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A preferred vision for leading secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

The role of administrator, when done successfully, is a difficult and multifaceted one. It involves fulfilling many different duties with many different groups simultaneously. Educational leadership is a balancing act of the day-to-day and the unexpected emergencies, of the mundane and the exceptional, of management and progress. This task would be difficult to accomplish by a team of professionals, let alone by one person. We all have our talents and abilities in certain of these areas but a successful administrator needs to be competent in all of them and be able to balance them effectively.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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Entering the world of education was not the path I had planned for myself in high school. Unlike many teachers I have talked to I had no plans of setting foot in a high school again once I had graduated. It wasn't that I had a bad experience in high school; I really enjoyed school and was successful at it. The thought of making a career out of education had never crossed my mind. During the fall of my senior year in high school I applied and was accepted to the Iowa State University School of Design. I was going to be an architect. However, as the end of my senior year approached I began to think about the teachers I had along the way. It became clear to me what a great impact the good ones made and the damage the bad ones could have on young minds, talents, and ambition. Even in my school experience, as good as it was, there were far too many of the later kind. This was when I decided to make a change. I wanted a chance to become one of the good ones. Each day that I go to work I strive to accomplish that goal.

My philosophy on education and being a teacher is fairly simple and can be broken down into a few statements of belief. First of all, teaching is a lifestyle, not a job. Teachers are under the watchful eye of students at all times and in all situations. One of the most important lessons secondary teachers and leaders teach is how to be successful adults. This means teaching life skills such as responsibility, patience, teamwork, fairness, and many other skills necessary for a successful transition into adult life. Students learn these skills faster by watching them modeled by adults than by simply being told about them. The same is true

for educational administrators. Administrators and teachers alike must be models of the traits of successful adults at all times if students are to learn and develop these skills.

The second statement of belief is that we must do everything we can to offer every student the opportunity to develop these skills. However, this does not mean we can force them to develop them. We must also give every student as much opportunity to succeed as we can. However, this does not mean we can force them to succeed. At the secondary level students have much more control over their success in school than ever before in their lives. Part of this belief involves the teaching of personal responsibility. At the high school level we must require and allow students to practice this skill. If we do not allow and require them to practice personal responsibility in the “safe” environment of high school, they will not be equipped with this skill when they enter the real world.

Administrators have a role in this process as well. The school environment and structure needs to be set up in such a way as to encourage students to develop these skills.

The third statement of belief is that there is no replacement for involved parents and families in the education process. From my experience, involved and concerned parents are the number one predictor of student effort, involvement, and success. School officials that think the school can replace the parent are fooling themselves and are taking a very important factor out of the equation.

This factor should not be removed and can not be replaced by the school system. Teachers must work in partnership with parents to produce successful learners, students, and ultimately, adults. This partnership may not always be easy to forge but it certainly is in the best interests of the students and ultimately the larger world as it will produce a more educated and successful citizenry. Once again this is an area where administrators need to not only be involved but must take the lead.

I have tried very hard so far in my teaching career to put these beliefs into practice. My success in each has varied but my experiences have reinforced my confidence in the accuracy of these beliefs. They are not always easy to live out but I believe them to be very important to successful teaching.

My philosophy on administration is fairly simple as well. One of my main beliefs is that effective administrators were usually effective teachers. Some move out of the classroom and into administration because they were not happy with their level of success in the classroom. In order to be a successful administrator and to enjoy the challenge of administration, administrators need to have been successful teachers and have enjoyed their time in the classroom.

The role of administrator is just as much of an educational position as that of a teacher. The only difference is that administrators spend much of their time and energy educating adults. They must get faculty, staff, and parents on board and equip them with the skills and beliefs necessary to help their students, sons,

and daughters succeed. They must be just as adept in matters of educational theory and practice as they are in school management and policy.

