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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: a reflective essay

Abstract
The successful school administrator needs to be a "finely-honed" instrument at the center of the education process. The administrator must be sensitive to needs of the entire efforts, as well as providing direction, vision, innovative ideas, support, reinforcement, and expertise for the complete educational effort. The unity of purpose in education will proceed as a team effort, knocking down obstacles and building outstanding educational competencies in the process.
A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
And Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

David G. Dreessen

May, 2000
This Research Paper by: David G. Dreessen

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Date Approved
Manager/Leader

Today's principal is much more than an instructional leader. The effective principal needs to be a good manager and leader. This is the first important role of the administrator. Glatthorn (1997) concludes that if school administrators are to serve as effective leaders of schools, they need to understand the importance of this role of the principal. Duties include clerical tasks, budgetary responsibilities, building maintenance, non-instructional monitoring activities, and general office duties. Being efficient in managerial skills helps in accomplishing these duties. Good school administrators strive to be effective managers. Chase (1997) states that principals are constantly participating in management activities to improve their facilities and programs.

There is a multiplicity of tasks and a wide diversity of functions for an effective administrator. Doud and Keller (1998) state that the role of principals in schools that enroll K-8 grade students is becoming more diverse and complex. A chameleon would probably be the best analogy for depicting today's successful administrator. As a chameleon changes colors and hues to match surroundings, today's administrator must be able to adapt to continually changing needs and roles within the educational community. Roberta Bernstein (1990) supports the belief that school administrators have to manage both the student population and the teaching staff in the school.
An effective administrator hires good people, and the best possible people in order to insure success. Understanding the requirements of the position which needs to be filled, and the multi-diversity of individual behaviors can greatly ease the stressors of being an educational leader. Many administrators are excellent at selecting staff, while others are not. If one were to ask colleagues about the chances for success of the administrators who could hire effectively, the majority would rule that success comes to the administrators who have the ability to hire good, effective, people. The effective leader needs to understand the nature of the open position, and be able to match prospective staff members to the demands of the position. Incorrectly filling a position with poor-choice staff members proves disastrous for the staff person, the administrator, and the learning community.

Making good selections of staff is essential for success. An effective administrator is knowledgeable about staff strengths and weaknesses. Recognizing the individual strengths of staff members and assigning positions appropriately results in success for the staff and the learning community in general. The individual teacher is comfortable, successful, and happy, which spells success for the total effectiveness of the school. In order for the administrator to effectively assign staff members, the administrator needs to be knowledgeable about the individual behavior styles of the staff, and possible extracurricular assignments, as well as the requirements of the position to be filled.
Principals need to be efficient. Making lists, agendas, and keeping time journals may help. Good managerial principals who strive to be effective do not get caught in daily office routine, discipline, paperwork, and telephones. Effective principals realize that school business of major importance is found not in the office, but in the classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, and cafeterias. The success or failure of the school is in the interaction of the members of the learning community.

Good administrators are approachable. Being a good school administrator requires that you keep the door to yourself and your office open at all times. Effective principals make themselves, “available”. The “open-door” policy Beth Whitaker (1997), supports this theory by stating that effective principals do not let themselves become isolated and insolated from the day-to-day operations of the school. Staff members need and demand the leader’s time and opinions. When the leader is not available, the leader’s effectiveness may be questioned. Effective principals must interact regularly with all the people in the school and remain visible and accessible. The availability of the administrator I see as a particular area needing my personal attention.

Being an effective manager means having access to good information. Effective use of knowledge and available technologies is valuable for an effective administrator. There is a tremendous amount of valuable information at our fingertips if we have the knowledge of technology to be capable of accessing the
data. In areas such as the utilization of the Iowa Communication Network, the ICN, and other related science technologies, I am very effective, while my actual computer skills are somewhat lacking. As with many educators, I have been slow to climb aboard the technology train. It seems to me that every day I missed out on technology training, added up to several years of lagging behind. I am personally very committed to the value of the use of technology in all facets of the school.

As effective managers, principals must make the school community function in the realms of budgets, schedules, staff assignments, hiring, evaluating, and firing personnel. Effective business skills, in the areas of organization, time management, establishing priorities, delegating authority, and problem solving is necessary for a successful educational effort. As an administrator, I see a definite need to continually hone my business and organizational skills particularly in the areas of planning and scheduling.

An effective administrator faces a large challenge in developing positive public relations with staff, students, community, and peers. More appropriately named the “forgotten” trait, effective public relations can bring many successful ideas into the school. Good public relations will include all media coverage of events happening within a school. Administrators want to be recognized with the school for positive actions that have been done throughout the school and the community. There are many positives that inevitably come from successful
public relations. The middle school where I currently teach has developed a reputation of being a troubled school. The current principal has attempted to improve this image through demonstrating the wonderful strides and positive programs of the school to the local media and business leaders. The result of the public relations effort has improved the image of the middle school with the students, staff, parents, and the community at large. Wagner (1995) states that focusing on school readiness, community partnerships, professional development, and the funding for school-based initiatives increases positive change. This positive “PR” pays dividends in the day-to-day operation of the school.

