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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

As a future principal, there are four areas that I feel I will be doing the most work. Those four areas are: parental involvement, community involvement, leadership style and technology. The bottom line in all of this is student learning. We always ask, whether a teacher or administrator, what is best for children? I will reflect on leadership style, parent involvement, community involvement and technology all as part of improving our school system to achieve the best education our students can get.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY  
SCHOOLS:  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper Presented to  
The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and  
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University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

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by  
Kathleen F. Hartzler

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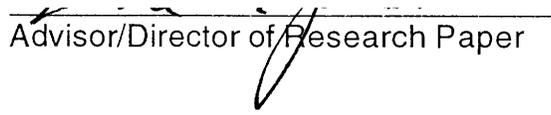
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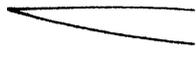
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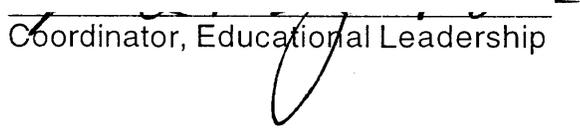
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It will be difficult to get out of the classroom where I have a direct impact on children and move into the principal role. This misconception is very popular. Many people think that a principal is in charge of discipline, evaluation and running the building. This is true, but through these and many other things, the principal should have direct impact on children. As a future principal, there are four areas that I feel I will be doing the most work. Those four areas are: parental involvement, community involvement, leadership style and technology.

I am in my fourth year of teaching at the same school. I've taught seventh grade language arts and reading for one year and sixth grade language arts and reading for three, all in the Manson Northwest Webster Middle School. For this reason, I have not had much experience with different administrators and their styles. I, however, feel very blessed in being a part of this district. There are many programs here that I have been involved with.

Because this is a small district, we, as teachers, get to make many decisions. It would be hard to run a school system this small without the cooperation of the teachers. It is important to get the feelings of the staff and use their input. The administration may get our input face-to-face or through surveys.

I think it is in the district's interest to please those who make it run. The principal in our building really does a nice job of winning over the attitudes of the teachers. He is a true leader because he leads by example. He feels very strongly about certain things and he does everything to get us to believe this also and he doesn't back down. The things he doesn't feel as strongly about are things he will let the teachers decide on. This is exactly what an educational leader should do. Teachers do this all of the time in the classroom. When a teacher feels very strongly about something, he or she will lead the students to understand that it is the best choice, but making the final decision is

theirs. Other less important things will become more of a classroom decision.

The bottom line in all of this is student learning. We always ask, whether a teacher or administrator, what is best for children? I will reflect on leadership style, parent involvement, community involvement and technology all as part of improving our school system to achieve the best education our students can get.

### Parent Involvement

An aspect of a successful school is parent involvement. Without the support of parents, a school would be ineffective. Parents need to have a say in what is done because they become resentful if they are not included. Resentful parents are like poison. They can spread things negatively. On the other hand, parents can spread news positively. The more we can involve the parents in what is happening in our school, the more they can help their child and communicate with their child about school functions. In this day and age when family units have been split by divorce and other reasons, we need more of this type of socialization between the parent and child.

I've heard of school systems where they don't make any attempt to try to get parents into the school system. I think this is a detriment to that school.

I grew up in a town of 4,000 people. It didn't seem to me that there were a whole lot of parents in the school during the school day. What I remember is my classmates and myself being able to go home to parents who loved us, had supper ready for us and who would help us with our homework. This is something I took for granted. Now it seems we can't give much homework because the students are home making supper and taking care of younger siblings after school because the parents are

both working or they are divorced and the one they are living with is working or not around.

I'm on a committee that has started a parent volunteer committee. We have scheduled parents in to work with teachers. They are copying papers, putting up bulletin boards, and working one-on-one with small groups in the classrooms. This has been great support for our school. Parents are in the building to see what we are doing. In turn it is helping teachers so that they can spend more time with students. Though there aren't as many parents as we'd like, the ones that are here are talking to other parents about what is happening in school. This can also give the families an opportunity to talk about something at home. With this kind of communication, we hope to get more parent involvement.

