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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: a reflective essay

Abstract
As a principal, the ship should sail toward the direction of becoming a learning community. The community needs to sense the impact schools play on their lives and their future. They also need to find their role when helping to man the ship. After all, the only path to greater academic achievement is the one open to all in which students and teachers travel daily together. If the map is clearly defined and the course is set, collaborative schools can weather any storm.
PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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As I walk into the school envisioned in my mind, I see many areas of learning taking place. The walls are brightly colored and the structure itself is round, centering around the media center. Student work is found arranged on the walls; some immersion projects are adorning the hallways. Posters with encouraging ideas are strategically placed to remind students of good citizenship. Teachers are emerging from strategy sessions after curriculum mapping and brain research training. A fifth grader is demonstrating her power point presentation on the rainforest, while a third grader is reading with a first grader. In the principal’s office, I see the budget committee consisting of a parent, a teacher from each grade level, and one of our many business partners prepared to begin a brainstorming session. Teachers are utilizing technology and innovative ideas in and out of the classroom. The staff is divided into teams; with the principal, staff, students, business partners, community members, and support staff represented on a team. The school is working with collaboration and creating a conducive learning environment.
Expectations for all of the members of this community-learning center are high and the discipline problems are low.

Of course, this is an ideal school where philosophies and beliefs are shared by the staff. In her book, Lorraine Monroe (1997) states, "No leader can single-handedly make an institution better. The leader can inspire, articulate the dream, monitor, evaluate and tinker with the series of actions that makes the dream happen, but the people actually live the dream and make it real" (p. 140). The principal of a school is like the captain of a ship. He or she may be navigating, but they need to develop a map with every member of the learning community on board to get to where they are going.

Visionary Leadership

In order to set a course for success, goals need to be defined and a sense of ownership in the building, by the staff, community, parents, and above all, the students, should be developed. One way to facilitate ownership is to invite all of the stakeholders to focus on refining a mission statement and specific goals for the school. The mission statement identifies the purpose of the school within the
community with the goals outlining the means in which to adhere to the mission statement. Instructional development, character education, and expectations of the students will be incorporated into the goals. The initial vision may begin within the principal, but the details need to be created together. When all of the stakeholders develop a mission statement and the goals of a school, each member begins to feel a sense of importance and worth in the school in the decision-making process. Kouzes and Posner (1995) describe developing a vision as:

A process of engaging constituents in conversations about their lives, about their hopes and dreams. Remember that leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue. Leadership is not about imposing the leader’s solo dream; it is about developing a shared sense of destiny. It is about enrolling others so that they can see how their own interests and aspiration are aligned with the vision and can thereby become mobilized to commit their individual energies to its realization. A vision is inclusive of the constituent’s aspirations; it is an ideal and unique image of the future for the common good” (p. 37).

Another way to facilitate ownership is to make each stakeholder an equal partner for decisions on school policies and academic issues. A principal should maintain or increase communication with parents.
and the community. Invite them to be a part of a site council, where issues and concerns of the school are addressed. Let the stakeholders know their opinions are vital to the success of the school. A variety of insights may bring about needed change or may improve current programming.

It is imperative the goals and vision of the school are developed before the upcoming school year. Barriers that would prevent the staff from accomplishing these goals need to be identified and addressed. The new staff members would need to be knowledgeable of the direction and purpose of the school. The vision and goals may always be in flux due to the changing population of the school and the diverse needs. Data may also influence changes. A principal needs to inform the staff of any changes prior to the beginning of the school year.

The current leadership at my school failed to develop a vision or goals with the rest of the staff. This caused a lack of direction for the school year and inevitably created situations that could have been
prevented. Developing goals creates the ownership and purpose a successful school requires.

Organizational Leadership

After developing a vision, restructuring the school may have to take place. Change may occur with the roles, rules and relationships between and among students, teachers, and administrators at all levels. McAdams (2000) feels the key elements of restructuring are shared decision-making at schools, curriculum alignment, which means clarity on what students should know and be able to do, linked to curriculum and instructional changes that are student-centered and enable students to master higher-order thinking skills. Unfortunately, as humans we are resistant to change.

