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
Someone once said that to be a great educator was to be like a prophet. You would need to prepare young people not for today, but for thirty years into the future. How do we go about making all the changes that would be necessary to answer all the pressing needs facing most schools? Glickman (1993) has suggested the following:

Success is the intelligent use of mistakes in self-renewing schools. The moral imperative of the schools is for its members to move into their areas of incompetence: If we already knew exactly how to do this work, we would not have the purposeless cycles of educational reform that schools are endlessly caught in. We all need to learn new roles and relationships. (p. 91)

Educators will need to rethink what has always been done. Einstein has stated that problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them (Maleki, 1999). The time to break paradigms will be now.
A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts in Education

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by

Marlys R. Frohwein

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Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Masters of
Arts in Education.

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When I think back to my early days in rural Iowa, my most memorable childhood events revolved around school. The first day of school is etched in my mind. I was so excited the evening before that I hardly slept. My parents lined us all up at the end of the driveway and snapped pictures to memorialize the event.

From the first day of school it was apparent that school was an exciting place. The interactions with peers and teachers were not as complicated as today. My parents stressed the importance of doing well and working hard. Respect for the teacher was a given. My fourth grade teacher was the first teacher that I really admired. Many Saturday mornings found me carrying some fresh cut tulips or some other handmade item to her house. I could not express then why this teacher made such an impact. Now I can say that she made a positive difference in the lives of the students she worked with. From that day on, I knew that I would be a teacher. I wanted to make that same difference with students.

Once into teaching, I had the opportunity to improve my craft through interactions with colleagues, professional growth plans and occasionally through staff development. Having worked with principals who had strengths that ranged from strong managers to one who was a visionary leader, I became aware of the effect a principal has on the entire school. That visionary principal brought our middle school to a new-shared vision. The culture and climate in the school became strong. Many new and innovative ideas were put in place for students. That principal went on to become the Superintendent of our district. During that
time trust became strong between teachers and administrators. With the successes fresh in mind, a door opened bringing a chance to begin a new stage in my professional life. That door was the University of Northern Iowa, which offered a program in Southwest Iowa in Educational Administration.

With this reflective paper, I hope to bring together what I have learned from my experiences in teaching, administrative classes and various other educational endeavors. The end product of those learnings will be thoughts on what is needed to have an effective educational organization and to be an effective administrator.

Prescriptions for Schools

Over the past half a century, numerous educational innovations have come and gone. Some of those innovations have included the back to basics movement, the educational reforms of the Sputnik era, and the accountability movement. School improvement efforts have been spurred on by federal grants, mandates by legislature and corporate endowments. The aims of education have been quickly changed by influences of society. One example, the passage of the Civil Rights Act, changed the attention of society from science, foreign languages, and mathematics to domestic problems. (Kowalski and Reitzug, 1993, p.110) stated that, "Schools are never separated from the problems of society as a whole. Whether it is national security, race relations, or poverty, schools are viewed as an integral part of the problem - and the solution." Schools have been charged with ensuring a better future and a better world. There have been long standing
thoughts as to what the purposes of public education should be. The most prominent have included: promoting the intellectual attainment of learners, creating good citizens, preparing individuals for the work force, and developing life-long learners. The most recent initiatives, including Goals 2000, have shown that schools cannot function apart from society. To answer these unique needs, many innovations and changes in education have been tried. But in all the changes in education, few staff development activities have worked to develop a person's capacity to produce a more caring relationship. Wheatley (1994) has shared that organizations need to be redesigned to honor and make use of who we are. There is a need for a greater caring for the personal growth of each individual. This would involve building a learning community where all people are continually discovering ways to live together, trust each other, learn together, nurture the environment and grow into higher states of both independence and interdependence. Speck (1999) defined a school learning community as one in which “students learn to use their minds well, and the adults and students model that practice every day throughout the school” (p. 5). Schools should reflect working independently and interdependently by operating autonomously with site-based goal setting, resource allocation, curriculum development and realistic assessment procedures. A more global view will be even more important today as we are standing at a unique place in history. For the first time ever, we are faced with challenges unique to our era. We are now facing global warming, the destruction of the ozone layer, and the possibilities that human beings through their
endeavors can alter the gene pool. During the last few years, there has been increased violence in the form of school shootings. We are faced with government deficits and an unprecedented breakdown of the traditional family structure. Those in education have seen a dwindling base of support for public schools. There has been a major crisis in self-confidence. Schools will need to recognize and respond to these problems. They will also have to understand their role as a bridge between what is and what might be, between the real and the ideal. There must be a reawakening, a reviving and a renewing of spirit for schools to be successful. Barth (1990) described working in education to be like a tennis shoe in a dryer. No statement better captures what it is like for adults who work in education.

Prescriptions for Administrators

Books on leadership have been abundant the last several years. Unfortunately, no two agree on what distinguishes an effective leader from an ineffective one. Sergiovanni (1992) feels that too much discussion has focused on issues of style and levels of decision making. There are times for direct leadership, when leaders need to manipulate people and events to accomplish the vision for the school. Sergiovanni feels instead that the moral dimension in leadership should be at the center of inquiry.

