizing the principal as an instructional leader to seeing it as perhaps the most important role of principals. By encouraging, engaging, and stimulating instructional techniques, administrators can influence the school climate, discipline, school and community relations, and exhibit a clear vision of leadership. This relates to why I intend to become a high school administrator. When one does the job well many lives are impacted. If the principal is a successful leader more students will leave high school with a strong interest in learning and a respect for education which they will pass on to their children.

<u>Discipline</u>

One does need a knowledge base in order to use one's leadership skills. Through the course work in this master's program, I have gained insight and developed visions of what I see as effective strategies for carrying out the many roles of the principal. The role of disciplinarian is seen by most to be an important role of the principal, especially in schools which do not have much discipline. Student discipline has an impact on all aspects of the school. Before learning can take place the proper environment must be in place. Students can not hope to have education as their primary goal in a school in which they fear for their lives or are continually harassed.

The school administrator can have a major impact on discipline in a school. The way discipline problems are handled can set the tone for the entire school. Discipline is especially important to beginning administrators since many will start out as a vice principal in charge of discipline. Administrators must be knowledgeable about current trends and successes in running an orderly school. By keeping a handle on student behavior, a learning environment where all students can succeed becomes much easier to achieve. The first step in establishing a well disciplined student body lies with the school environment. There is a growing body of research showing that the primary determinant of the effectiveness of a discipline policy is a healthy relationship between school and student (Gushee, 1984). Lufler argues that, ... "the debate over discipline has been guided by an incorrect analogy between school discipline and criminal justice" (as cited in Gushee, 1984, p. 2). Such an analogy has caused schools to blame students for problems which in many cases may originate in the school environment. Gottfredson and others, studying six middle schools in Charleston, South Carolina found that students lost 7,932 instructional days to in-school and out-of-school suspensions in a single academic year (as cited in Gaustad, 1992). In this case the punishment may have actually impacted education more than the crime. In analyzing data from over 600 secondary schools in the United States Gary Gottfredson and Denise Gottfredson found that the following school characteristics were associated with discipline problems: Rules were unclear or perceived as unfairly or inconsistently enforced; students did not believe in the rules; teachers and

administrators did not know what the rules were or disagreed on the proper responses to student misconduct; teacher-administration cooperation was poor or the administration inactive; teachers tended to have punitive attitudes; misconduct was ignored; and schools were large or lacked adequate resources for teaching (as cited in Gaustad, 1992).

After reviewing dozens of studies on student behavior Daniel Duke finds similar patterns. Duke notes that orderly schools balance clearly established and communicated rules with a climate of concern for students as individuals and small alternative schools often maintain order with fewer formal rules and a more flexible approach to violations than large schools typically have (as cited in Gaustad, 1992).

<u>Preventative discipline.</u>

The research shows that school climate and available school activities have a profound positive impact on school discipline. Effective school management has moved from the principal being the stern enforcer to the principal being a facilitator of teacher initiated discipline throughout the entire building. Today, well-disciplined schools would rather "catch students doing something right" than catch them doing something wrong" (Heller, 1996, p. 2). Common sense and some research promotes the argument that prevention is the best method of improving school discipline. One of the most effective forms of prevention is to just "...make sure that every child and teen is in contact with adults who care about them, who mentor them and who help them connect to society..." (Sautter, 1995, p. K12). Schools have tried a wide range of intervention strategies to accomplish such a goal. Students

must feel that they have an attachment to the school. When students are involved with the school and find it enjoyable and interesting discipline problems are reduced dramatically. Schools with successful intervention programs have a wide range of activities which are available and can be applied to best fit the needs of the student.

One example of successful intervention strategies can be seen at Monroe-Woodbury Senior High School in Central Valley, New York. The school has implemented a wide variety of programs. An Anger Management Seminar helps students find appropriate ways of dealing with anger. Their Human Understanding and Growth Program (H.U.G..) covers adolescent development and focuses on decision-making skills. The Partners Acting as Instructional Resources Program teams faculty members with students who are having problems with school. Student conflicts are dealt with through a peer mediation program where student mediators work with faculty facilitators to reach a solution. Guidance counselors, a social worker, a psychologist, a student assistance counselor and a nurse practitioner all work together to offer students counseling opportunities and monitor students who might need assistance. Having such a variety of options for students to turn to, offer programs that fit many needs. Further, the school conducts a periodic review of its discipline code with students, parents, staff, and interested community members all serving on the review committee (Heller, 1996). Staff development is used in the school to make current information on student management available to employees. Student awareness sessions are held as workshops for the entire school on acceptable

problem-solving alternatives. To reinforce the schools commitment to a safe environment the staff make themselves visible.

