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Administrator leadership of secondary schools : a reflective essay

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Administrator leadership of secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

The multiple tasks of principals are a dynamic undertaking of responsibilities and expectations. It is crucial we increase the value of today's society and acquire resources needed to nourish our youth and provide them with the tools needed to become successful in the future. The principal plays a key role in identifying what is needed in order to make his or her building most effective.

In a day when so much energy seems to be spent on maintenance and manuals, to be a leader means having the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those around you. In order to build a quality society we must have quality schools and effective teaching and learning; therefore, we must have quality leaders to ensure the success of our society.

ADMINISTRATOR LEADERSHIP OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

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Entering the second year of the 21st century, Americans are faced with mixed feelings of anticipation and uncertainty regarding our educational system, world economy, world peace, and most important, the welfare of our youth. Prior to the tragic events on September 11, 2001, our economy steadily displayed signs of prosperity with booming industry and low unemployment rates. However, following 9-11-01, our nation experience one of the greatest economic downfalls in history, leaving everyone with an unwelcomed sense of security, loss trust and a feeling of uncertainty.

How do the major changes occurring over the past few months affect our educational system? Can our schools continue to provide the best possible education regardless of societal barriers blocking our path? Can schools reflect a safe and nurturing environment for learning and continue to promote and produce quality citizens? "In all cases, regardless of what society exists, whether political, economic, religious or scientific, schools adapt to enrich the lives of students to become better individuals" (Kowalski, 1993 p. 165). I believe it is vital for the school administrator to effectively lead through conflict, nurture through tragedy, and manage the institution to better influence those involved. The success of an organization greatly depends on the success of leaders and how they interact with others to successfully reach desired outcomes.

Since my pursuit of the M.A.E. degree in Educational Leadership, many personal views and beliefs of school leadership have been clarified, as well as

restructured. Undertaking educational and administrative duties over the past few years have challenged my pre-existing views and forces me to analyze different approaches in educational leadership. Even though certain views and beliefs have been altered, my underlining philosophy of school leadership has remained the same: School leaders must acquire the necessary skills to be effective leaders and managers to ensure a safe and nurturing environment, and to install a positive moral culture to provide a comprehensive and quality education to all students. My goal of maintaining the mission lies ahead with great anticipation and desire.

Effective School Leadership

Quality leadership is the number one priority of an effective school. Leadership is a skill learned over time through multiple experiences and abundant risk taking opportunities. Leaders must deliver to the organization the appropriate services, products, tools, and equipment that people in the organization need in order to be accountable. "With strong leadership by the principal, a school is likely to be effective; without capable leadership, it is not" (Barth, 1990, p. 79). Administrators must acquire good leadership characteristics, be able to lead through adversity, and successfully promote staff, students and the school's vision in an everyday process.

My view of a school administrator is similar to an ambassador of a country or state. The administrator is the official representative of a school, so

what he or she does is modeled, critiqued and analyzed by the students, staff and community on an everyday basis. Constant visibility by the school administrator is important in establishing a networking opportunity between school, parents, school board and the surrounding community. Visibility allows an opportunity for principals to talk with others, provide positive reinforcement to teachers and students, and see learning taking place. "As stakeholders see the principal regularly and in a variety of ways - they develop a sense of commitment to the work of the learning community" (Speck 1999, p. 58)

Administrators must also be considerate and caring when building relationships, enabling a better understanding and respect of each other's experiences, values and philosophies. An open-door policy is key in establishing strong communication links, enabling trust to form. "A principal's commitment to action, developing relationships, and follow-through help build a foundation for trust." (Speck, 1999 p. 59). Respect and trust begins with an understanding of the diversity of each person's gifts. Understanding the diversity of these gifts enables leaders to begin taking the crucial step of trust and to think in a new way about the strengths of others. Everyone comes with certain gifts - but not the same gifts. True participation and enlightened leadership allow these gifts to be expressed in different ways and at different times.

