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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract
This reflective paper will address four areas, which are important components of a learning community. First, the importance of a positive school climate, and how this plays an integral part in the creation of the learning community. Second, to look at character education and a shift in discipline policies to help prepare students for our changing society. Third, a paradigm shift from extra curricular to co-curricular educational opportunities for our student body. Fourth, a look at educational leadership in developing the learning community.
A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A healthy, open, positive school is the dream of all educators and parents. Building this quality school is the most important and demanding responsibility of the principal. Educational leaders must address the tremendous challenges facing students in the 21st century. “Few schools today succeed at meeting the diverse needs of their students and providing the best education possible for all students” (Speck, 1999, P. 5). The key to facing these challenges and meeting the needs of the student is in building a learning community. “Creating a learning community that serves all learners cannot be accomplished by the solitary actions of a principal” (Speck, 1999, P.5).

It is important for the principal to involve all the stakeholders when creating the learning community. As administrators strive to create this learning community to meet the needs of our young people, this reflective paper will address four areas, which are important components of a learning community. First, the importance of a positive school climate, and how this plays an integral part in the creation of the learning community. Second, to look at character education and a shift in discipline policies to help prepare students for our changing society. Third, a paradigm shift from extra curricular to co-curricular educational opportunities for our student body. Fourth, a look at educational leadership in developing the learning community.
School Climate for the Learning Community

A positive school climate is a key to developing a learning community. “School climate is an ever changing factor in the lives of the people who work and learn in schools. Much like the air we breathe, school climate is ignored until it becomes foul” (Freiberg, 1998, P.22). School climate can be a positive influence on the learning community or a significant barrier to learning. A school’s climate is a fluctuation rather than static condition. It is influenced by outside forces as well as by the emotions of the staff and students. To create and maintain a positive school climate, there must be trust. Trust is the vital element in an effective organization. Trust is the basis for effective cooperation and communication. Trust is also the basis for productive relationships. Productive relationships help build learning communities. Developing positive relationships among students, teachers, and administrators, based on trust, will lead to a more cohesive, open environment and to higher student achievement. For any principal trying to create a learning community, trust is the first ingredient for success. Bullach and Malone reinforce this when they state, “School climate involves trust, respect, mutual obligation, and concern for others’ welfare” (Hanna, 1998, P. 83).

There is little doubt that teachers and administrators can lead the way to successful school change. Far too much emphasis, by non-educators, has been on changing schools from the outside. More emphasis must be on changing schools
from within. The importance of producing a positive school climate and culture remains at the core to creating an effective school. Manning and Saddlemire (1996) list four characteristics of positive climates:

1. Educators understand the importance of positive interpersonal relationships and their effect on daily school routines.
2. A positive verbal environment sets a tone for students to emulate.
3. Educators plan behavior management systems that enforce school rules and policies, yet allow students to retain self-respect.
4. Educators encourage behavior that demonstrates respect for all cultures and both sexes.

(Manning & Saddlemire, 1996, P. 342)

A positive school climate helps build a strong, passionate commitment to learning. The principal must serve as the role model, establishing an atmosphere in which all members of the school work to improve the processes and outcomes.

In their book Open Schools/Healthy Schools, Hoy, Tarter, and Kottcamp (1991) summarize an open, supportive, healthy school as:

A genuine and open interaction between the principal and faculty. The principal leads by example, providing the proper blend of direction and support depending on the situation. Teachers work well together and are committed to the task at hand. Given the “reality-centered” and considerate leadership of the principal as well as the commitment of the faculty, there is no need for burdensome paperwork, close supervision or impersonality and a plethora of rules and regulations.

Leadership develops easily and appropriately as it is needed. The open school climate is preoccupied with neither task achievement nor social needs, but both emerge freely. In brief, the behavior of the principal and faculty is authentic.

(Hoy, Tarter, Kottkamp, 1991, P. 15-16)
Character Education & Creative Discipline

As our society continues to change so must our schools. Compared to previous generations, today’s young people are more at risk than ever before. “One third of America’s youth are destined for school failure due to poverty, neglect, sickness, handicap or lack of adult protection and nurturance” (Kowalski & Reitzig, 1993, P.252). It is painfully clear that our society suffers severe and moral problems such as the breakdown of the family, an epidemic of violence; dishonesty at all levels of society, widespread drug and alcohol abuse, the physical and sexual abuse of children, and declining respect for human life at every stage of development. These societal problems have deep roots and require systemic solutions, but it is not possible to build a virtuous society if virtue does not first exist in the minds, hearts; and souls of individual human beings. The school, like the family, is one of the primary seedbeds of this virtue. (Lickona, 1997, P.27)

Character education is essential to the task of building a moral society. Character education is a proactive effort to develop good character in our students. It teaches non-controversial virtues such as respect, caring, honesty, and self-discipline, in non-controversial ways. The school is the place to learn about these virtues. The school is a community based upon relationship.
Because of this, the school is the natural place to teach guiding principles like respect and responsibility. Indeed, everything a student, teacher, administrator and community does teaches values.

