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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

The task of an effective administrative leader is to be a visionary who will organize the school environment in order to maximize learning and success for all students. It is not an easy task to undertake, but success can be achieved when the school leader involves stakeholders in the decision making process and treats others fairly and with respect.

Above all, an effective school administrator recognizes that he or she is a role model and that everyone from students, staff, parents, and community members take the cue from the principal. It is a position that can be very influential and the reflective administrator is careful about the image that is projected for the school and district. The administrator should be seen as a person with high expectations but someone who is a team member that will facilitate a positive learning environment with productive, successful students and staff members.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY

SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper Presented to

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By

Andrew B. Ferguson

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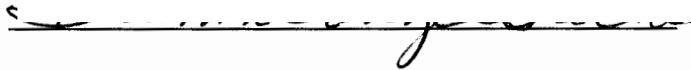
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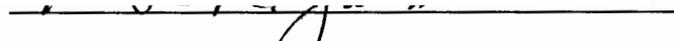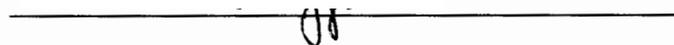The role of a school principal is an amazing position that allows an individual the opportunity to work closely with students, parents, staff, and community members, all in the name of achieving high student success. With this opportunity comes the awesome responsibility to ensure that students are realizing their maximum potential. Usdan, McCloud, and Podmostko (2000) state,

> The Educational Research Service concludes in its recent study on principals, 'Researchers, policy makers, and educational practitioners agree: **good school principals are the keystone of good schools.** Without the principal's leadership, efforts to raise student achievement cannot succeed.' Yet the power of the principalship represents an opportunity for meaningful improvement in education. (p. 6)

To be a quality principal, an individual must have the necessary tools to lead a school and assure high student achievement.

To be a truly effective leader in schools today, it takes a strong knowledge base as well an ability to perform in a way that allows students, staff, and other stakeholders to achieve the highest success possible. An educational leader must be a visionary, who is informed of the current trends, as well as someone who understands and can maximize effective instruction in his or her own building. It is a person that can organize a safe and efficient learning environment that promotes effective learning. In order to motivate students and staff to their highest

potential, a school administrator is someone who should work collaboratively with them as well as with families and community members so that needed resources may be put in place to achieve a successful school model. While working with various sub-groups, an effective leader is someone who treats all people fairly and with dignity and respect, while fostering a caring school environment. The administrator will also see to it that all students are given the right to a free, quality education. While working with diverse community groups, the educational leader sees the impact public education has in developing an economically productive nation and works on political aspects of education to improve in a more global sense. These traits, all taken from the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL), are crucial to becoming an effective school leader. It is important that a highly effective administrator model all of these traits to become a leader in the school, district, and community as a whole. I will detail each of the standards of effective, administrative leadership and reflect on my beliefs regarding the way I see myself in a leadership role.

<div align="center">Visionary Leadership</div>

To be a visionary leader working on restructuring the school culture, an administrator must involve stakeholders when developing a vision for the school. Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, and Jefferies (2000)

discuss the concept of a transformational leader and the need to involve

others as a necessary means of developing a shared vision.

> The restructuring process helps to move the principal from an
> instructional leader to a transformational leader. Leithwood (1993)
> argues that a transformational leader is sensitive to organization
> building, to developing a shared vision, to creating productive work
> cultures, and to distributing leadership to others. (p. 50)

There must be a common vision among staff if effective change is to take

place. This process of creating a shared vision must be done

collaboratively and will not be effective if done in a top-down style. If

stakeholders, such as parents, staff, and community members, are not

involved in some way, chances are they will not buy into the vision and in

turn, will not fully support its implementation. I come from a district

where shared decision making has been a priority and much of the focus

has been placed on site-based management. This gives the school some

flexibility to develop a plan, or vision, that fits with the needs of that given

school. I have also seen incidents where site-based management did not

work as envisioned due to the fact that the district has either put too

many parameters or not given enough direction regarding certain issues.

