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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

An effective administrator has a passion for assisting children in their educational growth. Administrators strive for a quality, equitable and applicable education for all children. Leadership is developed from the core values held by the individual. Values that are essential for a distinguished leader are integrity and honesty. Respected administrators have established positive working relationships with all members of the learning community, and they challenge each individual to achieve their fullest potential.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Recently, the number of administrators in Iowa has declined and a large demand for quality replacements presently exists. Before beginning this course work, I felt that the high school administrator's responsibilities were discipline, budgetary concerns, staff evaluation, and extracurricular activities. As I am nearing completion of the course work, I now realize that in addition to these responsibilities, the administrator has many additional roles in the learning community and that society is requiring more from its educational leaders.

The principal has evolved into a multidimensional individual: a leader, educator, and manager. These complex and interrelated roles define how the principal develops and fosters a true learning community where the entire school community (teachers, staff, principal, students, and parents) develops habits of continual learning (Speck, 1999).

Philosophy of Leadership

An effective administrator has a passion for assisting children in their educational growth.

Administrators strive for a quality, equitable and applicable education for all children. Leadership is developed from the core values held by the individual. Values that are essential for a distinguished leader are integrity and honesty. Respected administrators have established positive working relationships with all members of the learning community, and they challenge each individual to achieve their fullest potential. A successful administrator develops an open and effective means of communication within the learning community that fosters growth in all members. Finally, an effective leader must be a visionary in their approach in moving the organization forward.

Knowledge, Attitudes & Professional Vision

Upon entering a new school system, the first thing a principal must establish is a vision for the future. A principal will not be content with what the school is today but will determine what the school can be in the future.

Vision is what separates the principals who are school leaders from those who are simply managers of the school. (Speck, 1999)

All members of the learning community need to be involved in developing a school's direction. Evaluations are a useful tool in determining direction. Upon entering a school system, the principal will assess the community's commitment to improving the educational system. Surveys of parents and other community members will be utilized to gain an understanding of the community's values. The survey questions will focus on the school's strengths, weaknesses, and the direction the community feels the school should take to enhance the learner's experience. An analysis of the responses will then be used to grow upon the strengths of the school and also to identify the weaknesses.

The change will start slowly, with the staff playing a major role in determining how and when the changes will be effectuated. There are always staff members who see the need for change and staff who does not.

A successful principal uses the staff members that want to change as communicators with other staff. Use of test scores from previous years shows the patterns of students' growth and is a sounding board for changes. A successful principal keeps the teachers focused on developing new strategies. The principal also uses staff meetings and development opportunities wisely. The staff needs to understand the relevancy of meetings to improving the effectiveness in the classroom. It is imperative that the administrative team gives the teachers a voice in this process.

After a vision for the school is established, the framework is developed to implement that new vision. With the framework, the learning community makes a commitment to improvement; and, conversely, without framework and commitment from members of the learning community, change will not occur.

While I have not worked within a site based decision-making model, I believe in the merits of the model. According to Lange (1993), a total district commitment is required for the site based decision-making model to be effective.

Over the years I have observed different principals participate in decision-making processes. The style that the teachers have responded most favorably to is the style where the principal allows the teachers input into the school's workings.

As mentioned before, evaluations are important in the evolution of a learning community's development. The new principal will evaluate the strengths of the staff when entering a school system. One of the concepts that the principal will look at is the teaching/learning style of the teachers and how this impacts the educational process of the students. The testing apparatus, The 4 Mat System (McCarthy, 1985) introduced by Dr. Decker to the Cohort last semester, is an appropriate instrument for this purpose. This testing procedure provides insight to both the principal and teachers on strengths and weaknesses in the classroom.

The present system at my school empowers teachers. Our administrators ask for input both formally and informally. For instance, the administrator receives formal input by taking a survey during faculty meetings.

If the administrator believes that the staff supports a proposal, they attempt to implement the proposal. The administrators seek input on an informal basis by speaking with teachers in the hall during classes or when a teacher is in the office. The administrators do an excellent job of looking at each issue and deciding what is most important for the entire learning community.

As an administrator, it is necessary to distinguish between friendships and working relationships. Many people, even friends, exaggerate their positions. In getting the opinion of all the members of the learning community, the administrator promotes the model of site based decision-making. It is not necessary that all people receive an equal opportunity to voice their opinion. The administrator must hear the teachers' opinions before the administrator engages staff members in the change process. Including and encouraging, but not demanding, the staff to take a certain pathway will create greater harmony in the learning community.

