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What I believe about leadership and education

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What I believe about leadership and education

Abstract

Educational leadership should focus on excellence much like that found in the military, medicine, professional athletics, and business. With current educational focus on student achievement and proficiency educational leaders must strive for encompassing excellence throughout the school. Leadership directing this excellence must include designing effective professional development, have a clear vision, and implement programs towards standards-based instruction. To drive towards this excellence educational leaders must be effective communicators, reflective thinkers, and be willing to share leadership.

WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

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By

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Effective Communicators

Administrators increasing use of technology to become more effective communicators, improving the flow of information both to and from staff, students, parents and community (Johnson 2003). With increasing demands being placed on school administrators effective communication helps eliminate spending large amounts of time with small problems yet prevents these small problems from escalating into larger problems. E-mail while often impersonal provides administrators with sending mass e-mails to staff to notify teachers of changes in the schedule, responsibilities, and reminders of what faculty needs to accomplish to strive towards excellence. Quick, thoughtful e-mail allows administrators precious time saving techniques to spend time focusing on student achievement, staff development and everyday problems that administrators run

into. Attaching documents with e-mails also saves money by not making paper copies for everyone.

Administrator burnout is becoming increasingly common with the time commitments for administrators. By using effective communication techniques administrators will have more time to spend with family, hobbies, and opens up some free time for administrators. Effective communication will help keep administrators fresh and looking forward to each school day and allows administrators to spend more time being visible in the school.

It is important for people in the learning community to feel informed. Principals must pay attention to actively involve everyone in the communication process. Channels of communication vary from face to face, open meetings, newsletters and e-mails. Principals should try to create lines of communication that are open, and lines that are direct as possible. These aspects of communication allow for principals to improve the flow of communication between the school district and members of the learning community. It is important that principals communicate both the successes and where the school needs to improve. Principals do not want to deceive the public and it is important to communicate truthfully with the learning community.

School staff, parents, community members, students, and the school board want to know what is going on inside the school to see your school striving for excellence. Newsletters, newspaper articles, and open houses allow the

opportunity for the community to see the inside of school, allows teachers to show student work, what they are teaching students. This type of communication doesn't need to happen every day but should be something that administrators want to incorporate into their yearly routine.

Reflective Thinkers

Its often been said that experience is the best teacher. But is it? We do not learn as much from experience as we do when we reflect on that experience (Burris, Stemme 2003). Teachers often reflect back on their day and wonder what they could have done differently to improve their lesson. Administrators must also be reflective thinkers about what went well and how to improve on this to make it even better, administrators must also reflect on what did not go well, how to improve this idea to make it better or creative and come up with another solution to the problem.

Teacher evaluation is another important aspect of administration, when evaluating teachers both administrators and teachers reflect back on a lesson and look at what went well during the lesson and also what they would change to improve the lesson. This reflective practice and reviewing what is working and what is not working is important to improve teacher practice. Learning which engages participants in approaching new ideas, reflection, and dialogue can form a basis for the experience (King 2004). When evaluating teachers this is the process that administrators should take to improve teacher practice and open lines

of communication between administrators and teachers. This line of communication where administrators and teachers are comfortable in talking about what they need to improve on is vital for school success.

“In order to learn more profoundly “what works”, reflection is a most useful tool” (Cordry, Uline, Wilson 2004). Reflecting back on my 5 years of teaching I have learned what works best by reflecting after lessons either in school or on my drive home, what would I change? How can I improve this for next time? After the first period of physical science I teach I am thinking how can I improve this lesson. I feel that reflection has been a powerful learning tool for myself in realizing what has worked and more importantly on how to improve what I’m currently doing.

