A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: a reflective essay

Abstract
The opportunity to be the leader of a school district and a role model in the community is very exciting. There will be so many lives I will have the opportunity to touch. I eagerly await the chance to make new friends and develop a good rapport with the members of the community. To help accomplish this, I will attempt to answer the three questions which are asked in every relationship: "Do you really care about me personally? Can I trust you? Do you know what you are talking about?"

The staff, parents, students, and community must see me as someone they can come to with questions or comments. I will attempt to develop an atmosphere where everyone feels like they belong, including parents and community members. This will help to build a strong educational environment. "What children need more than anything is the chance to attach to adults who are meaningful and important to them" (O'Neil, 1997, p. 8).
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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Through all of my educational experiences as a student and teacher, I have respected and admired the principals for whom I have worked. I felt they held a position of stature and great responsibility. They were in charge of an educational institution where children could learn and prepare themselves for their future.

Preparing for my future was what I did as a student. I gave my best effort in classes to prepare myself for college. In talking with my principal and teachers, they encouraged me to go into education. In addition to their prodding, I saw how much my two older sisters enjoyed teaching. Then during my Junior year of high school, my math teacher allowed me to teach a few math classes with her guidance. At this point, I knew I wanted to be a teacher because of how much I enjoyed teaching others and seeing their faces when they understood the material.

Now as I finish my course work for becoming a secondary principal, I look at the question of why becoming a principal is the right choice for me. There are three areas which answer this question for me: the reasons why I started the administrative program, using
WHY I CHOSE ADMINISTRATION

There are several reasons why I chose to go into the field of secondary administration. I believe I will have more influence over all areas of a student's education. I will also have a greater opportunity to influence a student's life. Finally, many of my co-workers have told me I would make a good principal.

When my fellow teachers first told me this, I did not even listen to them. But as the time drew near for me to take classes in order to keep my teaching certificate, I decided I wanted a master's degree. I knew I did not want to further my bachelor of arts degree in mathematics, so I started considering what other colleagues were telling me about administration and why I would make a good principal.

As a teacher, I used a variety of teaching techniques to help my students succeed. While teaching it was difficult to pass these techniques on to other teachers who had difficulty in the classroom. The principal's job would be to help these teachers improve their teaching through suggestions, peer tutoring, and self-reflection.
My outgoing personality would also be a benefit as an administrator. I have never worked with a teacher who I could not get along with. I did not always agree with what they believed or how they taught, but we were able to get along in a professional setting. I felt it was important to respect everyone's ideas and opinions whether I agreed with them or not. There has not been a child or parent who I could not talk or relate to. Even when we disagreed, we were able to discuss the matter in a respectful and mature manner. This lead to good communication and usually a solution to the matter being discussed.

As the principal, I would need to be able to communicate with the students, faculty, support staff, parents, superintendent, school board, and community members. I have experienced working with all these groups while teaching and coaching. Whether it was giving a report to the school board, putting basketball reports in the paper, making sure the gym was ready for games, or finding volunteers for a youth basketball program, I was able to get my message across in a clear and understandable way. I will need to keep all of these different groups informed of what is occurring at the school and how they can help with its success.
Healey (1994) pointed out that we cannot expect parents to support our endeavors if they do not know anything about them.

In order for me to accomplish this, I must know what is happening at the school. As the principal, I will have some influence and control over what is taking place. I will no longer just be working on mathematics curriculum, but I will be overseeing all areas of instruction. In addition, I will be able to help set the discipline policies and procedures for the whole school and make sure they are enforced.

Being involved in more areas of the school will give me a greater opportunity to influence the students' lives. I will also work hard to develop strong, positive relationships with the students. I think they will see me as someone they can talk to and feel comfortable with. I will be a positive influence in their lives. Hopefully, they will see my leadership skills and the characteristics of a quality principal in my actions. These skills and characteristics were developed and fostered during my administrative courses.
Leadership

Early in my administrative coursework, I realized that administration was the area I wanted to pursue. The courses touched upon many aspects of the principalship. We looked at the four different frames of reference which most principals work from (Bolman & Deal, 1991). I learned that a good mix between the human resource frame and the structural frame would be best for me as a leader. The human resource frame's emphasis is on the interdependence between people and the school, while it tries to develop the best fit between human skills, values, and needs with their formal roles and responsibilities required to accomplish the collective goals and purpose of the school district. In contrast, the structural frame's emphasis is on the goals and formal roles while developing organizational structures that best fit the school's intent and situational demands. I understand that at times the leadership will have to be top-down in an attempt to maintain structure. However, I feel people's feelings and attitudes need to be considered when making decisions and changes in a school.
Therefore, I will use a collaborative leadership and empowerment style to make decisions.