In a successful learning community, parents are actively involved in their child's education. There are many advantages to parental involvement. One such advantage is that parents will develop a sense of ownership and will value the workings of the school. It is easy for a parent to blame a poor educational system for their child's problems if they (the parents) are not included in the process. Parents that are involved in the school systems have a positive outlook on the process and develop a solution to the problem instead of finding blame. Parents that are part of the learning community respond more favorably to current research in all educational areas.

It is important for all members of a learning community to share one major belief, and that belief is that everything that happens in school is meant to prepare the students to make a positive impact in the real world after leaving our buildings. Students need the ability to solve problems and to be able to use technology during this process. Technology continues to grow at a tremendous rate; and if children are not kept current, then society will pass them by.

If we as a learning community do not expose our students to technology, we have failed to properly prepare them for the world in which they live. Students who have worked with technology have a tremendous advantage over those students that were not given technological opportunities when competing for an employment situation.

Teacher evaluations are an extremely useful tool in classroom improvement. These evaluations should not be used solely as a means of removing an ineffective teacher from the system, as has been done in the past. The current trend in education is to use evaluations as an important tool in improving classroom performance of at-risk teachers and also improving skills of master teachers. A competent administrator uses the evaluation as a tool to compliment teachers on behaviors that support a positive learning environment and to propose changes in areas where weaknesses are found.

Site Based Shared-decision Making

The principal is the educational leader of a building. Administrators must demonstrate to teachers that their job is more than teaching in the classroom.

Teachers must feel that they have the administrator's support and also that everyone in the school is heading in the same direction. As teachers, we are knowledgeable about learning strategies, have expertise in the curriculum in our chosen field, and are aware of many management skills in operating a school.

Teachers want to be involved in change. Instead of being told what to do, teachers want to contribute to the process in a positive way. Teachers do not want to change for change sake; they want change that improves a student's learning. When staff members assist in the decision-making process, they develop a sense of ownership. This system is effective in maintaining staff moral when times become difficult. At the school where I am employed, teachers provide input on many decisions that affect the daily classroom. The teachers enjoy this style of leadership. If the staff is faced with a dilemma, they are willing to assist in solving the problem. For example, my high school is exploring changing the current schedule of an eight-hour school day to the block system.

The administrative team approached the teachers with the introduction of the system and asked the teachers to research block scheduling. They allowed teachers to participate in Area 7 educational meetings on block scheduling and allowed teachers to visit schools currently using the block system. The administration team is constantly seeking the teachers' input.

When the administration desires change, they must be the catalyst for that change (Chamley, Caprio, & Younge, 1994). The current administrators in my school continually approach teachers in order to keep them focused on the possible change over to the block system. In order for a successful change, teachers must be willing to change. There are always teachers who are willing to try new concepts and thrive on change (change leaders), teachers that take a wait-and-see attitude, and teachers that are against the change (James, 1995). According to Kozol (2000), schools need a balance of teachers to maintain a healthy environment. It is important that the wait-and-see people become part of the change process and feel comfortable with that process.

An administrator's attitude has a powerful impact on others. Whether that impact is positive or negative depends on the choices the leaders make. Administrators have an obligation to develop a positive attitude, one that inspires the people around them to achieve the impossible. Great leaders also possess a passion for their causes (Holtz, 1999).

When initially approached about the block scheduling system, many teachers voiced opposition to the change. Many of the current staff members have taught in the school system for an extended period of time and feel comfortable with the status quo. Because of this, they are reluctant to try block scheduling. They rely on the old adage "why fix it if it ain't broke". In order to convince the staff of the necessity for a change, the administrator visited with teachers on their use of classroom time and asked them to log their activities on a yearly basis (thematic scheme) and also on individual lessons presented by the teacher during the school year. It was imperative that the administrative team continued to have the teachers look at the teaching process with an eye on learner outcomes.

The administrator provided insight with regard to job performance (Danielson, 1996) and also provides current research on brain-based models and several other effective educational methods.

Most teachers are apprehensive about block scheduling; they are concerned about the possibility of reprisals if they are found to be ineffective with their current teaching methods. However, if our administrator creates an environment where teachers feel that they could take risks without fear of termination for making a "fatal error," the eight-period day system might be shown to be an ineffective way to teach.

Allowing teachers the freedom to make decisions in their classrooms maintains a higher level of staff morale (Gorton & Schneider, 1991). When teachers look at their methods of teaching and are held accountable for the learner's improvement, they value the experience more and are more willing to change. Teachers that are involved in the decision-making process maintain a greater level of expectation for the process and work harder at seeing that the process is completed.

