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
A principal must be an effective communicator and a motivator of students and faculty. A school principal must be a creative and innovative thinker that embraces the challenges of complex school decisions. The principal serves multiple roles as an educator, manager, and leader of the learning community who builds a vision that all stakeholders work together in making possible.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of a principal is being flexible. An effective principal is never completely satisfied and always strives for making things better. Continually monitoring and assessing best instructional practices, school testing data, and educational research, helps a principal implement change for developing a quality school. All educational decisions made inside a school are in the best interest of each student. Each day brings new challenges and great opportunities to empower the people we care most about, the children.

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A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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Barry Jones

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The occupation of a principal combines many talents and leadership responsibilities as the key component of a school’s success and growth. A principal must be an effective communicator and a motivator of students and faculty. A school principal must be a creative and innovative thinker that embraces the challenges of complex school decisions. The principal serves multiple roles as an educator, manager, and leader of the learning community who builds a vision that all stakeholders work together in making possible.

The school principal demonstrates care for all students by nurturing those who are in need, yet providing discipline for students who need redirection. A principal should model respect towards others, show tolerance in conflict, and act ethically and professionally in all situations. I believe that a principal improves school climate and culture daily, through positive interactions with staff, parents, and students. An urban school principal must promote and celebrate the unique cultural diversity and educational accomplishments of the student population.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of a principal is being flexible. An effective principal is never completely satisfied and always strives for making things better. Continually monitoring and assessing best instructional practices, school testing data, and educational research, helps a principal implement change for developing a quality school. All educational decisions made inside a school are in the best interest of each student. Each day brings new challenges and great opportunities to empower the people we care most about, the children.
Visionary Leadership

As a principal it is valuable to have each teacher in the school develop a mission statement that individually expresses goals they want to accomplish for every school year. The needs of students differ greatly, and I believe a mission is for students to challenge themselves to reach their potential both emotionally and academically, while thriving in a safe and secure educational environment.

The school leader affects the behaviors and thoughts of followers and must define the visionary goals of the school in sharing it with all stakeholders. A principal must be up to date with the latest information available concerning assessments and articulate the ways in which students are being evaluated to staff members. A principal needs to effectively use data collected, and analyze the information in setting a concrete plan for enhancing student achievement.

Communication is vital when sharing a vision. “Vision is what separates the principals who are school leaders from those who are simply managers” (Speck, 1999, p. 117). Communicating a vision goes beyond the walls of the school and into community. Staff, parents, and community members should all share in the mission of the school because every person that has daily contact with schoolchildren can make a positive contribution in a child’s education. Involving stakeholders in vision setting, planning, and decision-making benefits the school because it gives the community an opportunity invest in the success and the difficult decisions that effect the operation of a quality school.

A principal has to be visible in each classroom and be accessible to teachers, parents, and students. Daily visits in classrooms throughout the school allows a principal
to have a pulse on the quality of instruction and strategies, monitor student behavior, and oversee parental concerns of teachers and students. “The leader who loses direct contact with the work loses perspective. The further you get from the work, the easier it is to promulgate nonsense” (Monroe, 1997, p. 173).

To meet the ongoing changes and needs of the 21st century, a principal must be futuristic in their way of thinking. Educators must be able to adapt to constant changes, and the principal should help identify new educational trends and prepare objectives and goals to meet future needs of children. An effective principal does not balk at implementing changes. School data should be evaluated and school improvement plans need to be developed based from information collected. A principal needs to celebrate successes, but continue to make a high level of commitment to providing a clearly understood educational focus that sets high expectations for all children.

“Nearly everyone in the reform arena claims to be in it “for the kids” –from entrants in local elections for school boards to national politicians crafting new legislation. Their good intentions, however, often ignore the fact that ensuing changes will require students to change as well” (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p.126).

If school reform is to prosper it starts with the vision of the principal and how it empowers student’s attitudes and behavior towards obtaining a meaningful education. School reform efforts often come up short because of a lack of a detailed action plans addressing the schools’ need for change and how it will effect all stakeholders.