In the book, Fighting to Save Our Urban Schools...and Winning!, McAdams

(2000) states the need to give schools clear objectives as well as the

resources needed, then allowing them to come up with the desired

results. "School reform works best when policy makers give educators clear objectives and an environment in which objectives can be reasonably achieved. Then policy makers can and must hold educators accountable for results" (p. 257). He goes on to say,

> Given clear objectives, workable systems, and accountability, they (educators) can solve complex teaching and learning issues and obtain acceptable results. Policy makers who tell educators how to get results are as likely to be wrong as right, and by prescribing methods they inescapably transfer responsibility for results from educators to themselves. (p. 257)

Principals and stakeholders know their individual school the best and should be allowed the freedom to create a vision that meets the needs of the students and community as a whole. With this comes the awesome responsibility of creating a meaningful vision and being responsible to see that acceptable results are attained. A visionary leader must be confident enough to promote a vision among stakeholders while still working within the framework of district expectations. When coming up with a vision and goals for the school, it is important to remember that assessment data is very important to consider as it relates to student learning. The rationale behind a vision needs to be supported with data, which gives direction. As I am learning in a data coach training class taught by Peter Holly and Mary Lange, data gives the baseline for improvement while also giving

direction, similar to a needs assessment. Wilson and Corbett (2001) used student interviews for the Philadelphia School District as data to document progress on school goals as it related to reform initiatives. They "would use the interviews conducted each spring of each year as one of several contributions to its efforts to supply feedback to the District about its reform progress" (p. 2). The data will highlight areas of strengths as well as weakness, which in turn would drive the vision and goals. The results should then have an impact on instruction, and after systems wide improvement, increased student achievement will be noticeable. The strengths and weaknesses must be known first before planning a vision of improvement. You must know what needs to be improved before jumping into the planning stages. Gathering assessment data will assist in the process.

Instructional Leadership

As I stated before, an administrator must have an ability to lead in the instructional aspects of education. This means that the administrator understands that student learning is the fundamental purpose of schooling, that professional development is an integral part of school improvement, and that in the school environment, there is a culture of high expectations for students, staff, and self (ISSL Standards). In order

to do this, the principal needs to maintain a direct connection to the learning environment in order to understand what is truly going on in the school, and in order to be highly visible. This helps to foster trust and respect with the staff and students. All people need to be treated with fairness, dignity, and respect. This includes all individuals, from students, support staff, teachers, parents, and supervisors. The educational leader needs to remember that he or she is working with and for these people in order to facilitate student and staff success. Danielson and McGreal (2000) discuss their three-track framework designed to assist principals as they evaluate and enhance teacher performance. "The purpose. . . is to provide a structured, supportive, and collaborative environment to promote professional learning that will further the district's mission and enhance student learning" (p. 100). It is the principal's job to facilitate professional growth in a collaborative, non-threatening way, which will help promote the desired result of high student achievement. Monroe (1997) states in her views on leadership, "The real leader is a servant of the people she leads" (p. 126). The principal should know that their role is that of helper and facilitator, with an emphasis on striving to make those around him or her better teachers, colleagues, and students. Keeping with the idea of service and respect of others, people will feel comfortable

in an honest, open, school setting.   Students will also see this as a

positive way to deal with others, which will benefit them as a life long

skill. An instructional leader also is able to motivate staff and students by

letting them know that they are valued and important to the success of

the school. This is done in various ways but the most important is being

visible to the staff and students and being aware of what is going on in

the educational environment. Monroe (1997) comments on the need to

be a visible leader in order to keep a pulse on the school. "The leader

who loses direct contact with the work loses perspective. The further you

get from the work, the easier it is to promulgate nonsense" (p. 173).

When students and staff see an administrator that notices positive aspects

of the job they are doing, they will be more likely to attain higher

standards of achievement. When I say achievement, I am not just saying

academic achievement. A principal committed to high academic

achievement should recognize that the learning culture of the school has a

direct impact on this and instruction in the area of character education is a

viable teaching activity. Aronson (2000) feels strongly about the need to

help students learn the skills of respect and getting along. He states,

> We don't expect students to learn algebra on their own, or to
> become violinists or competent tennis players without instruction.
> Yet somehow we think that children can learn how to get along

with each other merely by being thrown together at school. Some
do, of course. But many more students would get along if schools
made human relations a part of the curriculum. (p. 105)

This type of instruction can and should take place in the schools, however,

staff need to be apart of the process of planning from the very beginning

all the way to the stage of implementation and evaluation. I feel that

staff should be expected to assist in implementing the shared vision and

to improve student learning. But the staff needs to have the time to work

together to plan collaboratively so that a high level of student

achievement may be attained. A common complaint heard when

discussing school improvement is that there is never enough time to do

one thing well. We have so many initiatives on our plate that we don't

have time to master any of them. If an administrator feels strongly

enough about something, then they have an obligation to allow for

collaboration and reflection among staff so that they feel confident in

what their role is in implementing strategies to support the vision and

goals of the school.