The site based shared decision-making model is not a perfect system. If an administrator is not a good facilitator or is one who procrastinates, the timeline for the change process can be extended. For example, at my high school the block scheduling system has been talked about for approximately three years, and no implementation date has been established. As the administration has not approached the school board yet, it could be several more years before it is actually put into place. To some this may seem like an extended period of time, but it is necessary in order to build staff consensus. Time spent on the issue now may reduce the anxiety associated with the change in the future.

An area of concern with site based shared decision-making is what happens when the faculty and administration cannot agree on an issue. Conflict is inevitable in all of society. How we deal with conflict makes good leaders either better leaders or pushes them out of the profession.

There needs to be a working atmosphere where research and justification overcome an individual's or group's beliefs.

If one party, for example the teachers, gathers research to support their viewpoint, then the administration must be willing to change their opinion. However, many times people allow emotions to dictate the decision instead of relying on research-based information. In a true site-based management system, the consensus of the group, when based on research, will dictate the final decision. When the administration continually chooses not to use consensus developed during the decision-making process, the staff will lose trust in the administration. This jeopardizes the entire site-based management system. It is very important that good communication occur between the parties involved.

As an administrator in a site-based management system, I will establish small working groups to assist the administrators in helping make the decisions. Creating diverse groups from the learning community will result in the inclusion of ideas from all the special interests while at the same time curtailing the length of time needed to start the implementation process.

I believe that principals who use an active style of initiating change are the most effective. Wasley (1991) suggests that collaboration between teacher leaders and administration is essential if site-based management is to be effective.

Parental Involvement

One of the areas where secondary schools can improve is the inclusion of parents or guardians in the learning community. It is not uncommon for elementary schools to have a high attendance of parent-teacher conferences while most secondary schools are fortunate to have more than half of the parents. There are several factors that affect this decline of parental involvement.

One of the contributing factors to this decline is that the nuclear family that we experienced in past generations has changed. Many of today's students attend our schools with only one parent supporting them in the learning process. It is difficult for that parent or guardian to attend to their child's education and also maintain their household.

Many single parents are overwhelmed with the daunting task of taking care of all the needs of their children in today's society.

When I was growing up, it was not uncommon for either one of my parents to help my siblings or myself with our homework. My parents worked outside of the house, but they understood the importance of education in our lives. Many of my friends had similar experiences with their parents.

Parents today feel that they do not have the time to assist with their children's homework. The parents are busy trying to maintain a certain level of lifestyle, and they spend more hours on the job and fewer hours with their children. Often parents will suggest that their children call a friend or use some other source to complete their assignments. In some locations schools have established telephone hotlines to aid students with homework assignments.

Another reason for lack of parental involvement at the secondary level is the specialization of the subject matter. This specialization creates a microenvironment in each classroom.

Parents feel uncomfortable participating when the teacher is very knowledgeable in a particular area and they lack that knowledge. The use of cross-curriculum teaching at the high school level would provide a comfort zone for parents. In a cross-curriculum setting the teachers involved are not the experts of the classroom but the facilitators of information for their students. Parents can then share in this facilitation process with their children.

While parents are reluctant to participate at the secondary level, teachers are also reluctant to have parents share in the learning process because they are not accustomed to having a parent in the classroom. In the educational process for a secondary instructor parental involvement is not emphasized; and during most teachers' experiences, they have not had parents participating in their classes. The combination makes teachers reluctant to change the way things are done.

Studies have shown that parental involvement increases the academic achievement of children. In 1993, Keith found that parental involvement had a positive result in all academic areas.

Ways in which parents contribute to their child's success are (a) provide an environment where the child is required to work on their homework on a nightly basis. It is important for the high school student to know that parents expect homework to be part of the daily routine; (b) ask the students to see their homework and review their work with them; and (c) assist their child with their homework if the student is unable to complete the work or if they are unable to provide assistance, suggest an appropriate reference source.

Perhaps most importantly, parents aid their children when they develop expectations for their child's time. Many teenage students have a difficulty with disciplining themselves. Teenagers are trying to develop a concept of self and also develop a role with their peers. As a result, teens spend more time outside of the household with their friends developing these roles. This causes several problems in the students' academic achievement. These students do not allow their parents to be involved in the learning process.

One example of this lack of self-discipline is the student who prefers to spend the evening with friends. Often this student comes to school with only a few hours of sleep, and it is difficult for the student to focus on the material being presented.

An administrator has several methods available to increase parental involvement. A school leadership program to promote parental access to curriculum issues is one such issue. This committee would help develop the curriculum to meet the learning community needs. It would establish criteria (rubrics) for the implementation of nontraditional curriculum items into the curriculum. Such items would include field trips, guest speakers, and movies. The committee reviews the teachers' use of nontraditional items to make sure that the needs of the students are met. Not all items used by teachers in a standard school meet the needs of the learners. Many times teachers use these items as a way to "fill" teaching time while they work on other things in their classrooms. The school leadership program eliminates this problem, and student progress occurs on a daily basis in each classroom.