Staff Development and Reflection

With No Child Left Behind administrators must make the most of the time allotted for staff development. Staff development is crucial for administrators to look at ways to improve student achievement. Maximizing this time and making sure faculty are implementing new ideas, and activities into their lessons is important for improving staff development. Critical reflection carried over into many different parts of educators’ lives and their meaning perspectives were decidedly shifted (King 2004). Changing school staffs’ viewpoints and open-mindedness towards change is often difficult for administrators. Reflective

practices improve the chances that teachers will incorporate new innovations in their classroom. These new ideas into the classroom will provide

Shared Leadership

With increasing professional and time demands being placed on administrators it is important for principals to delegate some of their authority to staff. It is important that principals carefully choose and place this responsibility with trustworthy staff. Utilizing the talents of staff opens allows for difference perspectives on how to improve operations inside the school. "Instructional leadership must be a shared, community undertaking. Leadership is the professional work of everyone in the school" (Lambert 2002). With No Child Left Behind educators are realizing they are responsible for student learning and achievement. This responsibility requires that educators take ownership in school improvement, as they possibly could lose their position without working towards improving how they are educating their students.

Delegating authority is sometimes difficult for administrators because when something goes wrong the person that takes the blame for the problems is the administrator. It is important that administrators have knowledge about the decisions that staff are making. Principals must trust that the staff is making decisions that are aimed at improving the status quo. "Because teachers are the largest, most influential group in a school, they should assume the majority of responsibility" (Lovely 2005). Most principals need to understand that delegation

is a responsibility that they owe themselves. Time commitment and burnout are inevitable if principals hold themselves responsible for every decision that school makes. Having free time outside of work will make you enjoy coming to school to work and this attitude of enjoyment does rub off onto the staff and students this attitude and sets the tone for the school.

Educational leadership should focus on excellence much like that found in the military, medicine, professional athletics, and business. With current educational focus on student achievement and proficiency educational leaders must strive for encompassing excellence throughout the school. Leadership directing this excellence must include designing effective professional development, have a clear vision, and implement programs towards standards-based instruction. To drive towards this excellence educational leaders must be effective communicators, reflective thinkers, and be willing to share leadership.

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Data Based Decisions

With the legislation of No Child Left Behind educational leaders must make decisions on how to improve student achievement. Educational leaders must now make decisions based on data; these data based decisions are part of the 21st century for educational leaders. “Schools gathered data for 150 years and rarely used it. Six months into NCLB schools are now required by law to use data.”(Doyle). Educational leaders now more than ever must have a knowledge based of translating and analyzing data so that everyone can understand the data and also make the data more user friendly for teachers, parents and the community to understand. “What is abundantly clear is that without purposeful organization and the capacity for nearly instantaneous recall and analysis, even the most abundant data are virtually useless.”(Doyle). One of the greatest assets that a principal has towards improving student achievement is the abundance of data principals have to use.

Implementing in Schools

Educational leaders now look at student data to drive teacher-in-service, educational leaders look at student data to find areas of weakness that teachers can work on to improve student achievement. With high-stakes testing and school funding relying on the results of these tests, data-based decisions are making the top of every educational leader’s agenda. Teachers are not void of the responsibility of looking at data; teachers are also responsible for looking at data

to see where students can improve in their subject area. Scientific based data is also vital for any new initiatives that a school is looking to begin, if a principal is looking to start a new program in his/her district there must be data that shows evidence that this new initiative will improve student achievement. School boards, superintendents now require data showing evidence that a program will work without evidence the program will never leave the room. This responsibility of educational leaders may be the most important, finding data based programs that can improve student performance. Looking into the 21st century of education and having NCLB administrators are now more than ever required to make informed decisions about programs that are looking to initiate. This may be the biggest responsibility for changing education in an educational leader's school.

Data based decision can follow a systematic approach administrator's first need to develop a plan. In this plan administrators first must look at what the data they are going to need to collect. After collecting data an administrator must ask several questions; how can we improve student achievement, what is the current baseline, what new strategy are we going to look at implementing, and what staff development is needed? Once a plan is in place the principal now must set the plan into action, the principal also needs to gather data and monitor the plan. Do we need more staff development? What problems have we encountered when implementing the plan? Next we need to analyze the results, as the data is gathered it is important to have staff members looking at the data as they have

some ownership in the attempts to improve student achievement. School staff must then look at several questions to analyze if the plan is successful. How was student achievement affected by this new approach or focus during the action plan period? How can the program be improved? The program failed and where do we go from here.