The questions today are which guiding principles will schools teach, and how well will they teach them. There is a growing support for character education program in our public schools. Character education was recently endorsed by the U.S. Congress (Public Law 103-301, 1994) and the President of The United States (Clinton, 1994) (Vessels & Boyd, 1996, P.56). In addition, many states and local governments are promoting character education through legislation, conferences, and state departments of education.

A comprehensive approach to character education is needed. This approach can be done within the school day as part of every phase of classroom and school life. This approach includes the teacher as moral model and mentor, creating a caring classroom community. It uses discipline as a tool for moral growth, teaching virtues through curriculum, cooperative learning, ethical reflection, conflict resolution, school and community service, creating a school-wide moral culture, and recruiting parents and communities as full partners in promoting good character. (Lickona, 1997, P. 30)
In addition to having character education programs, schools must eliminate the old-fashioned, outdated suspension policies when it comes to disciplining problem students. The word discipline means training that develops self-control, character, or orderliness and efficiency (Webster, 1972, P.401). Our culture has transformed this meaning of discipline into something one does to another to encourage conformity. Educational leaders cannot continue to coerce students into conformity.

In the creation of new discipline policies and procedures, school personnel must achieve three main goals. The three goals are to ensure the safety of students and staff, to create an environment conducive to learning, and to create strategies which teach, support, and value student responsibility, proper citizenship, and restitution. First and foremost, teachers and administrators must realize that all behaviors have a purpose. Discipline begins by getting to know the student, and the potential problems that students bring with them to school. Without that knowledge we, as administrators, can only discipline the child rather then address the problem. (Krajewski, 1998)

Secondly, schools must develop interventions and strategies, which will address the problem and develop the student’s self-esteem. Stanley Coopersmith’s work in self-esteem provides a good model that educators can use to develop approaches, techniques, and strategies needed in developing responsibility in youth. He found that students with high self-esteem had four
factors in their family backgrounds that distinguished them from others: warmth, clearly defined limits, a democratic atmosphere, and opportunities for practice in decision-making and problem solving skills. The continuous presence of these four characteristics in classrooms and other youth-serving organizations can make a big difference in helping young people make responsible choices.

Finally, school discipline policies must develop student ownership. Having students exercise ownership of their own actions by applying immediate and appropriate consequences works because of the immediate feedback to the student. Restitution is one technique which will foster a student’s ownership of their behavior and build their self-esteem. “Restitution is a reality therapy-based technique for helping people become self-directed, self-disciplined, and self-healed. The emphasis is not on behaving to please other people or to avoid unpleasant consequences. The emphasis is on becoming the person one wants to be” (Gossen, 1999, P. 43). This technique is based upon the fact that mistakes happen. Restitution enables the individual to attain and/or reclaim their self-esteem through personal effort. The student not only takes ownership for their actions but also has ownership in the plan for restitution. With punishment alone, ownership is relinquished. Once the punishment has been served, students are free and clear. Creative discipline moves past this first step to incorporate additional points of accountability built into six fundamental principles. The six principles are positivity is a better teacher than negativity; choice empowers; self-
 evaluation is an essential for improvement; self-correction is the most successful approach to changing behavior; social responsibility must be taken, rather then given, this involves intrinsic motivation; and authority can be used without punishment (Marshall, 1998, P. 31).

School personnel must redirect discipline to include the teaching components. Character education combined with the development of a student's self-esteem and ownership of action through restitution, will lead to a positive way of handling the problem student. These proactive approaches will create more parental support and open the communication lines to help us become a community of learners.

Paradigm shift: Extracurricular to Co-curricular

Of the many challenges that face educational leaders, the one of great interest as an administrator is the drop in participation in school activities among students across the country. As an educator, and coach for the past seventeen years, the importance of co-curricular activities, activities that are considered part of the school's curriculum, in the learning community has been etched in my mind. Too many administrators view extracurricular activities, activities that are considered outside of the school's curriculum, as a necessary evil that could be cut for the sake of saving money. Instead, there needs to be a paradigm shift to the concept that these activities are an extension of the school day and serve to compliment
the education process of the total child. Co-curricular activities may be the solution to our educational problems. Expanding co-curricular activities may also be the cheapest means of improving academic performance as well as of instilling socially acceptable values and norms of conduct in young people. It has been found that participation in co-curricular activities can increase academic performance, decrease discipline problems, improve attendance and graduation rates, and better prepare students for post-secondary education (Pressley & Whitley, 1996). “Participation in interscholastic athletics may lead to experiences, attitudes, self perceptions, and treatment that enhance the academic performance of students for the following reasons:

1. There may be an increased interest in school, including academics, generated through participation in sports.
2. Athletes are motivated to perform at higher academic levels in order to remain eligible.
3. Athletic success may lead to a heightened sense of self-worth that spills over into academic performance.
4. Coaches, teachers, and parents take an interest in athletes, including their classroom performance.
5. Athletic participation may lead to membership in elite peer groups and an orientation toward academic success.
6. An athlete may have the hope or expectation of participating in athletics at the collegiate level.

