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

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

### Abstract

In this paper I will address what I view are the areas in which a principal needs to be strong, in order to be an effective and efficient administrator. I believe the most important roles of the principal include: instructional leadership, communication, student discipline, and parental and community involvement.

**A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:**

**A REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

**REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

**A Research Paper**

**Presented to**

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**Master of Arts in Education**

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**by**

**Larry D. Janssen**

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**Dave Else**

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In beginning my preparation to become a principal, I have many preconceived ideas of where education is, where it is headed, and what I believe is important for the education of our students. At this time, I believe we are a nation of schools who are trying to keep up with all the technological advances that surround us today. We are on the cutting edge of educational transformation. However, we also realize that we only have so much time and money to invest to keep up with these advancements. As much as we want to move forward in this area, our efforts seem to take us one step forward and two steps backward. By using my values, beliefs, and leadership skills, I hope to lead a school district in a positive direction.

When I was growing up, I was fortunate to be surrounded by people who shared similar beliefs, values, and morals. These were people who truly cared about me as an individual. I remember my teachers from school and church. I can recall the leadership provided for me by my coaches and youth leaders. All of these people had a tremendous impact on me and helped mold the type of person I am today. My children need and deserve the same type of leadership. It is my responsibility to provide them with the tools and skills needed to become a successful part of society.

As I look at education today, I see it being in a state of transformation and reformation. Obviously we have entered

the age of technology or better known as the information age. With new technologies being introduced on a daily basis, it is difficult for education to keep up and yet it has become very important for educators to make every attempt to keep up with these changes. Because we live in a world of constant change, we cannot afford to be complacent or satisfied with the status quo. Iowa is perceived as having one of the top educational systems in the country. We are consistently one of the top states in American College Test (ACT) scores across the nation, but there is always room for improvement. If we want to stay at the top of the educational flagpole, we need to be open to new ideas and concepts. If we resist change, we will always be in a catch-up mode.

In this paper, I will address what I view are the areas in which a principal needs to be strong in order to be an effective and efficient administrator. I believe the most important roles of the principal include: instructional leadership, communication, student discipline, and parental and community involvement.

### **Instructional Leadership**

One of the central roles of the principal over the last decade has been to be an instructional leader who is held accountable for the academic achievement and success of students. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are at the

center of creating and sustaining a learning community. The objective of the principal is to provide an educational atmosphere where the act of teaching all students how to learn, think, and solve problems is important.

Cordeiro (1994) describes the principal's role in today's school learning community as that of a generalist who, through collaboration, distributes and coordinates leadership opportunities that focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The principal is no longer the only instructional leader, but one who facilitates instructional leadership within the school by allowing teachers to use their instructional expertise and share in the instructional leadership role.

Odden (1995) states that the new role of the principal in instructional leadership is facilitative:

Rather than being the key decision-maker and "thinker" in the school as the person holding the top position in the hierarchy, principals in restructuring schools facilitated the activities of myriad groups and subgroups all engaged in decision-making on several fronts. (p. 190)

The principal must reinforce the message of shared instructional leadership for improving curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The principal must empower the teachers to assume instructional leadership and provide the support for change. Recent research (Greenfield, 1987) on major

curriculum change found that when teachers assumed key leadership roles, schools made more progress in implementing new, thinking-oriented curricula. These studies also found that the effectiveness of these teacher roles depended on support from the principal. This shift from instructional leader to facilitator represents a major alteration in the role of the principalship.

The role of the principal as instructional leader has evolved into that of a facilitator or transformational leader. Leithwood (1992) proposes using the phrase transformational leader to describe the 1990's principal in a role that blends technical expertise with human relations. The principal takes on the role of facilitator in the process of developing, implementing, and evaluating curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In this role, the principal keeps the vision and focus central and helps others, especially the teachers, lead various efforts.

Technology is at the heart of education today. An effective instructional leader must not only provide instructional needs to students to meet this technological demand and skill, we also need to train faculty to deliver these services. We need to constantly hold seminars, workshops, courses at school, and send teachers to those kinds of activities to become proficient in these areas.

Effective-schools researchers say that a key element of an effective school is an effective principal. The principal has to be the person the instructional personnel look to for the instructional leadership in the system. If they do not, the implications for the school are considerably negative (Edmonds, 1981).

