A preferred vision for administrating secondary schools: a reflective essay

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Abstract
The mission and vision of the American public school system must promote the individual success of each of its students. School districts throughout the country are as unique as the students that attend them; just as the needs of each school system are unique. The physical structure and climate vary from district to district, and state to state. The dynamics of the educational system are too great to box up and label one district as the model for all others use as a pattern. However, there are important elements that create school districts that are higher achieving than others. The quality of the administration and especially the principal is one of the essential characteristics of high performing schools.
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Life is a collection of daily experiences and every person handles those occurrences differently. I reflect on these daily happenings and view each individual learning as an opportunity to learn and grow. How one handles life's happenings is what makes individuals different and distinguishes people apart. Some choose to float through life and go with the flow, no matter where it may take them. I choose to be a person who identifies my direction and then maps out my course to achieve whatever my goals may be. Sometimes what may mean going against current and popular decision, but if I feel it is correct and right, I will continue on my way. Although, if the flow is on course with my path I will gladly join in and work with those that have a similar vision.

Every person in education wears a variety of hats. I'm no different in comparison to others with the possible exception that I have continuously sought increased leadership opportunities and responsibilities. As a student and graduate of a rural Iowa school district where opportunities may have been limited in the eyes of many, I found the small school setting offered multiple opportunities to seek and accept leadership roles. Whether those roles were serving on the student council or on an athletic field, I sought them out and accepted the challenges in each of those positions. These early experiences plus a solid base of traditional family values provided me the foundation for my future leadership endeavors and my career choice in the world of education. The travels and steps that I have taken to improve myself would not and could not have happened with out the support of my family, fellow teaching colleagues, and my own personal commitment to myself in the field of education. I am a husband, a father, a son, a
teacher, a coach, a school administrator, and a military service member. All of
these duties and responsibilities contributed to what I am striving to become in the
field of education...a positive educational leader. These are the hats that I wear
on a daily basis and I willingly accept the responsibilities that each bears. Each of
these roles offers unique responsibilities and challenges, but all are handled with
the same personal commitment to my values of integrity, achievement, education,
faith, family, fun, happiness, humor, leadership, nurturance, and success. This list
of values is not intended to be complete or exhaustive and not in an order of
importance, but these are the words that identify the make up of Travis Fleshner.
Each carries a specific meaning and weighs on how I live my life and make
decisions on a daily basis.

As a high school student I had the opportunities to participate in a variety
of activities. I enjoyed each separately, but the area where I had the greatest
opportunity to demonstrate my leadership capabilities was in the field of athletics.
I was a captain on my high school football team and a leader on the baseball team
as well. Each of these team sports offered opportunities to work with other
students and coaches to collectively form a working unit, a team. As a
quarterback in football and a catcher, in baseball I was able to utilize my
leadership strengths and give more to these teams. I thrived on the challenges of
each of those positions, not the power, but the responsibility. My coaches and
teachers truly sculpted my leadership style.

As I advanced through high school into college, I accepted the
responsibilities of military service. Currently, I am a sixteen-year veteran of the
United States Army Reserve and I am as proud of that decision today as I was the
day I swore the oath for the first time. The military offered me an opportunity to
learn a different style of leadership and to increase my self-discipline. Working
with men and women from different walks of life is also a great experience. As a
service member I have had the opportunity, not only to continue my civilian
education, but my military education as well and expand my leadership roles and
capacity. I have had the opportunity to attend military leadership training schools
on several occasions and these continue to expand the breadth and depth of my
civilian and military leadership. Most recently, I have returned from Iraq, having
served my nation proudly in “Operation Iraqi Freedom”. My leadership abilities
had never been tested in such an arena before leading soldiers in a combat zone.
This was no easy task, but it was a challenge I welcomed, to serve my country and
assist the oppressed people of Iraq.

As a teacher I was able to work with all the students in the entire 7-12
grade school building. As a physical education instructor, I have had the
opportunity to work with students in a slightly different classroom setting,
teaching life and physical skills that the students can take with them into their
adult lives. I also had the privilege to serve as the head varsity football coach at
the high school. It has been a truly rewarding experience, to work with young
student/athletes in goal setting and mapping out the strategies to achieve those
goals.