Coulombe (1995) indicated that supportive parental involvement increases the probability that students will succeed academically. Supportive parent involvement is stressed because pressure can lead to conflict and counterproductive behavior. He also says, "Parental involvement in the area of volunteerism contributes directly to goal and program support" (p. 72). We can't expect parents to accept changes different from their education if they don't understand it. If educators choose not to involve parents in new teaching strategies and developing standards, then we are in for a lot of frustration, failure, and community conflict.

McGee (1996) notes how a homeless family was helped to realize the importance of school. This article gave argument to the fact that homeless families can't be reached. There aren't many homeless people in our school district, but when I become an administrator, I may encounter homeless people, and this article gives me hope to this often difficult battle.

Vandergrift and Greene (1996) placed parents into four categories: (1.) supportive of child-active participant, (2.) supportive of

child-inactive participant, (3.) not supportive of child-active participant, and (4.) not supportive-no participation. As educators, we need to tap into the supportive-active participant parents as much as possible.

Divorce is an area that we, as educators, struggle with. It can hinder the learning of students. According to Clapp (1992) adolescents distance themselves from home life and look for others for support. The more the parents can get into the school and be involved with the students, the more the relationship can grow. Because of this, schools need to help families understand the importance of these relationships.

There was a study done in the Manson Northwest Webster High School in 1996. Sixteen students were inducted into the National Honor Society and all of them came from two parent homes. Therefore, it shows that there is a correlation between having both parents at home and success in school. What the home situation is like directly affects school performance. The more we can bring that home into our school, the better chance we have of making the school experience successful.

The bottom line to parent involvement is the more there is, the more successful the student is. Students will exhibit more positive behaviors and less negative ones in school. Expectations are higher for students whose parents are involved in the school and the opinion of the parent is higher.

### Community Involvement

Community involvement is another important aspect to maintaining a successful school. Though it is different than parent involvement, it is as important.

The smaller the school district, the more important the community involvement. Our district is a consolidated school district of nine hundred students kindergarten through twelfth grade with schools in two different towns. What I've learned in four years is that the more informed the

community is about things happening in school, the happier or more content they are. Routman (1996) notes that change may happen successfully if the community understands curricular changes and knows there won't be as many changes. Educational terms and language confuse parents and often then the communication is unclear. It is important for those in the school that they speak the language that the community and parents know. He also says, "We must look critically at ourselves and our practices in order to improve and refine them" (p. 25). He also says, "When questions arise, educators must listen carefully. Parents deserve to know that their concerns will always be taken seriously" (p.25). I feel if they are involved in some of the decisions whether or not it turns out the way they want, they feel like they had some say and become more supportive.

One way our school involves community is with a 280.12 & 280.18 (280) committee. The committee members are rotated periodically so many people serve and help to make decisions. We have a school improvement model that starts with small study groups of teachers who study areas of importance within their building, for example: block scheduling, parent involvement, and student responsibility. There is then a building level team that consists of one member from each small group. All small group action is discussed here. One or two members of each building level is on the district level team where they discuss action of every small group as well as the action of each building level team and decide if there is action to be taken whether it goes to the 280 committee for approval. When it reaches the 280 committee, they decide whether the action goes to the school board for approval. With this model, the administration hopes to get all teachers involved in the transformation of our school. With the community members on the 280 committee, they also feel involved and this generates positive feelings among the community.

Another program that is strong in our community is called Community Cares. It is a program started by our superintendent and some community members. It is comprised of staff, students and community. Their purpose is to plan events for students. Some of those events include: dances, sports tournaments, and New Year's Eve parties. The reason for this is to keep students from doing things like drinking and smoking that are so prevalent in a small community. It helps to negate the comment, "There's nothing else to do". This ties the community into the school district in a positive way.