Administrators must encourage and influence teachers to reach their potential and to perform responsibilities more effectively. To ensure a unified

system, administrators must promote the success of teachers and delegate responsibilities for each person to be as effective as they can, both professionally and personally. "Leadership needs to speak to a group broader than the individual leaders" (Lambert, 1998 p. 5). Everyone shares a special gift. Transferring leadership capabilities establishes ownership and comprehensive participation from others. Participation is the opportunity and responsibility to have a say in your job, to have influence over the management of organizational resources based on competence. In order to accomplish goals means to permit others to share ownership or possession of existing goals. No one person is the expert at everything. When we think about the people with whom we work, people on whom we depend, we can see that without each individual, we will not succeed as a team.

In many organizations there are two kinds of leaders - both hierarchical leaders and roving leaders (Depree 1989). "In special situations, the hierarchical leader is obliged to identify the roving leader, then to support and follow him or her, and also to exhibit the grace that enables the roving leader to lead" (Depree, 1989, p. 49)

Another important aspect of an effective school leader is having a clear picture of the future. Leaders are visionaries - and how the vision is achieved depends greatly upon the administrator's ability to motivate others to reach the desired outcomes. "Motivating factors vary from individual to individual, and

principals must employ a variety of incentives to motivate staff individually and collectively" (Speck, 1999, p. 62) I am a strong believer in the power of motivation and momentum. In order to guide a school to reach its' vision, it is necessary to convey what the vision is and delegate responsibilities for that vision. Administrators must share the vision, promote the vision, mediate the process, and make sure the vision is developing in a positive and effective manner. The needs of every individual must also be carefully acknowledged and thoroughly examined to create a sense of ownership and valuable investment.

Administrators should also influence students in identifying the vision, assist with planning and organization of the process, which will eventually be contagious to those around them. By emphasizing the importance of setting goals and high expectations to reach the outcomes established, students will work to higher potential, creating better outcomes. "Students tend to learn as little – or as much – as their teachers expect" (Martz, 1992 p. 89). This task ensures a quality comprehensive education. Schools can help all adults and youngsters learn how to lead and enjoy the recognition, satisfaction, and influence that come from serving the common interest as well as one's self-interest (Barth, 1990). Principals need to articulate this idea in an effective and cautious manner, being careful not to create a multitude of egotistical furry, to enhance the quality of life in our schools and outcomes produced.

School leaders must acquire the ability to lead staff and students through a variety of adverse situations. Whether the adversity is in the form of personal or group conflict, tragedy, or other adverse situations, knowing how to handle the issues can determine the existing environment or culture of a school. Overcoming environmental and organizational barriers with leadership approaches and effective decision-making principles are necessities in building an effective organization. Leadership involves the development of goals and the directions of the organization despite barricades of adversity or other challenges. "One of the most significant roles of leaders (and of leadership) is the creation, encouragement, and refinement of the symbols and symbolic activity that give meaning to the organization" (Deal & Peterson, 1991 p. 128). Leaders must incorporate different ways of thinking about common problems such as transforming school problems into school opportunities.

Literature about leadership frequently distinguishes between managers and leaders by stating that a manager does things right and a leader does the right things (Bennis, 1989; Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Additionally, a leader is characterized as the vision holder, the keeper of the dream, or the person who has a vision of the purpose of the organization. Bennis (1990) believes that leaders are the ones who "manage the dream" (p. 46). Leaders have not only a vision but also the skills to communicate that vision to others, to develop a "shared covenant" (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 216). Leaders invite and encourage others to

participate in determining and developing the vision. "All leaders have the capacity to create a compelling vision, one that takes people to a new place, and the ability to translate that vision into reality" (Bennis, 1990, p. 46).

Out of multiple administrative experiences I have encountered over the past few years, the topic of dealing with change has been the most valuable learning experience in educational leadership training. Transforming from a traditional style of education to an "arts" emphasis was the task of McKinley Middle School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I have learned that principals must strategically look at all aspects of the change before the change begins. First of all, the principal must take full ownership in implementing the change. Successful organizations must first and foremost focus on their purpose or mission. Only when they are clear about the purpose can they make whatever strategic changes necessary to best accomplish that purpose.