The starting place for all administrators when showing loyalty (fairness, equity) to the learning community and public relations is establishing a base system. By using the base system, rules, expectations, etc., and the public relations demonstrate to the public that you are an effective administrator. An administrator should not have an, “I know it all” attitude. Administrators need to be loyal to all stakeholders in the learning community. Loyalty means that you treat all situations fairly, legally, efficiently, and correctly. Loyalty does not mean you should hang yourself out to dry, such as participating in unethical activities, or risking embarrassment for being responsible for other people. Administrators need to maintain balance between being loyal and doing the right thing (C. Scott, personal communication, October 1999).
Parents, students, faculty, the superintendent, and other stakeholders will remember this loyalty towards them, and will return the actions. If a practicing administrator feels that a change is needed to make the system more effective, stakeholders may be more tolerant and agreeable to the change when the administrator has demonstrated loyalty. Beck & Hillmar (1987) say that principals who seek help with the decision making process are leaders, willing to work closely with teachers to implement change once it has been introduced by others.

An administrator will be able to assign staff members more effectively to positions and extra curricular activities, when familiar with individual behavior styles. The ability to quickly identify personal behavior styles, is a trait that one naturally possesses. Either you have it or you don’t! Placing a tenured, ready to retire, teacher in a physical education position, we would all agree, would not be a very practical move. Instead, this steadfast person should be placed in an environment where class control and discipline will be easier to maintain. Steadfast people are more apt to go along with the group, as they do not want to muddy the waters. A “greenhorn” should run the physical education class. The new teacher will handle the fast-paced action, and deal with uncooperative adolescents more effectively. Dominance behaviors run high with fast paced task-oriented activities, as they are strong willed, and better suited for this
environment. The correct placement of faculty members greatly reduces the need for dealing with the age-old problem of efficient time management.

Communication

Effective communication in the educational facility is of utmost importance. The spoken word is only a small part of the message from an administrator. The administrator's attitude, rapport with staff and students, parents, and the community is the essence of communication and takes many forms. Effective communication goes far beyond simple speaking and listening. Body language also conveys information. Good dissemination of information, as well as effective verbalization and listening skills, is very important. Communication also involves all staff regarding the input and receiving of ideas and concerns. Teachers must be aware and understand a great quantity of information. Without effective communication, hostility may result from a staff person who was not informed of a meeting or necessary piece of information.

An effective administrator needs to use understandable vocabulary that can be understood by members of the learning community. During my graduate study in educational administration, I was amazed at the broad range of educational jargon (vocabulary) used in the field. If we, as educators, could limit the jargon, perhaps administrators would be more understandable. Educators use this "jargon" so often, that the individual fails to realize that students, staff and the community at large, often do not comprehend the concepts.
Administrators would be better to listen more, and speak less. Teachers really want three items to result from communication: to be heard, respected, and understood. I am reminded of an adage that my father once taught me, “If God intended man to talk more than listen, why do we have two ears and only one tongue?” An administrator must remember there is a huge difference between hearing and listening. One can hear what another says, but listening is the understanding of what was said. The main reason for firing an administrator is because of poor communication skills (R. Decker, personal communication, June 1999). The best way for administrators to communicate thoughts, values, beliefs and purpose is to be good at listening and talking with people so that all information is understood. Communication in the school takes many forms, such as modeling behaviors, facial expressions, posture, bulletins, body language, dress, oral expressions, tone of voice, etiquette, and telephone manners, are just a few of the ways communication among people is accomplished. An example of the powerful communication of modeling is cited by Blase and Kirby (1992) in their discussion of the power of praise.

The writing of reports and bulletins is also important for the successful administrator. In the school setting, actions may also speak much louder than words. The teachers physically present in the office with concerns should have high priority. Informing staff, students, and parents of special events and changes to the normal routine in timely manners is necessary. Many teachers have morale
problems caused by inadequate advance warning of upcoming events through the office. In summation, effective communication is the second major pillar supporting the successful administration of a school.

Shared Decision-Making

The educational leader cannot accomplish the goals of the school without motivating the faculty into making shared decisions. A successful administrator motivates his faculty into taking ownership of the school. In the past, many people believed that the principal, as the instructional leader, bore the main, if not the sole responsibility, for the success or lack of success of the educational facility. The principal was thought to be highly educated, and paid extra money so policies, innovations, etc., were passed down to the faculty, and accepted without any opportunity for input. The principal’s role was to actively engage teachers who were otherwise seen as passive participants in the process of change and decision-making.

