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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Effective principals articulate a clear vision about what they expect of adults and students. They do this more than just the beginning of the year. They spend time explaining to students what they expect in achievement, behavior, attitude, and effort. They don't make excuses. They make sure learners have what they need to meet high expectations. They motivate, inspire, provide direction, and celebrate excellence. If principals don't have high expectations, they cannot expect much of others.

Principals must establish high expectations in their schools. You can model high expectations by selecting challenging goals, informing others of your dreams, and keeping people posted as to your progress. Modeling the process of setting a high standard, planning the steps to its achievement, and regularly assessing growth is one of the best lessons you can teach the students in your school.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING SECONDARY SCHOOLS
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

By

Theresa A. Fisher

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Dr. Gregory Reed

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A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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I grew up in a family that was focused on education. My grandmother was an early country school teacher in Missouri. My father was a teacher and coach who became an administrator before I was born. My mother began her teaching career before she was married and continued after her children entered school. Her career lasted nearly thirty years. With this strong background in education, there was no better field for me to pursue. From living in this strong educational environment, I learned at an early age to respect and appreciate what a good educational foundation means. My Catholic education background through sixth grade instilled a strong disciplinary foundation and helped me realize the importance of good leaders in our schools. Although I have enjoyed my twenty-five years in the classroom, I feel that my interests are turning toward a wider vision in the educational field.

Having been in education for many years, I have worked with a variety of administrators. Unfortunately, this has not always been a positive experience. I have found that there is a lack of leadership, which I believe should be a major part in the role of an administrator. This leadership is not only true in the role of an administrator, but also in the role of the classroom teacher. The trend in society today seems to be for a teacher to be accepted on the level of the student instead of the teacher being respected and seen as the authority in their field of study. The teacher needs to set expectations for the students from the beginning and support the student in their efforts to meet these expectations. Now the young teachers seek more of a peer relationship with the students, instead of expecting more from the students. The teacher must learn that they are not an older student, but must set expectations to be met by the students.

I believe a principal's role including working with students, staff, parents, and community to set visionary goals or a strategic plan for the improvement of the school and the community at large. To do this, the principal would need to learn as much as possible about the history of the community and try to facilitate plans to collaboratively develop a vision for the future success of both the community and the school.

A principal is the major communicator between the school and the community, so it is imperative that the principal be willing to listen to students, staff and parents about their concerns and know what action to take to help alleviate these concerns.

Although a principal is the major disciplinarian in a school setting, I believe if the discipline is handled in a way that demonstrates respect for the students, the students will respect the disciplinarian. Having the expectations clearly stated and collectively created to show students expectations, the more likely it is that students will meet behavioral and academic standards. This is very important to me since there seems to be, as I stated before, a lack of general respect in our society today.

A principal has the role of a leader, due to this role; the principal is looked to for guidance and support in many different situations. It is important that the principal feel comfortable in this role and can be open and fair when dealing with the various issues as they come up.

In my teaching career, I have had the opportunity to work with many wonderful hard working teens, and have many who seek me out today for further advice or as a friend. I feel I have been fairly successful in teaching more than just subject matter in my classes.

I remember that as a youngster the teaching profession was well respected in

our society. I believe this is no longer an accepted practice. Due to changes in our society, the schools have had to take on the added responsibility of forming young minds of respectful behavior expected in society, which in past generations was taught in the home. The tendency in our society today is the refusal to accept responsibility for our actions. This is one of the responsibilities that is falling on the school's shoulders and will be an area in which school administrators might see as their responsibility.

As a future administrator, I feel the following elements essential for exemplary educational leadership: communication, decision making, collaborative leadership, and being able to have a vision for the future of education. I will discuss the importance of each in the rest of this paper.

Communication

Communication is a natural activity that we all engage in unconsciously. There have been great leaders all over the world who became great because of their strength in communication and their ability to present their thoughts and ideas in such a way as people listened. Others followed them because they believed in and respected those ideas. The foresight of the men who drafted the Declaration of Independence, which was written over two hundred years ago, still reflects the rights of people in our society today.

Communication is a continuous on going process, not a series of incidents pasted together like photographs in a scrapbook instead it is much like a motion picture in which the meaning comes from the unfolding of an interrelated series of images (Adler & Roman, 1991, p5&6).

Several different types of communication exist. Intrapersonal communication deals with oneself, such as in diaries or journals. Interpersonal, which is the most common used, is when two people or more interact directly and personally with each other. Small group communication is when each person can participate actively with other members. Such as curriculum committees, staff development groups, or data finding committees. The last is public communication, in which a group becomes too large for all members to contribute. Examples of this would be public awareness groups, fund raising or bond issue groups (Adler & Roman, 1991, p.21).