To drive school reform the principal must analyze school information and use research to promote change. School data collection should help a principal realize if school goals and visions are being accomplished. Data also reflects important issues that
need to be addressed and what impact school efforts are having on student learning.

"Many schools gather data. Doing something with the data is sometimes where the barriers begin" (Bernhardt, 1998, p.4). Without continuous use of data and research, a principal has no way of effectively monitoring improvement within the school.

I believe the school principal should be skilled in the multiple assessment methods used to measure student achievement, as well as the reliability and validity of the test. All staff members should be competent and consistent in administering and scoring standardized tests. The principal must provide the expertise and guidelines for all teachers to follow because inconsistencies can occur when principals allow varied time limits and different accommodations for students, all that effect the validity of the test.

"Strong validity is demonstrated when evidence and logic suggest that the evaluation is accurate and reasonable. Validity concerns the soundness, trustworthiness, or legitimacy of the inferences or claims that are made on the basis of the obtained scores" (McMillan, 2001, p.17).

"The principal can help guide and support the restructuring of assessment so that it evaluates the curriculum that is taught and the programs that the school offers" (Speck, 1999, p. 141). A principal should be aware of the emerging trends of assessment methods that are alternatives to norm-reference tests. Performance-based assessment allows students to use their knowledge to solve a problem through open-ended questioning, portfolio work, or student constructed responses. This method of assessment is powerful because students are given opportunities to explain, demonstrate, or justify their skills instead of providing a multiple choice answer.
I believe a principal needs the trust and respect of staff and parents to be successful in implementing change. Without the trust of an educational leader, the school can quickly falter. Trust is a challenging task for any person placed in a new environment. How does a new principal gain respect and trust? A principal must build a foundation of trust through action. While building relationships in an organization, staff members should be honest and open in sharing their beliefs and values. A principal should always remember the value of trust with staff and students. If a principal loses the trust of the school community, it may never be regained because trust is at the core of learning.

Technology is rapidly becoming a reliable tool for teaching, coordinating, and evaluating. Modern technology allows a principal to manage school resources much more efficiently, as records can be filed on computer servers and all information can be accessed at the touch of a button. Within the next few years, most classroom teachers will be recording grades through technology. In the near future, parents may be able to obtain their child’s weekly assignments and test scores while tapping into their school’s web site. This is just another move towards the accountability of the teacher providing rationale for grades. Will parents be able to access teachers’ daily lesson plans as some education forecasters predict? These possibilities are very real and a principal must be prepared to adjust to the increasing influence technology is having on society.

A principal should be aware and informed of the instructional software available to the district and the effectiveness technology can have on learning. Many educators are having trouble overcoming the barriers of implementing new technology programs and the
principal has the responsibility of providing the staff with proper training and resources to implement such programs. To implement new technology for staff to use as an instructional tool, a principal must first be familiarized with the equipment, and should receive training to develop skills on how school software can best impact student learning.

An administrator must be able to evaluate results and inspire constant improvement. Assessment of information should have a distinct focus on being purposeful and pertinent to the goals of the school. The purpose of all valuable assessment is improving student achievement. It is the role of the principal to guide staff in understanding the value in assessing results and how it influences instruction. The words "Iowa Test of Basic Skills" provides stress to many teachers and administrators because of the scrutiny that can come with the interpretation of the results. Principals need to allow time to explain the purpose of this assessment tool to new teachers. In the era of accountability, the media releases standardized test results to the public, which fairly or unfairly holds the principal responsible. Tough situations make a principal stronger and dealing with criticism comes with the position.

Instructional Leadership

The accountability for school testing results has put tremendous pressure on school principals. A principal's performance is linked to the success or failure of the student's test scores in their school. School districts should take a close look at all the variables that contribute to student achievement. For example, the curriculum implemented in the classroom should be evaluated and refined, if outdated or found ineffective. The school population is always changing and scores cannot be compared
with past years because of the different population that is served. “Limiting the schools’ responsibility to a “we do the best we can, but it’s really up to the students and their parents” approach was simply another way of dooming large numbers of students to failure” (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 121).

