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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Today's successful administrators fill many important roles that demonstrate educational leadership. First, administrators are goal oriented. They are visionaries with a set path for themselves and others around them. Administrators are also life-long learners. They believe in continual learning for themselves and others. At last, administrators need to be caring, collaborative, and supportive as leaders and decision makers. They need to be true advocates for the children within their buildings.

A Preferred Vision For Administering Elementary Schools

A Reflective Essay

A Research Paper Presented to:

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Master of Arts in Education

By

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It takes a special person to become an educator. Many people believe they can teach and work with children until they come to understand the large responsibility they have undertaken. Educators do so much more than just teach. They not only help their students learn, they also inspire. In today's society, educators are expected to counsel, parent, and attempt to instill morals within children from variety of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. My decision to become an educator came while I was working with children in college. I was amazed at how a child's mind worked. It was overwhelming to me that one person was not only responsible for teaching a child how to read and write, but was also responsible for providing that child with the skills necessary to succeed in life.

When it was time to begin my teaching career, my path led me to Houston, Texas. My goals sent me looking for diversity and culture, something that would be ideal for an educator from Iowa. I was looking for what the Webster Dictionary (1989) defines as, "An instance or a point of difference" (p. 225). Student teaching took me into a first grade English as a second language classroom and a general education first grade classroom in an inner city school. After student teaching, my first job was teaching second grade in an elementary building within the same school district. This school district provided the diversity and culture I was searching for. Yet, there were many challenges educators encountered on a daily basis. Several students in my second grade

classroom wore the same exact uniform everyday for weeks at a time, because they had only one uniform to wear to school. If a button fell off a second grader's pants, the only way for it to be repaired would be if the teacher sewed it back on. Some of the students would get very little sleep at night and would fall out of their chairs during a lesson because they were sound asleep. Students weren't allowed recesses during school hours because the school playground equipment didn't meet state safety requirements. Parent conferences weren't scheduled because too many parents would not attend. Students had mothers and fathers in prison that sent pictures as a way of communication. Even though these children were preoccupied much of the day with their lives outside of school, teachers were expected to teach as if there were no outside distractions. A child's home life was not supposed to be a factor in their daily performance in the classroom. Teachers were told if a child didn't learn in the classroom, there was no one to blame but the teacher. This put enormous pressure on educators within the building and school district.

After a year of consistently worrying about my students and over-planning my daily lessons, Iowa welcomed me back to education with its high priorities and true values. I began to realize how Iowa values its education and allows students to be kids. Teachers in Iowa are valued for their diversity and well-developed classroom culture. Different teaching and learning styles are appreciated, allowing staff and administrators to create safe classrooms conducive

to learning. I also began to understand how school administrators play such an important role within our schools today. How can one know what makes a successful administrator? Short and Greer (2002) state that the “best predictor of how a person will administer a school is how the schools where he or she was a student or teacher were administered” (p.63). Simply put, to find how an aspiring administrator will lead, one can simply look to the administrators that modeled successful leadership for them.

Today’s successful administrators fill many important roles that demonstrate educational leadership. First, administrators are goal oriented. They are visionaries with a set path for themselves and others around them. They have the vision of where they want their schools to go and a plan of how to get there.

According to Stephen Covey’s (1989) The Seven Habits of Highly Effective

People:

Vision is the fundamental force that drives everything else in our lives. It empowers us with a sense of the unique contribution that’s ours to make. It empowers us to put first things first, compasses ahead of clocks, people ahead of schedules and things” (p.86).

Administrators are also life-long learners. They believe in continual learning for themselves and others. At last, administrators need to be caring, collaborative, and supportive as leaders and decision makers. They need to be true advocates for the children within their buildings.

Goal oriented administrators follow many of the same principles of Stephen R. Covey's The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. First, goal oriented principals are individuals who take the initiative, respond to questions and concerns, and make things happen. Administrators must be willing to take the lead within their buildings. They must be the type of leader that decides to create new programs, when the ones within their school building are no longer effective. According to Peter Drucker and Warren Bennis (1989) within the book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things. Management is efficiency and climbing the ladder of success; leadership determines whether the ladder is leaning against the right wall" (p. 101). Administrators must not be afraid of change, but need to learn to embrace it. At the same time, once these changes begin to occur, administrators should be ready to intelligently answer the questions staff and community members may have about the change. Above all, effective goal oriented administrators are not individuals who would sit back and wait for change, but people willing to be part of the change process. Stephen Covey (1989) believes, "Management is a bottom line focus: How can I best accomplish certain things? Leadership deals with the top line: What are the things I want to accomplish?" (p. 101).