This collaborative leadership and empowerment in decision making will be a key factor in school improvement. According to Leithwood (1992), in order to have collaborative leadership, staff members need to talk, observe, critique, and plan together. As the principal, I will need to find time for the teachers to do this. This is important because I do feel schools need to be continuously looking for ways to improve. Throughout the administrative courses, we talked about educational transformation. This change is best brought about when starting with a common vision. As Fullan (1992) states, it is the principal who is responsible for making vision-building a collective exercise.

The staff needs to have a shared vision which they have developed. As Riley says in his book, *The Winner Within: A Life Plan for Team Players* (1993), "Leaders must get the team started thinking about the covenant, but they must let all members help build it." Then, the whole school needs to be focused on this goal and work as one collective unit to make the changes necessary to reach the goal.
Curriculum

One area which needs to continuously change will be the curriculum. I will be a firm believer that students learn best from integrated curriculums. Barb Harken, an English and social studies teacher from Denver, said "I have seen a greater retention of information from students who have taken my English 10 and World History integrated course, than from those students who took the classes separate" (personal communication, June 12, 1995). The difficulty with integrated curriculum is finding time for the teachers to sit down together and write it. "As many different subject areas as possible need to be involved in curriculum building. It may seem time consuming, but it really helps everyone to begin to see and think in terms of interconnections" (Drake, 1991, p.22). This will be a challenge for me to work out. Hopefully, I can find time during the school day or use phase three money to pay teachers for curriculum writing before and after school or during the summer.

While writing the curriculum, I think teachers need to take a serious look at the amount of topics they are going to cover. I feel we sometimes attempt to cover too much material. The topics get briefly
touched on and students do not have the chance to understand the material. Dempster (1993) stated that truly effective learning requires frequent distributed practice, and this can only be achieved by reducing the size of the existing curriculum, which is dangerously close to being full. I realize that I will not be an expert in all areas of curriculum. I will need to rely on the "experts" in each area to write quality curriculum and decide what should be covered in each class and at each grade level. My role will be to support their writing and answer their questions if I can or find someone who can, such as a consultant from the area education agency.

Professional Development

Professional development is another area where change should always be taking place. As a teacher, I was always striving for the perfect lesson. I looked for ways I could improve my teaching techniques in order to help students learn. As the principal, I will need to foster a supportive environment where all teachers are attempting to do this. Reitzug and Burrello (1995) discussed three ways to help build this environment: encourage justification of practice, provide alternative instructional frameworks, and
encourage risk-taking. I will have to let teachers know it is okay to teach using different methods as long as they can justify why they are using each one. I will also need to set-up quality staff development which gives teachers opportunities to learn new teaching strategies. Finally, I want to make sure they know it is acceptable to take risks. Even if something does not work, we can sit down and discuss why it did not work and what could be done differently the next time to make it work.

Teachers can also use portfolios to improve their teaching. "Teachers can prepare professional development portfolios and use the portfolio materials as a means to facilitate their learning and to improve their classroom practices" (Dietz, 1995, p. 40). The best way to get teachers to improve their teaching is through self-reflection. I will need to ask probing questions about what they thought of their lesson. Hopefully, allowing the teacher to bring up the areas which need to be improved on will make for a positive feedback conference. In order for this to occur, the teacher needs to feel comfortable with the evaluation process. As Dr. Decker stated, "The teacher needs to realize that I am trying to catch them doing something
right when I do a classroom visit" (personal communication, June 12, 1996). I feel if I stress this point, the teachers will not be defensive about me being in their classrooms, but they will want me to come and see what they are accomplishing. However, I know that not all teachers are going to see the need for improvement on their own. It will be my responsibility to work with these teachers to improve and, if need be, to terminate their contract. I think this will be the toughest, but one of the most important parts of my job. "Identifying, evaluating, remediating, and if necessary, discharging incompetent teachers, is critical to improving the instructional process in schools. It is also a process that is personally unpleasant, frustrating, and at times anguishing for school administrators" (Waintroob, 1995, p. 20).

