Defining a leader: administration at the secondary level: a reflective essay

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Abstract
To teach students and know that you are affecting their future and possibly the future of the world is a daunting fact. To choose to be an administrator further commits oneself to the lifelong challenge of learning, teaching and facilitating an educational opportunity that will benefit students. To be a school administrator is to make a courageous decision. To be effective as a school administrator requires a strong leader who is able to build consensus among teachers; seek input from the community; and promote the trends that may reach students who are in danger of slipping through the cracks.
DEFINING A LEADER: ADMINISTRATION AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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INTRODUCTION

To teach students and know that you are affecting their future and possibly the future of the world is a daunting fact. To choose to be an administrator further commits oneself to the lifelong challenge of learning, teaching and facilitating an educational opportunity that will benefit students. To be a school administrator is to make a courageous decision. To be effective as a school administrator requires a strong leader who is able to build consensus among teachers; seek input from the community; and promote the trends that may reach students who are in danger of slipping through the cracks.

What motivates a teacher to want to become an administrator? Georgene Mais, director of elementary instruction in Birdville, Texas was "driven 'to create that learning environment' for an entire campus...to be a positive influence 'within the whole community'"(Bernstein, 1990, p.33). Nancy Villarreal, an assistant superintendent in the San Francisco area, "believes administration is the ultimate teaching experience...I've begun to look on all of us as learners. Some of us are adult learners; some are student learners"(Bernstein, 1990, p.33). It is that idea of administration as a different kind of teaching that motivates me to become a school leader.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SCHOOL LEADER

A careful review of administrators indicates that those who are the most respected are those who have received recognition for their outstanding work in the area of leadership. According to Bennus and Nanus,"The new leader is one who commits people to action, who converts followers into leaders, and who may
convert leaders into agents of change. (p. 3)" (Kowalski, 1993, p. 18). The common characteristics of good administrators include: organization, flexibility, and the need to maintain an open door policy, communication with all staff members, and the ability to be a fair decision maker. A good administrator has a strong belief in children and in doing what is in the best interest of the child. They are leaders who provide guidance while challenging teachers to reach new levels of professionalism.

What exactly does an effective educational leader look like? An effective educational leader does not lead from behind a desk in an office with a closed door, believing that the methods they learned twenty years ago in college are still appropriate. An effective administrator is a dynamic and charismatic leader who is out in the classrooms, roaming the halls, reading current journals and collaborating with others to provide the best educational opportunities for students and staff. This leader who remembers the human side of management and takes time to visit with the staff and get to know them on a personal level. This personal touch will build loyalty and aid in the development of the common values that are the vision and mission of the school because the employees feel that the principal cares about them and as a result they feel the job that they do is important. It also allows the leader to build strong partnerships in the learning community as each member is able to answer these three questions: "Can I trust you? Do you know what you are talking about? Do you care about me?" (D. Else, personal communication, August 29, 2001).

"School leadership needs to be a broad concept that is separated from person, role, and a discrete set of individual behaviors. It needs to be imbedded in
the school community as a whole."(Lambert, 1998, p.5). If leadership is to be a part of the school community as a whole, the organizational structure of the school needs to be scrutinized to see if it supports collaborative efforts.

Lambert (1998) suggests that no one arrangement fits all situations. "Schools have found many working arrangements useful: leadership teams, facilitation teams, or research teams...ad hoc groups of various topics...grade-level teams, interdisciplinary teams, school site councils, and school improvement councils."(Lambert, 1998, p. 84). The culture, climate and leadership capacity of the school will determine what form of leadership is most effective to implement.

One can conclude "that the definition of leadership is about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. (Lambert, 1998, p.5).

INTERSTATE SCHOOL LEADERS LICENSURE CONSORTIUM

The job of being a principal is one that is evolving and changing as the country and its educational needs change. Malone and Caddell (2000) noted, "Historically, the principalship had gone through five evolutionary changes: one teacher (one-room school), head teacher, teaching principal, school principal, and supervising principal (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, and Usdan 1990). The principalship is currently in a sixth stage -- the principal as change agent". (Malone and Caddell, 2000, p. 162). This sixth stage, change is behind the issuance of new standards that govern the performance of educational leaders.