In a continuing effort to be the best educator I can be I have chosen to
expand my education and my leadership potential in the University of Northern
Iowa’s Educational Leadership program. The coursework has greatly expanded my leadership capacity and has given me an entirely new perspective about how I view education and each student in the educational setting.

My current position as an educational leader now affords me the opportunity to work with the entire school district: students, teachers, staff, and community stakeholders. This leadership challenge is one that I truly look forward to managing. The challenges that face school administrators expand far beyond that of the difficult student who is the “buzz” in the teachers’ lounge. The challenges are not only to increase student knowledge and achievement, but also to work on elevating the teacher’s understanding of quality classroom instruction to better serve our students.

Visionary Leadership

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

The vision of an administrator in this new millennium is to see beyond tomorrow and next day. It is this vision that bonds the school system into an educational community. Vision is more than a collection of words that states beliefs about how things should be done, but rather an on-going process. We often see mission and vision statements posted in schools or places of business. When asked “what are you doing to support, or enhance and develop that vision?” the staff person have absolutely no response. I have heard it stated at multiple
conferences, “You are always moving...either forward or backward,” you are never static. As an educational leader we must work with our teachers and stakeholders not only to communicate our vision, but develop it and live it. "Laraine Hong (1996) describes it as purposeful tinkering" (Lashway, 1997). "Thomas Sergiovanni (1994) characterizes vision as an 'educational platform' that incorporate the school's beliefs about the preferred aims, methods, and climate, thereby creating a 'community of mind' that establishes behavioral norms" (Lashway, 1997). "This unifying effect is especially important in school settings known for their 'isolationist culture' (Carol Weiss, 1995)" (Lashway, 1997).

The rate of change in education and the needs of students parallels that of the business and technology world. This change process must be planned for by the administration of all school districts throughout the United States if we are truly going to offer a meaningful education to our students. "Understanding and delivering what the school needs is the principal's core job" (Portin, 2004). The core elements of a school system: students, administration, faculty, support staff, and the community must be aware of this pace of change and be willing to get on board, to create a positive and productive school climate for staff and students to work together in education.

The role of the administration in this change process consists of a multi-pronged approach: communication, development and implementation, modeling of the school's mission, and vision with its various stakeholders. Students and student development should be the first and foremost in all planning procedures. 
All that occurs in a school district should be geared towards the improvement and betterment of student learning.

The face of day-to-day operations in an educational system in the state of Iowa is changing. "No Child Left Behind" legislation has outlined plans for nationwide school reform and accountability. In the state of Iowa "No Child Left Behind" has placed a tremendous strain on the local control of school districts. While other states in the union have developed state-wide student standards, Iowa has maintained its stance on local control of student learning. Although the critically important student performance on standardized test still loom over each school district, forcing school districts to rethink and evaluate what is the educational value of what they are teaching. Accountability is one of the main ingredients in the "No Child Left Behind" recipe for success. Accountability is paramount for success in any organization.

The importance of effective communication is essential in the development process. An administrator should have the ability to communicate with the various stakeholders in his or her school district in a variety of ways. The inability to develop good lines of communication can halt even the best plans. A quality administrator has the ability to connect with all those involved in the educational process. "Today's principals must exercise their powers of persuasion not only with those whom support is expected, but others who may not support their views" (Domenech, 2002). The interpersonal relationships that need to be established can foster a peerless work environment. A positive school climate will produce an outstanding learning environment for students as well.
Instructional Leadership

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, developing, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture that includes instructional programs conducive to student learning and staff professional growth (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

While difficult to scientifically measure, school culture has dramatic effects on students’ ability to learn.

My concern is that most school administrators may not fully understand the profound effect that a hostile, competitive social environment can have on the development of student groups and their attitudes towards each other.

As a social psychologist, I know that if the environment were a bit friendlier, a bit more cooperative, then youngsters would benefit enormously and would learn to appreciate one another to a greater extent than they now do (Aronson, 2000).

As educational leaders are constantly assessing our school system and seeking avenues to better connect with our students:

We look for the latest curriculum, software, or program that will help improve our school and test scores. Unfortunately, as we focus on restructuring, our efforts often tend to leave our staff exhausted, frustrated, and counting the years to retirement! Before we realize it, we find negative culture in our schools, with unhappy teachers playing the B-M-W (Bitch, Moan, and Whine) Game (Hollas, 2001).

