Educational leadership: a reflective essay

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Educational leadership: a reflective essay

Abstract
An educational leader should strive to create an atmosphere of professionalism rooted in trust, dedication and commitment to preparing young people for an ever-changing future. This can take place by using the change-process outlined by Speck (1999). One major component is that the learning community must be an open system, include a representation of all stakeholders and be a collaborative effort. The other major component is the idea that the process is cyclical. Change is not a culminating end, but an ever-evolving process. An effective leader will facilitate this change for the benefit of all stakeholders in the learning community.
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Purposes of Schools

Ideally, society is responsible for preparing future generations to become responsible citizens that embrace the beliefs and values that founded the United States of America which are embedded in our Constitution and Bill of Rights. Each community has the burden of providing this opportunity to all young people and to provide funding for such. This phrase, responsible citizens, becomes more and more complicated as communities seek to find answers surrounding the decline of educated high school graduates. Schools have taken on social responsibilities that perhaps are drawing away from the original purpose of schools. Schools should work to unify our nation and assist all citizens in reaching their potential.

As local districts and state governments seek improvement in schools they should keep in mind the purpose of our forefathers to create a nation that preserves the quality of life for which they built a strong Republic. School alone cannot accomplish the task of preparing future generations. Society (family, community, church and government) needs to take ownership of their future leaders.

In a broad sense, schools exist for the good of the nation, to protect the rights of all individuals. People with sound education, strong values and a sense of ownership make informed decisions that will enhance their lives as well as others. Creating a need and desire in people to continually gain knowledge is
crucial in building an educated generation that will perpetuate itself. If society shirks this responsibility, the nation will crumble.

The evolution of education, as with our society, has grown from a narrow, straightforward path to a myriad of avenues and turns that make it impossible to explore all aspects. Education brings to mind preparing students to be active community (local to global) participants. However, communities are changing so rapidly it is difficult to know how or for what to prepare.

When viewing the different aspects of education the pieces of its roots in Christianity and politics are still evident. Also noticeable, however, are the remnants of the Industrial Revolution, various national interests such as the lunch program, our response to the launching of Sputnik I, the Civil Rights movement and the push for the rights of the disadvantaged and handicapped citizens. As the eighties evolved, the country was a nation at risk with literacy at an all time low. Vocational classes dwindled and now, the focus has come full circle with the need to teach the basics. It seems obvious as the banner of education has grown, managing all the avenues has become difficult, if not impossible, to do successfully. Sergiovanni (1991) had a valid point in that education’s umbrella has become so large as to muddle what its purpose should be.

Where does all this discussion lead? Society needs to take a reflective look at how the preparation of citizens will evolve. If education continues to take on more roles, schools will become less and less effective.
To increase the effectiveness of schools, communities need to reach a consensus on commonalities of education. Legislation from state and federal levels can promote change and improvement offering incentives. The public voice can speak loudly against or for changes and create new policies. Educators can unite for improvements. Other special interest groups can lobby for recognition within education. Looking at just these avenues and each set of agendas for change in education, it seems change or improvement will not be made for the common purpose of preparing future generations to become responsible citizens. Each of these groups sees change from different perspectives that will benefit them directly, not necessarily the students that are affected by the change.

Looking at the whole person, school can only compliment society as it prepares young people to live productive lives. Family, community, government, church and intrinsic motivation as well as educational experiences, affect how each person lives life. Until communities, society as a whole, realize the awesome responsibility they have, education will continue to be poked and prodded to fix the problems of our young adults. Educational institutions are expected to transform their charges into the ideal of a responsible citizen with a desire for continual learning.

This leads to tough decisions by all leaders in the educational field. Imagine a tightrope walker. This person can envision their goal at the other end
of the rope. With each step towards that goal comes a decision to be made which will influence the rest of the walk across the rope. This is the task of an educational leader. At each step there are philosophical decisions to be made. Then, in practical terms, administrators must have confidence in the skill and their ability to lead so that each decision will take their organization one step closer to their goal.

During the course of a professional career, growth and change should occur. The basis of this change or growth is formed by research, experiences and self-reflection. Being able to allow for change in self is important in developing a successful leadership style.