The role of the principal is constantly changing and there is more emphasis than ever on school principals to be in the classroom demonstrating best practices in the instruction of students. A principal cannot afford to be to disconnect with the classroom teacher and the effective instructional strategies used in the school.

School should be a student centered learning environment where teachers tap into the curiosity of students and their eagerness to learn. I feel the principal should enthusiastically promote learning activities that give children hand on learning experiences where they participate in doing it, instead of reading about it. Hands on learning manipulatives should be in areas where students need objects to assist in their learning. I believe a principal should lead the way in developing or discovering experiential learning activities that can deepen understanding of a subject.

School must be a place where students can express their ideas. “Traditional school has been reception-based; that is, students are supposed to sit quietly and listen while the teacher talks, presents, tells, shows, and explains, supposedly “filling them up” with the curriculum” (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998, p. 10).

Caring for individuals in working with diverse groups of students throughout my career will prepare me as an instructional leader. “If learning is grounded in emotions, then surely learning is best supported by leaders grounded in caring who influence and
contribute to emotionally positive school environments through relationships embodying engrossment, action, and reciprocity” (Lyman, 2000, p 119).

Student success in urban schools can be directed to the caring teachers who strive to meet the individual needs of each student. You can teach someone if you do not care, but the depth, longevity, and meaning of it are greatly affected. Hinton (2000) states:

“When I have teachers who care for the children they teach, I can see a night-and-day difference in academic performance, in discipline, in how the teacher is perceived by the parents of the child. I have validated it, looked at test scores and seen that students perform better. The child’s perception of learning, of themselves, and the world is altered. Failure is not an option” (Lyman, 2000, p. 117).

An effective instructional leader is informed of what learning is taking place in each individual classroom. A principal has to have an understanding of the curriculum and how it is being taught in each grade. Students are aware of what effective teaching resembles.

“Students want teachers who “stay on students” to complete assignments, go out of their way to provide help, explain things until the “light bulb goes on” for the whole class, vary classroom activities, control student behavior without ignoring the lesson, and understand students’ situations and factor that into their lessons” (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 61).

Understanding students and their needs allows the principal and teachers to be able to provide appropriate instruction and assessment. The principal is the vital link that assures that every student has individual needs met.

In what ways can a principal promote instruction to meet the diverse needs of inner city youth? As an instructional leader, the principal should assist and support staff in providing more interactions in the classroom. “The transition from a passive classroom to an interactive classroom is based primarily on the manner in which the teacher engages
the student in the learning process" (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, & Jeffries, 2000, p. 86).

Instead of allowing the teacher being the sole provider of knowledge, the classroom should actively involve students and allow the teacher to take the role of the facilitator. “Urban children often feel excluded from the learning process, because the process has not been designed to encourage them to achieve” (Thomas, et. al., 2000, p. 87).

“Many of the skills recognized as important for an effective principal are learned skills” (Barth, 1990, p.71). A school leader should continue to broaden their knowledge of the different learning styles and the multiple intelligences that exist within students. Instruction should focus on the visual, auditory, and tactual learning styles of each student. The principal should assure that school curriculum is culturally sensitive and that instruction allows different learning styles and intelligences to be showcased. As educators we need to evaluate instruction and determine if we are challenging all students to develop higher order thinking skills.

Organizational Leadership

I feel most important aspect of a school leader is providing a safe a secure atmosphere for children. “If kids can have one place in their daily lives where there is order and stability and where worthwhile activities are going on, then there is a high possibility that their lives can be transformed for the better” (Monroe, 1997, p. 125). A principal must ensure that the operation of the building runs soundly and must communicate and delegate responsibilities among teachers, custodians, office help, and parents.
The organization of a school should reflect a caring environment that range from the bus driver to the principal. Hinton views the principalship as a nurturing role. In explaining his choice of nurturing as the one word that would best describe the environment of the school, Hinton said, “Persons who work with children need to know they are loved, respected and cared for before they can really make an impact on the lives of children” (Lyman, 2000, p. 102). The school principal should care about the well being of each student and staff member. To care about an individual helps in understanding who they are.