Secondly, successful change efforts often require redefining the role of leaders, who must lead the organization toward clear articulated goals. If the principal and other leaders of a school fail to model that they are serious about the change, staff members will not take ownership in the change. Staff members need to know that their leader values the new vision, will stand for it, and will take risks in supporting the vision.

Principals must also manage the facilitation of resources and procedures of the school building, such as understanding procedures of the physical plant and

maintenance details. Principals must oversee financial and administrative procedures, scheduling, student behavior, bus schedules, lunch procedures, calendars and other organizational duties beneficial in the organization of the school. "Without the fundamentals of management, the principal is unable to successfully carry out the multidimensional roles - the school would be in chaos." (Speck, 1999 p. 19).

In reference to analyzing personal characteristics of managers vs. leaders, a balance of the two must be incorporated. A principal with high management skills but very low leadership skills, will find it very difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill the vision of the school, unless he or she can acquire the skills needed to transfer leadership to those around them. I have learned over the past few years that the balance between a principal's leadership and managerial skills are not as equally distributed that I once thought. The principal must be a leader through vision, but must also spend the majority of the time managing the process. Leaders become the servants to the vision; they work at providing whatever is needed to make the vision a reality and gather the resources, both human and material, to bring the vision to reality.

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is a significant factor in facilitating, improving, and promoting the academic progress of students. Principals become servants to

their vision of success for all students. Principals support teachers' instructional methods and their modification of instructional approaches and materials. Principals communicate directly and frequently with teachers about instruction and student needs. An example of frequent interaction with teachers is principals make a "conscious effort to interact in a positive manner with every teacher on a daily basis" (Reitzug, 1989, p. 54). Reitzug's analysis of teacher and principal interactions revealed that in the school where students were achieving, there were more interactions dealing with instructional matters. Support for the teachers' instructional efforts occurs because these instructional leaders are cognizant of what the teachers are doing. When instructional leaders know what is happening in classrooms, they are better able and willing to provide resources and materials that support teachers' instructional efforts.

Providing feedback on instructional methods and materials can assist teachers in accumulating the resources and instruction needed to ensure a quality learning environment. When principals interact with teachers about classroom efforts, they are communicating with teachers about the instructional process, just as teachers interact with students about their progress.

When monitoring progress, effective principals focus on students' outcomes by leading faculty members to analyze student data, evaluate curriculum and instructional approaches, and determine appropriate staff development activities. Principals must provide the staff with opportunities to

create, explore and examine professional opportunities to greater enhance the learning environment of the school. A principal must have the capacity to leverage human resources and apply profound knowledge of teaching and learning in order for the instructional system to be effective. With consistent monitoring, assessing, and promoting, a principal can ensure accountability and improvement of the system, as well as, build the culture, climate and community around them.

When planning for in-service meetings, it is helpful for a principal to understand that teachers' thinking concerning in-service topics, will vary from concrete to abstract levels. Teachers may view in-service activities as providing information for implementation, as a collaborative act, or as a time to refocus or to be informed. Principals, by respecting and considering these varying levels in teacher thinking concerning in-service, enable teachers to become "the agents rather than the objects of staff development" (Glickman, 1990, p. 333).

Another important factor in quality instructional leadership is the implementation of mentoring programs. For example, beginning teachers enter their careers with varying degrees of skill in instructional design and deliver. Good mentors are willing to coach beginning teachers to improve their performance wherever their skill level. However, the principal must make certain the mentor has the knowledge of quality instructional support. Sometimes lacking opportunities for shared experience, mentors often limit instructional support to

informal conversations. Although such dialogue can be helpful, discussions based on shared experience are more powerful. Such shared experiences can take different forms: mentors and mentees can engage in teach teaching or team planning, mentees can observe mentors, mentors can observe mentees, or both can observe other teachers.

Regardless of the nature of the experience, the principal must ensure a quality training experience for mentors to equip themselves with the knowledge, skills and dispositions prerequisite to effective coaching. Principals also have to be willing to give mentors and the mentees time and opportunity to participate in the pre-conferences, classroom observations, and post-conferences that lead to quality clinical support.