Change may be welcomed when a principal is visible in the building, in the classroom, and in the hallways. The action and mood of the school hinges on this idea. An effective leader takes an active role in the daily activities of the school. The staff observes behavior that generates trust in the judgment of the leader. By participating in
the classroom, a principal becomes knowledgeable of teaching styles and is more aware of possible improvements.

When working with the teachers, especially in the area of instruction, a principal needs to patient and supportive. Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, and Jeffries (2000) feel that unless the principal exhibits strong leadership qualities, the restructuring process can never really begin. A strong leader can be defined as secure, grounded, and not easily intimidated, he or she can readily adopt a leadership style that will propel the restructuring process. The change process may take time and cause frustration, but the results may mean student success.

An effective leader needs to show they care through their dedication and passion for achieving the goals of the school. Fostering positive relationships with the staff and the students is imperative to the success of a school. Positive changes for school improvement will not occur unless trust is established between staff members and the principal. In order to build trust in a school, the principal has to take risks and be willing to follow through with a plan
even when it is difficult. A principal will not facilitate reform until the staff responds by believing in him or her and what he or she is trying to accomplish. Covey (1992) calls this type of power "principle-centered power." The leader is followed because they are respected. The followers commit to the cause because they believe in it. The principal needs to establish this type of leadership to institute change. Change may come in the form of restructuring the school so the grade levels are clustered together. This idea would foster collaboration among teachers. Reallocating human resources to meet the needs of all students may also invite possibilities for school improvement. Reflection of the process and a dedicated principal are essential for the success of our students. To reach a number that represents a transformation within a school means changing the old ways to meet the needs of the learning community. Successful methods and programs are often born out of nonconventional ideas. Unfortunately, some schools attempt new concepts and abandon them before they have a chance to work. When such situations arise, a principal should hold a shared brainstorming session for resolutions. Effective group
processes need to be used to prohibit the stifling of innovative ideas and to allow enough time for ideas to be shared, attempted, and evaluated. When teachers feel comfortable enough to take some chances of their own, the doors of opportunity to learn for the staff or students are opened. The goal of the school should foster a desire to be a life long learner. A principal needs to demonstrate to this concept and encourage those around him or her to encourage this type of learning. Hooks (1994) states,

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students are essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin (p.13).

Ethical Leadership

A good ethical leader needs have excellent intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. The principal should know their capabilities and be able to work with the various stakeholders in the learning community. Being flexible and approachable is another essential
element to building positive relations in the school. Since much of the principal’s workday is not planned, he or she has to learn to roll with the punches and tackle any situations that may arise. This includes meeting with parents, staff, or the students, without saying, “I am busy”. For the principal it means late nights and/or early mornings, demonstrating conviction and dedication to the success of the school. Many conflicts within the school can be resolved by empowering the personnel. Using the vision and goals of the school as their guide, staff members need opportunities to make some decisions on their own. This helps to build confidence within themselves and may convince the staff that the principal believes in them and their judgment.

The principal of a school should consistently act professionally and hold the staff accountable for following a similar code of ethics. Stakeholders shall always be treated equitably and with respect and dignity. Modeling these values to the staff members could influence the classroom. Aronson (2000) states, “One of the best ways to induce youngsters to do anything is by modeling the behavior”
Teachers who value their students as learners and as teachers foster a positive learning environment.

In a world filled with violence, students of this generation are faced with more decisions than ever before. Schools have to employ character education into the curriculum giving them the tools to make sound decisions. A climate of a school can do a great deal to either foster or hinder a student’s skill in getting along with others. Often times a student misbehaves because they do not feel a connection with their classmates or to the school. “Schools can create a learning environment that not only deters violence, but also educates young people in emotional maturity and emotional intelligence” (Aronson, 2000, p. 91). As a school, we cannot assume these values will be taught at home. Many students are not being offered emotional or academic support at home. Monroe (1997) feels if kids can have one place in their lives where there is order and stability and where worthwhile activities are going on, then there is a high possibility that their lives can be transformed for the better. Consistently treating others with respect and teaching these values is the first step. These
principles will not only make school a more meaningful place but it will also help guide the student in their adulthood.