The leadership that counts is the kind that touches people differently. It taps their emotions, appeals to their values, and responds to their connections with other people. It is morally based leadership - a form of stewardship. Morally based leadership is important in its own right, but it is also important because it taps what is important to people and what motivates them. (pp. 119-120)
(Bolman and Deal, 1995, p.167) shared this same sentiment. “To prevail in the face of violence, homelessness, economic depression, and widespread malaise, we need a vision of leadership rooted in the enduring sense of human wisdom, courage and compassion.” It will no longer be acceptable for administrators to focus only on behaviorist principles. “People behave in terms of how they see themselves, how they see the situations they confront, and the purposes they seek to fulfill.” (Combs, Miser and Whitaker, 1999, p. 10) Having a person-centered view of events will result in true educational leadership.

Given the complexities of the educational environment, administrators will face the monumental task of ensuring student achievement. To accomplish this, they will need to involve those who work most closely with students. Zarkowski (1997) shared ideas, which would assist in creating a vision for the school. A couple of the tips related to empowering people and building a strong base of action. Owens (1998) mentioned that there are major differences between management and leadership. Management deals with managing things, while leadership deals with leading people. Administrators have to be responsible for developing and enhancing the potentials of all the inhabitants of the school and promoting positive interrelationships through their leadership. They should be mediating the school climate by accepting problems and challenges as opportunities for learning. Hargreaves (1995) suggested that administrators need to understand the political configuration within their school, need to act politically to secure support and resources for students, and need to empower others to be
more competent. These are all aspects of positive politics that will result in school improvement. Stakeholders should be encouraged to collaborate by planning together, using peer coaching, observing each other's classrooms and sharing responsibilities for student learning.

Administrators will need to promote improvement while looking at stressors that affect good teaching. These stressors include top-down mandates, no time for reflection, traditional evaluation and a lack of a sense of efficacy. Educators should work collaboratively with administration to define purpose, goals and outcomes along with the best methods, strategies and actions to achieve those outcomes. Administrators need to promote staff development activities that encourage educators to look at pedagogy. They will need to analyze the needs and concerns of all involved in education including students, parents, the community and organizations. The following will continue to be important to school improvement: keeping abreast of leadership within the organization; staying current on research and literature related to school improvement; recognizing priorities, resources and energies available to the district; using frameworks for effective teaching practices (Danielison, 1996) and developing teacher evaluation systems that improve instruction. Activities that foster improvement will need to be promoted within an atmosphere of collegiality where risk taking, personal accountability and professionalism will be the norm. Sergiovani (1992) has noted that "leadership is important, and the kind and quality of leadership we have will determine, for better or worse, the kind of schools we have" (p. xi).
Administrators should recognize that they have a monumental task ahead of them, and that only through collaboration with many people can they build a base of support strong enough to tackle the tough issues involved in education.

Prescriptions for Teachers

Teachers should view students as being on an unending journey toward wholeness, self-expression and morally sound contributions to fellow human beings. It should be understood that each student has the capacity to influence several systems of which they are a part; and therefore, they can make the world a better place. Schools should be child-centered with teachers being facilitators of learning. Educators should also be agents for social change. The purpose of teaching must be to bring out the child's unique qualities, to allow full development of his/her creativity and sensitivity and to encourage personal integrity, love of learning and self-fulfillment. Educators should work to stimulate collaborative efforts and life-long learning by students, as well as themselves. This sense of community will be necessary in the school environment to promote learning by all involved. Covey (1989) has spoken of the importance of creating a community of learners in the following statement: "Dependent people need others to get what they want. Independent people can get what they want through their own effort. Interdependent people combine their own efforts with the efforts of others to achieve their greatest success", (p.49).

Because there has been no conclusive evidence that traditional evaluation practices improve teaching, new emphasis should be placed on self-evaluation and
portfolio development. Glickman (1990) has shared that teachers who are thoughtful and will use reflection to analyze their teaching will produce students who are more thoughtful. The act of teaching has been described as a highly intellectual process, involving continuous decision making, not only during classroom instruction, but also before and after (Costa and Garmston, 1994). This can be seen as teachers manage a multitude of activities occurring in the classroom at the same time. Coaching conversations should encourage teachers to clarify goals, anticipate strategies, summarize impressions of the lesson, infer relationships between student achievement and teacher decision making and make applications for future learnings. This focus on decision making plus planning with peers before teaching and reflecting after teaching will improve instruction. In an Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) article, Mann (1999) reported conversations with Thomas McGreal, Carl Glickman, Robert Garmston and Art Costa related to teacher evaluation. These experts on school improvement agreed that important issues were not addressed in old forms of evaluation. One issue addressed by Garmston related that teachers working individually would not make as much difference in student learning as those who worked together as part of a professional community would. Barth (1990) echoed this by wondering how the teaching profession could survive, when members have been isolated from each other’s knowledge base and successes. School improvement experts encourage self-evaluation and reflection.
The importance of self-evaluation and reflection was mirrored in the statement; 
"You don’t grow, if you don’t understand yourself." (Dr. Robert Decker, personal 
communication, April 5, 1999)