As we work collaboratively to generate the best educational system to meet the needs of our students, it is paramount that positive school culture is not jeopardized in any way. Regardless of where an educational leader may be in their career the importance of positive school culture, in my assessment, outweighs even the grandest of curriculum designs. An educational leader must assume the role of change agent, but as with any meaningful change it must begin
at the individual level. A positive school culture has an understanding environment that invites change.

The first rule of change is and always has been that it must begin with the individual. If we really are expecting sustained change in public schools and improved student achievement as the result, then it is imperative that we begin by developing the leadership skills of our building-level administrators in an organized, intentional way. To fail in this endeavor and still expect different results is indeed administrative insanity (Clark, 2001).

The federal legislation of “No Child Left Behind” carries vaulted ambitions, but ambitions that can be reached, if school culture is such that learning is first and foremost.

It is relatively easy to promote the top students in a school system, offering those students advanced classes and providing awards for top achievers. A true test of an instructional leadership is how he or she can develop the average and low achieving students. “Today’s instructional leaders function in a constantly changing environment and serve students with greater and more diverse needs than ever before” (King 2002). An educational leader needs to insure that the instruction of curriculum is taking place effectively each and every day in the school building. They do not necessarily require all of the answers, but they need to have a firm grasp of current instructional strategies and be able to evaluate the instruction. The Iowa teaching standards serve as an excellent framework for success.

This sense of futility can permeate a school to the degree that neither students nor educators believe anything could really be different. In schools with large numbers of learners who struggle with life and literacy problems, an unchallenging reading curriculum can easily become part of school culture (Allen, 2001).
While it is difficult to compare small, rural Iowa schools to the segregated schools of the 1950's, many of Iowa's small districts are facing the same struggles as the "Black" schools of the 1950's. The funding available for those segregated schools and many of Iowa's school districts is scarcely enough to keep the school doors open. These schools "...are less likely to offer college-preparatory classes, and they have much higher rates of teachers teaching out of their subject areas, greater teacher turnover, and lower test scores" (Ferguson and Mehta, 2004). The struggles of African American school districts in the 1940's and 1950's are well documented and are considered to be a major shortcoming in the history of the United States educational system. However, rural districts throughout the nation are still facing equity issues. Rural districts are constantly in contention with the larger school districts in a state's educational system. To often the educational leaders exit the rural districts prior to intervention and implementation of positive change. Thus, creating a revolving door in the central offices that leave the rural school districts in a constant cycle of new beginnings. Multiple elements within a curriculum can be manipulated or staffing considerations given to low achieving students, but the real key lies in the students' school environment. "A discussion of educational equality and inequalities would not be complete without addressing issues of social inequalities and their impact on educational outcomes" (Bell, 2002). All students can learn, if we as educators are skilled enough to teach them. Twenty five years ago, Ronald Edmonds in a 1979 article wrote that, "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; we already know more than we need to do that; and
whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far” (Edmonds, 1979). An educational leader with a strong sense of their vision will work to narrow the gap and make efforts to close the space between the various social levels. “Unfortunately, minority and disadvantaged students find themselves trapped disproportionately by the system's well-defined stratification policies (Bell, 2002).

If students can be at ease in a classroom and a school building, they are more apt to produce the desired results that instructors desire for them. What exactly does this positive school climate and culture look like? Successful school culture takes on various faces in every school building. Every school has different elements within them that motivate them to be successful. The task is to find those elements and develop a collaborative project to produce that desired outcome. An administrator that is willing to develop, nurture, foster, and sustain that positive school culture will realize the true value of education. Multiple best selling books have been written on the dynamics of culture and its importance to productivity. Books such as Fish map out cultural development in the workplace and how to make work more enjoyable. There is nothing wrong with enjoying your work.

An educational leader must assure the continued development of students and teachers by supervising the instructional practices within the educational setting. Assessments may take on various forms, but all should be geared toward the improvement of student learning. “With leadership for student learning as the priority, instructional leadership might be described as simply be described as
'anything that leaders do to improve teaching and learning in their schools and
districts'” (King 2002). As student populations become more and more diverse,
effective instructional leaders need to identify the need for multiple instructional
strategies and assessment tools will become more critical to the effective
instruction of children. In November of 2001 U.S. Secretary of Education, Rod
Paige, urged “principals to be ‘engineers of accountability’ and ‘to work towards
high academic standards and…annual assessments to measure student progress
against those standards” (L.E.G, 2001). “They recognize their own need to
develop a broad knowledge base in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and
they seek ongoing professional development activities to achieve that goals”

Organizational Leadership

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success
of all students by ensuring management of organization, operations, and resources
for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment (Iowa Department of
Education, 2000).