One key to successful communication leadership is to share an adequate amount of information in a skillful manner (Adler & Roman, 1991, p.21).

Since Interpersonal is the most common form of communication used, there are different styles to be considered.

One style is the Autocratic Style, when a leader dominates, tells others what to do, and uses strong rewards or punishments. Research shows this style to be very effective; such leaders are often respected, but not necessarily well liked by their subordinates (Trentholm & Jensen, 1992, p.347-348).

Another is the Democratic style leadership, which is the most popular with workers. A democratic leader seeks input from workers, believing that their participation in the work process will be a primary motivating force. This style is more time consuming than the Autocratic, and does not work in every situation. It assumes that workers want to participate and have essentially the same goals as management (Trentholm & Jensen, 1992, p.347-348).

The last style is Laissez-faire, or the "hands off" approach to leadership. The leader allows capable workers to use their own judgment and to call upon him/her only when they need advice or a second opinion (Trentholm & Jensen, 1992, p.347-348).

All three leadership styles have one thing in common, a leader often adopts a single style and does not change it. Situational approaches to leadership, emphasizes the need to be flexible and look at a variety of factors before determining the most effective communication strategies.

Evidence shows that the most successful leaders are those who can adapt their communication style to different situations and different people (Trentholm & Jensen, 1992, p.347 & 348).

One quality an education leader should have is to know when each of these Interpersonal leadership styles should be used. A good leader must know which strategy works best for the person or group he/she is working with. The form of communication an administrator may use with a staff member asking for advice about how to handle an issue in the classroom would certainly be different than the form used when talking to parents about their child after the child had committed a serious infraction against a school rule. This in turn would be different from the form used when representing the school at a public meeting on fund raising. All forms of communication must be adopted to the situation that is presented, in order to be the most effective.

Understanding communication types and leadership styles inside and outside the school is imperative to the accomplishment of the school's goals as well as to the

public image and perception of the school.

Image starts at the top, with the communication skills of the principal. It filters down in to all aspects of the schools culture and climate. The attitudes and persona displayed by the principal have direct effect on how the school is viewed, perceived, and responded to in the community (Wilmore, 2001, p.56).

Decision-Making

No one likes tough decisions. In fact, many people do not even like making decisions at all. To make a decision means we eliminate other options and select a single choice. It means we must give up the benefit of all possibilities for just one.

While this seems like a loss, selecting one option gives us focus and helps clarify our thoughts and actions. This could be risky. The biggest risk is we might not make the right decision. Yet who knows what is right? Is right in the eyes of our constituents? Is right in the eyes of our boards? Is right in the eyes of our staff? Or is right however we view it, our own interpretation of the world or our own selfishness (Hooper, D. W., 2002, p.72).

Peter Druker reminds us: " The understanding that underlies the right decision grows out of the clash and conflict of divergent opinions and out of the serious considerations of competing alternatives (Hooper, 2002, February).

If, however we can know what is right, we should always do it.

As Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir once said quoting Mark Twain: " Always do right. This will gratify some people, and astonish the rest." Clearly none of us who have the heart of a servant leader want to make a wrong decision. To make a wrong decision goes against our very nature (Hooper, D. W., 2002,

February). Therefore decision making can be an awesome responsibility. Principals must face the fact that sometimes there is not clear cut right or wrong decisions- just a different one. Other times a decision involves choosing the lesser of two evils, rather than the better of two things, both of which are good. The days of the principal as the lone instructional leader are over. We no longer believe that one administrator can serve as the instructional leader for an entire school without the substantial participation of other educators (Welmor, 2002).

As the call goes out for increased involvement of various stake holders in education, there is one set of stake holders that is often overlooked - students. Few studies have sought to ascertain the attitudes of students or adult school leaders concerning student involvement in school decision making. A review of studies that asked students about their expectations and their experiences with school decision making elicited four common conclusions:

1. Students are not usually involved in school decision making because they are not asked.
2. When queried about their desire to be involved, many enthusiastically responded, "Yes".
3. Students can yield valuable insight into the educational process.
4. Encouraging students to become involved and to stay involved requires a legitimate offer of real influence (Patmor & McIntyre, 1999, p.74-78).