Getting to the heart of the problem.

Studies of successful discipline programs reinforce what Monroe-Woodbury Senior High School is doing. Multiple studies call for the need of clear behavior standards which are developed with student and community input, adequate adult supervision and presence, partnerships with outside agencies, and a student support network with staff members who have a clear understanding of their role.

Another example of what schools can do to get to the root of discipline problems rather than just treating the symptoms is a pilot counseling program called "Beat It" at Menchville High School in Newport News, Virginia (Gorton & Thierbach-Schneider,1991). Any student who was assigned in-school suspension was either assigned to an experimental group, which went through the trial counseling program, or a control group which received no counseling. The counseling sessions were aimed to help students get more direction, purpose, and meaning in their lives. Topics addressed included such things as self-confidence, setting goals and developing plans of action, making students feel worthwhile, developing enthusiasm, and helping students find areas of their life which they need to work on improving. The results of the trial showed the value of such counseling sessions. After 27 weeks the students from the control group were 15 times more likely to be referred to the principals office for discipline problems, 13 times more likely to be returned to in-school suspension, more likely to be

suspended out of school and more likely to repeat the same behavior which got them put into in-school suspension in the first place (Gorton & Thierbach-Schneider, 1991).

Such programs play an important role in getting at the cause of the discipline problem and helping students to deal with what is causing them to act out. Administrators should seek to diagnose the causes of discipline problems rather than just addressing behaviors which are symptoms of a larger problem. The time and effort expended in diagnosing and working for solutions to the causes of discipline problems will be great, but one must consider the alternative of continued time spent dealing with the same discipline problems over and over again.

More punitive forms of discipline.

Once a positive and supportive school environment has been created the school should see a reduction in discipline problems. There will still be some students who continue to disrupt the education process. The cause of the problem for such students may be the school structure or home environment. An alternative school or a school program emphasizing career preparation programs may address these student's needs. Administrators have a much more difficult time effecting a student's home environment. This is where school and community agency partnerships become valuable. The administrator might be able to see if the student's parents are getting the social service support they might need. Some students though will continue to create problems. The goal of the nonpunitive measures mentioned is to reduce the

number of students who misbehave. For those students who continue to disrupt the educational process more punitive measures may be needed. This is where a school's discipline policy comes into play. The purpose of the school's discipline policy should be to inform students of their rights, responsibilities and consequences for not choosing to become a productive student. All students should be made aware of expectations at the start of the year and throughout each school year. A school's discipline policy is one part of such a process. It should inform the reader of the school board's discipline philosophy, place responsibility for policy enforcement and specify offenses and state their seriousness (Gushee, 1984). It is the foundation for ensuring fair and consistent discipline.

A variety of schools have created special programs to address increasing problems of violence. The best program is always prevention through strategies already mentioned, but when more drastic measures are called for several effective examples exist. At Henry Foss Senior High School in Tacoma, Washington, a zero policy against fighting was adopted in response to increasing violence (Burke & Hubert, 1996). Anyone fighting would be removed permanently from the high school. The policy was communicated clearly and often to students and parents. The policy was found to have a dramatic effect on violence at the school. During the 1989-90 school year, 133 fights or assault-related incidents were reported; during the 1990-91 school year 195 incidents were reported; and during the first semester of the zero tolerance policy, twelve

incidents were reported. The policy continued to have a lasting effect. During the 1992-93 school year, four incidents were reported and during the 1993-94 school year, three incidents were reported.

The previous example illustrates how a school might successfully deal with discipline problems as they arise. In order to prevent such problems from becoming larger than they need be a school should have plans in place to deal with violence and emergency situations. Every school should have a comprehensive plan in place to deal with violent situations. Students who have a history of violent behavior should be identified early and professional care for such individuals should be obtained. No one person can make a school safe. Staff, student, and community partnerships are vital to generating solutions to a school's problems. To plan for a safe school some initial assessment is needed. Heller (1996) suggests inviting in local police and the fire department to assess a building's environment for safety and security. Alarm systems, lighting, video surveillance of isolated areas and parking are all things which should be considered. In order to better control building access only one or two entry points should be established; other doors should be for exit only. Reports should be kept on truancy, fighting, weapons in school, drug and alcohol involvement, vandalism and other behavior problems in order to determine how best to spend one's resources.