Organizational leaders are responsible for the management of the
organization, operations, and resources to ensure a safe, efficient, and effective
learning environment. The principal needs to establish procedures and
boundaries for which the teachers can effectively work to best suit the needs of
their students. These boundaries are necessary to maintain a certain structure, a
structure that still allows for the development of the mission and focuses on the
goals the school has established. These boundaries allow teachers to still take
risks and develop their innovations. The heartbeat of a school system is the students and the human resources within the district. The efficient organization of these human resources, supplemented with physical safety and the tools with which to educate students provide the optimal learning environment. The role of the principal in this organization is to empower those working within the educational system, while providing parameters in which to work.

“Empowerment requires principals, teachers, staff members, and parents all to have mature judgment and the desire to make the school a learning place for all students” (Short & Greer, 2002). A principal often has to serve as a cheerleader; the one “who must find ways to coax, inspire, and otherwise convince their ‘players’ to strive for individual and collective excellence. It is this ability to motivate that demonstrates a principal’s leadership at its best” (Hollas, 2001).

Effective administrators should also provide a support network for the various educational components. Once the structure and upper level support is established the faculty and staff will be able to further develop the school's mission and vision.

Collaborative Leadership

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with staff, families, and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).
The empowerment of staff to work not only independently, but interdependently is a challenging task, but a task that is more than worth the effort.

Principal’s leadership is crucial because they are uniquely situated to exercise some special skills of initiation, support, and visionary. Among the more important tasks for the principal is to establish collegial relationships in an environment that may previously have fostered dependency relationship (Lambert, 1998).

Over the past year I was faced with this same scenario, but the environment in which I worked was not the friendly hallways of a school building. I found myself on the edge of a combat zone preparing to enter an unknown land, Iraq with a group of young men dependent on my leadership. As we started preparations to move to Southwest Asia, I was struck by the realization that I needed to make an adjustment to the way I managed my soldiers. The United States Army contains a very rigid rank and order system. It is the same “top down” method that exists in many school systems today. This system does not create an environment that allows for people to work or think without a given direction. In certain circumstances this model is very effective, but in day-to-day operations I needed soldiers to work independently and have the ability to work together efficiently and effectively. Iraq may not have been best place on Earth to attempt the implementation and utilization of the empowerment model, but as it turned out it was the perfect place. Soldiers were forced into roles or duties and had no choice but to accept it and excel. All of our lives depended on their daily successes. The empowerment model allowed my soldiers and me to be one of the most requested squads in our entire battalion. The higher command had extreme
confidence in our abilities and we were confident in ourselves to succeed. The past year may have been one of the most authentic field tests for me of this leadership philosophy ever conducted. It is this very philosophy that I will bring to a school district: structured, yet open to opinion, and more expanded opportunities for positive action. This empowerment model when expanded to all those involved in a school system: students, staff, support staff, and community is capable of producing a strong and successful learning community.

The school district and all of its components should involve the community. A school system within a community should be perceived as one of community based learning. The principal needs to communicate with and involve community members. The public relationship the school has with its community stakeholders is a major element in the development of the extended learning family. Terrence Quinn, a recently retired principal, describes one of the many roles of an educational leader. “The job of the principal…call it salesmanship, marketing, or cheerleading…is to build the community’s confidence in and enthusiasm for your school” (L.E.G., 2001). Parents have more influence on their children than they often believe. Parents who have increased structure in their homes have children that are more willing to accept structure at school. “Parents play an important role in efforts to improve student performance. By monitoring homework, emphasizing good health and sleep habits, and encouraging their children to do well at school, they make a valuable contribution to student motivation.” (Sorrentino and Zirkel, 2004).
Another area parents can assist and serve as an extension of the school is the area of child management. "A child’s behavior at home is usually mirrored in school. That is why it is so important for principals to communicate to parents the positive effects of a structured, healthy home life on school success" (Wherry, 2001). Each school district has a variety of out of building resources that are willing to assist in the educational development of its children. The principal needs to enhance and nurture those relationships. The financial constraints facing school districts truly necessitate the need for of assistance from external sources to provide the educational tools that today's schools require. Monetary contributions are the simplest form of community endorsement, but there are multiple resources within every community that would benefit a school district. Each community has people who can contribute whether it is a business person speaking to a group of seniors preparing to graduate or a local speaker from the neighboring tree nursery sharing stories of nature with elementary students. The resources are there, within the community; they simply need to be harvested. Collaborative leadership point also aligns in with the political aspects of leadership as well. The task of community relations should perpetuate from the administrative position.