After all who better has an invested interest in how a school is run, if it is not the students. There are a number of schools that use student leaders and student

government to help give ownership of the school back to the students. In many of these schools, students and administrators, work side by side to decide how and what the governing factors will be for that particular building. Many of these students are high school students, but I do not see why this would not work at the middle school level as well. With the principal being advised on all decisions needing to be made, it sure would lessen the risk of disgruntled students, if they had a say so in the process. This would also be a way for the students to learn how important it is to listen to the opinions of others and to act for the betterment of the student body as a whole, instead of only thinking of what is the best for them on an individual scale. Educational leaders, as well as school boards, faculty, community groups and unions, simply do not have a clear, systematic agreed upon thinking process for making the tough choices. As the principal, it is important to be well informed at all times, and to seek as much outside input to help make a better decision where everyone is concerned.

If this process includes getting help with making a decision, it is better to ask for input and make a sound decision based on this information, rather than stand alone and make a not so informed decision. After all, as good administrators, it is important to remember that with most decisions, "the buck stops here" the here being with the principal.

A thinking process is a step-by-step approach to organizing the information and making the judgments needed to arrive at a sound conclusion. Consider the job of a school administrator in terms of a repertoire of management tasks, with each task requiring a different thinking process. Some tasks involve

creating a sense of order and coherence, especially in a complex management situation. The term "situation appraisal" is used to describe the systemic thinking process one goes through to identify key issues, separate them so they are clear to everyone with a responsibility for action, and then set priorities. At other times, the task is to determine why things have gone wrong. Here the required process is "problem analysis." At still other times, the key issue involves selecting the best choice among alternatives, and this is called "decision analysis". Finally, peering into the future to anticipate dealing with future problems or opportunities involves "potential problem analysis" or "potential opportunity analysis" (Klempen, R. A., 2003, p. 18-20, 22, 24).

Collaborative Leadership

Effective leadership means planning and preparing for success from the first day of a leader's appointment. In this case the leader will be the principal of a school district, who is not only responsible for setting the climate of the school, but also responsible for setting the future goals and incorporating them with the districts goals.

In the past this job would have been solely left up to the administrator, but research has found that for a principal to have effective leadership, they also must have support of the stockholders they are responsible for. Without the collaborative work between the teachers and the administration a wall begins to rise and over time the height of this wall becomes a major barrier affecting the education of the students.

One way for leaders to leave a lasting legacy is to ensure that others share and help develop their vision.

Leadership succession, therefore, means more than grooming the principal's successor. It means distribution of leadership throughout the school's professional community so others can carry the torch after the principal is gone (Spillane, Halverson, & Drummond, 2001).

Sustainable leadership benefits all students and schools, not just a few at the expense of the rest.

Sustainable leadership is aware of how lighthouse, magnet, and charter schools and leaders can leave others in the shadows and is sensitive to how privileged communities can be tempted to skim the cream off the local leadership pool. Sustainable leadership recognizes and takes responsibility for the fact that schools affect one another in webs of mutual influence (Baker & Foote, in press).

When working in a collaborative environment the success of all the students, both regular education and special education, can be explored in depth.

The collaboration among policy makers, administrators or community services, service providers, and children and their families appears to be necessary to identify the service needs of children and their families, to establish effective communication, to deliver a set of well coordinated needs based services, and to secure the necessary resources (Skiba, R., Polsgrove, L., & Nasstrom, K. 1996).

Characteristics of secondary schools and their personnel provide a number of challenges to the development and implementation of collaborative based structures.

The traditional department approach tends to isolate educators in their

classrooms with little opportunity to enter into professionally related dialogue with other educators, particularly among teachers of different disciplines (e.g., math, science). For example, secondary school general educators have indicated that a majority of their professional interactions occur among their departmental colleagues, with very few professional interactions occurring with educators of other disciplines (Foley & Mundschenk, 1994).

A second challenge is the lack of professional interaction between secondary school special and general educators and community service providers. An additional challenge is the typical managerial role of administrators of secondary schools. Under the typical style, the administrator serves as a manager and assumes the responsibility for the centralized control of school activities and resources, and is the primary decision maker concerning the operation and function of the school (Seller, 1993).

Such a role is incongruent with the principles of collegiality, parity, and shared decision making that are the under printings of collaborative-based structures (Clift, Johnson, Holland, & Veal, 1992).

The development and establishment of collaborative-based programs in secondary schools may be facilitated by school administrators, leadership styles and skills. Suggestions have been made that school administrators review and shift the authority structure of the school. The proposed changes included principals and educators becoming collegial partners rather than maintaining the current superior subordinate relationship that exists between principals and faculty members (Maxson, 1990). This shift in authority allows

the principal to be a team member in the pursuit of school goals and to find methods of supporting others in their leadership of educational activities (Seller, 1993; Uhl & Perez-Selles, 1995).