Currently, a principal handles problems by implementing action research teams. Allen and Calhoun (1998) define action research as a process of individual reflection on practice, as a process to support staff development in schools, as a collaborative process to support the leader’s professional development, and as a strategy to guide site-based school improvement. A steering committee and its based management bring faculty input to the administration in the building where I am currently teaching. The administration hears the voices of the stakeholders
and utilizes the thoughts and ideas collaboratively into an effective part of the school’s overall efforts.

I believe that principals are most effective when they manage the staff and model positive behaviors so that the school staff believes efforts are “we” rather than “I” policies. This philosophy embodies the idea that Americans in every corner of society want to influence decisions that will positively influence their lives. If the principal is effective in enlisting the support of staff in a plan, the educational team will likely make the ideas become reality.

Effective administrators are excellent in considering the interests of students, teachers, the school, and the District before making decisions. Principals who show strong leadership skills are more willing to work closely with teachers to implement change, which has been suggested by the decision-making team. Without a true understanding of the full system in education, change introduced in the name of reform may bring in untested fads that quickly fail (Ball and Goldman, 1997). Teachers working under a principal of this nature are certain to feel more comfortable and trusting of the principal and will be more actively involved.

An effective administrator must have an idea of direction. Plans or methods to achieve those goals must incorporate desired outcomes. The steps and procedures necessary to achieve specific goals must be considered and enumerated or the effort dies for lack of direction. The administrator is
responsible for ascertaining that timelines and procedures for achieving goals are developed.

The ability to recognize group dynamics helps administrators understand group roles, processes, consensus, and sources of potential conflict. The teaching staff must be allowed individual ownership in a school's shared beliefs to allow direction and purpose for the entire staff. As an administrator, I must realize that reaching a group consensus takes more time and patience than making decisions in a traditional top-down system. Being able to direct a group and establish a group consensus is an increasingly valuable and necessary requirement of a successful principal. In my administrative classes, I have learned that developing the staff as a team is an invaluable way to start shared decision-making.

As a team it is necessary to be committed. Every teacher needs to know in advance that policies will be decided by consensus and each person's ideas and beliefs will be respected. Knowing all this, the principal must remember to be patient. Losing patience may doom effective staff interaction. Assisting staff in solving problems and creating an attitude of "we can" is highly desirable. Allen and Calhoun (1998) stated the participants live the problem-solving process and model it for their students. The principal must delegate his authority to a select team of decision-makers. Allowing them to voice their oppositions and ideas will boost morale, and increased motivation may be an inevitable product. The select
team will conduct a disciplined search for alternative solutions, then take collective action, and finally monitor the success of the solution.

I believe trust is essential to effective shared decision-making. The principal must be able to gain the trust of everyone involved with the school, including the Board of Education. This mutual trust must include the Board members, as they can be of great importance restructuring to new systems.

The administrator must set the ground rules concerning shared decision-making in advance, letting everyone know appropriate roles. Each person must understand the difference between recommendations and decisions for effective shared decision-making. It is essential that individual members' concerns are acknowledged and that the necessary time be taken to deal with them as problems arise. Many teachers are frustrated after spending hours of time involved in a shared decision-making process only to have the recommendations overturned or never used.

In schools with a caring, trusting climate, administrators and teachers respect one another's actions and professional needs. All stakeholders work hand in hand to empower, support and reinforce one another.

I believe that making a mutual commitment to work by consensus and to base decisions on the best interests of the students are the heart and soul of shared decision-making.
Vision

Effective educational leaders must have a vision. Nearly all school districts have developed both vision and mission statements, Peel and McCurry III (1997). Personally, I think my vision changes, especially after finishing another graduate class. If schools are to thrive and flourish today, positive and inspiring visions must be present.

After much research I have decided that vision is the plan I have for my school, how I'm going to make this plan work, and the action of doing it. According to Peter Bishop (1998), Futurists have multiple visions of what is in store and also recognize the variables that impact the future. I'm slowly realizing that I have visions often.

Leaders know where they want to take an organization, and they are successful at taking the group with them towards their vision. A vision has power only for those who can see it, Peel and McCurry III (1997). Vision creates a sense that, no matter what the sacrifice involves, the effort is high priority. Vision and commitment cause others to work towards the vision because they know it is important, stimulating, and challenging. However, no vision can be realized unless it is communicated clearly and effectively. If organizational leaders develop a vision in isolation or do not understand their roles as communicators of the vision, then its power will not be realized, Peel and McCurry III (1997).
A good administrator cannot overlook the substance of a positive vision. The administrator believes the vision is beneficial and must be passed on to the whole learning community. We acquire personal visions based on our experiences and our set of values. According to Pell and McCarry III (1997), the most important role of the educational leaders today is to improve the eyesight of educators, parents, students, and community members, so they can see the vision of their school and District. Simply developing a vision is only the beginning; communicating that vision to others may be the most challenging. The vision becomes the energy behind every effort and the catalyst that prevails when faced with adversity.