Parental involvement is encouraged and needed in planning and implementing a trip by students, i.e., the Spanish Club on a trip to Mexico. This type of activity increases the students' interest in Spanish because they will be required to use Spanish on the trip. Parents help raise the funds for the trip and also help prepare the itinerary for the trip. At home the parents help prepare their child for the trip by placing greater emphasis on the classroom learning materials.

Students demand more from themselves when they know their parents will be reviewing their effort. Schools can tap into this determination and establish areas of study for a specific group of students. For example, the freshmen group of students could study European countries in social studies, and at the same time have a unit of the types of foods that are unique to those countries in consumer science classes. In science class they could explore the discoveries in science attributed to individuals from these countries. In math classes they could learn about the numerical systems from these areas.

They also investigate famous structures of these countries and the geometric figures involved in these structures. The business classes would discuss the economics of the country to gain an understanding of the lifestyles. At the conclusion of the session, every class is assigned a project to demonstrate to their parents. This heightens the expectation to perform by the students.

Many of today's parents are highly educated and feel more comfortable participating in a classroom that utilizes their education. This knowledge is a valuable resource tool. When this resource is utilized, parental involvement in secondary education increases. Sasser (1991) found that parents want to be involved but are deterred because of some school practices. An extra benefit to parental involvement is an increased feeling of parental ownership in the education setting. In summary, it is important that all schools encourage parents to participate in their children's education. It is the administrator who leads the way.

Technology

In the mid-1980s, many classrooms did not have computers in them. Today, in most classrooms you will find at least one computer, with many classrooms having a bank of computers. This phenomenon is attributable to society's great emphasis on computer technology. The educational setting must prepare students for the use of this technology. The days of going to work at the factory, local business or mine after high school are over.

Providing these learning experiences requires the expenditure of thousands of dollars to simply equip the school with the computer hardware. After purchasing the hardware, the school still must obtain a sufficient amount of software so that each student can participate. Additionally, the school must pay for training of the staff to implement the new technology. Staff development is crucial in order that teachers keep abreast of the latest technology.

Once a system is in place, it is expensive to maintain. Most systems require a coordinator to maintain and implement any changes that take place within the system.

The importance of technology and the recognition of its cost have been addressed by the state of Iowa. The legislature established a fund to assist in the purchase of computers and software for the classroom. It is important that the school have enough funding for the purchase of computers and software so that every child in the system has access to a computer. If schools only provide machines to certain areas, i.e., business education, students that choose not to enroll in those types of classes are excluded from the use of technology.

According to Mehlinger (1996), technology is not only a product of a culture; it also shapes the culture that created it. Technology has changed the way we educate our youth. The technology in the classrooms years ago was very simple; the overhead, filmstrip projector, or the slide machine. Research was done through the use of books or the encyclopedias. Conversely, today very little use is made of these sources and most research is carried out on the Internet. This has completely changed the way in which students perceive the learning process.

Students expect technology to be part of the learning process, instead of "maybe" being included.

The use of technology in the classroom does have a downside. Gilbert (1996) listed several problems with the use of technology in the classroom. Limited and uneven access to equipment, fragmented institutional planning, underestimating the difficulty of faculty adoption and lack of easily available information about "best practice" are examples of these disadvantages. These difficulties can be overcome when the school's leader involves the learning community in planning and preparing the learning environment for this process.

It is important that the educators have goals in place before this technology is implemented in their classroom. Technology should not be integrated into the classroom in a haphazard manner. Additionally, the teacher must look at the mission and vision of the school to determine if the proposed use is compatible with that vision. In my district, there are no guidelines for software selection for use in classrooms.

Guidelines need to be established. These guidelines will ensure that the requirements of the school district are being met.

To utilize technology to its fullest potential, it is important that teachers review the software and compare it to the curriculum goals for the individual classes. The teacher must make sure that the software meets the needs of the learner. It is easier for an administrator to put in place a program to aid teachers in the purchase of materials than it is to defend the purchase of improper or inadequate materials.

In summary, today's student must be exposed to technology in all areas of their academic lives. In order to meet this requirement, schools must develop a vision for technology at the school and continually work toward that vision. Schools must have a spending plan that affords opportunities for all students, with teachers using the technology frequently in the teaching process. Having students use computers as word processors is not an efficient use of technology. Students can do presentations on computers using several different programs.