“You cannot teach a child you do not love. You cannot teach a child you do not understand. You cannot teach a child you fear. You cannot teach a child before disregarding you political baggage, e.g., sexism and racism. You cannot teach a child without bonding with them first. To bond, you must have love, respect and understanding” (Kunjufu, 1995, p. 94).

A principal should have a grasp on the school financial situation and must be able to balance the school programs with the funds available. Allocating funds for services provided should directly impact students. At our school, we have used money raised to purchase technology. Our school has provided educational support clubs and enrichment programs that are funded from the school budget. Successfully managing money entails detailed record keeping of transferred funds and other pertinent budget information.

Given the responsibility of overseeing the use of all funds for instructional programs and resources, the principal needs to use members of the learning community to assist in the spending of funds. I believe that a Site Based Budget Team can empower community stakeholders as the team shares fiscal responsibility for the successes the shared decision making process brings to the school and community. “Members of the
Site Budget Team are aware that they have limited resources and must provide a focus for the school budget to bring about the changes necessary to improve and support student achievement" (Speck, 1999, p.183).

An effective organizational leader must manage time efficiently with the many responsibilities they possess. As the school leader, a principal is a manager of people, recognizing potential problems, thus having strong conflict resolution skills with students, teachers, and parents. A principal is the one who establishes the environment both within the school and the community.

To reach school goals a principal must be innovative in their way of thinking and utilize their staff members' strengths. At my school, responsibilities are delegated to teachers and the abilities of the staff are maximized by serving on specialized committees. This organizational structure helps the school run effectively and efficiently.

Collaborative Leadership

An administrator must be informed of community resources that are available in assisting and strengthening the school. Schools do not always have all of the personnel and materials necessary in meeting the diverse needs of students. Specialized community agencies have a lot to offer schools, whether it is substance abuse education, assistance to English Language Learning students, or professional development trainers; a principal should utilize these available resources.

The success of collaboration depends on the ability to manage and maintain the relationship. For two years I worked for a human service agency that provided violence and substance abuse prevention education. I collaborated with principals in numerous
urban schools in working on objectives of how acts of violence could be reduced in schools. Root cause interventions allowed us to uncover problems that the schools could address. Anger management support groups were developed in place of school suspensions. Violence prevention programs were presented in the general education classrooms. Conflict managers were trained to use peer mediation skills. The collaboration between schools and our human service agency proved successful as all assisted elementary schools showed a noticeable decline in office referrals. This experience gave me the opportunity to serve on committees and make community connections that will assist me in the future.

Many resources exist in the community that can greatly benefit a school. Multiple neighborhood businesses facilitate the Junior Achievement Education Program at each grade level in our school. Local artists and architects discuss designs and provide workshops for students. Parents develop student fundraising campaigns to purchase supplies and equipment for the classroom. Our school relied heavily on community members in critical decision-making regarding the renovation of our 100-year-old school. A principal should not allow their school to operate in isolation; instead the school should involve the community in activities and decision-making whenever needed.

One of the most valuable collaborations for a principal would be to utilize the resources and services of the Heartland AEA. As the complexity of the research and data-driven assessment era moves forward, a principal can use data interpretation specialists and school improvement trainers to assist in reform efforts. If a principal is trying to implement changes in their school, AEA centers will collect research articles on
dependable and caring support person that can breed success. A principal should always be seeking ways in which collaboration efforts can be created for the benefit of students.

Collaboration in the classroom improves social interactions and can break down barriers that exist between indifferent students. “Cooperative learning works well because through it students gain power” (Glasser, 1998, p. 13). Cooperative classrooms create an environment where everyone contributes and competition is absent. “In cooperative classrooms, students listen, write, tell, paraphrase, read, illustrate, repeat, and interact. Students are given multiple learning opportunities and generally show greater achievement gains than students in traditional classes” (Gunter et al., 1999, p. 284).

Jigsaw groups can be set up for students to work as a team for a common goal. In jigsaw groups students are responsible to provide individual pieces of information and then present in a group format. What is the benefit of the jigsaw classroom? “The jigsaw process encourages listening, engagement and empathy by giving each member of the group an essential part to play in the academic activity” (Aronson, 2000, p. 137).