An administrator also needs to have a sense of balance within their job. There is much discussion in the professional literature on a management versus leadership style of administration (Kowalski & Rietzug, 1993). Effective administrators strike a comfortable balance between these two basic styles. While managing an institution is necessary, it is effective leadership that will address the concerns brought out in the previous pages. The community and the state look upon administrators as catalysts of change towards common standards.

Effective leaders have a vision for their school. They are excellent communicators in creating ownership within their schools for this vision. There is a mutual confidence and trust between these leaders and the staff, knowing that
all are working towards this vision with the common underlying theme of student success.

Can schools and the diverse leadership involved, come together for the common good of preparing future generations to become responsible citizens with a desire for continual learning? As cultural, economic and moral changes happen so rapidly in this society the likelihood of this happening by chance is slim. Leaders at all levels who are excellent communicators and have the trust and confidence of their subordinates can create and achieve realistic results towards helping young adults become responsible citizens with a desire for continual learning. The caution, again, is that education alone cannot do this. It must be a group effort of family, school, community, church and government.

Personal Philosophies

Faculty

The selection of new staff into a building should be done with extreme care and diligence. It is important to keep in the forefront during the discussion on candidates the district’s vision and purpose. Staff made of unique individuals can be blended together to make a meaningful and powerful team (Sergiovanni, 1992). When choosing a new teacher look for innovative ideas and the willingness to work for the good of all students. Teachers should bring with them an eagerness to hone their skills, but not at the expense of the team.
As an administrator develops and implements a program for supervision and evaluation, thought must be given as to the purpose of the program.

According to McGuire (1988) the main purpose is to provide a process for teachers and evaluators to work together towards the improvement of the teacher. Another leader in the area, Smith (1989), believes it is the administrator's duty to help the teacher improve. All types of evaluation should center on common characteristics of effective teaching. The National Board of Professional Teaching Standards has developed an extensive listing of effective teaching behaviors within four headings: planning, implementing, assessment and climate.

The actual process to bring that improvement about is one of debate. Edward Pajak (1993) has brought together a synthesis of the different models for improving instruction. Many of these models reflect what the evaluator 'sees' in the classroom under somewhat artificial settings. There is a pre- and post-conference, as well as the observation itself. Some of these models such as Madeline Hunter's model were based on a set of pre-selected observable behaviors for the evaluator to look for that would indicate whether the teacher was effective or not (Pajak, 1993). As time has progressed so has the technique of evaluation.

There is a need for the clinical model, at least in some form, and there is also a need for the more newly developed models that portray the teacher as the director and the evaluator more as the coach in the process. A newly hired
teacher should have more direct supervision and guidance, which is where the clinical model can be utilized. As this teacher becomes more confident and acclimated to the school other types of evaluation tools should be promoted. In either situation a formative evaluation should be conducted at the conclusion of the year’s cycle of evaluation. Formative evaluations should be nonthreatening tools used to identify strategies with the teacher in order to increase teacher effectiveness (Manning, 1988). Many ideas can be used to document and promote the growth of teacher effectiveness. Portfolios can be used to facilitate learning and the improvement of effectiveness (Dietz, 1995); professional goal setting can also be used to map out continued improvement.

Along with the evaluation tool utilized by the administrator, the support given to the teacher on a consistent, daily basis is essential. This support includes everything from classroom discipline to staff development. Assuming the teacher is operating under the same vision and purpose of student achievement as the team, the principal should do whatever possible to help support that effort in the classroom. To begin with, the principal must display integrity and ethical behavior (Seldon, 1988) as a model for teachers in their classrooms. Another way to show support for teachers is to empower them whenever possible or a principal can “hoard power and dampen spirit” (Bolman & Deal, 1995 pg. 92). Empowerment of staff can be an extension of the principal’s power, giving them the freedom to take risks without reprisal (Mentell, 1993). This is an important
aspect of support if the idea is to build a team for the common goal of student achievement. Teachers will feel a sense of ownership and pride in what they do when given this opportunity.

Staff development is a key component to the improvement of a team. Teachers cannot be expected to develop new and improved curriculum or management tools without being exposed to innovative ideas. It is too easy for teachers to be locked in a vacuum if administrators do not impress upon them to keep open minds and then facilitate this with staff development opportunities.

Curriculum

An administrator should become a knowledgeable supporter and facilitator of curriculum development. There are many major ideas to assist an administrator in reaching this level, however a discussion of the three ideas of developing a school vision for high standards of learning, aligning the curriculum and continuous school improvement will provide an umbrella to work under.