They can do research using the Internet to gather information. The possibilities are endless.

Evaluation

Teacher evaluations are the most misused and underutilized process in the educational setting. Presently, teacher evaluations are a stressful time for teachers. The system is viewed by the teacher not as a tool of improvement but, rather, as a device to remove the teacher. This situation exists for several reasons. First, the evaluation has focused on the hierarchal ladder with the principal being in charge and the teacher being evaluated solely to determine whether their position is maintained, not on improving their teaching methods. Perhaps most importantly, a premium has been placed on teacher improvement as compared to past practices where teachers were deemed "a good teacher" when their students scored well on tests. Past evaluations did not look at the ways in which teaching methods affect the learning process. Today's teacher evaluations have corrected this situation. The school that I will serve, teachers will have a role in evaluations.

I chose to become a school administrator in order to play a larger role in ensuring student success in the classroom. The average administrators spend most of their time seeing to the day-to-day operations of the school. On the other hand, I want to be in the classroom on a daily basis to help with the learning process.

A comparison between the learning process in academics and athletics can be made. How often do you put athletes on the field without practicing and improving a technique that they are using? This would not happen in most athletic programs, but yet administrators do this all the time with teachers in the classroom. In order for teachers to improve, the administrator must be in the classroom and provide feedback to the teacher.

According to Danielson (1996), a framework for professional practice can be used for a wide range of purposes, from meeting the novice's needs to enhancing the veteran's skills. Because teaching is complex, it is helpful to have a road map that is structured so there is a shared understanding of the teaching process.

A school system operates more effectively when the staff has a program that enables them to become better instructional leaders. In the situation where the principal is in the classroom, looks at the mechanics of the teaching process, and follows a format where the teacher receives immediate feedback from the administrator, everyone wins. The teacher becomes a better teacher, the students acquire a better understanding of the subject, and the principal has a staff that trusts him or her and works hard.

The goal of the evaluation is to help the teachers be more effective in the classroom. The evaluation process should be used as a tool to improve teacher effectiveness, not as the sole means of firing a poor teacher. As Dr. Decker says, "find the teacher doing something right" (R. Decker personal communication March 18, 2001). The evaluation should not be used as the tool of dismissal but, rather, a verification of good teaching skills. If the strengths of a teacher are emphasized and strategies given to improve weaknesses, the teacher will respond in a more positive manner.

Principal uses praise to his staff as well as to give them corrective feedback. The administrator must build a level of trust among the staff so that they understand that the administrator is attempting to help the teacher become more effective in the classroom. The staff must know that the administrator is not there with the idea of catching the teacher doing something wrong. Hartzell (1995) stated that it is important to point out the positives from the class to give the teacher confidence. I think that the administrator can help determine how effective the teacher is with proper reinforcement for the teacher. At times it will be necessary to be critical of teaching practices. However, it will have a greater impact if it is done only as a last resort.

The use of evaluations by other teachers is beneficial. This mentoring system helps both the novice instructor to improve their skills, as well as keeps the experienced teacher motivated to maintain a high level of skill in their classroom. In this process it is important that the administrator makes sure that the teachers feel comfortable in working together to improve the teaching process.

This system aids the administrator and teacher to improve teaching methods. The system helps administrators who feel compelled to do the daily management become the educational leader for the school.

Portfolios can be used in the evaluation process. In this evaluation process, teachers are required to collect activities that they have done in their classrooms. A portfolio provides teachers with evidence of the accomplishments of their students. Many different types of data are included in the portfolio. They gather the different types of assessments that they used on a unit. They then analyze the positives and negatives of the units and look for ways to improve the teaching of the unit. At that point the teachers bring the portfolio to the administrator. The teacher will take the administrator through the work and describe the teaching unit, pointing out strengths and weaknesses of the unit. Again, this is a nonadversarial approach to help teachers become better in their profession.

Conclusion

As I look back, my attitudes and ideas of an administrator's role have changed. When I entered this program, I thought that I would not be given much new information that would be useful to me. I thought that I had a good grasp of the duties and responsibilities of an administrator and what was necessary to be a good administrator. At that time I thought the most important aspect of an administrator's job was the daily operations of the school.

After completing the program, I now know that the management of the day-to-day operations of a school is a small part of an administrator's duties. The principal must be a strong visionary leader for tomorrow. As the principal, it is important that the staff and I share a vision for the future and constantly work to achieve that vision. The staff and I will develop values that will aid us as we develop the school to its fullest potential. Instead of an evaluation system that is perceived as punishing teachers, I will use a system of evaluation that the teachers can use to improve their teaching methods.

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