The vision must change over time. Changes to the vision will occur because the administrator is a life-long learner. Keep the vision fresh and contemporary! Roll with the punches, but do not bail out too early! The administrator must be patient and allow for the vision to focus. Barth (1990) suggests that all educators have a personal vision about the way we would like our schools to be. The recognition that lack of patience is one of my downfalls will help me deal with the problem.

A great administrator must be enthusiastic and that enthusiasm must somehow be made attractive to the entire learning community. Speck (1999), mentions that the principal as leader has an important part in making a difference for the school now and in the future. My father has said, great leaders have two
characteristics: 1) they know where they are going, and 2) they can persuade others to follow! The vision that an administrator holds must be fair and unbiased to all. By being fair and knowledgeable, the morale of the staff will rise, increasing the motivation to work toward the success of the vision.

The administrator is responsible for making vision-building a collaborative exercise rather than manipulating people to believe in another’s vision. Building a collaborative vision with my staff, when I’m an administrator, will be very beneficial toward achieving success. Involving the faculty is the number one difficulty to successful visions. The faculty at my school will know in advance that personal input and involvement are two things required from all staff members. The staff will gain ownership in the vision, which will minimize the difficulties encountered in achieving that vision.

A mission statement may be defined as the vision one has for his/her school. Effective visions and organizational mission statements can’t be forced upon the masses. Rather, they must be set in motion by means of persuasion, Phillips (1992). The mission statement illuminates the paths toward the vision. The graduate students in Dr. Decker’s personal development class last summer were instructed to write their own mission statements. Mine sounds like this, “With this educational institution, all persons attending or working will be expected to perform and act in an efficient and professional manner.” The bottom line is, I want people who are willing to work hard, and have the perseverance to
see the vision be successful. Many times, people give up too easily. My vision statement will be fair to all and will never demand from people what I myself would not do.

Futurists have multiple visions of what is in store and also recognize the variables that impact the future, Bishop (1998). My personal vision is largely derived from my personal values and experiences. I realize now, that I have been driven by vision for many years. People need to make a move in order to see where they are going, Rallis and Zajano (1997). I knew I was going to UNI to obtain my teaching degree, and someday be an administrator at the secondary level.

I envision "my school!", and "the vision" I have for that school as exciting and positive! My vision at my future school has a faculty with a positive, winning attitude. The faculty is mutually supportive and willing to attempt innovations. The faculty must be sensitive to student needs, and be motivated toward a common goal. I firmly believe that anyone in a leadership role must have a vision and a personal set of beliefs for the entire educational community. The true leader is one who builds in substitutes for "follow me" leadership that enables people to respond from within, Sergiovanni (1992).

Conclusion

The effective school administrator may be characterized as the central hub of an "educational wheel" that encourages, supports, influences direction, and
ultimately carries the entire instructional mission. The school administrator recognizes that an efficient learning environment must be a cohesive "unified whole" which includes all members working in tandem in the school, NOT in opposition. The administrator recognizes and utilizes the strengths of all staff members. Each individual's contributions are recognized and applauded as essential portions of the entire successful educational effort.

As strength in the "hub" of this great educational effort, the administrator's importance is tremendous. With a strong, well-founded central core, the effective school administrator is able to support, guide, direct, and assist all facets of the educational effort. The hub is a foundation for curriculum, staff, innovation, PR, flexibility, teaching skills, evaluation, finances, and all the numerous aspects of the educational process. Sergiovanni (1992) suggests that leadership becomes less urgent and less intensive once the wheels of professionalism begin to turn by themselves.

The effective school administrator must hire good staff people and be able to communicate effectively with those persons. Further, the school administrator must have a positive attitude and maintain good rapport with staff, students, parents, and the community.

The administrator must have a vision for the learning center, and be able to communicate the vision clearly and concisely with an amount of flexibility which allow members to feel like each person has some ownership in the result.
Shared decision-making, i.e. involving staff, in formulating direction for the school, motivates and may encourage the "we" rather than "I" thinking.

The successful school administrator needs to be a "finely-honed" instrument at the center of the education process. The administrator must be sensitive to needs of the entire efforts, as well as providing direction, vision, innovative ideas, support, reinforcement, and expertise for the complete educational effort. The unity of purpose in education will proceed as a team effort, knocking down obstacles and building outstanding educational competencies in the process.