Another practice that is important is to build partnerships with the community. Sanders (1996) lists ten insights useful for establishing effective, comprehensive and permanent programs of school-family-community partnerships.

1. Partnerships are a shared responsibility.
2. Partnerships take time.
3. Partnerships reach out to all family members.
4. Partnerships improve incrementally.
5. Partnerships are important throughout the grades.
6. Partnerships need students.
7. Partnerships include the community.
8. Partnerships include the hard-to-reach.
9. Partnerships link to the curriculum and student learning.
10. Partnerships follow the six types of involvement:
  1. parenting
  2. communicating
  3. volunteering
  4. learning at home
  5. decision making
  6. collaborating with the community (p.65).

My research identified three programs that dealt with involving the community in very different ways. The first, Lubetkin (1996) was an elementary school that was having trouble with overcrowding. They used parents and building representatives to form a safety committee. This neighborhood was in a very dangerous part of town. The parents were very worried about drug use and gangs. The Safety Committee expanded into a Neighborhood Association. With community members on the committee, they had more weight at the city level.

This committee took care of the drug problem and then focused their attention on Operation Clean Up. They used their time to clean up the neighborhood. Once these two things were done, everyone felt proud about his/her neighborhood. Parents became advocates for their children's education. The school boasted 85% of parents were involved in their Parent Teacher Association and 99% attended parent teacher conferences.

The second program, Conyers (1996) involved senior citizens in Cook County, Illinois. It was called a Senior Exchange. Anyone that was fifty-five or older could participate. They earned money to pay a portion of their property tax bill that supported their district. They were paid an hourly rate based on minimum wage. The total wages that person could earn was based on that person's school district portion of the property tax bill. They also received a free medical check-up.

The writers explained this program by showing some similarities between elementary children and senior citizens. They were: loneliness, a constant need for reassurance, and the fear of failure in their relationships (Conyers, 1996). Because of these similarities, the two groups work well together.

A third program that involved community in the school is from Chase and Durdan (1996). It was called the Baltimore Learning Network. The community helped meet the needs of its children. They went out into the community to be involved in many things. These activities were not tied to the curriculum, but the hope was that the interest in school would grow because of the involvement in the community. Some of the places they visited were: aquarium, science center, zoo, museums, library, theaters, businesses and government agencies.

As an administrator, I see the relevance to involve the community as much as possible. I think it is important to have the administrators on these committees also so they can show support for the programs.

### Technology

Another aspect that is important to education is technology. It seems you can't catch up fast enough to all that is going on in the world of technology. If we cheat our students in technology, they will not succeed in their careers.

"A well-defined mission that describes technology's place in education is critical to the success of a school because the ability to use technology is critical to the success of students in their everyday lives" (Bennett, 1996, p.60).

Students are continually learning to use technology. Using technology can positively influence students' overall achievement. The motivation factor alone increases engagement, a goal of most classroom teachers (Brownlee-Conyers, 1996). As educators, we would be doing a huge disservice to our students if we did not expose them to as much technology as we can. Some things we can expose them to are: Internet, Hyperstudio, and E-Mail. Also things as simple as word processing and writing programs on the hard drive. These are activities that some of the students would not get at home. It seems that when we give students a chance at something they go above and beyond what is expected. Most students have a computer at home and know more about them than the staff. In many cases, I use students as resources because they can tell me how to work something on the computer. As an administrator, I need to convince the staff to do this and not be inhibited by their knowledge. When a teacher is a lifelong learner, he/she fosters a love of learning in students.

In a study done by Whitaker (1996), he suggested the importance of doing projects on the computer that involved parents and students.

The example that he gave was once a month class project done at night. The parent and the child together had to complete this project. He insisted that this helped not only with knowledge of technology, but also with communication in the family.

What many people don't think about is that there is more to technology than computers. One thing I use frequently is the laser disc player. It is a source for information and helps in my class for research. The Internet is another possibility for research. Our library is very limited in research materials so all of these things help.