Believe in a school vision for high standards of learning. A school’s vision of curriculum needs to embody the district’s vision. As a principal and leader of the school it should also reflect my personal vision for learning. Glatthorn (1997) presents a good process to help a faculty develop a curriculum vision. After developing the vision the next step is to conceptualize how the vision will be met by identifying curriculum goals with either an inductive or deductive approach which, again, is outlined in Glatthorn’s book. As the
principal, it will be important to have a personal vision in line with the district
vision to be able to lead a faculty through this process with confidence. The
importance of the perception of administrative leadership is paramount. It is
important for leadership to be visible, show support and take active interest in the
curriculum development.

Aligning the curriculum. There are two different mental pictures that
come to mind when thinking of aligning curriculum. Dr. Denise Schares talked
about the two ideas as being horizontal and vertical alignment. Glatthorn also
discusses six types of curriculum alignment as separate levels yet interwoven with
each other. This way of aligning curriculum is interesting. There is a wide gap
from the first level of recommended curriculum and the last level of learned
curriculum. A curriculum leader should focus on facilitating the alignment of
written, taught and learned curriculum while utilizing what Glatthorn calls the
supported and recommended curriculum. Trying to force teachers to adopt
recommended curriculum without ownership is doomed to fail from the
beginning. Teachers need to see how what they do in the classroom parallels a
recommended curriculum and if it does not parallel it, find worth in the adoption
of other ideas. The assessed curriculum should be the barometer of how well
aligned all levels are. A curriculum leader should also look at the alignment of
interdisciplinary curriculum and from one grade level to another. As these
concepts have been studied the task seems awesome. For an administrator alone
to balance this important aspect of the job with all the other parts of leadership seems impossible. How does a leader do this? Perhaps in a larger school this task could be delegated to some extent, but in a smaller school where does the responsibility fall?

**Continuous school improvement.** Glatthorn writes about establishing “a culture that values continuous improvement and collaboration.” (p. 87) He goes on to discuss the importance of administrative leadership in focusing a building on continuous school improvement. A large part of this is continuous curriculum development and improvement.

An effective leader will emphasize a collaborative effort in building a culture that values school improvement. An effective leader also works with teachers to make the written curriculum come to life. One way to begin this process would be to build yearly plans collaboratively, then from these plans, develop units of study that bring together teachers from across disciplines and perhaps grade levels. This is just one aspect of continuous school improvement, however no matter which part is looked at, the key ingredient to successful change is collaboration.

**Students**

“Creating a clear understanding of the students and their learning needs enables the principal and faculty to be more precise in providing the appropriate curriculum, instruction and assessment procedures.” (Speck, 1999, p. 41) An
administrator’s task is to ensure the faculty is always working towards this end result. Many people have spent many years developing theories on how students learn; learning styles, critical thinking, cooperative learning, dimensions of learning, left brain/right brain theories, multiple intelligences and the list goes on. It is the responsibility of the principal to expose the staff to these ideas and help them synthesize the best of these theories together to create an optimum learning environment for students.

Students need these three things to be successful; the ability to work alone, the ability to work with a team and to creatively problem solve (Wagner, 1995). Whichever theories a teacher operates under, these three ideas should be what drive their teaching. Motivating students is another aspect of the learning process to consider when developing a teaching style to meet all students’ needs. According to Strong, Silver and Robinson (1995) students are motivated by success, curiosity, originality and good relationships. An administrator must strive to support teachers in finding ways to foster these four things for each student.

All of these theories must be taken into consideration within the developmental growth of each student. No two students are at the exact same stage in development, neither physically nor cognitively. This is a major flaw in the educational structure of our society. How to address this issue as an administrator is difficult. Ultimately, it is the teacher that must deal with the
inequities of development between students. The administrator, again, should be a support person for the teacher providing strategies, information and monies for workshops and in-services on how to best meet the needs of students at all levels of growth.

Lastly, the development of life long learners should be a must for all team members of a school. Life-long learning needs to be modeled from the highest level of administration to the classroom teacher that has daily contact with students. Not only should it be modeled, but also it should be made known to the students that this is taking place. Students that have teachers and administrators continually updating and expanding their knowledge will determine that it is important to continue their own learning past the exit point of their basic schooling.