The role of administrator, when done successfully, is a difficult and multifaceted one. It involves fulfilling many different duties with many different groups simultaneously. Educational leadership is a balancing act of the day-to-day and the unexpected emergencies, of the mundane and the exceptional, of management and progress. This task would be difficult to accomplish by a team of professionals, let alone by one person. We all have our talents and abilities in certain of these areas but a successful administrator needs to be competent in all of them and be able to balance them effectively.

As unplanned as my entrance into being a teacher was, my entrance into educational administration has been planned from the start of my career. Ever since I began preparing to become a teacher I have felt that the place I would eventually like to end up was in the principal's office. The principal of any high school has an amazing opportunity and responsibility to implement these beliefs in a school. The tone, culture, and environment of a building are set by its administrator. During my pre-professional preparation and my career as a teacher, I have experienced three different high school settings. Each had its own culture; each culture was a reflection of the leadership of its administration. If an administrator can instill these core beliefs into the school faculty and staff and get them to buy into the system set forth by the administrator, the school, the staff,

and the students will experience higher levels of success. I feel that the avenue of administration will enable me to make a positive impact on a school district and in so doing, the lives of many students.

There are several critical elements I consider essential for exemplary educational leadership. These elements are: a clear knowledge of oneself, the ability to engage parents in the education of their children, the ability to empower faculty and staff to become leaders in their school, and the ability to communicate effectively with diverse groups of stakeholders.

Knowing One's Self

The first critical element essential for exemplary educational leadership is a clear knowledge of oneself. This includes discovering, outlining, and reflecting on your own values, beliefs, priorities, strengths, and weaknesses. Self awareness also includes a commitment to continuously strive to achieve and maintain balance and growth in your own life. A principal must have a thorough knowledge of self in order to effectively balance the myriad demands that are placed on them and be able to move a school forward toward a shared vision.

Administrators can not predict each and every crisis or difficulty that will occur during the course of a year or even a day. However, administrators can prepare for the unpredictable. A clear knowledge of one's beliefs and the main values and principles that guide one's decisions can act as a compass. A compass is never disoriented; it always points in the right direction. In the same way a

clear understanding of one's own values and beliefs can also point toward the right answers in dealing with the gray areas of life. To go into a position of leadership in a school without a clear knowledge of one's self is a very dangerous proposition.

Organizational leaders will be faced with many decisions. Some have clear right and wrong answers, however, many are not resolved so easily. Without clear priorities and a value system in place these types of decisions can paralyze a leader. Not everyone will agree with every decision any leader makes. However if leaders are consistent with their decisions and those decisions seem to line up with a value system that is shared and supported by others in the organization they are more likely to accept even unpopular decisions. Humans also have a natural desire to please. The desire to see those around us happy is healthy, however as the saying goes, "you can't please everyone, all the time." Without a knowledge of ones own priorities and values the desire to please others can cripple one's ability to lead effectively.

Many authors have written extensively on the importance of self-knowledge both relating to educational leadership and in other walks of life. Diane Newell (2002) noted in her article "The smarter they are the harder they fall" that self awareness is both one of the most important qualities of an effective leader and an area of common weakness among these leaders. Newell notes that most leaders are adept at "tough skills" such as intelligence, analytical/technical,

determination, rigor, and vision. However, she argues they are usually weak in such “soft” skills as self awareness, self regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill (Newell, 2002). She argues that many leaders fail to reach their potential due to shortcomings in this area. Newell suggests that these skills are difficult for some to learn, especially those who have experienced a lot of professional success. She claims this is due to their lack of familiarity and comfort with the idea of failure (Newell, 2002). Newell suggests a coaching strategy for developing these qualities for those weak in self awareness skills.

A similar case for detailed personal and organizational awareness and planning is made by Carl Glickman in his article “The Courage to Lead”(2002). Glickman uses the analogy of Meriwether Lewis of Lewis and Clark fame to illustrate his point.