Several steps are necessary for schools to effectively deal with the discipline problems they face today:

1. Focus on the prevention of problems. Every effort should be made to diagnose the cause of the problem and to find a solution.

Counseling programs may help students resolve some of the issues causing them to act out. Schools need to establish a caring and supportive atmosphere for all students. Some students may respond best to a different environment. Alternative schools or vocational education programs may address their needs. Others may be affected by their home environment. The school should try to help such students as best they can through counseling and working with community service agencies to address student problems.

  2. Have a clear and well known discipline policy which has been created with varied input, and is supported by the entire staff.

  3. Have tough punitive punishments for those students who continually cause serious discipline problems.

  4. Be prepared for the worst. All schools should have an emergency preparedness plan which has provisions for acts of violence.

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

  One of the first steps to establishing a well disciplined school is to have a school which has a relevant and up-to-date curriculum which meets the needs of all students. Meaningful change or reform in our schools must begin in the classroom. Change in curriculum has the greatest impact on student achievement. Lasting and successful change should involve the building of coalitions including parents, teachers, community members and administrators. Such coalitions help guide the change process through the politics of school reform. An administrator is vital in any change involving curriculum (McNeil, 1996). Often we overlook how an administrator can influence curriculum. Administrators

have an impact on curriculum through staffing, supervision, having an open mind, scheduling, and the allocation of resources that facilitate the enactment of curriculum. In order to effectively carry out these roles one must have an understanding of the current trends in curriculum. Today there is an emphasis on preparing students for the work place, blurring the distinctions between subject areas and adding certain outcomes which all students must meet.

Tech Prep And School-to-Work

One reform which is at the forefront today is Tech Prep and School-to-Work. Both come from federal legislation passed in the early 1990's. The goal is to better address the needs of the 62% of high school graduates who don't go on to a university after high school (Dutton, 1995). Guidance counselors are key people in both programs. They help students early in their high school years to choose a career cluster and pathway. Once students have chosen their career pathway they begin to explore that career cluster as a part of their high school curriculum. One of the keys to implementing a Tech Prep and School-to-Work program is articulation between high school and post-secondary school programs (Cuetara, 1995). In order to make the curriculum relevant, partnerships between the school and businesses are vital. I see such programs as being very promising. They will help to make high school more relevant for many students who are left out today. I am concerned that with such an emphasis on career education we might

forget the citizenship function of schools. Schools serve a variety of purposes and anytime we place too much emphasis on one we risk compromising the others.

Interdisciplinary Teaching

Schools everywhere are blurring the lines between subject areas. The strong emphasis on separate subject areas at the high school level make interdisciplinary and integrated teaching slower to catch on. The Tech Prep and School-to-Work movement is moving curriculum in this direction. Curriculum is centered around career clusters rather than the traditional subject areas (Banick-Wacker, 1995). Many schools have also begun to explore some problem or topic with each subject area contributing to the understanding of the overall topic. The key to moving in this direction is to get a few interested teachers started and have the others follow as they see the successes.

One thing that Tech Prep and School-to-Work and interdisciplinary learning have in common is applied learning. In order to appeal to a variety of learning styles one needs to vary instructional methods (Armstrong, 1994). Applied learning is learning by experience. Studies have proven that the most lasting learning comes in this form. If this is the best way of learning the next step is to determine what to teach.

Outcomes-Based Education

Many school districts have been establishing outcomes which all *students must achieve. The purpose of such outcomes is to determine* what is to be taught. The process has generated some controversy in certain communities. The ideas behind Outcomes-Based education

would not be objectionable to most people. The goal of OBE is to set specific goals for student learning and testing to help students meet set goals (Fitzpatrick, 1994). The objections come in deciding what will be the desired outcomes. In order to effectively use OBE, educators must build community support for the outcomes (Chion-Kenney, 1994). They must come from a grassroots level.

Clearly there are a variety of movements in curriculum today, as always. The current trends seem to stress career based education and applied learning most. The best course of action I feel is too take parts of all ideas and create a system which best addresses the needs of one's students.