Our district is looking at collaboration regular education teachers with special education teachers in the core areas. Special education students would then be fully included in the core classes. What is important to our district is there any evidence that this will improve student achievement? Without this evidence of improved student achievement the district will not change the way special ed. students are currently being taught. This change from just 5 to 10 years ago when schools were allowed the opportunity to try something new has changed. Without any evidence that a new program will improve student achievement schools should be cautious at incorporating new programs into their curriculum.

Finally what benefits does data-based decision approach have? For schools it gives teachers and students timely and accurate feedback, documents improvements in instruction, it measures the success or failure of a school program, and holds schools accountable to improving student achievement rather than settling for the norm. Effective leaders anticipate and lead the school to improve and change. Principals now must look at evidence that there is a

problem and that the proposed solution will correct that problem. As long as principals have some valid evidence that shows this new program will improve student achievement parents, school boards, and teachers are more likely to buy into the program which ultimately will improve student achievement.

Creating safe and supportive schools is essential to ensuring students' academic and social success. There are many factors that contribute to establishing a school that has an environment that feels safe for students. The climate of a school has always been essential to a school's success in educating its children and preparing them for life outside of the school atmosphere and into the working world. Creating a school climate that is safe and conducive to student learning is essential for any school to be successful. A successful school administrator must be willing to take the risks necessary to transform a climate and provide ongoing support to those engaged in the process (Fullan 2002).

School Climate

When entering a school, staff, students, parents and community members immediately get a feel for the climate of the school. How does it look? What do we see on the walls and in the hallways? What messages do the bulletin boards send us? What noises, voices do we hear in the hallways? School climate is reflected in every interaction and in every decision teachers and students make. Every school wants to have its unique identity that makes it special to the students, staff and community members that live, work and attend the school.

Improving School Climate

When looking at improving or changing the climate of the school an administrator must first look at the school's message should convey. Establishing a mission statement is one of the most important aspects towards establishing the school climate. Once this mission statement is in place an administrator has a goal of what the school climate should be and can begin to mold the environment to fit the mission statement.

Recognize the Positives

School administrators often only work with students with disciplinary problems, rather than focusing on the many positives that are going on in the school. Good school administrators find ways to provide teachers and students with opportunities to feel special (Furlong, Felix, Larson 2005). There are many ways in which an administrator can make teachers and students feel special; writing short notes thanking them, stopping by and talking to them, talking to students in the hallway congratulating them on an activity. All of these small things make large contributions to the climate of the school and staff. These positive behaviors help contribute to a climate where students and staff feel appreciated at school.

Discipline

Disruptive student behavior damages teacher morale and leads some teachers to leave. New teachers in particular have trouble with classroom

management, and teachers who leave say they do not feel adequately supported by principals when it comes to disciplining individual students (Vail 2005).

Administrators must support teachers' efforts and be consistent with disciplining students. If rules are not consistently enforced students may have mixed messages which make it harder for teachers to maintain order in their classroom. If a principal does not agree with a teacher's decision they should let the teacher know in a way that does not make the teacher look like the bad guy in the situation and discuss alternatives that they can use in the classroom to maintain order in the classroom.

Safe Schools

Parents, teachers, students and community members want their school's to be the safest place in the community. In any school there are instances throughout the school year where kids may feel unsafe: bullying, fighting and the threat of weapons are now thwarting students' safety in schools. Bullying in schools has always been a problem in the school setting however there are steps that can be taken to reduce the severity of this problem.

The first step in correcting the problem is to collect data to help assess its severity. This can be done in many ways surveying students, parents, and teachers. Also have students color in a map of the school where they see bullying behavior the most. Once the data is analyzed look at what steps are necessary to reduce the problem. Make sure teachers are visible and adequately trained in

recognizing bullying behavior and have a plan in place for disciplining students who are bullying. It is important to educate students about bullying through speakers, advisor/advisee time, or character education classes. With educating students it is also important that students feel that they have an adult in the building whom they feel comfortable discussing the issue.

Small Learning Communities.