Increasing teacher involvement in decision making and respecting teachers 
as professionals will result in a greater sense of efficacy in teachers. Teachers who
are more efficacious will feel that they can and do make a difference. They will
have a more internal locus of control, which results in being less stressed and less
affected by outside forces. Teachers can influence classroom improvement by
focusing on educational goals. Once goals have been selected, teachers need to
develop content that is appropriate for all students. Using a wide range of
instructional strategies and practicing elements of specific effective teaching
behaviors will ensure that students are challenged, while having their unique needs
met. Programs will need to be in place to support the new teacher as well
as promote continued growth of experienced teachers. Wasley (1999) has shared
that mentor teachers skilled in helping teachers assess their skills and progress
must be available to help new teachers build an ever-expanding repertoire of skills
for engaging children in learning.

Prescriptions for Students

One of my administrators asked that the staff try to catch students doing
something right each day. Having a background in special education, this request
aligned with reinforcement techniques that were learned in college. I had been
taught that the time to reinforce a student was when they were doing something
good. If not, you may have the tendency to react to misbehavior with negative reinforcement. Reinforcement can result in a behavior being repeated. The crux of what the administrator was trying to impart in the statement, “catch them doing something right”, was that you should be reinforcing a behavior you want to be repeated. Beyond the mere behavior management aspect, staff should consider the interactions they have with students. If all conversations with students begin with “Stop”, “No”, or “Don’t”, students will have had a very negative experience with adults in the school. Green (1997) shared that when caring relationships were absent, teachers were forced to rely on discipline. Students need to feel that schools are places where they are cared for and nurtured to become all that they can be. Building students’ self-esteem, providing a safe learning environment and facilitating learning that is relevant should be what students experience daily. Making learning meaningful and relevant for students and then fairly assessing their progress must be the focus.

While the focus has been on administration and teachers when building leadership potential, building student leadership has taken a back seat in many schools. Some schools have required students to participate in community service activities. These activities have been particularly beneficial for students who harbor so much energy and moral outrage. Schools should consider applying those same service activities to their own organization. By encouraging students to be leaders and to be workers within their school, a stronger culture and climate can be built. Students also need to take responsibility for their learning. To do
this, there should be student-centered classroom assessment, student-involved record keeping and student-involved communication. “Student involvement provides conceptual understanding and shared vocabulary. It also keeps students in touch with their own growth and motivates them.” (Richard Stiggins, personal communication, March 10, 1999) Assessment should energize students rather than breed dependence on teachers. Students should not see grades as the motivator. Students’ confidence can be crushed with old systems of assessment. They should believe that targets are attainable and within reach. Schools will need a new vision of student assessment to accomplish these ideals.

Personal Prescriptions

The importance of knowing yourself has been discussed in several of our leadership classes. As a principal, my values and beliefs will provide the basis for the decisions I will make, as well as, the basis for my interactions with people. My personal profile has suggested that I am orderly, sensitive and conscientious. I have always valued people who are committed to their work and who go the extra mile for others. I have felt that education is the only profession that has the unique opportunity to change for the better all who are involved with it. For me to contribute meaningfully it will be necessary to focus on the following areas. The first must be relationships. Without this piece, there will be little collaboration, risk-taking, collegiality and student achievement. Barth (1990) saw the benefits of promoting collegial relationships. “My years in school suggest that the quality of
adult relationships within a school has more to do with the quality and character of the school and with the accomplishments of students than any other factor”, (p. 163). If the adults in a school are struggling with interrelationships, the students will also struggle.

The second focus must deal with understanding and enhancing the human resources involved with your school. Providing support for students, staff, community members and parents will build bonds that are hard to break. Capacity building will result in more self-directed learning, empowerment, work being accomplished and the school making a difference for kids. Bennis (1999) warned that unless leaders learn to value their people and tap the potential of their human resources, their organizations would sink. Whether it is for a school or for personal reasons, how one deals with people will impact his or her life in some way. The next area that must be attended to will be the establishment of a learning community. This community should value, promote and model ongoing learning. Decision-making should be shared, in order to bring in multiple perspectives. All involved in education must recognize that we never have all the answers. Assessing what we do, seeking information regarding best practices, focusing on teaching and learning, and promoting the examination of new ideas will translate into school success.

The last area of focus for me will be to strengthen time management, delegation, and organizational skills, which will give me more opportunities to concentrate on leadership activities. Keeping the school’s efforts focused on the
future will keep us from being overwhelmed by day-to-day problems and concerns. These skills will also allow me to keep a balance in my life between work, family, friends, church and self-renewal. With a balance established in my life, I will be able to stay in education long enough to make a difference in the lives of the people I will encounter.

Someone once said that to be a great educator was to be like a prophet. You would need to prepare young people not for today, but for thirty years into the future. How do we go about making all the changes that would be necessary to answer all the pressing needs facing most schools? Glickman (1993) has suggested the following:

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References