<div style="text-align:center">Organizational Leadership</div>

This information flows into the idea that the operational procedures

of the school should be designed and managed to maximize opportunities

for successful learning. If an administrator feels strongly about the vision

and has high expectations that the staff, students, and parents will promote the vision, then it is imperative that the structure and organization of the school allow for this to be done. This means that teachers need to be given the necessary resources to facilitate effective instruction. It also means that people are valued and their judgement is trusted. These sections about organizational leadership along with the following section regarding collaborative leadership are closely related. A highly effective educational leader will have the school organized so that it is operating smoothly and resources are utilized to help students and the staff make the most of learning opportunities. Providing opportunities for teaming, especially when referring to school reform ideas, is an organizational structure with many benefits. Glatthorn (2000) suggests, "A team approach is an effective means of harnessing the talents of others rather than relying solely on the abilities of administrators. Finally, the team approach is more likely to build support among teachers by involving them in the decision making" (p. 150). Part of the organizing will include many rich opportunities for key stakeholders within the building and in the larger community to collaborate in meaningful ways that will enrich the school environment and overall achievement of the students as future productive citizens of the world.

One piece of the puzzle of organizing a school environment that promotes student achievement is something that has been a hot topic for some time. It is the idea of creating a culture of safety, respect, and cooperation in each school building. In a time when school violence is a reality, it is up to the schools to provide students with skills that will help them work well with and get along with others. Aronson (2000) speaks to the idea of resolving conflicts. "One of the most challenging situations for educators entails resolving conflicts between students and preventing disagreements and minor altercations from escalating into violence" (p. 106). He goes on to say, "Some schools focus on helping students develop such skills from the earliest grades. At an elementary school in California, a daily community circle is the forum for discussing 'good news' and 'bad news' at every class" (p. 107). By organizing and teaching strategies like this one, students are allowed to work out their problems in a supportive atmosphere while becoming more aware of others feelings. Another strategy discussed by Aronson is the idea of cooperative learning to reduce the effects of competition in the classroom environment. He gives very specific ideas of structures and teaching models that can be used in the classroom but warns of the pitfalls if it is not done correctly.

> Attempts to enforce cooperation in the classroom can also backfire if not carefully designed. Simply assigning students to work together in groups to produce joint reports does not guarantee true cooperation. Most often the group dynamics of an unstructured 'cooperative situation' of this sort mirror the larger competitive classroom dynamic. (p. 134)

It is the job of the principal to facilitate teachers to organize their classroom structure so that school is a safe and positive experience for all students. To continue to work toward a safe environment, the school leader will use positive and negative feedback from stakeholders to make necessary changes as needed.

Earlier, I spoke of Thomas et al. (2000) describing the transformational leader. They go on to support the idea of collaboration by saying, "Transformational principals believe that it is essential to engage teachers, parents, and students in the process of restructuring; decision-making is a collaborative venture" (p. 51). By doing this, the end goal of helping kids and increasing student achievement can be realized. Thomas et al. (2000) follow up their thoughts on effective leadership by pointing out,

> Transformational principals understand that their purpose is to run a good school to serve children. To achieve that goal, they develop procedures that result in successful outcomes for teachers, students, and parents. Interaction between teachers, students, and parents must and will occur if information is shared openly and decisions are made collectively and collaboratively. (p. 51)

This can only happen if a principal organizes and structures opportunities for collaboration.

Collaborative Leadership

Parents know their child better than the schools and they provide an important piece of the collaborative puzzle. To allow for collaboration and conversations among stakeholders, opportunities need to be in place so that parents and community stakeholders can become involved and voice their opinions. One of these opportunities is scheduled conferences. If parent/student/teacher conferences need to be adjusted so that parents can attend without interfering with work, then the administrator needs to see that an appropriate plan is organized so that collaboration is achieved. Through these conferences, the groundwork can be laid to promote future positive school improvements and reform.

Through meaningful collaboration, effective school reform can be established. One piece to consider when assessing effective school reform is the collaboration with students and listening to what they have to say about their education. Wilson and Corbett (2001) comment on student input regarding school reform. "If substantial reforms to improve what and how much students learn actually occur in schools, then

students' descriptions of their classrooms experiences should reflect those changes. Reform, in other words, should become noticeable in what students say about school" (p. 1). By organizing collaboration with students to hear their feedback about school improvement, a window into the classroom is created and some judgment about the effectiveness of instruction can be done. The effective building principal would want to assure that there was quality instruction across the entire school and if not, something should be done, namely organizing staff development to improve how teachers are teaching so that they are meeting the needs of the students and working towards the shared vision of the school. Wilson and Corbett (2001) describe the need for quality instruction for the whole school as "scaling up within a school" as opposed to just "pockets of success" where effective instruction is taking place hit-or-miss. "Another way to phrase what we mean by 'scaling up within a school' is to think of it as reducing the significant variations in instructional quality that exist across the classrooms" (p. 93). It is through collaboration and discussion with teachers, students, and parents that this can be achieved.