Ethical Leadership

An ethical leader sees that all children are given opportunities to participate in activities no matter what there race, gender, or disability may be. How can a principal assure that they are providing such equitable activities? The annual school equity audit that is submitted to the state allows a principal to reflect on what programs the school offers and who is participating in them. While filling out our schools audit, I was able to see the wide range of services involving the diverse student population in our school. I was able to review lesson plans that addressed cultural awareness and diversity submitted
by all grade levels. The equity audit outlined the numerous activities in which every
student had opportunities to participate. Such activities included a Literacy Club, Jogging
Club, Homework Club, Chess Club, and many others. Another benefit of involving much
of the student body in after school clubs is it provides a positive activity during a time in
which many parents are not home. Research has shown that the prime time in which
young adults are involved in illegal activities is between four p.m. and six p.m. These
facts affirm my strong belief that schools should extend services beyond the school day
so students can participate in a safe and secure environment.

A principal can provide motivation to students through actions. If a principal has
a school goal to improve reading scores and motivate students to read, then he or she
should be an active learner and should be seen reading by students and with students. A
principal should provide intrinsically motivating reasons for students wanting to succeed.
Modeling is a powerful instructional technique that all teachers in a building must
demonstrate to students. "Teachers who read more and model their own intrinsic
enjoyment of reading to their students usually have students who read more inside and
outside class" (Bruning et. al., 1999, p. 153).

An effective leader of a school must act with integrity, model respect, and treat
everyone in an ethical manner. There is a lot of pressure on principals to handle
situations in the best interest of students, teachers, and parents. "The leader needs to
send the message “I am here to support you in whatever way you choose, as long as your
way improves children’s academic and social achievement” (Monroe, 1997, p. 191). A
principal is empowered to teach character education, because many students do not have
it modeled in their homes. More responsibilities have been placed on schools to teach beyond the textbook and are expected to model behavior because our society is calling for it.

To teach character in school, a principal has the opportunity to hire teachers who share the same values and beliefs to be taught in school. "Schools have to offer students a common goal that they can all work toward together, within a structure that supports a positive sense of belonging" (Aronson, 2000, p.122). Throughout our school the teachers have a "word of the month" that addresses positive character traits and feelings. These "key" words are put into action as students are recognized for modeling proper behavior. The goal is to improve the climate of the school and reward those who exhibit positive behaviors.

"Teachers' actions demonstrate their beliefs. When actions demonstrate a lack of high expectations, little patience, an no regard for the student's personal experiences as a conduit to the teaching and learning process, maximum learning opportunities are a dream often deferred" (Thomas, et. al., 2000, p.72). How can students' respect be earned?

Schools should set high expectations for all students. "Educators repeat often the phrase "all children can learn" and then turn around and expect less from poor children. The national data are consistent, poor children do not perform as well as middle-class children. But if we don't expect them to, they probably never will" (McAdams, 2000, p. 257).

Children thrive in a school where students are empathetic to each other's thoughts and feelings. A school leader should not tolerate verbally abusive or bullying behaviors. "Children who are unpopular are lacking in emotional intelligence; they don't intuitively
know how to relate well to other children. Some are too touchy, prone to take offense at the slightest provocation, quick to retaliate angrily” (Aronson, 2000, p. 116). It is the responsibility of the school to provide a sense of belonging for all students. Schools have an obligation to provide support to students who feel isolated and emotionally withdrawn.

Perhaps one of the more time consuming jobs of a principal is setting up a discipline plan for students when school rules and expectations are not met. A principal must handle each individual situation with fairness, and avoid making impulsive decisions. Reflecting on disciplinary issues are crucial. By reflecting on reasoning behind decisions made, a principal may benefit when a similar situation arises again. Each situation must be handled on an individual basis, because no two situations are identical to each other. I believe that a principal who is an effective disciplinarian gives students opportunities to discuss incidences. When a principal actively listens, and demonstrates an interest in knowing the facts, a child will be more honest and open. A principal should at all times model the importance of communication because it may not be modeled in the child’s home. An effective disciplinarian still must be firm and expect students to follow the code of conduct set by the school.