The important thing is that students learn how to use word processing and know how to do research so that when they get into high school and college, they have some experience. The knowledge will come not with memorizing facts, but with knowing how to use the information at hand. There aren't many jobs where some sort of technology is not being used.

Technology is change and change is difficult. Mehlinger (1995) provides 7 lessons for change:

1. Change is learning-loaded with uncertainty.
2. Change is a journey, not a blueprint.
3. Problems are our friends.
4. Change is resource-hungry.
5. Change requires the power to manage it.
6. Change is systemic.
7. All large-scale change is implemented locally (p. 149-154).

Principals cannot succeed by using management and leadership strategies that do not support the integration of information technology into classroom practices (Bennett, 1996). States expect administrators to take courses in leadership, management and challenges of special education, but few require administrators to be technologically competent (Ritchie, 1996).

There will surely be some difficulties when trying to implement technology. The biggest difficulty in implementing technology is the lack of support from the administrator, so knowing this, I will have overcome the biggest obstacle. A lack of funds is another problem, but with the administration behind the idea of this change, hopefully I can implement some technology in my school or district. According to a study done by Chopra (1994), they chose a pilot school to receive funds to implement technology and they discussed 10 elements that lead to the success:

1. Planning. Implementation takes a great deal of time.
2. Commitment. Gives everyone involved a sense of ownership.
3. Training. This is needed for teachers and administrators to build confidence.
4. Attitude. The training helped change teachers' fear to potential.
5. Interdependence. Success depends on everyone functioning as a member of a team with a shared focus on the target.
6. Service. Timely service for technical equipment difficulties.
7. Scarcity Psychology. The technology was given to schools who showed the most enthusiasm.
8. Board of Education. They play an important supportive role.
9. Public Education. There needs to be several meetings to develop a common knowledge base.
10. Technology Center. A vacant junior high building was used.
11. Leadership. Principals' leadership was critical to success (p. 8-9).

Any school planning to implement technology needs all of these things, and the first four especially, to be successful. The last one, leadership is where the administration and building principal have to play a critical role.

According to Governor Terry Branstad (1996), giving students technology education as well as the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic will help them to get good jobs in the future. The more knowledge that they have the better off they are. They then become more accessible.

When I'm an administrator, I will expect the staff to use computers and as much technology as they can. If the staff doesn't feel comfortable with it, they won't have students use it. I was fortunate to go through the University of Northern Iowa as an undergraduate where they expected us to write papers on computers. This forced me to learn how to use a computer. Now I use them all of the time personally and professionally.

### Leadership Styles

The fourth aspect of being an administrator is leadership styles. The way an administrator runs a building is by the style he/she believes in. That style is usually based more on personality and feelings toward different areas in the building than it is feelings about what is right and wrong. A principal needs to make many split second decisions and if he/she is thinking about what is right and wrong without going with gut feeling, it may be too late to decide.

John W. Gardner (1986) lists six characteristics of leaders by which they distinguish themselves from the general run of administrators:

1. Leaders think longer-term; they look beyond immediate problems.
2. Leaders look beyond the agency or unit they are leading and grasp its relationship to larger realities of the organization, as well as the external environment.
3. Leaders reach and influence people beyond their own jurisdiction.
4. Leaders emphasize vision, values and motivation; they intuitively grasp the nonrational and unconscious elements in the leader-constituent interactions.
5. Leaders have political skills to cope with conflicts of multiple constituencies.

6. Leaders never accept the status quo; they always think in terms of renewal (p. 199).

As a future administrator, I hope I can become a strong leader and possess these six characteristics.