Second, goal oriented administrators begin with the end in mind. They have a clear image of what their goal may be, as well as the steps they need to

take to obtain the goal. According to Stephen R. Covey (1989) in his book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, “To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you’re going so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction” (p. 98). If administrators are about to implement change, before taking any forward steps, they should always know exactly where they are at within the change process. In the article “Leading When Everyone Goes Back To Zero,” authors Spady and Schwahn (2001) use the Total Leader Model “by asking the educators to look at education with an out-of-the-box perspective...” They go on to say that, “by taking a fresh look, educators dramatically broaden their perspective, increase their options, and release their creativity” (p.11). The Total Leader model believes there are five realities for administrators to follow when their change process has started at the beginning. First, there must be a purpose to the change. Spady and Schwahn (2001) believe “without purpose, however, people lack a compelling reason to pursue change and often simply go through the motions or resist the change altogether” (p.11). Second, there must be a vision that shows a clear, concrete picture of what the end product should look like when the purpose is accomplished and when it is operating at its absolute ideal best. Next, there should be some ownership for educators, as well as administrators. With ownership, there is a commitment to purpose and vision within the change process. Spady and Schwahn (2001) state

that ownership is the “motivational fuel that powers the engine of change”(p.12). Ownership will help educators identify with the change process and help with the success. Fourth, there is a need for administrators to provide the capacity for knowledge, skills, resources, and tools that will be needed for change. Spady and Schwahn (2001) continue on by stating, “It’s the know-how and how-to element of any change effort, and it embodies the entire array of information, skills, processes, technologies, and resources...” (p.12). Capacity is needed for the change process to occur in a competent manner. The last step of the Total Leader Model is support. In order for an administrator to have a sustaining change process, they will need to help support the individuals who have implemented the change. When administrators support the change process, then it is a true reflection of their commitment.

Goal oriented administrators must next organize their weekly goals and align them with their principles, priorities, and vision. Administrators who are goal oriented are able to use effective self-management on a daily basis. These administrators are disciplined to make decisions that will help produce successful outcomes. Stephen R. Covey (1989) believes that people must have effective goals that focus on results rather than activity. An effective goal:

Identifies where you want to be, and in the process, helps you determine where you are. It gives you important information on how to get there, and it tells you when you have arrived. It unifies your efforts and energy. It gives meaning and purpose to all you do. And it can finally translate itself into daily activities so that you are proactive, you are in charge of

your life, you are making happen each day the things that will enable you to fulfill your personal mission statement” (p.137).

Administrators with these characteristics are able to decide what should be done during the day that would benefit and fulfill the school’s mission statement. Short and Greer (2002) state that, “The principal’s behavior is what conditions the levels of trust that can occur in the building”(p. 63). The principal’s behavior reveals their goals and their true values as a leader.

Fourth, administrators who set goals maintain a frame of mind that is always seeking to have everyone they work with feel as though they are contributing to the success of the school. These principals also make others feel good about the decisions they make by developing a highly cooperative environment in which there is a large commitment to the school community. Linda Lambert, the author of Building Leadership Capacity In Schools (1998), states that leadership “needs to be embedded in the school community as a whole. Such a broadening of the concept of leadership suggests shared responsibility for a shared purpose of community”(p. 5). Effective administrators are able to empower others in four different ways. First they are able to structure tasks so that staff members are rewarded with success. They are also able to use positive and persuasive words to convince staff members they are able to successfully complete any task given to them. Third, successful administrators are able to reduce tension within their school building and build excitement and pride with

their staff members. Finally, they are able to model their own empowerment and self-confidence through their behavior and interactions with other district administration.