Community Relations

On the opposite side will be the opportunity to work with the parents and community. Throughout the administrative courses, we discussed the importance of parent involvement in the school. Hamilton and Osborne (1994) suggested that when parents get involved in their child's education, it helps the student create
attitudes which are conducive to learning. Because student learning should be the major goal of the school district, it will be important to have good school and community relations which can best be accomplished through involvement. According to Crowson (1992), the three most effective means of parent participation or involvement are 1) direct approach by phone or in person, 2) parent-teacher conferences, and 3) work as a volunteer.

I will need to visit with community members and ask for their views on how the school is doing educating its students. I think it would also be important to set up a workshop at night for parents to come in and see what will be taught in the classes and how each teacher will be conducting their classes. "It is not enough to involve parents in school activities, we must give them opportunities to experience the curriculum" (Healey, 1994). However, I realize I will never be able to please all of the community members, but I must always be looking for ways to improve the school and community relations.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

My communication skills will serve me well as an administrator. As I have already discussed, I will be
able to communicate in a clear and understandable manner with all groups involved in a school district. The most important group will be the teaching staff. I will get to know them personally and attempt to communicate with the staff in person. At times, my role will be only to listen to teachers. They may have something upsetting to discuss or something exciting to share. Either way, I will listen intently and discuss the topic with them when they are finished sharing their ideas.

Secondly, I will be honest and trustworthy. I will tell people what I honestly think and feel. Sometimes that will be difficult but people need to know where I stand. I cannot afford to be a "fence walker." I need to be on one side or the other and not waver back and forth depending on who I am talking to. I will treat everyone the same and all situations the same. When I say I will do something, I will make sure I get it done on time and to the best of my ability. The principalship is a big job to be done all alone. I must have teachers who I can trust with responsibilities. The high school principal from Allison-Bristow, Dan Moore, said, "Always remember you do not get paid for what you do; you get paid for what
you are responsible for; you cannot do it all yourself" (personal communication, October 25, 1994).

Lastly, I will be a positive role model in the community. I was raised with sound morals and values. I am not going to change them. I feel our schools need to teach some morals. As Thomas and Roberts (1994) stated:

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The responsibility for teaching and demonstrating ethical judgment and behavior to children falls to all of us—it is not the responsibility of the family alone. As educators, we must remember the words of Theodore Roosevelt: To educate a person in mind and not morals is to educate a menace to society. (p. 35)
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I believe the best way to do this is by example and I plan on setting an excellent one.

CONCLUSION

When I look at why I chose to become a principal, what I learned in class, and my personal characteristics, I know I made the right choice. I feel prepared and ready for my first principalship. I realize I do not know everything but I am looking forward to the challenge of running a school. The opportunity to be the leader of a school district and a role model in the community is very exciting. There will be so many lives I will have the opportunity to
touch. I eagerly await the chance to make new friends and develop a good rapport with the members of the community. To help accomplish this, I will attempt to answer the three questions Dr. Else talked about which are asked in every relationship: "Do you really care about me personally? Can I trust you? Do you know what you are talking about?" (personal communication, January 29, 1997).

Answering these questions will not be easy. I will need to be honest and open with everyone I deal with. The staff, parents, students, and community must see me as someone they can come to with questions or comments. I will attempt to develop an atmosphere where everyone feels like they belong, including parents and community members. This will help to build a strong educational environment. "What children need more than anything is the chance to attach to adults who are meaningful and important to them" (O'Neil, 1997, p. 8).

I will also attempt to display the behaviors Sagor (1992) talked about for principals who make a difference. They endeavor to visit each classroom every day, practice active listening, and view teaching as an experimental science. There are so many topics
which I could list to be successful. But as long as I keep the best interest of the students' learning in mind when I make all decisions, I will do fine. It will be a very rewarding profession because of the opportunity to help so many students.
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