An effective instructional leader has the responsibility of leading the entire school learning community. The principal is there to provide direction, stability, and consistency to all people involved in the school operation. The principal needs to be in touch with what goes on in the classroom and has to understand the needs of the students and teachers. Andrews and Sodor (1987) identified the effective instructional leader as a principal performing at high levels as: resource provider, instructional resource, communicator, and visible presence in the school.

These practices are supported by Foriska (1994) when he discusses instructional leadership as critical to the development and maintenance of an effective school.

Instructional leaders must influence others to couple appropriate instructional practices with their best knowledge of the subject matter. The focus must always be on student learning and principals today must supply teachers with resources and incentives to keep their focus on students.

**Principals must keep teachers informed about the most recent educational tools and developments available for effective teaching to take place in the school.**

### **Communication**

**An administrator must be a person who possesses people skills. To be a good leader, the principal must be able to maintain a warm and friendly relationship with the faculty, support-staff, students, and community. As a communicator, the principal articulates a vision of the school that heads everyone in the same direction. The behavior of the principal communicates whether he/she has a firm understanding of the purpose of schooling and can translate that meaning into programs and activities within the school.**

**Effective communication must be displayed at three levels: one-to-one, small group, and large group, to articulate the vision of the school to the school district, parents, and the community. An effective communicator knows how to handle confrontation and has the listening skills necessary to lead a group in the proper direction. It is important that the principal understands how to communicate the school's direction or vision to outside forces that would move the school away from the direction the staff and principal have chosen.**

**Communicating effectively in an organization requires skills beyond the interpersonal level. A principal must be able to develop a sound and trusting relationship with the faculty by behaving consistently, objectively, and fairly over the course of time. Covey (1990) contends that you need to first understand where a person is coming from before you can be understood. Effective interaction depends on how well an administrator is able to listen to others. Listening to people makes them feel as though they are important, valued, and appreciated as a person. The art of listening is a skill that is often overlooked in society today. The principal needs to demonstrate the ability to engage in two-way communication accurately, sensitively, and reliably.**

**Asking questions is an excellent way to initiate communication because it shows other people that you are paying attention and interested in their response. Glaser and Biglan (1977) suggest to ask open-ended questions, ask focused questions, and ask for additional details and examples. Once the questions have been answered, giving feedback is especially important. This feedback can be in the form of praise, paraphrasing and perception checking. Effective school administrators give plenty of timely positive feedback. They give negative feedback privately, without**

anger or personal attack, and they accept criticism without becoming defensive.

Whether a principal is communicating with one person or a group, nonverbal messages also play an important role. Amundson (1993) notes that one study found 93 percent of a message is sent non-verbally and only 7 percent through the words used. Geddes (1995) offers the following pointers about non-verbal communication: body orientation, posture, facial expression, eye contact, use of space, and personal appearance.

**Body orientation.** Body orientation can indicate whether you like or respect people by facing them when interacting.

**Posture.** Good posture is associated with confidence and enthusiasm. It indicates our degree of tenseness or relaxation.

**Facial Expressions.** Some people hide emotions by not using facial expression. Others exaggerate facial expression to belie their real feelings.

**Eye Contact.** Frequent eye contact communicates interest and confidence. Avoidance of eye contact communicates the opposite.

**Use of space.** The less distance, the more intimate and informal the relationship. Staying behind your desk when

someone comes to visit gives the impression that you are unapproachable.

**Personal appearance.** People tend to show more respect and respond more positively to individuals who are well-dressed, but not overdressed.

School administrators can enhance interpersonal relationships with colleagues and constituents by exhibiting vision, humor, accessibility, team-building skills, and genuine praise. All of these can help to create a positive emotional climate. Vann (1994) says that principals earn staff and community respect by articulating a clear vision of their school's mission and working collegially to accomplish agreed upon goals and objectives. This is a process that should begin before school starts and be reinforced throughout the school year.

Communication experts also recommend using sincere praise whenever possible to create a more constructive atmosphere. It is also important to be available and welcome personal contact with others. Informal meetings are as important as formal ones. An administrator who takes the time to get to know the faculty and staff will be able to identify, develop, and make the best use of each staff member's capabilities.