Performance Based Standards

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) in 1996 released a set of standards for administrators to help provide a framework for the
creation of educational leadership programs. The six standards and accompanying performance objectives define what the new face of administration will look like. It will no longer be simply the completion of required coursework but also demonstration of the skills needed to successfully do the job.

Standard 1: A school administrator is a leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the community.

Standard 2: A school administrator is a leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

Standard 3: A school administrator is a leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.

Standard 4: A school administrator is a leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs and mobilizing community resources.

Standard 5: A school administrator is a leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness and in an ethical manner.
Standard 6: A school administrator is a leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. (Sharp, 1998, p. 3-8).

These standards are common sense, if boiled down into one simple statement, they mean doing what is best for the children of the community. They require dynamic and proactive leaders who can change hats and roles many times during a day. Leaders who can compel a group of people to believe in a common mission and strive for continuous improvement.

Job Description

A closer look at the standards also provides a job description for the educational leader of a school system. These standards for licensure of school administrators provide a definition of what an effective administrator looks like. They compliment and support the five tasks of high school administrators as outlined by Hughes and Ubben. Hughes and Ubben (1980) "divided all the responsibilities of the high school principal into five primary tasks: school-community relations, staff personnel development, pupil personnel development, educational program development, and business and building management (pp3-4)." (Kowalski and Reitzug, 1993, p. 42). Individually the standards and tasks shape the role of the principal together they describe the essence of a transformational leader. This type of leader does not receive compliant behavior from followers but commitment because of a focus on the achievement of common goals shared by the leader and the followers. (Kowalski and Reitzug, 1993, p. 233).
The Principal as a visionary.

Standard 1: A school administrator is a leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the community. (Sharp, 1998, p. 3).

Sheive and Schoenheit (1987) define vision as "a blueprint of a desired state...an image of a preferred condition that we work hard to achieve in the future"(Sheive and Schoenheit, 1987, p. 94). Being visionary is not enough, the principal must also be able to articulate that vision to a variety of audiences in a timely manner. Kowalski and Reitzug (1993) suggest "One strategy for minimizing communication oversight is to establish a written schedule of regular (and frequent) written communication with various audiences"(p. 214). This communication, which should include the school vision and mission, may take the form of parent and community newsletters and updates to committee members and school board members.

The principal as the instructional leader of the school.

Standard 2: A school administrator is a leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth. (Sharp, 1998, p. 4).

When school systems are compared one notes that each has a climate and culture that is unique to that building. As the leader of the organization the new administrator faces challenges when dealing the issue of culture. In 1993,
Kowalski and Reitzug wrote "Cultural change is especially difficult in organizations where strong beliefs and values have existed over a period of time." (p. 159). This is not to say that change is impossible only to suggest that a collaborative approach may bring about sustained change and improvement.

A careful review of research dealing with the principal's duties as the instructional leader of a school suggest that this role has many components. The role of the principal includes but is not limited to: curriculum and instruction, dedication to school and district goals, mobilization of resources, setting high expectations, a collaborative approach to decision making, and a firm protection of instructional time. (Kowalski and Reitzug, 1993, p. 231).

Staff development requires administrators to look at teachers as professionals who need to be involved in ongoing learning opportunities. While many administrators believe in the importance of serving as the instructional leader of the school few actually act on this belief. Fink and Resnick (2001) stated "Most principals spend relatively little time in classrooms and even less time analyzing instruction with teachers. They may arrange time for teachers' meetings and professional development, but they rarely provide intellectual leadership for growth in teaching skill." (Fink and Resnick, 2001, p. 598). Principals are hesitant to become involved as instructional leaders when critiquing teachers performance in the classroom for a variety of reasons including lack of knowledge about the specific subject being taught. Fink and Resnick (2001) caution against this hesitation suggesting "As instructional leaders, principals have to be able to figure out what to do for a teacher — what kind of professional development would be appropriate for a given person at a given time... The principal has to lead by
creating a culture of learning and by providing the right kind of specialized professional development opportunities." (Fink and Resnick, 2001, p. 600).

Individualized staff development or professional improvement commitments allow the principal to function as the instructional leader in the collaborative development of plans to meet teacher needs. The individualized staff development plans require a desire from the teacher to improve classroom performance and a willingness of the principal to be an advocate for the teacher. It should be tailored to meet the needs of the teacher discovered during the evaluation process.