Collaborative Leadership

The standards taught in school need to be a reflection of the neighborhood in which the student lives. Not only should the principal be active in the community, but they should also be available to all stakeholders and should listen to their concerns, discuss ideas openly, and demonstrate honesty at every turn. It is important to foster positive relationships with the community in order to utilize all of the available resources. Often times an opportunity arises where schools and businesses join to create a partnership and where there may be an exchange of goods or services that benefit both parties.

Businesses may provide insight to the schools on desired qualifications for employment helping to shape and mold the curriculum.

Community meetings are an excellent opportunity to inform the public of happenings and current issues facing the school. These connections would be held in the evening with invitations to students,
staff, and members of the community. Test scores and other data shared at this gathering represents the report card of the school. The public becomes aware of the success of the school and possibly offers ideas for improvements. Some businesses may offer resources to provide a more quality education for the children of their community. Businesses and community members realize by investing in the schools they are investing in their future.

Students need to see the big picture of what they are doing in the classroom will affect what they do in the community. What better way to inspire these values by working with community leaders and parents? Lyman (2000) states,

Because of the school's commitment to partnership with parents, the circle of community is enlarged, and parents as well as children grow in their understanding of caring and community. Ultimately, the larger circle must include more than parents and neighborhoods, and extend to and include the whole community (p.149).

By creating a larger circle, you break down the barriers of isolation in the community. Parents, community members, students, and teachers must join hands to help facilitate a learning environment.
A principal needs to remind the community that we all benefit from an effective, successful school.

That is precisely why a principal needs to employ methods which allow teachers to work collaboratively. Every adult in contact with the students from the custodians to the administrator would need to take an active role in educating our youth. They would understand the importance of being a team player and striving to achieve those goals. Principals must model the cooperative behaviors they seek in others through genuine collaboration with teachers on important matters. “An effective principal acts with integrity and fairness and is open to constructive criticism” (George & Alexander, 1993, p.510). Lines of communication would be open to discuss recent developments in curriculum and discipline.

Collaborating also allows the principal to see a variety of perspectives and to gain insight on current circumstances. Programs need to be evaluated and updated periodically; sharing this responsibility provides insight and fosters trust in a school. It helps to break down the walls of isolation a teacher too often feels. Teachers
may offer new ideas or support current plans. A principal needs to provide time for the staff to share ideas. Speck (1999) feels a principal endeavoring to create a community of learners must provide support, motivation, and encouragement as essential parts of the collaborative process. Some collaborative relationships are similar to marriages where there is give and take. Each member needs to be flexible and open to scrutiny. People must realize how important compromise is while always keeping the overall success of the school in mind.

Creating an excellent working situation directly affects the learning environment. The staff will be treated as professionals, respecting their judgment, and valuing their opinion. A principal must continually read and keep professionally updated. If he or she comes across a great idea or interesting article, it should be shared with the staff by placing professional journals in teacher's mailboxes. Once the staff realizes the purpose, they may read it, pass it on, or better yet, implement the ideas in the classroom. If a principal's own
professional goals are shared, the staff may strive for excellence by taking chances to improve their pedagogical skills.

Collaboration can also extend to families and community members. Parents, teachers, and business people should form a council to foster shared decision-making. This idea helps create school policy and increases lines of communication. Values and beliefs of the community become more defined at such meetings and public relations strengthen.

This type of shared management can also be done with the operation of the school. Empowering all areas of the staff, including the kitchen, custodial and support staff, fosters a smooth running school. Within the infrastructure of the building, all of the space needs to be utilized efficiently. This includes during and after school hours. If a school is to become a learning center, it needs to address all learners regardless of age.