Keeping their goals in mind, administrators must now learn the highly effective communication skill of becoming a good listener. As Cunningham and Cordeiro (2000) state, principals must learn to, “listen with not only the ears, but with eyes and hearts” (p. 176). When an administrator learns to listen with empathy, they can begin to understand the other person from their frame of reference. Once principals have become good listeners, they can clearly and logically communicate their own thoughts to another person. Cunningham and Cordeiro (2000) go on to say that:

Communication is at the heart of successful leadership and begins by understanding what others are saying through effective listening skills. Take time to understand others; it is far less than the time needed to back up and correct misunderstandings (p.177).

In order for principals to secure a positive climate for communication, they must learn to encourage staff members by being honest with their own feelings, attitude, and reactions to situations. Administrators then need to be tactful and sensitive to the other person’s needs, feelings, and problems. It is important for them to treat others in a non-threatening manner. Administrators must learn to accept people as they are and respect them for their differences, opinions, perceptions, and approaches. It is also important for all administrators to

approach others with a positive demeanor by smiling and greeting them in a caring way. Above all, administrators need to be dependable and approachable, so that others feel a bond of trust.

Sixth, goal oriented administrators learn to leave their comfort zones to confront new challenges with their work in education. They build their own strengths by investigating values or ideas that may be different from their own. They are willing to listen and to implement others' ideas, giving up the need to control and take personal ownership. Administrators learn to throw out old self-written scripts that may limit their ability to lead and begin to write a new one. By administrators testing their own boundaries, they soon develop a unity with others. They find they have created new powers of leadership that may lead to exciting alternatives to use.

Finally, administrators that are goal oriented need to take time for themselves. They need to take care of their physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual needs. Goal oriented principals are highly involved people who spend a lot of their time leading and helping others. Therefore, it is important that administrators take care of themselves. As Covey would say, administrators need to be self-managers. In order for principals to have well balanced lives, they need to plan out how they intend to balance it. A self-manager first identifies the key roles in their life. These are the roles that are played at home as well as a principal. The next step is to think of one or two important results that should be

accomplished in each role during the following week. Then, the time should be created to achieve each goal. Everyday this schedule for a balanced life should be reviewed so daily planning becomes more of a function of daily adapting and prioritizing activities in a meaningful way. Covey (1989) believes, “As you overview the day, you can see that your roles and goals provide a natural prioritization that grows out of your innate sense of balance” (p. 165). An administrator must have a personal mission before they try to prioritize activities in their life. Otherwise, accomplishments do not lead to success.

Successful administrators are also life-long learners. They believe that education and learning is continuous for students, teachers, administrators, as well as parents and community members. Administrators also believe that all students have the ability to learn, yet they don't all learn in the exact same way. Grasmick (2000) states that, “All children can learn. All children have the right to attend schools in which they will succeed. All children shall have a real opportunity to learn equally rigorous content” (p. 47). The book Best Practice New Standards for Teaching and Learning In America's Schools written by Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde (1998) details essential guidelines for administrators to implement in schools today. Principals need to make sure that classrooms are student-centered and take into account student interests, concerns, and questions. Classrooms need to have students experimenting, so deeper thinking and learning is being carried out. Principals need to make sure students are being taught with a holistic

approach, not through isolated parts of curriculum. Patricia Wolfe (2002), the author of Brain Matters, states that, “teachers need to consciously select strategies to assist students in learning broad concepts that are embedded within rigorous, relevant content” (p. 133). Learning needs to be authentic, where students can be expressive to construct meaning over what they have learned and maintain good retention. Learners also need the opportunity to reflect, debrief, and abstract from their experiences to understand what they think they have learned. Administrators need to make sure that classroom learning is democratic, as well as social and collaborative. Students working together collaboratively provides for a much better learning environment versus students competing or working alone. Classroom learning should be cognitive, developmental, and challenging for students, but in a construct manner. This enables students to build their own understanding, by being submerged in a rich environment for learning. It was Steven Levy (1996) that said in his book Starting From Scratch:

It is extremely important for teachers to ask the right questions, to help students formulate and articulate the right questions, and to lead the dialogue that follows from the questions, encouraging various hypotheses and testing them against further observations and the body of established knowledge in each discipline” (p. 37).