Stephen Covey in his book Seven Habits of Highly Effective People discusses his philosophy of synergy. Synergy simply stated is that people working together, truly working together, not just sitting at the same table will obtain a heightened level of output as a result of working together collaboratively. Example, if two teachers were working independently on the same set of
problems, the sum of their individual efforts would be one. If the same pair of teachers were working together, synergistically, on the same set of problems the sum of their efforts would not be two, but equal the output of three or more because of the multiple strategies they may employ to generate their solutions (Covey 1989). This synergistic model is really a basis for collaboration and forward progress towards empowerment.

Creating a collaborative culture in which teachers are motivated to work and learn together, and feel affirmed, validated, and appreciated, is an important factor in successful school improvement. In fact, creating a culture that consistently reinforces and nurtures positive staff attitudes should precede any reform effort (Hollas, 2001).

“In a school setting, power to accomplish the school’s mission is increased when the principal involves teachers, other staff members, and parents in the basic decisions of the school” (Short & Greer, 2002).

Ethical Leadership

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

The roles of an ethical leader are intertwined within all of the ISLL Standards in administration. While it is difficult to really describe an ethical leader, it is very easy to describe when ethical leadership is not utilized. The ability to lead and develop an educational system falls squarely on the ethics of the principal. “The principal is the key to building a trusting environment. Trust begins with the principal” (Short & Greer, 2002). A reflection of the school district's current status whether it be the school's climate, school's curriculum or other elements involved all are based from the ethical decision making processes
the administration choose to incorporate. An area where ethics is challenged is in the area of dealing with students with special needs. All educators want what is best for kids, but the increased pressure to produce gains in standardized test data in this population presents a confounding factor. “Force is bound to be conflict between instruction designed to improve test scores and instruction….formulated for students’ IEPs” (Sorrention and Zirkel 2004). The merit of an administrative team is based on the ethics that they stand behind.

Political Leadership

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context (Iowa Department of Education, 2000).

Political leadership consists of the administrator's knowledge of current political actions and policy involving trends in education. The ability to stay abreast of current movements by federal, state, and local political leaders in education is an essential step in developing and maintaining a productive and caring school system. The laws and policies that govern public education systems are of obvious importance, but the trends and legislation that affects the classroom teachers are equally as important. A politically active administrator is more likely to stay current with all of elements that affect the school system. Movements with curriculum, assessment, and cultural diversity are a few examples that political leaders are reviewing. In the state of Iowa, the comprehensive school
improvement plan is a not only a developmental model of school district, but a political tool to assess a school's progress in educating its students.

Conclusion

The mission and vision of the American public school system must promote the individual success of each of its students. School districts throughout the country are as unique as the students that attend them; just as the needs of each school system are unique. The physical structure and climate vary from district to district, and state to state. The dynamics of the educational system are too great to box up and label one district as the model for all others use as a pattern. However, there are important elements that create school districts that are higher achieving than others. The quality of the administration and especially the principal is one of the essential characteristics of high performing schools.

The administrative component of the educational equation has recently assumed a changing role. The all encompassing and all powerful position of the principal have been shifted to an empowerment philosophy. The ability of an administrator to effectively communicate the mission and vision of the school and all its stakeholders will reflect on the school's productivity and in the school's climate. Even within this empowerment philosophy the principal must provide the formal structure and formats to allow the remaining stakeholders an opportunity to develop the school's vision and mission, the betterment of education rest solely on the ability to change and develop new thoughts and ideas. The administrative mechanism in the education machine needs to be strong, but at the same time cannot function individually. There must be an element of
teamwork by each of the stakeholders to provide the quality educational experience our youth need and deserve. The principal, while providing the necessary components, needs to maintain an active role in the development of the school unit.
References


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