The decision a principal makes concerning the issue of instructional leadership and the extent to which that principal develops the skills needed to exercise appropriate instructional leadership will influence what does or does not happen in classrooms throughout the country. (Anderson & Pigford, 1987, p. 71) The importance of instructional leadership responsibilities of the principal cannot be ignored, nor can the reality that good leadership skills are seldom practiced.

I believe principals must require information and skills in order to support practices of instructional leadership in their schools. They need to know what effective instructional leadership is and how to become an effective instructional leader. Learning to become an instructional leader is a complex,

multidimensional task. If principals believe that growth in student learning is the primary goal of schooling, then it is a task worth learning.

Political Leadership

I regard political leadership as a means to an end. Political leadership involves the harnessing of people resources toward something more desirable. Political leadership is a balancing act that holds competing priorities and people at bay or influences them in order to improve the position of the school represented. "Politics involves activities to acquire, develop, and use power and other resources to obtain desired future outcomes when there is uncertainty or disagreement about choices" (Daft, 2002 p. 451). The political principal must be savvy and understands when and to whom to be indebted. The political principal is constantly bombarded with, "is it worth it," types of situations and must make judgments on what is beneficial and what is not.

The political principal must know and understand his or her resources, allies, detractors and the power brokers of the community or school system. Being active in community organizations, serving on committees or volunteering for challenging situations provides leaders with the respect or trust needed to build a reputation. In return, principals use this established reputation to assist them in receiving quality returns on future investment. Daft (2002) refers to this type of leadership as "impression management." "Leaders seek to control how

others perceive them. In other words, they strive to create an impression of greater power" (Daft, 2002, p.452). Once this is established, the leaders can influence others to think the same way in order to agree on the correct direction.

Political leaders are also acceptable of being perceived in negative ways. If political actions are not approached cautiously by the principal, staff members, students, parents and the community can perceive the principal as a tyrant, arrogant or autocratic figure. Political leaders who are not cautious and skillful in political tactics can challenge ethical standards and may cross boundaries with many consequences.

Daft (2002) explains the difference between personalized and socialized charismatic styles of leaders. Personalized styles are self-centered and are directly built around the needs of the leader. Socialized charismatic styles benefit the school or organization, bringing greater rewards to everyone involved. Incorporating a socialized style of leadership establishes a clear direction towards the desired outcomes through a unifying nature.

The world of a principal is political. Some principals are successful players in the game and some are not. Successful political leaders need a great amount of insight, skill, wisdom and the ability to know where their investments are placed. In order to be an effective principal, political leadership skills must be used to help others within the school acquire ownership and the resources needed to accomplish the goals or vision. "By empowering others the principal helps

build the sense of commitment and ownership necessary to carry out their joint efforts for improving the school" (Speck, 1999 p. 59)

Providing A Safe and Nurturing Environment

Multiple roles of the administrator contribute to the development of a safe and nurturing environment in a school. School districts are in a state of confusion concerning the safety and welfare of students, and parents are also entangled in a whirlwind of panic and doubt. The horrific event at Columbine High School in 1999 has opened the eyes of many educators and administrators about the new age of violence occurring in our society. Many schools have implemented tighter security procedures such as security guards, identification tags, limited building access and in many cases metal detectors.

Violence or the threat of violence has a direct impact on the quality of education provided. Students frequently act out their hostility by being disruptive; creating an atmosphere in the classroom and the school that militates against constructive teaching and learning. Factors contributing to school violence are numerous, complex, and mostly community-related. "Teachers perceive that the major factors contributing to student violence are lack of parental supervision at home (71 percent), lack of family involvement with the

school (66 percent), and exposure to violence in the mass media (55 percent)" (Kuhn, 1993 p 176). Adding to this research of common factors contributing to student violence would include the negative effects of peer pressure, drug and alcohol abuse and depression.