(Pressley & Whitley, 1996, P.79)

The NASSP/Carnegie commission on the restructuring of the American High School, in Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution (1996), devotes a segment of their report on the premise that co-curricular activities are essential to
changing high schools for the 21st century. High Schools provide for social and personal needs of students, as well as academic growth. All students need to feel a sense of belonging. When students do not feel they belong, their likelihood of dropping out of school increases. Co-curricular activities can provide this sense of belonging.

"Another focus of reclaiming our schools is to encourage students to become part of the community. Memberships in clubs and groups, such as athletics, is an effective way to learn moral values" (Duncan, 1997, P. 123). Benefiting from such co-curricular programs will reinforce the goal of teaching students to be responsible and well rounded human beings, providing them with opportunities that develop character, critical thinking, sociability, and specific life-long skills (Carnegie, 1996, P.4).

Administrators who believe in the benefits of such programming must become innovative in their thinking. With the same research of the Carnegie report, the most alarming of data indicates that students of low socioeconomic status were less likely to participate in activities than were high socioeconomic status students (Carnegie, 1996, P.5). Because of the importance of co-curricular activities as a means of helping at risk students, all those within the educational community must look at innovative ways to get all students involved. There is a strong need to continue the trend of moving our extra curricular programming to co-curricular status, thus giving true value to all phases of student interests.
It is time to stop selling and/or defending the educational benefits of an activities program. Instead, educational leaders should only have to point to activities as the very best examples of dropout prevention and school reform initiatives.

Educational Leadership

Central to my conception of a good school and a healthy workplace is community. In particular, I would want to return to work in a school that could be described as a community of learners, a place where students and adults alike are engaged as active learners in matters of special interest to them and where everyone is thereby encouraging everyone else's learning. And I would readily work in a school that could be described as a community of leaders, where students, teachers, parents, and administrators share opportunities and responsibilities for making decisions that affect all the occupants of the schoolhouse (Speck, 1999, p.9).

To achieve this vision, educational leaders can not overlook their most valuable resource, the people that make up the school’s community. To bring about positive school change to develop a learning community, educational leaders must move away from the stereotype of principal as the manager of a school to one of leadership. The key style of leadership needed to bring about effective school reform and build a learning community is transformational leadership. This leadership style focuses on higher order intrinsic, and ultimately moral motives and needs such as esteem, autonomy, self-actualization,
righteousness, duty, and obligation (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993). Because of its intrinsic nature, transformational leadership builds on a school’s greatest resource. It allows everyone to become a stakeholder in the learning community. The transformational leader is in pursuit of higher level goals that are common to both leader and follower.

The transformational leadership style is applicable in many tasks such as determining district vision, mission, and goals. Transformational leadership style, employed by the principal, is effective in most areas if the faculty is willing and able to assume responsibility, ownership, and leadership.

The principal can effectively use this leadership style in two roles: as educator and leader of the school. As mentioned above, the most important task of the principal is building and communicating the school’s vision. The transformational leadership style will prove to be valuable in this endeavor.

When building a school’s vision, it is important to have two-way communication, empathy, and exposure to ideas and stimuli. It is an interactive process (Speck, 1999). The vision is the heart of the learning community. It is what the school communicates through words, actions, and written material about the hopes for the future. The principal must first have a personal vision, that through shared decision-making, can be translated into a school community vision.
It is a process of engaging constituents in conversations about their lives, about their hopes and dreams. Remember that leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue. Leadership isn’t imposing the leader’s solo dream; it’s about developing a shared sense of destiny. It’s about enrolling others so that they can see how their own interest and aspirations are aligned with the vision and can thereby become mobilized to commit their individual energies to its realization. A vision is inclusive of the constituents’ aspirations; it’s ideal and unique images of the common good (Speck, 1999, P. 37).

It is up to the principal to keep the fire burning. A school that lacks a clear vision does not have a clear focus for learning. The school lacks purpose. Through conversations on the vision, the principal forces the school and himself to be held accountable for acting in a way that is congruent with the vision.