The duties of the principal as the instructional leader of the school are thrust into the spotlight with the recent focus on accountability in education. Tirozzi (2001) stated "The principals of tomorrow's schools must be instructional leaders who possess the requisite skills, capacities, and commitment to lead the accountability parade, not follow it...Without leadership, the chances for systemic improvement in teaching and learning is nil." (p. 528).

Accountability must start within the school system through the implementation of a professional growth plan that allows participants to have a choice in what they pursue outside of district offerings but require them to develop a plan for the year and spell out how they will use the knowledge that they gain by pursuing this training. The principal must be a partner in the development of the plan and hold regular feedback sessions to encourage accountability. Another angle to professional development is to use your staff to train your staff. Encourage teachers to pursue professional development opportunities that will benefit them in their classroom and then hold workshops
for your entire staff and have them share what they have learned. This also allows for collaboration between grade levels in the preparation of the presentations.

The principal as an advocate of a safe school environment.

Standard 3: A school administrator is a leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. (Sharp, 1998, p. 5).

A safe school environment is an ongoing goal that is at the forefront of many decisions the principal makes. The principal must protect students and staff while they are in the school and at school related functions. The principal of the school must handle discipline in a constructive manner utilizing character education and other behavior programs to ensure that a productive learning environment exists. Copland (2001) states that principals are in charge of creating this safe school environment, "They must deal swiftly and unerringly with student discipline and ensure a safe and productive school environment in a media climate obsessed by incidents of school violence." (p. 528).

The principal as a collaborative team member to better education.

Standard 4: A school administrator is a leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs and mobilizing community resources. (Sharp, 1998, p. 6).

While public schools are in effect taxpayer owned and therefore taxpayers should be involved in the administration of the school through the election of school board members this spirit of collaboration between school administration
clear personal mission and priorities to guide one's life facilitates setting priorities for the organization.

Dennis Smith, a superintendent, notes "he tries to provide a clear direction for an entire school district and community." Sometimes building consensus means subordinating your own ideas"(Bernstein, 1990, p. 35). The struggle between personal vision and mission and that of the organization is common to administrators. "As one wise man observed, 'The greatest battles we fight are in the silent chambers of our souls.' We need to ask ourselves: 'Am I willing to be a person of total integrity?'"(Covey, 1994, p. 69).

The principal as an agent of change.

Standard 6: A school administrator is a leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. (Sharp, 1998, p. 8).

This notion of influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal and cultural context, does not mean that the principal is a true politician who runs for and is elected to office. Rather as Knezevich (1984) suggested "Politics deals with decision-making power, its distribution and limitations, among persons who are part of the organization, community, state, region, and nation.(p. 491)"(Kowalski and Reitzug, 1993, p. 166).

To be an agent of change an administrator as Meyers and Robbins(1991) suggest "requires risk takers in leadership positions – administrators who involve others, create support networks, effectively communicate, tolerate mistakes, provide reinforcement, set high expectations, and lead by example."(Kowalski and Reitzug, 1993, p. 169).
Superhuman Principals

Does this mean that the principal is superhuman? No. Although, from reading a job description in the local paper one might become convinced that the school district advertising and opening was looking for a "leader who can 'walk on water' and 'wear a superhero's cape'"(Peterson and Kelley, 2001, p.8). While the job of being a principal has many facets it is possible for one person to accomplish the job. Effective principals are effective because of their ability to balance the many aspects of the job. Copland (2001) writes "the leadership of these principals was not superhuman; rather it grew from a strong and simple commitment to make schools work for their students and to build teachers' determination and capacity to pursue this collective goal."(Copland, 2001, p. 528).