One idea is to open the media center to the community after school hours. Support staff would be available to assist the parents in a variety of areas such as, help on the Internet or finding a book.
Some parents do not feel comfortable on school grounds; this program demonstrates a commitment to not only the student and their family, but to the community as a whole. Lyman (2000) describes this type of community efforts by stating a school leader grounded in caring rebuilds community by drawing a larger circle and by including families in the circle of caring. Certain elements help with the success of a caring program: committed leadership, common language, staff development, integration into academics, focus on respecting others, and community service. Speck (1999) feels, “The principal must establish a collaborative collegial process for members of the community to work together to develop a curriculum that reflects the needs of all members of the school learning community” (p.134).

Instructional Leadership

In order to create a learning community, the curriculum would need to be aligned with the vision and goals of the school. Speck (1999) describes what a principal needs to know about the curriculum:

The principal must have a working knowledge of curriculum areas, but it is more important that the principal facilitate the development of curriculum and review of current trends and
practices by teachers. The principal as curriculum leader must facilitate the development of the teacher's knowledge of the new curriculum frameworks, place attention on the curriculum development process, and provide professional development to bring about the curriculum changes (p.135).

Instruction should provide students the necessary tools to become productive members of their community. Programs should consistently be scrutinized by all members of the learning community. The stakeholders need to have open conversations about effective and ineffective programming. Students need to be equipped with a sound education to compete within the global economy. This means careful examination of current practices and possible changes to the curriculum. In order for this idea to be accepted, a well-defined plan needs to be in place. A successful instructional program can be described as having these components: curriculum as the content, instruction as the process, adequate staff development, monitoring by the schools, and a collective effort meaning the involvement of everyone (Joyce and Showers, 1995).

The first step the principal needs to take is to design a team representing grade levels and subject areas of the school. This team
needs to meet on a regular basis and have open lines of communication with other staff members. This team’s sole focus is on improving the academic achievement of all students at the school. Jackson and Davis (2000) describe this as:

The principal’s role, in conjunction with the school leadership team, is to help various constituencies within the school develop sufficient knowledge about both the need for a school wide improvement process and the nature of the proposed changes so that they can make an informed judgment (p.157).

Elements needed in these discussions include data analysis, aligning curriculum with standards and benchmarks, and assessments. The team would need to work collaboratively and establish collegiality, where respect is shown, they have a common work ethic, and conversations are centered on teaching and learning. This is not to be confused with congeniality, which makes for a friendly atmosphere, but continues to encourage isolation among teachers.

The principal’s job of fostering collegial relationships in a school is made more difficult by the history of schooling as the isolated work of individual teachers in their classrooms and the principal’s traditional role as sole authority and decision maker
(Speck, 1999). So many times, students give up because they feel they lack what it takes to be successful. A child who works diligently to have the highest grades or be the best athlete sometimes misses meaningful learning experiences. They become so caught up in winning and competing; they create a cold and heartless school environment. In Elliot Aronson’s book, *Nobody Left to Hate*, he offers an ideal model for encouraging cooperation rather than competition. The jigsaw method is a successful model, which has been implemented for thirty years.

Jigsaw is a specific type of group learning experience that requires everyone’s cooperative effort to produce the final product. Just as in a jigsaw puzzle, each piece—each student’s part—is essential for the production and full understanding of the final product. If each student’s part is essential, then each student is essential. That is precisely what makes this strategy so effective (Aronson, 2000, p.135).

This model not only helps the student connect with the materials, but it also helps make a connection among classmates. Students, who otherwise would have felt out of place in a group or worthless, now have confidence. This model also helps to break down cultural barriers and provides equality not commonly found in
the traditional classroom. Students need to have high expectations in place. As soon as the expectations are lowered, the student’s sense of worth is lowered and striving for excellence has hit a brick wall.

Teachers need to find ways to incorporate differentiated learning within the classroom, recognizing the need for enrichment or reinforcement. Teachers and students need to realize the importance of learning from each other regardless of ability.