Pierson and Bredeson (1994) suggest that principals use humor to improve school climate. This is a way to relate to teachers and break down the rigidity of bureaucratic structures by humanizing and personalizing interpersonal communications. The proper use of humor can benefit all involved in the school learning community.

#### **Student Discipline**

The most important thing that takes place in school is learning. Anything that interferes with that should not be tolerated. Students have to have discipline before learning can take place. Effective school administrators help children become more self-controlled with a firm and fair discipline policy.

School discipline basically has two main goals: (a) to ensure the safety of staff and students and, (b) to create an environment conducive to learning. Serious student misconduct involving violent or criminal behavior defeats these goals and often makes headlines in the process. However, Moles (1989) says that the most common discipline problems involve noncriminal student behavior. These less dramatic problems may not threaten personal safety, but they still negatively affect the learning environment. Disruptions interrupt lessons for all students and disruptive students even lose more learning time.

Duke (1989) points out the goal of good behavior is necessary, but not sufficient to ensure academic growth. Effective school discipline strategies seek to encourage responsible behavior and to provide all students with a satisfying school experience as well as to discourage misconduct. The way to have a good classroom climate is to have good teaching and keep things focused on instruction. It is important to approach discipline in a positive way. All children must be treated with respect. Focusing on solutions rather than consequences develops a positive atmosphere for discipline. Being honest, fair, and communicating openly will create mutual respect between the administrator and the student.

School administrators can decrease disruptive behavior having rules and consequences for these rules. However, rules and the consequences of them should be clearly specified and communicated to staff, students, and parents by such means as newsletters, student assemblies, and student handbooks. Meyers and Pawlas (1989) recommend periodically restating the rules, especially after students return from summer or winter vacation.

Once the rules have been communicated, fair and consistent enforcement helps maintain students' respect for the school's discipline system. Consistency will be greater

when fewer individuals are responsible for enforcement.

Providing a hearing process for students to present their side of the story and establishing an appeal process will also increase students' and parents' perceptions of fairness.

School administrators can increase positive behavior by extending social rewards. Smiling, praising, and complimenting can be extremely effective in increasing desirable behavior. If class is dull and boring, students will be disruptive. Making school enjoyable and interesting for as many students as possible may dramatically decrease discipline problems.

Sometimes problem behavior occurs because students simply don't know how to act appropriately. Black and Downs (1992) urge administrators to regard disciplinary referrals as opportunities to teach students valuable social skills that will promote success in future employment as well as in school.

The principal plays an important leadership role in establishing school discipline, both by effective administration and by personal example. Principals of well-disciplined students are usually highly visible models. They walk around the school and greet students and faculty. They informally monitor possible problem areas as well. Effective principals are liked and respected, rather than feared, and communicate caring for students as well as a willingness to impose

punishment if necessary. The key to an effective discipline program is that the administrators must provide stable and supportive leadership.

### **Parental and Community Involvement**

Another role of the principal is to be an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating and communicating with families and community members. The school is a place where everyone comes together to promote learning. Boyer (1995) says that a school is a community for learning, a place where staff and students, along with parents, have a shared vision of what the institution is seeking to accomplish. To achieve educational excellence in a school, there needs to be a purpose or vision, communication between the teachers and students, and parental involvement in the education of their children. Community is the glue that holds an effective school together.

**Parents need to be involved in their child's education.**

They have to be willing to provide both quality time and quantity of time. Without parental involvement, a true learning community cannot exist. The home and school must act together as a partnership. To have a well-rounded school, it takes teachers, students, parents, and community members. Parents are the first educators of children and they need to reinforce all the good things that are taught in school.

**Teachers need to communicate with parents on a regular basis and parents should feel free to visit the school at any time and have active participation in their child's education.**

**Principals must invite parents and others in the community to become partners in the learning process at school, at home, and in the community. A school must welcome, involve, and provide training for parents who want the best education for their children and can benefit from that learning and training.**

**Parental involvement must be meaningful. They have to become involved with the students' learning both in the classroom and at home. Giving a parent a role to play in schooling can enrich the learning experience of both parent and child. Glickman (1993) gives some insights into the importance of parental and community involvement:**

**A school, with its charter, has involved parents and community members in decision making. It has developed a covenant of learning principles and, through critical study, it has sampled additional parental and community responses to proposed actions. Those parents and community members who get involved typically become strong advocates of change and help school personnel inform the larger community. People involved in the process tend to reason more than those who are not involved about benefits for all children. (p. 105)**