Community/Parents

A person's perception of a situation is their reality so it is important for an administrator to seek to understand before they expect to be understood (Covey, 1989). This is very important in community and parent relationships. A principal, whose intentions are clear, and communicated well, will earn the trust of the community (Warren & Leaders, 1985). Once this has been accomplished there is much power in the unity between the administrator and an informed community.
Parents need to be involved with the school. For this support to happen the administrator must find ways to convey what is going on in the school, how the school operates for the good of all students. Healey (1994) states that in order for parents to support the school they must have knowledge about how the school operates. Three most effective ways to begin to involve parents is through direct contact or phone, conferences and volunteer committees or activities (Crowson, 1992). This parental involvement is a key link to higher student achievement, which should be the ultimate goal for schools. Grant (1995) has found that there is a direct variation between parental involvement at school and higher student achievement.

My Vision of Educational Leadership

Creating a school that serves all learners cannot be accomplished by the solitary actions of a principal. It results from a systematic building of collegiality and community through an atmosphere of ongoing learning for all members of the school community. (Speck, 1999 pg. 5)

The whole organization plays a part in the success of any leader. The task of a good leader lies in how to create direction and shared vision with a staff and community so that the desires of all stakeholders merge into a common set of values and beliefs. "Effective leadership is a relationship rooted in community. Successful leaders embody their group's most precious values and beliefs. Their ability to lead emerges from the strength and sustenance of those around them."
Bolman and Deal (1995) also discuss four sides to providing a balance within an organization: love, power, authorship and significance. These relate to building a strong culture that every team member operates within.

An administrator should focus on building a team’s culture based on the values of trust, commitment and dedication. The leader needs to model these values in all aspects of the position. Only by observation and reflection will a staff begin to believe in what an administrator is capable of doing and achieving. Another important part of being an effective leader is the ability to invest themselves in the community and school.

In reality, studies show that in day-to-day duties even the most well intentioned administrators have little time for leadership reflection and vision molding (Mc Greal 1983). It is too easy for administrators to get caught up in the necessary management duties of running a building and neglect the very essence of what a good leader desires to achieve. Visionary leaders plan time to reflect and mold a shared vision for the future of the learning community. Then time, resources and manpower are invested to align the building goals and day-to-day operations to make the shared vision a reality.

In summary an educational leader should strive to create an atmosphere of professionalism rooted in trust, dedication and commitment to preparing young people for an ever-changing future. This can take place by using the change
process outlined by Speck (1999). One major component is that the learning community must be an open system, include a representation of all stakeholders and be a collaborative effort. The other major component is the idea that the process is cyclical. Change is not a culminating end, but an ever-evolving process. An effective leader will facilitate this change for the benefit of all stakeholders in the learning community.

Conclusion

I have become knowledgeable about many tools that will help me continue to evolve into an effective leader. My pastor at church in a recent lesson also helped solidify what needs to take place in order for this and other learning to 'stick'. He talked about how listening and knowing does not mean someone has learned how to do a skill or an art. Until that skill or art is practiced it is not truly learned. I knew this to be true in my classroom as I have, and still am, evolving into a more well-rounded teacher, but it really helped me to see this same reality within my training as an administrator. All the tools I have accumulated, and the manuals that go with them, will not hold true meaning until I have opportunities to experiment, fail and then try again.

This is an exciting journey that I have begun. The foundation has been laid and it is now time to start reaching towards the sky, building the support structures that will fortify my sanctuary as I begin this journey into educational leadership. Phillips (1992) provides many words of wisdom some of which I
would like to recall to close this reflective essay. Among the more universal thoughts are these. Look for casual as well as formal contact with your faculty. Sometimes these are more important than the formal contacts. "When you extinguish hope, you create despair." (p. 37) Another point Phillips makes is to delegate authority by empowering people, which is an important concept this program has enforced. People, in general, will seek a person out who is preceded by a good reputation. The organization will eventually respond to situations in the same way as its top leader. "When making a decision, understand the facts, consider various solutions and their consequences, make sure that the decision is consistent with your objectives, and effectively communicate your judgment." (p. 98) Phillips also points out that the best leaders are life long learners. Lastly, I would like to draw to a close with this universal truth in affecting lasting change. When a leader wants to enact a lasting change it is important to call on the past, link it to the present situation and use this knowledge to provide the rationale for needed change to make the future better for students.
References