Are there any alternative solutions to reducing the increasing amount of discipline referrals to the principal? Facts have shown that in most cases suspension and expulsion have little impact on the rehabilitation of a student’s action. Educators need to address behavioral problems of a student before the behavior is out of control. Elementary teachers must confront behavioral issues concerning students instead of passing them on
to the next grade. One idea is to set up a teacher to mentor a student from a different grade level who may be experiencing behavioral problems. This idea allows a different teacher to have a fresh prospective on the student’s situation compared to the classroom teacher who becomes irritated easily does not listen empathetically to a student’s situation.

Political Leadership

A principal’s priority in serving children is having a complete understanding and interpretation of educational laws. A principal should also use their influence to help schools create change when needed. “Schools are the benefactor when educational leaders have open communication with state representatives and voice opinions that affect the school and community. Schools are big business. Schools cost the taxpayers a lot of money. And school people, like all people, have personal and group interests that powerfully influence behavior” (McAdams, 2000, p. 260). The incredible collaboration and passion of school leaders and community stakeholders were largely responsible for the increased sales tax vote approval because of their commitment to children and education.

Active participation in politics regarding education shows the community your level of commitment for the betterment of all children. Regular school board attendance is necessary to keep informed on current policies and school reform initiatives. “Only fundamental changes in governance can transform the nation’s urban school systems. Throughout urban America, if school systems improve, it will be because boards (and the superintendents they hire) make them improve” (McAdams, 2000, p. 262). A principal
should lead the school community in becoming actively involved in issues that affect the stakeholders of the school and use their voice to inform board members of the importance and impact of their decisions.

A principal has a responsibility to assure that all policies are adhered to. I have noticed the increased amount of laws in education, especially laws affecting special needs children. A principal must be proactive in working for each student’s best interest. I believe that a principal must be an advocate for the rights of every student in school.

Conclusion

To become a great leader one must continually reflect and respond to difficult circumstances. A principal develops personal leadership skills through past experiences and personal values and beliefs. A leader should be a decision-maker who concentrates on the vision of the school and never loses sight of its importance. The school principal must be able to be willing to deal effectively with all types of people.

An effective leader should be intrinsically motivated. If committed to making the school climate accepting of all, the principal should find ways to make work enjoyable and fun. Job satisfaction is needed to create a healthy organization and is dependent on the strong work ethic that is needed in improving school conditions.

A school leader should be optimistic in thinking about the future of education. I strongly feel that a leader should focus on possibilities and solutions instead of the impossibilities of what can be done. Too much time and resources can be wasted on negative thinking, when options and solutions could be created. A principal must have
the commitment of the staff in order to reach goals. An innovative leader looks for ways to make things happen, instead of looking for reasons why they cannot happen.

It is my belief that an administrator has responsibilities unlike any other leadership position. A principal must wear many hats in dealing with the complex problems that we face in the American school system. I hope I will have the opportunity to share my educational beliefs and values and utilize my abilities in making a difference in the lives of children.
References


the desired topic that may influence the school leader's decisions. AEA centers can supply teachers with the latest educational technology software, provide additional literature materials for the classroom, and staff development trainings. The luxury of using AEA centers is that a principal can be more efficient in handling the daily operations of the school while gaining assistance and expertise that directly impacts teachers and students.

A collaborative effort that I have found rewarding involved the participation and dedication of our neighborhood church. I assisted in implementing an after school program for students that were struggling academically and socially in school. Volunteers from a neighborhood church donated their time and committed to work with a student one on one for the school year. The volunteers met with the students once a week and provided support in reading, math, and any areas in which the student needed assistance. All students involved in the program showed significant academic improve throughout the year. Another collaborative effort that has improved student achievement is our Literacy Army program, which is a one on one reading program involving community volunteers. These successful community collaborations have produced many success stories that show the power of community involvement.

A principal should always be thinking of ways to utilize human resources that are available in the community. Too many students are lacking a person who is providing the support needed to be successful in school. If schools can collaborate with churches, nursing homes, high school mentors, or business partners, each student can have that