Leadership comes in many packages. Site-based management decision making is a common area of leadership. According to Leithwood (1992), school site-based management will help to increase parent and teacher participation in decision making and enhance opportunities for exercising teacher leadership. I feel there isn't enough of this done because teachers are the ones who are practicing in the field and are in turn the experts. In a district our size, there is only one middle school and high school so the shared decision within the district is what is being used here. Our superintendent lets our principals make a lot of decisions based on the needs of that principal's school. In turn, my principal lets the teachers make a lot of decisions in our building. This ability gives everyone the chance to have ownership in the process.

There are four frames that an administrator can use to observe the organization. They are structural, human resource, political and symbolic frames. The structural frame deals with goals, formal roles and relationships. The human resource frame deals with interdependence between people and skills. The political frame deals with power, conflict, and distribution of scarce resources. The symbolic frame deals with meaning, shared values and cultures (Bolman & Deal, 1993).

The superintendent in the district in which I teach is primarily politically framed with some use of the human resource and structural frame. I think a superintendent needs to be very politically framed to run a school effectively. The principal at the school in which I teach is primarily human resource framed with some structural framing. I feel I will be this exactly. I feel that I am mostly in the human resource frame because I am concerned with the fit between human needs, skills and

values with formal roles they play. I will use the structural frame also because I will have goals and will have developed an organizational structure that best fits my school's needs.

What is leadership? According to Orlich (1989) these things define leadership:

1. Leadership is rooted in meaning.
2. Leadership emerges out of a vision.
3. Leadership emerges out of a dramatic sense.
4. Leadership requires the articulation of a vision and building a covenant.
5. The leader will embody the vision in organizational structures, policies, and procedures.
6. Leadership provides mechanisms for the continuous or periodic renewal of the institution (p. 202-212).

Transformational leadership seems to be the way that leadership is turning. This enables more people to be involved in the decision making processes of the school. Sagor (1992) suggests three building blocks of transformational leadership. (1.) The leader must have a clear and unified focus. (2.) There must be a common cultural perspective. (3.) There must be a constant push for improvement from the leader (p.13). All of these things seem logical and feasible to me as an administrator.

As a female in administration, I feel I am breaking the "norm" from traditional leadership. Most people expect males to be in an administrative role. It is very exciting to be part of the process to break that mold. Ella Flagg Young (1909) was quoted as saying:

In the near future, we shall have more women than men in charge of the vast educational system. It is a woman's natural field, and she is no longer satisfied to do the larger part of the work and yet be denied the leadership"  
(McGrath, 1992, p. 62).

## Conclusion

Educational administration is a broad topic. It is more than being a principal, curriculum director, athletic director, or superintendent; it is being a leader. It is also being able to make a difference in the educational world.

If I can describe myself with one word, it is leadership. I believe that I am a good leader for many reasons. One reason that I am a good leader is that I lead by example. I have sound judgment and what I expect from people, I also display as a person. Another reason that I think I am a good leader is because I am outgoing and willing to take risks.

A good educational leader will need both of these things to develop a good rapport at school. My ability to take risks will lead me to get more things done in our school as well as in our district. If the teachers in our school see me taking risks and getting things done, they may be willing to take some risks in their classroom which will only make our school better.

I see myself as a very human resource leader with the structural frame to be my "backbone". I am a very structured person who cares for people's feelings and this combination will work well in a lot of situations as an administrator. I am willing to use the political frame as well as the symbolic, but they are not my preferred style.

I hope that when I am a principal, I can involve our staff in most decisions. I also hope that if I have a concern, I can approach my superintendent and feel comfortable with his/her advice. I think it is important to involve staff on decisions, and that doesn't mean just little things, but major changes in the school, because they will feel like it is **our** school and feel like doing a better job in the classroom because it is **our** decision in **our** school.

Just as I hope to feel comfortable going to the superintendent with a problem, I hope the teachers in our school will also feel comfortable coming to me and feeling satisfied with my decisions or my guidance. I hope students feel they can walk into my office with the same results.

As I reflect on what it will be like to be an educational administrator, I know that I want to be a leader, I want to involve staff, students, parents and community and by doing these things, I feel that the school I am principal in will be a successful school.

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