The second major task of the principal as educator and leader is to develop a collaborative environment. A collaborative environment is one in which people work together. “It is characterized by mutual respect, shared work values, cooperation, and specific conversations about teaching and learning” (Speck, 1999, P. 105). To develop this collegial environment, principals must first become a colleague and clearly communicate to all members of the learning community the importance that collegiality can bring to the school. Principals can emphasize this importance in daily communication with teachers and by modeling it in their daily actions.
Research by Little (cited in Speck, 1999) found that the norms of collegiality were developed when principals clearly:

1. Communicated their expectations for teacher cooperation.
2. Provided a model for collegiality by working with teachers in improving the school.
3. Rewarded expressions of collegiality among teachers by providing recognition, release time, money, and other support services.
4. Protected teachers who were willing to go against expected norms of privatism and isolation by engaging in collegial behaviors. (Speck, 1999, P. 107)

A principal that is committed to developing a collaborative environment must realize that it is a long, slow process. However, the change from I to we is an important cultural change that must take place if a school wishes to establish a true learning community that is dedicated to continuing improvement and lifelong learning.

The second key component to developing a collaborative environment is shared decision-making. The empowerment of teachers by the principal and by themselves is vital if teachers are to truly become full members of a learning community. “Decentralization of both authority, responsibility, and resources through site-based management practices gives direct ownership to those educators within the building” (Lambert, 1998, PP. 77-78). Through these practices, schools will become cohesive, united communities. The benefits of this collaboration will be high levels of innovation, energy and enthusiasm, and support for personal growth and learning.
In fulfilling the role of educational leader, the principal must also focus on this role as an instructional leader. This role has evolved from the top-down, command and control style to the facilitative, behind the scene style. True instructional leadership begins with the principal facilitating a commitment to student productivity, satisfaction, and achievement. "Instructional leadership is a shared responsibility, situational, planned, enhanced by a common purpose, involved in risk taking, and characterized by being goal oriented" (Pellicer, 1990. P. 57). To achieve this definition of instructional leadership, principals must perform at a high level in four areas: resource provider, instructional resource, communicator, and visible presence.

First, principals must function as a resource provider. The principal must realize that the teachers in the schools are its greatest resource, and they must be acknowledged for exemplary teaching and encouraged to share with others. Through mentoring programs, the principal, as instructional leader, can empower the teachers to develop an environment of risk taking and creativity in the learning community.
Secondly, as instructional resource, the principal must identify good teaching and provide feedback that promotes professional growth. The principal must read to stay current on best practice in the teaching profession. In addition, the instructional leader should be competent in giving constructive feedback to the teaching staff. This feedback needs to motivate the teacher to take a reflective look at their instructional strategies.

Third, the principal must be an effective communicator. “The principal must communicate to the staff essential beliefs that all children can learn and experience success, success builds upon success, schools can enhance student success, and learner outcomes must be clearly defined to guide instructional programs and decisions” (Whittaker, 1997, P.156).

Finally, the principal must be visible. To be an effective instructional leader, the principal must remember that school business of major importance takes place in the classroom, hallways, playgrounds, and cafeterias. They will never have a sense of the atmosphere of the school unless they get out of the office. Effective instructional leaders make it a point to visit classrooms daily. While in the classrooms, the principal should not only take notes of the workings of the classroom, but also participate and interact with the students. Helping children work on assignments or getting involved in class discussions promote the principal’s belief in the importance of learning (Whittaker, 1997, P.156).
Educational leadership is a people oriented profession. Successful leaders, no matter what the profession, understand that their number one responsibility is to take care of those within the organization.

The role of a leader is the servant's role. It's supporting his people running interference for them. It's coming out with an atmosphere of understanding and love. You want people to feel they have complete control over their destiny at every level. Tyranny is not tolerated here. People who want to manage in the traditional sense are cast off by their peers like dandruff. (Owens, 1998, P.221)

Throughout this reflective process, this paper has attempted to look at key components to turning schools into learning communities. Educational leaders of these learning communities that want to shape the future encourage their stakeholders to challenge conventional thinking and to create a continuous renewal. Building a school learning community is difficult and time-consuming work. It starts with a principal's personal vision about schooling and develops into a collective vision of collaboration, shared leadership, co-curricular activities, and effective educational leadership strategies. Schools, that are striving to think creatively and are transforming isolation into collegiality, will become warm, innovative learning communities. As we continue to head into the 21st century, learning communities should go forward with hope, striving to move things to the next level by asking why not questions to challenge the status quo.
If you look around, you will see principals and districts that believe in this servant role, and those who do not. To create the learning community, the servant role must be in place. All stakeholders are there to serve each other, so an environment of life-long learning is present for all to succeed.
References