This (Lewis’s) insistence on detailed preparation is typical of many great leaders. They minimize the chances of failure through extensive planning and thus are ready to respond and adjust to the many unanticipated day-to-day problems that will occur en route (p. 41).

This idea of detailed planning is important in organizational planning but is just as important in personal preparation for leadership. Glickman describes Lewis’s extensive selection process for finding just the right crew members to complete his mission. In other words he was trying to determine if they were the right people for the job and if this job was right for them. If more prospective

principals did the same there would be much higher job satisfaction ratings both from the principals and their respective buildings.

As a final illustration of the need for self awareness and priority setting I journey outside the realm of educational leadership to draw from experts in personal and professional fulfillment in other walks of life. In his book, *First Things First* Steven Covey talks about the need for balance and self awareness. Covey argues that we must discover what is personally important to us and make time for those things in our lives. His book relates a lot to balance in life, balance between work and play, between urgent and important, between what we must do and what we want to do. (Covey, 1996) Rick Warren adds another wrinkle to this line of thinking in his book *The Purpose Driven Life*. Warren's book takes a faith based approach to effective leadership and life skills. In one chapter he describes the need to "know your shape" (Warren, 2002). Warren explains this as the idea that we all have God given talents, abilities, and values. To be happy in our lives we need to find a job that allows us to use them (Warren, 2002). A lack of awareness of these abilities and values or a failure to act on them, according to Warren, will leave your work life unfulfilled (2002).

I have already begun to implement strategies to make this critical element part of my professional life. The Lifestyles Inventory taught me much about myself. Tools like the LSI are valuable not only to prospective principals but to anyone who desires to learn more about themselves and where their preferences

and talents lie. After examining the results of my LSI, I am currently working on a personal and professional growth plan.

Prior to applying for my first principalship I will also write personal mission and vision statements to make sure I find a district that is right for me. Besides making sure my personal values and goals align with a prospective employers' I think writing this personal mission and vision statement will help me better understand and define myself.

Self awareness and a clearly defined value system fit into the Iowa Standards for School Leaders. They relate directly to standard one – visionary leadership. This standard states:

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

In order to develop, articulate, implement, and steward this vision, one must know oneself enough to make sure their beliefs align and are shown through in this shared vision. This starts with looking within and discovering the core beliefs and values which drive us all.

Parental Involvement

The second critical element essential to exemplary educational leadership is an awareness of the importance of parental involvement and the ability to

encourage and enhance this involvement. A successful administrator must understand the role of parental interest and involvement in the education of their children. The administrator must also be able to foster positive involvement from parents and insure that this involvement is creating positive educational and social results for students. In order to do this an administrator needs to understand and apply the results of valid research.

To think that the school and its employees are the only educational force in a student's life is preposterous. The educational decisions made by students are greatly affected by outside forces. A wealth of research conducted by hundreds of different researchers, in hundreds of places, at many points throughout recent history all points to the importance of parental involvement on student aspirations, attendance, effort, and level of importance education has in a student's life. Each research study that is completed adds to the mountain of evidence supporting these claims. The comprehensive findings of the past thirty years of research in this area suggests the positive effects of parental involvement transcend all ages, economic backgrounds, and geographic locations (Henderson & Berla, 2002).

Conducting a literature review of the current research in the area of the effects of parental involvement on student educational performance is a daunting task. The amount of research on parental involvement is massive. However, even a small sampling of the available research can offer a very clear view of the impact parental involvement can have. Two of the most respected names in this

area of educational research are Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla. Henderson and Berla have spent more than a decade publishing reports dealing with the positive effects of parental involvement. Their findings have become the basis of philosophical statements in many state departments of education.

According to the research of Henderson and Berla, students with involved parents are more likely to earn higher grades, take more rigorous courses, attend school regularly, have better social skills, graduate from high school, and go onto some type of post-secondary education (2002). Henderson and Berla have also determined that although the positive effects of parental involvement hold true for all races and economic backgrounds; white, middle class parents tend to be the most involved of all groups (Henderson & Berla, 2002). If this is true it follows that increasing the involvement of minority and lower socioeconomic parents may be an effective way to close the achievement gap (Henderson & Berla, 2002).