These ideas need to be presented during staff development through demonstrations and testimony of teachers who have implemented the ideas and programs into their classrooms. Speck (1999) states “The principal must cultivate the development of the collaborative decision-making process where teachers work together with access to information and resources critical to effective instructional decision making and promote substantial professional development to implement new curriculum and instructional practices” (p. 132). Teachers need to be aware they have or have access to the resources, knowledge, and support to improve curriculum and effective instruction. Through collaboration and
reflection, teachers can determine “what works” in the different school subjects and clearly define “best educational practice” in each teaching field (Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, 1993). The principal’s role as an instructional leader may change when he or she empowers the staff to do what is best for the learning community.

Another way to produce an effective school through collaboration is to provide support groups for the staff. Teachers and support staff needs opportunities to confide, share, and encourage each other. The principal should design a schedule where this type of reflection and thinking can take place. A mentoring program at the school needs to be incorporated to encourage new teachers to continue their careers. So often, we see new teachers surviving only five years or less in the business of education. Providing another teacher to lean on and offer support can encourage these teachers to remain in education. It may also help improve the veteran teacher’s practices. Peer coaching and peer evaluation is necessary in a learning community. This type of system allows colleagues to be part of assessing each other and improving their teaching skills. Some
teachers have a tendency to implement engaging teaching strategies when their peers are evaluating the lesson.

The role of the principal is to teach these skills and assist during reflection with the peer evaluator and the teacher being evaluated. Evaluating the principal is also an effective tool for improving leadership within a school. The principal is the voice to the community and should be open to scrutiny. Exemplary leadership a principal provides a school establishes the framework for successful student achievement.

Political Leadership

In order to ensure the success of all students a principal should be well versed in all areas of school law and policy. Employment discrimination and education of the handicap are crucial areas to focus on. The principal plays a key role during the development and implementation of the individualized education plan for a child. The principal also needs to be conscientious and inform the staff of types and intolerance of discrimination. Any decisions made should be well informed and based on the law as it applies to the situation. This is a
daunting task due to the interpretation of the law and the variation from state to state. “Even with the great sweep of constitutional precedents that have developed under the hand of the Supreme Court of the United States, the law governing our schools can frequently be difficult to accurately assess and summarize” (Alexander & Alexander, 2001, p. XXXI). However, it is pertinent to stay abreast of these laws to be an advocate for the child, their families, and the staff.

A principal needs to demonstrate their commitment to public education by establishing a solid relationship with the school board. Since the school board establishes the policy the principal has to enforce, the basis for these policies should be known. The principal needs to communicate what is best for his or her school and offer a variety of perspectives on each topic.

Community members have a viable interest in the success of area schools. Not only are they interested in the students as the future workforce, but also the financial interest of the tax dollars being invested into the area youth. The principal should communicate this information through test scores and other success stories. The release
of this information needs to be accompanied by an explanation to inform the public of the results. Many misconceptions of test scores are a result of inadequate information. Some of the assessments utilized by the school may not be strictly pencil and paper tests, but may include a variety of authentic assessment tools. The leaders of the community can play an active role by offering skills which need to be taught before entering the workforce. It is imperative the principal maintain these relationships with the leaders of the community in order to strive for success for all students.

Conclusion

As a visionary leader; a vision will be developed with staff including clearly defined goals for the upcoming school year. As an organizational leader, trust will be established with the staff to help manage the resources and to provide a safe learning environment. Ethical leadership will be demonstrated through beliefs and attitudes, which will inspire the staff and students to possess similar expectations. Political leadership qualities will be utilized to build and strengthen positive relations with the parents, business partners,
and community members in the school district. As a collaborative leader, the principal will strive to be an active listener, an encourager of innovative ideas, and to make our school a positive environment allowing room for growth. The staff will be encouraged to develop their own conclusions and to make their own educated decisions. Decisions will consistently be based on the vision created by the school stakeholders, using it as a guide to constantly offer improvements. Lastly, an instructional leader will possess the knowledge of the current curriculum design, assessments, and provide professional development for school improvement.

As a principal, the ship should sail toward the direction of becoming a learning community. The community needs to sense the impact schools play on their lives and their future. They also need to find their role when helping to man the ship. After all, the only path to greater academic achievement is the one open to all in which students and teachers travel daily together (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 119). If the map is clearly defined and the course is set, collaborative schools can weather any storm.
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