Principals that are successful life-long learners are individuals that exemplify specific traits. First, they are self-directed learners who accept and seek new challenges with their learning. Life-long learners are those that identify the purpose for learning, define their own courses of action, and then follow

through with their own plan. By being a self-directed learner, these principals are able to apply prior knowledge and processes to construct new knowledge. They access and utilize information from a variety of sources.

Life-long learners are also effective communicators who express themselves clearly and concisely. They are attentive listeners, who are able to listen, interpret, and quickly respond to others. Life-long learners are complex thinkers as well. They are creative thinkers, who are able to construct meaning, solve problems, make and evaluate decisions using a variety of thinking strategies. The article "How Maryland Communicates Change" by Nancy S. Grasmick (2000) is an example of how principals in Baltimore, Maryland were able to communicate the importance and value of a new state-testing program. Administrators were able to communicate the importance of these tests to teachers, who then began to communicate the importance to parents. The teachers began to believe in the value of the testing, the more they communicated with parents. By working directly with their teachers, administrators were able to develop a clear understanding of their concerns with test content and its design, as well as with administration.

Administrators who are life-long learners are those that produce quality work. They evaluate and adjust their work to reflect their best effort. They persevere to create products that achieve their intended purpose. Principals need to make sure that classroom curriculum is "uncovered" for students and not just

“covered”. Uncovering the curriculum for students encourages them to investigate the process, not just learn the answers. In Understanding by Design Wiggins and McTighe (1998) state that, “uncoverage asks teachers and students to pay more attention to explaining, interpreting, and applying knowledge to better grasp what makes knowledge knowledge” (p.99). If principals are to help develop curriculum that can be uncovered by students, then they must find curriculum that has depth and breadth. Wiggins and McTighe (1998) state that, “depth alone on a topic is insufficient; we need breadth, too. Breadth implies the extensions, variety, and connections needed to relate disparate facts and ideas” (p. 101).

Life-long learners are also responsible citizens that show good character. Administrators need to demonstrate respect and concern for themselves and others around them. They also assume responsibility for their own actions, without placing blame onto others. Principals learn to demonstrate sensitivity to cultural and individual differences between people. They learn to celebrate these differences, because principals know that no two individuals are identical. Life-long learners also participate in the democratic process by getting involved with educational issues that affect students, educators, and the community.

Above all, life-long learners know that cooperating with others is vital for the success of a school. Principals realize that they need to be sensitive to organizational dynamics and details. They also know that they need to allow for

individual differences amongst teachers as they build mutual respect within the school community. Principals not only work with others, they acknowledge the ideas of others. They learn to contribute their ideas, suggestions, and efforts when working collaboratively. In The Principal As Curriculum Leader, Glatthorn (2000) states that, “there is abundant evidence that the principal plays a key role in determining the overall effectiveness of the school” (p. 25). Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that principals work side by side with other educators to evoke change within our schools. According to Linda Lambert in Building Leadership Capacity in Schools, “leadership is about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively” (p. 5).

Finally, administrators need to be caring, collaborative, and supportive individuals. Principals should provide a supportive and caring community for students, while becoming solid conflict managers within their school buildings. Snowden and Gorton in School Leadership and Administration state that, “effective leadership requires a knowledge of conflict management that is applicable to a wide variety of situations, including situations that could escalate into violence” (p. 109). Principals can build trust by taking a problem-solving approach to handling conflict. Conflict should never be avoided, because this escalates problems. Principals should give themselves enough time to find out all the facts before handling a conflict. A resolution to conflict should always be fair. Principals should deal with all individuals involved with dignity and respect. In

an interview with a Louise Jesson (personal communication, November 7, 2000), a third grade teacher at Pleasant View Elementary School in the Pleasant Valley School District, she states that principals should, “provide social, emotional, and academic support for students who need them. Students don’t have an equal educational opportunity if they have issues which interfere with their learning.”

In order for administrators to avoid conflict, they need to have clearly defined and developed roles. Administrators need to communicate to staff, students, and the community the principal’s role as the building leader. Teachers, students, and parents also need to understand their roles and responsibilities within the classroom and school. In Building Leadership Capacity in Schools, Linda Lambert (1998) explains her beliefs about roles within a school community. She explains, “As roles evolve, members of the school community reach a point of collective responsibility – a condition demonstrably linked to high student achievement” (p.94). When roles and responsibilities are clearly defined expectations can be met by everyone involved. Student achievement is then impacted in a positive manner.