The process by which parental involvement influences student performance is not completely understood. Several theories have been suggested. J. L. Epstein has suggested that the parent's involvement conveys to the child the importance of education and thereby leads to higher student aspirations (Hong and Hu, 2005). Other researchers have proposed that children who perceive their parents as being highly involved might see themselves as a more competent student (Patterson, 1986).

To administrators, the mechanism by which parental involvement produces its positive effects is less important than the overwhelming evidence that it does. Clearly students with involved parents show higher aspirations, obtain better grades, and have fewer disciplinary problems (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002). The question of utmost importance as administrators then is "how do we foster positive parental involvement?" Some parents may not know how to get involved in their students' educational lives and may need assistance in doing so. Compounding this problem is the fact that many administrators are unsure of how to encourage effective parental involvement in the school lives of children (Vandergrift & Greene, 1992). This problem is particularly pronounced in high schools as parental involvement tends to decline as students grow older (Stouffer, 1992).

Some common reasons for lack of parental involvement include parents feeling that they have no ability to help or get involved, that they are unaware of the desire for their involvement, or that they lack the time or resources they feel are necessary to become involved (LaBahn, 1995). There are many ways to overcome these roadblocks to involvement. The most important element in any program designed to increase parent involvement is the support and encouragement of the principal (LaBahn, 1995). The role of the principal in this process can not be overstated. "Ultimate responsibility for creating harmony between the school and the home rests with the principal" (Campbell, 1992, p. 3).

To begin with the principal needs to understand the limitations of parents. Some parents may be more able to help in some areas than others. Some parents may be limited in time and resources due to their family situation. For example, a single mother or father working two jobs may have more difficulty making time for educational involvement than most two parent families.

Communication seems to be a key to improving parent – school relationships. Establishing an inviting atmosphere for parents makes them more comfortable and willing to become partners with the school in the education of their children (LaBahn, 1995). Once this rapport has been established between school personnel and parents, the parents experience less stress and anxiety about becoming involved in school events. When this occurs there are many possible avenues to increasing their involvement. Some common and highly beneficial ways to elicit involvement include having parents help with school fundraising projects or parent teacher organizations (LaBahn, 1995). This type of involvement offers parents the opportunity to work side by side with teachers and administrators and causes a feeling of ownership on the part of the parents in the education of their children (LaBahn, 1995). Asking parents to volunteer in various ways can have a similar positive impact. In addition to encouraging involvement in the school setting, many parents need encouragement and education on how to best help their students at home. Many parents might appreciate “parent education” classes of this type (LaBahn, 1995).

No matter the type of program set up to increase parental involvement two truths seem to stand out from the research. First, parental involvement of most any type is beneficial to students, parents, and the school as a whole. Secondly, the principal is the primary connecting force between school and home. As an administrator I will feel a great sense of duty to the parents and students of the school I serve. Principals must take the lead in establishing this very important avenue to increased student achievement. Creating, enhancing, and reinforcing parental involvement are certainly some of the most important current roles principals have.

Teacher Empowerment

The third critical element necessary for exemplary school leadership is teacher empowerment. No Child Left Behind has ushered in an era of ever increasing demands on teachers, administrators and schools, not to mention students. In this new age of accountability it is more important than ever for all team members to feel as if they can be leaders in creating positive change in schools. In order to accomplish this a willingness to empower teachers as leaders is vital. Furthermore, not only is it necessary to be willing to empower teachers as leaders, it is also critical that administrators know how to successfully empower their faculty.

Teacher empowerment has taken on many different forms under many different names. One form is called site based management. Site based

management is a decentralized form of governance that emphasizes empowering teachers and parents in educational decision making (Heck & Brandon, 1995). A similar method of teacher empowerment is shared decision making. Shared decision making is a less formalized version of site based management in which the principal attempts to bring democracy into the workplace by involving teachers in decision making (Heck & Brandon, 1995).