Evaluation

One of the most effective ways that a principal can ensure that new curriculum methods are being experimented with and implemented to meet changing student needs is through the evaluation process. Most of the evaluators I experienced felt as if it was something that had to be done, none seemed to enjoy doing it, and none seemed to do it effectively. In my experience the process focused too much on the districts checklist and not enough on continual improvement. We all want to see everything checked as exceeding district expectations, but many times if this happens I think it is the evaluators way of avoiding having to provide evidence as to why one category may still need work. This is especially true for successful teachers. I have made entries in my journal noting that the evaluation process would be much more meaningful if the administrator had the teacher think more reflectively. I always thought

that having the teacher setting goals and evaluating their progress would be a major improvement in the evaluation process.

<u>Theoretical Background</u>

I feel most comfortable with the Developmental and Reflective Models discussed in Pajak (1993), particularly the model of Costa and Garmston. Pajak states that Costa and Garmston "... concentrate almost entirely on the practical matter of how supervisors can guide teachers toward conscious understanding and control of their actions in the classroom to attain desirable learning outcomes for students" (as cited in Pajak, 1993, p. 234). I view evaluation as a tool for improving teaching first and evaluation second. There is little in a school which would have a bigger impact on kids than to help all abilities of teachers in a building improve instruction. In most cases the teacher knows what they need to work on. They just need encouragement and direction. The evaluation process is a key opportunity for such support.

<u>Trust</u>

The first step an evaluator should take is to build trust. One must have a trusting relationship in order to work cooperatively with teachers on identifying areas for improvement. When an administrator has not built a trusting relationship with his or her staff, the staff will be suspicious of the administrators intentions. This is especially true when an administrator has removed teachers whom he or she saw as being ineffective. Every effort should be made to remedy a teacher's ineffectiveness. If one fires someone they not only ruin someone's career, they also burn many bridges. Many staff members will not feel

the same way about that administrator ever again. Active work at remediation demonstrates to the staff that the administrator is committed to helping everyone reach their highest potential. If remediation does not work, one has only built a better case for use in dismissing that teacher.

Involving Teachers

The key to successful teacher improvement is teacher involvement. Collaboration is a key word today, that also applies to evaluation. The best way to sell an idea is to get the stakeholders involved in forming that idea. This is where a professional improvement plan comes in. Each year teachers should fill out a plan listing what key areas they want to work on and their plan to reach set goals. We spend time setting building and district goals; there is no reason why those most close to students should not set goals and have improvement plans. The key to such plans is to have the teacher create the plans. Change is only going to come if the teacher decides to make the change. If the teachers create the plans themselves and the administrator shows that he or she is going to hold them to such a plan, improvement will be made.

Too many times the evaluation process becomes a low priority for administrators. Yet it can have a great impact on students by improving instruction. By involving the teacher more and making the evaluation process more reflective, the process can be made more meaningful. If teachers are encouraged to critique themselves and seek ways to improve, the quality of education will improve. One cannot force someone to do something. If one is able to get that person to see that they need to change than change will come much more easily. Such a

system of evaluation will be especially valuable in getting effective teachers to continue to stretch their potential and recognize their high quality. We can all improve on what we do.

Vision of an Effective Administrator

What is an effective administrator? This is a key question which all administrators should be able to answer. The answer should be the goal that all administrators strive for. I see the effective administrator as someone who is able to create a trusting, supportive and collaborative learning environment. Just as there is a blurring of the lines between different departments in curriculum today, there should be a blurring of lines between the traditional role of administrators, counselors, teachers, community members, parents, and students. In the classroom of the future the teacher will not always be the one doing the teaching. The "teacher" may be a community member, a person from another country speaking to the class over the internet, or the students themselves as they discover knowledge under the direction of a teacher. Roles are changing. The role of the administrator is changing also. Building on the idea that it takes "a whole village to raise a child", the administrator will need the collaborative leadership skills to bring a variety of community resources together to form an educational program which meets the needs of the community and which has the community support needed for success. Curriculum must be developed which will meet the needs of the future and address the needs of all students. Teaching methods which meet all learning styles will need to be common place ensuring that all students are involved in the learning process.

Such changes will help work to prevent much of the disruption caused by the students who are not at school to learn by interesting such students in the educational process. The administrator of the future will not just punish students but will seek out the causes of their actions in order to gain more long term solutions. Community service agencies will be brought in to team with school personnel in trying to stop cycles of behavior and actions which continue to destroy families' and children's futures. The future administrator must have the skills to bring such diversity of solutions together into an effective educational program. The true challenge rest with getting others to see one's vision and also realizing what contributions others can offer in coming up with a common vision for a school. Those who succeed will find their rewards in the many lives which will be improved. An effective administrator has the opportunity to impact the lives of every student that sets foot inside the school.

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