Lead by Example

Put into practice in the real world of education these standards mean leading by example. If lifelong learning is a part of the mission statement of the school system the administrator needs to be engaged in continuing education and professional development. As Kowalski and Reitzug (1993) suggested "Professionals are expected to engage in lifelong learning to ensure currency in their practice."(p.25). If developing students who will be contributors to their communities in a positive manner is a goal, then the administrator should be a member of community organizations, volunteer, and be visible at community events. Kowalski and Reitzug (1993) support the role of the principal as official representative of the school. They wrote "Often communities expect persons in these roles to maintain a high level of visibility and be active in civic function."
If development of programs that are strong and meet the mission of the school system is the goal, then the administrator needs to facilitate all staff members in the process of developing standards, curriculum mapping, and assessment so that the programs that are provided meet the needs of the students and the community at large. If providing a safe environment for learning is part of the mission of the school, the administrator needs to lead the attack to eliminate harassment by maintaining a learning environment where all feel safe and welcome. If the goal is to provide students with interpersonal skills that will allow them to function as team players on the job and in the community, then the whole school system must model this. If the development of personal integrity and good decision making skills is important, the administrators must act ethically in their position of authority. They are after all, role models. In a ever changing and interdependent society, schools and other groups must realize the importance of building collaborative relationships that have the potential to influence other groups and secure support for projects that will ultimately benefit the community as a whole.

Leadership in Practice

Tirozzi (2001) writes that "The time has come for America's principals to define a new reality for America's schools, a reality embedded in the belief that all - and all means all - children can learn to high levels. Leadership is not a spectator sport. It is reserved for participants..." (p. 434).

The awesome power that educators possess in the life of a child is humbling. It is a teacher who can turn a child onto learning and captivate an imagination. Once the process is begun it is impossible to comprehend the extent
of one teacher's influence on society. A career as an administrator should be viewed with equal awe and amazement. Administrators can have the same impact on teachers and other professionals in their building and district. How can the impact of a school leader be measured? As Wilmore and Thomas (2001) stated, "Therefore, school leadership can best be measured by the way a principal uses him or herself to create a school climate characterized by staff productivity, student productivity, and creative thought (Thomas and Walker, 1999)"(Wilmore and Thomas, 2001, p. 115).

Dedication

Dedication to students and what is best for them is at the center of my vision for students. If I should ever wake up and hate students and the process of helping them learn, I hope I will know that it is time to leave education. Children in our society are being forced to grow up before they are ready. It is my job to provide my teachers with a mission that will compel them to go that extra mile to reach a struggling student. What is best for a student may not always seem to them to be the most fair course to pursue, however, I have been charged with the mission of providing them the best educational environment possible.

Changing Face of School Leadership

The face of school leadership is changing. Top-down administration is being abandoned in favor of collaborative efforts and site based management. Learning communities are being challenged to work together to take ownership in creating a learning environment where all students have the opportunity to learn. The leader of this school must be "committed to transforming a school, must have a clear vision, be able to communicate it, and be able to inspire others to
collaborate ethically and professionally for the achievement of all children, even those difficult to teach" (Wilmore and Thomas, 2001, p 118).

Communication

Good communication skills will enhance the image of an administrator within the school and within the community. It is important to remember that is the staff cannot support you if they do not know what the ultimate goal is. Simple things such as a weekly schedule of events or detention rotation and positive feedback for accomplishments made by oneself or one’s students may be the boost needed to keep on teaching and reaching for that step above where you are currently functioning. Current trends in education that impact the school system need to be shared with all staff so that a consensus may be built before a new system or approach is adopted. The community needs to know via newsletter or press release when something good happens at your school. It helps to counter the negative image some have of young people today.

Management and Organizational Skills

Management and organizational skills complete the four key areas for a good administrator to excel in. Management of facilities is something that must be done on a collaborative basis, the custodial staff need to feel valued for their efforts to maintain quality facilities. Organization skills are essential to handle all of the hats an administrator must wear. Delegation of tasks and a team approach within the administrators make the many hat that an administrator must wear more manageable. One minute it may be a scheduling concern, another a fight in the hallway, and another a parent concern about a student's progress academically all are situations in which a principal must act in a manner that conveys concern
CONCLUSION

Being an administrator is a calling to a profession that requires dedication and integrity. It means being willing to do the research before making the difficult decisions that affect the educational experiences of students. It means being the leader working to build a shared vision and a commitment to working toward common goals.

While the administrator is no longer a classroom teacher, he or she functions as the instructional leader of the school. This means helping teachers be the best by showcasing exemplary teaching practices and taking the time to develop professional improvement commitments with those teachers who need to improve. It also means promoting professional development that is aligned with the district comprehensive school improvement plan.

School administration is not an easy job. There are many long hours, sleepless nights, and headaches. The reward of being a school administrator is in seeing the success that students achieve and the impact your leadership has on the learning community.
References