No matter the name or specific actions taken, empowerment movements center around the idea that when teachers are empowered to make decisions which affect the school they will be more satisfied with their jobs, more likely to embrace change, and become change agents themselves (Heck and Brandon, 1995). Paul Terry (1998) of the University of Memphis argues that teacher empowerment signifies a change in paradigm toward decisions being made by those working most closely with students.

The effects of teacher empowerment on student achievement are significant and real. They are also difficult to quantify in a simple chart, graph, or statistic. Teacher empowerment can have positive effects on student achievement in many ways. For example, a significant amount of research indicates that teacher empowerment along with things like collaboration and group problem solving indirectly result in higher student outcomes and educational improvement (Heck & Brandon, 1995).

When teachers are given the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies, and use professional judgment about what and how to teach, those teachers are going to be more likely to accept and promote positive changes in the school. Beyond accepting and promoting positive change in the school itself, teacher empowerment can have significant effects in individual classrooms as well. Teachers who feel empowered tend to have an internal locus of control. With an internal locus of control, teachers are more likely to seek solutions to situations that arise from day to day in their classrooms and the school (Terry, 1998). Empowering teachers creates a faculty full of creative problem-solvers with the self-efficacy necessary to believe they can cause significant positive outcomes in the school.

The question becomes how can administrators empower teachers to become leaders in their school? Several key components that lead to teacher empowerment have already been implemented in many school districts. One such example is professional study groups. Linda Lambert (2002) describes study groups as a chance for colleagues to read articles and discuss the implication of the texts' ideas for their school. Study groups may also convene to analyze student achievement data in an effort to improve instructional procedures (Lambert, 2002). Leadership teams are another good way to empower teachers as leaders in the school. Leadership teams are groups of teachers drawn from all areas of curriculum and instruction that assist the principal in analyzing data,

planning, advocating, monitoring, and implementing the comprehensive school improvement plan. Lambert (2002) argues that an integrated and thoughtful school improvement process is critical in increasing leadership capacity in teachers.

Other voices in teacher empowerment claim that teachers will become professional leaders when they are treated like, and made to feel that they are, professionals. Teachers should be held to professional standards of dress, mannerisms, and behavior. They should be encouraged to display diplomas and awards on their walls and these accomplishments should be celebrated. Items like professional business cards issued by the school can also add to the sense and image of professionalism among faculty members (Terry, 1998).

There are many ways to encourage teachers to take on leadership roles in schools. It is clear that all parties benefit from the results of empowered teachers. Teachers feel more efficacious both individually in their classrooms and as a group in the larger school environment. A school full of teacher leaders can achieve sustainable school improvement at a much higher level than schools whose only instructional leader is the principal (Lambert, 2002). The principal's role in this process is to provide leadership opportunities, expect excellence and provide the supports teachers need to achieve it, and continually look for opportunities to develop leadership capacity in all staff members. The principal

who can do these things and empower the teachers they work with will have a much larger impact on a school than they ever could have acting alone.

Communication

The fourth critical element that is essential to exemplary school leadership is communication. Communication is the ability to articulate, share, receive, and exchange ideas. The ability to communicate is certainly one of the most important skills an educational leader must possess. Without the ability to communicate effectively with diverse groups of people no administrator can succeed. Communication is the bedrock on which the current demands on administrators are built. Each and every one of the six administrator standards developed by the state of Iowa discuss, include, or allude to the need for the ability to communicate.