This movement in structure may have a number of implications for school leaders. School leaders may need to offer support to staff members who are going through this change process. Principals may also need to provide resources available in or close to their school district for the staff to have easy access to.

The administrators working in the restructuring activities may need to model professional development and demonstrate the importance of professional development by participating in the activities of staff development programs. School administrators may also support the professional development of school staff members by providing release time from instructional duties and allocating additional resources for professional development activities (Seller, 1993; Zemelman Et al., 1993).

There is abundant evidence that the principal plays a key role in determining the overall effectiveness of the school. Teachers can work with the principal collaboratively in discharging vital leadership functions. However, even in the best teacher leadership models, there is a strong need for the principal to provide ongoing leadership (Glatthorn, A.A., 2000, p.25).

Vision

Effective leadership depends on being able to look to the future and plan for the changes that could or could not take place. As a leader in education it is up to the administration, as well as the rest of the community to make sure education in a

district is heading in the direction to increase educational strengths and not to hinder the learning of the students involved.

Effective principals articulate a clear vision about what they expect of adults and students. They do this more than once at the beginning of the year. They spend time explaining to students what they expect in achievement, behavior, attitude, and effort. They don't make excuses. They make sure learners have what they need to meet high expectations. They motivate, inspire, provide direction, and celebrate excellence. If principals don't have high expectations, they cannot expect much of others (Young, 2004).

Principals must establish high expectations in their schools. You can model high expectations by selecting challenging goals, informing others of your dreams, and keeping people posted as to your progress. Modeling the process of setting a high standard, planning the steps to its achievement, and regularly assessing growth is one of the best lessons you can teach the students in your school (Young, P. G., 2004).

In developing a vision, emphasis must be placed on developing a shared vision. One that is common to teachers, members of the school community, and the school leader. Embedded in a school's vision is a collection of values and beliefs. Often these remain unspoken and unexamined unless a skillful group facilitator helps the group to explore the subtleties of a particular set of values. The process of revealing the beliefs undergirding a proposed course of action helps participants to build a high level of commitment to the new program, or effort, even though this process may be personally painful (Short,

& Greer, 2002, p.48).

A vision presents a challenge- it is an ambitious view of the future that requires employees to give their best. Many successful organizations do not have short, easily communicated slogans, but their visions are powerful because leaders paint a compelling picture of where the organization wants to go. Strong, inspiring visions have been associated with higher organizational performance. When people are encouraged by a picture of what organization can be in the future, they can help take it there (Daft, 2005, p.513).

This is an important concept in education. Once the community can envision what their educational district will look like in the future, it is easy to get people involved.

It is important when forming a vision to be familiar with the future trend in education. Beyond the funding of schools and No Child Left Behind, there are many challenges that will affect education in the future. The impact of having an older generation than there ever has been in history, the increase in the number of minorities, the increased impact of technology, just to name a few. These trends look ahead to the world our children will be in charge of in the future. It is important for education to keep its finger on the pulse of everything that affects the education of the children in our country right now.

Vision is always about the future, but it begins with the here and now. Vision has a tendency to energize people and garners commitment. People want to feel enthusiastic about their work. A powerful vision frees people from the mundane by providing them with a challenge worthy of their efforts. Many

people commit their time and energy and enthusiasm at home when they go to work because they do not have anything to inspire them. Employees are not generally willing to make emotional commitments just for the sake of increasing profits and enhancing shareholder wealth. Vision needs to transcend the bottom line because people are willing, and even eager, to commit to something truly worthwhile (Daft, 2005).

The principal is the tie that binds the school together and who extends that bond to include families and other community members to form a collaborative team. The single focus of this team is a common vision of student's success. The purpose is to respond to the many diverse needs and interests within the community and to mobilize the necessary resources to meet them. The principal provides the organizational oversight as well as personal, campus and community sensitivity to align needs, interests and resources (Wilmore, 2002).

Without having a clear, understood vision or path to follow for the future of a school district, it is not possible for a school to move forward. With the No Child Left Behind changes taking place, there are going to be more and more changes in the curriculum, funding, and classrooms in our schools in this country. Many of these changes will definitely help the students to become successful, and also allow the teachers to move forward to become the educators that are needed in our school district today. Without the vision that is taking place in education, this vision would not be possible.

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