Too often many students go unnoticed during their tenure at school. School personnel need to build relationships with students so that students feel connected to the school and teachers within the school. In smaller schools it is easier to have small learning communities and build it is essential to have at larger schools to help with building these relationships. The interdisciplinary team, working with a common group of students is the signature component of high performing schools, literally the heart of the school from which other desirable programs and experiences evolve (Oxley 2005). The size of the learning community affects the quality of students' relationships with their peers and teachers and ultimately student performance. These communities should never exceed a few hundred students and hopefully less.

Small learning communities are effective when teachers share a common knowledge about students, communicate consistent messages to parents and helps recognize student problems. It is important that this team have a collaborative planning period so they can discuss student problems, what they are seeing in the

classroom and respond to students' needs. Teaching and learning teams position teachers to form meaningful relationships with students as well as to facilitate a more authentic, active form of student learning (Oxley 2005).

Small size in itself will not transform schools; it will help with building relationships and contribute to the climate of a school where students have a relationship with an adult in the building. This sense of belonging helps contribute to a school climate where students feel safe when in the school and can focus on academic achievement. The importance of these relationships is often overlooked schools that build a school climate where students feel safe and can be successful it is a common factor that leads to improved social and academic success.

School reform efforts have generally been unsuccessful in providing the leadership, understanding, and motivation needed to empower staff members to create the collective vision based on shared values that align curriculum, instruction, assessment and supporting programs for schools (Huffman 2003). The lack of commitment for school reform starts with the leader of the school and the commitment to working on reform within the school setting. A visionary leader is one who "established goals and objectives for individual and group action, which define not what we are but rather what we seek to be or do. (Anfara, Brown 2003). A principal's most significant effect on student learning comes

through his/her efforts to establish a vision of the school and develop goals related to the accomplishment of the vision.

Visionary Leadership

With No Child Left Behind driving education into the 21st century school administrators are looking at ways to reform schools in increase student achievement. School reform needs to have some direction to improve on areas of weakness and focus on strengths and this can be done with having a vision statement. DuFour and Eaker (1998) examined the co-creation of a shared vision:

The lack of a compelling vision for public schools continues to be a major obstacle in any effort to improve schools. Until educators can describe the school they are trying to create, it is impossible to develop policies, procedures, or programs that will help make that ideal a reality.

When making change it is important to have a vision of what the school should look like. This vision is vital to school improvement and being a visionary leader. This vision is the roadmap to creating a utopian school; this roadmap gives educators an idea of what is expected there are many different routes to meet the goals of the vision. A vision statement is not a task for an administrator to undertake alone, this vision needs to be a shared vision encompassing the entire learning community.

Multiple Stakeholders

Hord (1997) defines vision as a concept in a learning community that leads to norms of behavior that have a primary focus on student learning and are supported by staff members. The school vision needs input from the people that are involved within the learning community, including parents, teachers, school staff, administrators, students, and community members. All stakeholders that are involved with the school need to be heard to help develop the vision of what the school should look like. Allowing input from many stakeholders increases the ownership the learning community has in developing the vision. This ownership of the vision is more likely to keep those involved with developing the vision to hold others within the learning community accountable to meeting the expectations of the school's vision. DuFour and Eaker (1998) continue on the idea of a shared vision in schools:

What separates a learning community from an ordinary school is its collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they seek to create. Furthermore, these guiding principles are not just articulated by those in positions of leadership; even more important, they are embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the school.

Defining a vision based on shared values is a crucial step that administrators must consider as they lead their schools through reform efforts. The first step in school

reform is to identify the end goal and then finding the resources for the learning community to begin to build towards that vision.

Commitment

After creating the vision for the school it is important that the administrator stays committed to working towards this goal. Allowing staff development time for teachers to work on the goals of the vision is essential for the staff to not only buy into the vision but also to show how committed the administrator is to meeting the goals of the vision. Administrators will need to give people exposure to information, present them with ideas and allow collaboration among teachers to meet the goals of the vision. Providing teachers the resources to meet the goals of the vision are critical providing professional learning opportunities is also vital to meeting the goals of the vision. Creating a committee to oversee the vision is a great idea to maintain the commitment to the vision and also to revise the vision as needed as time progresses.

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