Today’s successful principals hold many tough roles that provide them with mental and physical challenges. Their actions on a daily basis help show others their vision, which leads to change in education. Principals that continue as life long learners are true instructional leaders. They demonstrate the importance of learning at any age. Caring, collaborative, and supportive

administrators create caring communities, where everyone promotes learning.

Administrators that are goal oriented, life-long learners, and compassionate with their leadership are positive examples to aspiring principals. They are the ideal models for true leadership in today's schools.

As a future administrator, I strive to incorporate all these roles into my principalship. I understand that my every action shows my true vision. As a life-long learner I plan to continue my education by enrolling in continual graduate classes that will help me as an administrator. I will also continue to participate in classes and seminars that educate teachers on new teaching strategies within the elementary classroom. Administrators who are life-long learners need to be current on new theories of education that deal with teaching as well as leading. As a principal, I need to have a basic understanding of new theories of teaching. Not only am I a leader, but I also continue to be an educator. This will only help me to understand what to look for while making observations in the classroom setting. Awareness of new theories and principles in education will assist me in making decisions on future staff development projects. This will also guide me when hiring new educators to teach in my elementary building. As Steven Covey (1989) would say, I am looking for educators to teach in my building that have "resourcefulness and initiative" (p. 75). An individual who shows resourcefulness and initiative are those who are proactive in their lives and work by putting the responsibility to act upon themselves.

As an instructional leader, I will also guide my teachers through understanding the No Child Left Behind material presented by the state of Iowa. Through bi-monthly faculty meetings, I will facilitate whole group discussions and small group meetings on the new state standards and their criteria. In addition to building knowledge about the state standards and criteria, I will assist my teachers with understanding the purpose of compiling a professional portfolio. This will entail cooperatively and collaboratively working together to produce artifacts that will show teachers are meeting the state standards in their professional area.

As a caring and collaborative leader I will strive to develop a school wide character program that will promote citizenship, caring, responsibility, respect, fairness, and trustworthiness. Students from kindergarten through six grade will feel a sense of connection with one another and will have a basic understanding of what it takes to be a person of character. In order for students to feel they are learning in a caring and collaborative environment, they must feel a sense of belonging. One way to promote this sense of belonging is to present a special pencil to each child on their birthday. As a school principal, it is my commitment to try to reach each and every student within the school setting. Having knowledge of each student and their background establishes a sense of connection and sets a level of trust.

Developing a level of support means that the principal's door is always open and their schedule is flexible to provide time for a student or staff members. In today's school setting, time is a precious commodity. Teachers often feel the stress of having too much to do and too little time. Supporting teachers by giving them the gift of time is one way that I can attempt to lift the burden of stress from my staff members. Whether it is providing more planning time in place of meetings or being understanding of the pull between obligations at home with family and at work with students. I want staff members to know that I can relate to their situation. It will be my job to make sure that staff members are appreciated and understood. A simple face-to-face thank you or a handwritten letter on their birthday is one way of accomplishing this goal.

Parents also need to feel supported. They need to feel listened to and understood. As an administrator my door needs to be open to parents, as well as students and staff. Parents will feel supported once they are listened to and an open end of dialogue is established. By attending school functions and student activities I will be able to communicate my dedication to my staff, students, and school.

Like the habits of Steven Covey's The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, I will need to listen to understand, rather than expect to be understood. I will continue to "sharpen the saw" (p. 287) by maintaining my physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. I will strive to be a successful

administrator while balancing my personal and professional lives. As I move into a new phase in my educational career by becoming an administrator, I look forward to putting my personal vision into action. As a new administrator, I will take the initiative to develop a plan of action where I am building a school environment that is caring, collaborative, and supportive of one another. This will be a slow process, where I will need to continue to prioritize while maintaining my envisioned goal. This is a challenge I am prepared for as long as I maintain a winning attitude and continue to open myself up to new possibilities.

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