**The entire community benefits from education.**

**Community involvement provides the school learning community with rich resources of expertise, experience, application, and opportunities for community service.**

**Principals and teachers must understand the importance of community involvement and decide how to connect the school with the community surrounding the school.**

**Parental involvement is a key to successful education.**

**We cannot teach a part of the child. We must teach the whole child. The parent can bring to that situation information and understanding that would be lacking without the parent.**

**Schools today have become school learning communities in which all stakeholders play a major role in developing an effective and efficient learning environment. Parents and teachers work together and decide what is important for the students to learn. Sergiovanni (1996) contends that schools are not like businesses, but should be viewed as small communities more like families and churches, which are concerned as much with the quality of life of their members as with what they produce. The what and the how of student learning should be decided by teachers and parents within the school because that is the essence of a democratic community. The give and take of such discussions is what produces understanding and trust.**

Many times we need to reach out to the parents and community. I think it is the school's responsibility to create this involvement. Parents and community members often times do not feel comfortable coming into the school. It is the job of the school or the principal to find ways to get them involved at a level with which they are comfortable. Heaviside and Farris (1989) found that the most common sort of involvement by schools with the larger community involved guest speakers or the provision of demonstrations or equipment. This sort of cooperation and collaboration between the school and community can be very positive. It is important for students to experience the diversity of what the community has to offer. The principal along with the faculty and staff members can take the initiative in providing opportunities for the community to become involved in the school learning community. The principal needs to encourage teachers and staff members to find a variety of ways to make connections to the surrounding community.

Community involvement requires work which allows the students to see the results of their learning and efforts in the community. The connection between the school and community can bring them closer together. Students can no longer be isolated to the classroom. We must prepare them to meet the demands of the next century by involving them in

**their community rather than just listening to lectures about it in the classroom.**

**The Implications for Summary** I believe that I have a strong personal and professional vision for what the role of an administrator should be in the school learning community. Principals today find themselves in a magnified fish bowl. They are bombarded by changing expectations and responsibilities and often find themselves without the knowledge to adequately address such challenges. The principal has been identified as the critical element in a school's success. No longer is the principal viewed as a passive and reactive manager. The perception of the principal today is on who is an active leader and learner. The principal assumes the awesome responsibility for all aspects of school life and often has difficulty rationalizing his or her changing role and the increased demands of the position. The principal of the 1990's is challenged to facilitate administrative vision, demonstrate concern for students' learning processes, and relate to faculty, staff, and community in a cooperative environment. These new demands require the principal to implement and institutionalize new strategies for leading change. Educational reform literature abounds with articles that describe the ideal school headed by a strong, visionary

an administrator capable of providing a vision for the future.

**leader who promotes an atmosphere of collegiality and participation in a learning environment.**

**The implication for principals is clear. The better a principal understands teachers' expectations, the more likely a principal can fulfill the expectations of the role. Valid and reliable data on teacher expectations will assist principals to understand more thoroughly how those expectations can influence teacher behavior. Ultimately, this affects student achievement.**

**The principal is the instructional leader who needs to model positive instructional methods and stay current with the latest teaching methods. The principal is the person who provides leadership, encouragement, support, knowledge, and resources.**

**The principal is the one who involves the parents and community in the school learning community. Parental and community support is the key to successful education. Education has changed dramatically over the past decade and it is apparent how important a role parents and community members play in our schools today. Without their help, the school cannot achieve the type of success that is necessary in today's world.**

**The principal is a communicator. After being involved in an administrative capacity the past two years, I have come to**

realize that proper communication with the faculty, staff, students, and parents is a must. Lack of communication in an organization produces mass chaos. The key to an efficient and effective learning community is communication throughout.

The principal is a disciplinarian. For a school to be a safe learning environment for the students, the principal needs to make rules, communicate them, and carry out the rules in a firm, fair, and honest manner. It is important that the faculty, students, and parents understand the discipline program or problems will exist.

It takes a team to make a dream work. I believe administrators, teachers, students, and parents need to work together to make sure each child's needs are met. It is important for the principal to take time to build strong, trusting relationships with staff members and then become one of the greatest cheerleaders for effective instruction to take place in the school learning community.

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