Today, with the increasing concern of violence occurring in our schools, administrators need to promote the formation of additional counseling, conflict/resolution programs and strategies to defuse potentially violent situations. These actions and programs will begin to persuade those involved to use nonviolent means to resolve their differences. Conflict resolution strategies can teach young people new ways of channeling their anger into constructive, nonviolent responses. The development of teacher crisis groups or mentor programs can enable teachers and volunteers to spend more time with students who are experiencing difficult situations. Mentors could include volunteers from businesses, service organization, colleges and universities, churches or parents. Youth are less likely to misbehave or engage in violent acts if community members from their neighborhood are highly visible on a daily basis in the school. Administrators must also insist on collaboration with school psychologists, counselors, nurses, social workers and other student services personnel to participate in the violence prevention process to prevent any type of school violence or tragedy from occurring.

In order to maintain a safe and orderly classroom and school conducive to teaching and learning, administrators and teachers must assure that the behavior standards are followed, and they must do so in a manner that is fair, but firm and consistent. Schools must be kept in a structured web with guidelines, rules and consequences for inadequate behavior standards such as the zero tolerance rules and other restrictions to ensure the safety of all.

Establishing A Positive Moral Culture

Culture influences everything that occurs in our schools: how people dress, how students and staff speak and act, how students treat one another. Though culture is difficult to explain it is very powerful in our schools and greatly shapes the attitudes within. The principal is the key figure in promoting an environment within the school that is conducive to students learning. To develop a positive culture, it takes the combined effort of both the principal and the staff to identify factors that build the foundation. Then, it takes cooperative teamwork to develop strategies to promote the desired climate or to overcome the inhibiting factors.

Principals must look at many factors relating to sculpting school culture before actions are placed. First, principals must read the culture's history and current condition. Principals should know the deeper meanings embedded in the school before trying to reshape it. Second, leaders uncover and articulate core

values, looking for those that are the best for students and that support student-centered professionalism. Finally, principals must work to shape a positive context, reinforcing cultural elements that are positive and modifying those that are negative and dysfunctional.

Over the past few years, there has been a growing concern over the intensity and complexity of community problems finding their way into our schools - problems that will be relinquished upon administrators for years to come. Schools have become more and more concerned with at-risk and poor socio-economic status students terminating education, or becoming dependent on drugs and alcohol, with no one to identify and prevent reasons for this action.

Principals play an important role in establishing core values in school culture and rely heavily upon community, parents, and students to help shape accordingly. Principals can influence others on the appropriateness of how actions and words are used, attitudes towards learning, or how they celebrate special awards and accomplishments of staff and students. "In crafting school culture, school administrators are models, potters, poets, actors, and healers" (Peterson & Deal, 1998 p.28). Without special attention to surrounding issues, school cultures become tainted and lead to greater disappointments.

Principals must develop a process to enable students and parents to better understand the importance of setting morals, standards and actions to become more successful in school, both academically and socially. Communities and

especially families need to get "back to the basics" of moral and character education to help students develop more positive and constructive self-awareness. "The schools role as moral educator becomes even more vital at a time when millions of children get little moral teaching from their parents and where value-centered influences such as church or temple are also absent from their lives" (Lickona, 1991 p.132). Building the emphasis of character, values and morals should be placed in the homes of the family. However, since many families are neglecting to undertake such a role, it is now the responsibility of the school and administration to do what they can to reflect a positive moral education.

Leaders must take a role in developing, expressing, and defending civility and values; to respect other persons and an appreciation of the way in which we serve each other. Escalating moral problems in society, ranging from greed and dishonesty to violent crimes to self-destructive behaviors, such as drug abuse and suicide, are bringing about a new consensus.

In conclusion, the multiple tasks of principals are a dynamic undertaking of responsibilities and expectations. With all that has happened in our world over the past few months, it is crucial we increase the value of today's society and acquire resources needed to nourish our youth and provide them with the tools needed to become successful in the future. The principal plays a key role in identifying what is needed in order to make his or her building most effective.

In a day when so much energy seems to be spent on maintenance and manuals, to be a leader means having the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those around you. In order to build a quality society we must have quality schools and effective teaching and learning; therefore, we must have quality leaders to ensure the success of our society.

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