While collaboration with teachers, students, and parents is crucial, the educational leader also works with the broader community to garner support of school goals and activities. It is the job of the principal to

organize opportunities to work with the larger community in ways that are open and honest. When the community feels that it is being heard and that they are valued, individuals will feel more likely to support school initiatives. Schools need to do this work with the larger community because it is they who support the schools through property taxes, grants, and tax levies, and the community is what schools are preparing students to become a productive part of upon graduation. This is not always an easy task, as McAdams (2000) states, "The consequence is that, unlike private schools, public schools cannot focus on just satisfying parents and students. They must also satisfy the public" (p. 250). He goes on to say that schools must do a variety of things from providing multicultural awareness, to meeting the needs of talented and gifted students, to including children with learning, physical, and behavioral disabilities in regular classes as much as possible, among many other things. "Making sure all these things happen requires administrators, implementation plans, teaching materials, training for principals and teachers, reports to demonstrate compliance, program evaluations, and policies and procedures to deal with noncompliance" (p. 251). When structuring school improvement measures, an effective administrator needs to consider the larger community and how education fits into the global

context of our society. In my current school district, the idea of a tax levy

has been discussed and an attempt to pass one has been unsuccessful

many times because schools have not gotten the word out to the

community about the pressing needs that it has. The community in

general does not see a need for an increase in money so the levy

continues to be voted down. There is a need to reach out to different

businesses, agencies, and organizations so that they see the benefit of

improving the schools. In December of 2000, a levy was finally passed in

large part due to the organized efforts of schools and parents getting the

word out to the public. Site Councils and parent groups phoned

registered voters to discuss the issues and ask for support of the levy.

The goal was to inform and then hope that through open dialogue,

individuals within the community would begin to support the vision. If

parents see the connection of what the district is trying to accomplish to

what the vision of the school is, they will be more willing to support a

levy. The key is to involve them and make them feel like valued members

of the school community. Ideas for this need to come from an

administrator that is committed to collaboration among all stakeholders

and promotes the success of all students.

Ethical Leadership

As an ethical leader, the most important thing an administrator

needs to remember is that he or she is a role model and many people will

take the cue from them regarding ways to act and treat other people. An

effective leader should model the fact that people are treated fairly,

equitably, and with respect in addition to applying laws and procedures

fairly while protecting the rights and confidentiality of students and staff.

In her book, How Do They Know You Care?, Linda Lyman (2000) looks

into the concept of creating a caring atmosphere within the school, which

encompasses how students, teachers, and parents are treated. The

parents are a key piece of this and it goes back to the idea of

collaboration with all stakeholders. Lyman takes us on a journey looking

at a specific male principal and how he was able to create a caring

community in his building in Peoria, Illinois.

> When I began my exploration of how a principal contributes to
> building a caring environment, I anticipated finding that teachers
> and other staff members would also be an integral part to a caring
> school. I had not expected to find parents so actively involved in
> knowing and caring for each other's children. By both requiring
> and welcoming their involvement in the classrooms, as well as a
> host of other activities, the faculty and staff have drawn the
> parents into the circle of caring. (p. 2)

Mr. Hinton, the principal Ms. Lyman chose to chronicle, encourages parents, as well as teachers, "always to be positive with their children, never to give up on them" (p. 2). He assisted in the process of bringing parents on board by sharing personal experiences with them about the struggles he has experienced in his lifetime. Lyman quotes Beck (1994) who writes, "that administrators can do much to shape, define, sustain, or change a school's culture. Leaders seeking to operate under a caring ethic surely would seek to cultivate a culture where such an ethic could flourish" (p. 122). Student and staff achievement can improve in a culture of caring. Beck and Murphy (1993) write, "Recognizing that communities and their occupants flourish in caring, nurturing environments, these principals will seek to utilize a caring ethic to guide their decisions and their actions" (p. 195). The end result when a principal follows through with these actions will be a place where there is a great deal of mutual respect and where high achievement is the norm.