Steven Covey (1990) referred to communication as “the most important skill in life” (p.237). Covey argues that behind the physical need for shelter and food, the highest need humans have is to be understood through communication (Covey, 1990). In the role of school administrator this statement rings very true. Elaine K McKewan (2003) makes her position on the importance of communication clear in her book *10 Traits of Highly Effective Principals*. The first trait discussed in the book is communication. According to McKewan; “Successful principals are communicating virtually 100 percent of the time they are on the job – listening, speaking, writing, and reading” (p.1). McKewan (2003)

also states that communicating in appropriate, meaningful, and productive ways is the number one priority of a principal's job description (McKewan, 2003). A successful administrator can communicate effectively with teachers, students, parents, colleagues, and others on an individual level and also in small or large groups.

A lot hinges on what messages a principal sends out. What administrators say and do communicates an image of who they are as well as what they believe and value (Hensley & Burmeister, 2004). In addition to the importance of the messages a principal sends out is the manner in which he or she welcomes, processes, and gives feedback to messages from others. Listening skills are just as important to good communication as speaking or writing (Irmsher, 1996). In addition to speaking, writing, and listening there are thousands of nonverbal cues that each person sends out every day. These nonverbal cues reveal just as much, if not more, than the words one uses about the intent and feeling behind the communication. Phyliss A. Hensley and LaVern Burmeister (2004) put this idea very succinctly when they wrote: "When we probe further and ask [aspiring administrators] to describe great communicators, they tell us they are not only good writers and good speakers, they are honest, trustworthy, and credible individuals" (p. 30). Much of what Hensley and Burmeister are referring to is the ability to build trust through communication. Through verbal and nonverbal messages sent, and the ability to listen actively and honestly to others,

administrators can establish credibility and an environment of trust, respect, and collegiality among their staff.

With all of the evidence that points to the importance of effective communication in leadership it is no surprise that an entire industry has been built upon the ability to teach leaders how to communicate effectively. One could fill a library with the articles, books, and other resources available on the subject. Amidst all of this literature there are some simple truths that appear time and time again.

Great communicators must attend. Attending means being fully attentive to those with which one is communicating (McKewan, 2003). Too often people multitask while listening to another person. Things like rustling papers, checking a pager, or anything else that divides ones attention should be avoided. According to McKewan (2003), the most effective communicators are able to make those with whom they are communicating feel as though nothing exists at this time but them and what they are trying to say.

Great communicators must listen. Listening is much more than hearing. Hearing is a biological function while listening implies action on the part of the listener. Listening to another authenticates their importance and fulfills their need to be understood and appreciated (Irmsher, 1996). Active listening is a process that includes not interrupting, avoiding the temptation to rehearse the next thing you want to say, asking questions for verification, paraphrasing to demonstrate

understanding, and giving feedback on what was said (Irmsher, 1996). Empathy is another important part of active listening. Empathy is the ability to see a situation from the point of view of the one who is experiencing it. This can be particularly important when dealing with parents. Empathy can help explain why a parent may seem upset, angry, or out of sorts when discussing a particular issue. (McKewan, 2003).

Finally, great communicators must be able to adapt to different situations. Administrators are presented with a wide range of different situations each and every day. An adept communicator knows that differing situations, differing audiences, and differing topics require differing communication styles. Some situations and settings will require a more directive approach to communication while others will involve a greater degree of listening. An effective administrator needs to be able to read the situation and adapt their style of communication to what the situation deems necessary.

Communication is the heart of effective school leadership. Without effective communication skills it is impossible to fulfill the six standards of exemplary school leadership. Administrators would be well advised to continuously monitor the effectiveness of their communication skills, accentuate the areas in which they have strength, and consciously work to develop areas of weakness. Through honest reflection and dedicated effort an administrator can

improve their skills and use communication to build trust, relationships, and a brighter future for their school.

Conclusion

I believe these critical elements to be essential aspects of educational leadership in this day and age. There are certainly many other habits, traits, and behaviors that are also key to success in school administration. Throughout my tenure in educational administration I plan to build on my strengths in these areas as well as work diligently to improve in areas in which I am not as adept. Any prospective administrator needs to use critical elements such as those that I have identified to do an honest self assessment and reflection in order to do the same. The students of our public schools deserve no less.

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