When I say that people should be treated fairly and equitably, that does not mean that everyone should be treated the same, and I will explain this thinking in relation to the concept of zero tolerance. I am not in favor of a zero tolerance policy because it does not allow for an individual to make common sense decisions. I am in favor of extremely

high standards of behavior and learning, but I do not agree with a blanket

policy that does not allow for an individual to look at each situation on a

case-by-case basis. Curwin and Mendler (1999) bring up the phrase "as

tough as necessary" as an alternative to zero tolerance. They state that

major misbehaviors almost always involve complex circumstances and a

policy of zero tolerance does not usually get to the root cause, which in

turn does not lead to meaningful interventions. They go on to say,

> The concept of 'as tough as necessary' is an attempt to find a
> balance between being strong and being fair. It goes to the idea
> that each case should be looked at on an individual basis and
> decisions made from there. This does not mean that violence and
> misbehavior is tolerated. (p. 119)

If someone does not perform up to the expectations, then I feel that they

should be dealt with as an individual and a focus should be placed on the

problem and working towards a solution. Ethically, I have a hard time

treating everyone the same when we know that there are diverse learners

that need to be treated as individuals with fairness and respect. This

concept can expand beyond student behavior and into learning as well.

Marzano, Pickering, and Pollack (2001) discuss this same concept in the

context of academic instruction and learning, focusing on the idea that

students need to be treated as individuals with unique needs. "The

inference that should be drawn from this illustration is that no

instructional strategy works equally well in all situations. . . . Instructional

strategies are tools only" (p. 8). Just as we know that one instructional

strategy does not work with all students, the same is true when dealing

with behavioral situations that arise among students. High standards and

a culture of equity can be achieved through the ethical treatment of all

stakeholders.

Political Leadership

A political, educational leader is someone who understands the role

of the school in a more global context. It is a person that fosters

communication regarding school issues with representatives of diverse

community groups and who is aware of the impact of federal and state

reforms on the local community. Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998)

comment on the current public and political scrutiny of America's schools,

> Since the mid-1980's, we have been enjoying and enduring the
> most intense period of educational reform in this century.
> Everyone has gotten into the act: politicians, parents, teachers,
> taxpayers, teacher educators, social critics, journalists, and
> researchers-all are passionately involved in school renewal. (p. 1)

Even with the intense visibility on schools today, they go on to say, "So no

matter what misgivings we might have about the current era of school

reform, on thing is sure: today, millions of Americans are thinking hard

and talking urgently about their schools. And that is welcome" (p. 2).

Schools are going to stay in the public eye and that can have a positive

impact. McAdams (2000) states, "business leaders play a critically

important role in urban schools" (p. 258). He goes on to say that

business leaders involved in the daily workings of a school can make "a

significant difference in many schools. Some of the business interventions

have been extensive and sustained and have had enormous, positive

impact on entire feeder systems" (p. 258). There needs to be open

dialogue with other decision-makers that affect education. I feel that an

administrator needs to be informed of the current issues and laws that

may affect education and then understand how it will affect the individual

school, including students, families, and staff. I also firmly believe that a

principal needs to be an active, public relations worker. It is through

contacts with the larger community that the broader community can see

how the hard work and success going on in public schools is contributing

to society by preparing students who will be productive citizens. An

effective administrative leader needs to recognize the achievements of

students and staff and get the word out to the public through newsletters,

newspapers, and other media. Monroe (1997) describes a program that

she implemented in her school that got the students out of the building

and into the community doing meaningful work. Through this program,

she "wanted to create a for-credit community-service program for our

kids" (p. 139). She assesses the programs effectiveness by saying,

> The program turned out to be quite successful. We scheduled our
> kids' core courses in the morning and sent them off to various
> community sites in the afternoon. Again, the special attention paid
> off; the kids loved the community service in the politician's office,
> the local day-care centers, and a senior citizens' residence on the
> Grand Concourse. (p. 139)

By being an active promoter of the schools, an administrator will open

lines of communication with various community groups and also show the

general public that the schools are making progress and working towards

success. When the public sees this, they will be more supportive of issues

affecting the schools.

Conclusion

The task of an effective administrative leader is to be a visionary

who will organize the school environment in order to maximize learning

and success for all students. It is not an easy task to undertake, but

success can be achieved when the school leader involves stakeholders in

the decision making process and treats others fairly and with respect.

Above all, an effective school administrator recognizes that he or she is a

role model and that everyone from students, staff, parents, and

community members take the cue from the principal. It is a position that

can be very influential and the reflective administrator is careful about the image that is projected for the school and district. The administrator should be seen as a person with high expectations but someone who is a team member that will facilitate a positive learning environment with productive, successful students and staff members.

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