A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: a reflective essay

Laura K. Lawrence
University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©2002 Laura K. Lawrence
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, and the Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/1065

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: a reflective essay

Abstract
Principals need to look into the future and make changes that are needed to fit the needs and development of tomorrow's student. It is also important that principals remember to build a school community that continues to grow and not stay stagnant. The vision of a school is a continuous process that is built on dreams of the principal, staff, students, and people in the learning community. This process cannot stop. "Most important is that the leader continue not only to believe in the dream and the need to pursue it, but also to do the hard brain work of never doubting its importance" (Lyman, 2000. p. 32).
A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
And Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Certification

Of Secondary Principalship in Education

By

Laura K. Lawrence

May 2002
This Research Paper by: Laura K. Lawrence

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

This essay has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Certification for the Secondary Principalship in Education.

Dianna Engelbrecht
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson
Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner
Head, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Post-Secondary Education
The events of my educational life have clearly supported my desire to work in a school as an educational leader. I believe my philosophy for educational leadership developed through the early years of teaching, coaching, and working as a Program Coordinator in Hawaii. It was during this time that I first discovered what my role as an administrator could do to impact a school. The Director of the school became my mentor and offered many insightful philosophies in becoming a school leader. The one that stands out the most in my memory and my continued way of thinking is the wisdom she shared with me in a book by Robert Fulghum. The book is entitled, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. In that book the author states, “All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. These are the things I learned:

- Share everything.
- Play fair.
- Don’t hit people.
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
• Don’t take things that aren’t yours.
• Say you’re sorry when you hurt someone.
• Wash your hands before you eat.
• Flush.
• Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
• Live a balanced life- learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
• Take a nap every afternoon.
• When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together.
• Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the styrofoam cup: the roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.
• Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the styrofoam cup-they all die. So do we.
• And remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned-the biggest word of all-look.”

(Fulghum, 1988. pp. 6-7)

This wisdom has followed me in my varied roles in education. If you take any one of his items and infer them into our sophisticated adult terms for the life of a principal it holds true, clear, and firm. I feel my philosophy follows these terms and in this paper I will explain my vision of educational leadership utilizing the statements from the
Robert Fulghum's book and what I have come to learn about the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL).

Standard 1: Visionary Leadership

This standard shares the wisdom from Robert Fulghum's book in the statement, "and then remember the Dick-and- Jane books and the first word you learned-the biggest word of all-LOOK" (Fulghum, 1988. p.6). This ISSL standard describes a leader who values a vision that looks into the future and develops a school atmosphere in which learning is cherished and shared by the entire school community.

Communication is open and effective in order to develop a learning community where the vision and goals for student learning encompass the educational programs, plans, and actions.

In order for this to happen in a school building, I believe the principal has to model the core beliefs and vision to his/her stakeholders. It is so important for the principal to be the leader in terms of future goals for the school and commitment to making the school the best learning environment it can be. The vision needs to
impact all stakeholders in order to meet the needs of all students in
the enormous spectrum of education.

Principals also need to look into the future and make changes
that are needed to fit the needs and development of tomorrow’s
student. In reading Redefinition of High School: A Vision for Iowa,
the members of the Urban Education Network of Iowa, Inc.
collaborated in a document to discuss these very issues of what a high
school should look at in making changes for the 21st Century. The
document discusses important ideas like making larger schools into
smaller learning communities, prioritizing the need for building better
relationships amongst students, parents, and staff, and to look at the
need for a change in the organizational structure of the high school
building. The document strongly emphasizes the need to be a
visionary leader to enhance the educational community for all of those
involved.

It is also important that principals remember to build a school
community that continues to grow and not stay stagnant. As stated in
the book, How Do They Know You Care, the author writes, “A builder works from an idea to a design, understands the importance of a strong foundation, makes adjustments, and knows that finishing work requires time and attention to details” (Lyman, 2000. p.32). The vision of a school is a continuous process that is built on dreams of the principal, staff, students, and people in the learning community. This process cannot stop. “Most important is that the leader continue not only to believe in the dream and the need to pursue it but also to do the hard brain work of never doubting its importance” (Lyman, 2000. p. 32).

Living in the moment can stunt the growth of the entire school community. Principals need to know when change is needed to increase learning in their building. In his article, Poll states, “change is actually not such a bad thing. Change helps us to keep current with times. It motivates us to improve on previous processes. Change even encourages us to challenge ourselves” (Poll, 2000. p.15).

Reform is a part of building a school that is moving into the future.
There are new practices, students, and educational needs that a principal cannot ignore. In the book *Listening to Urban Kids*, the authors Wilson and Corbett wrote, "We contend that something else is missing in recipes for urban school reform: an underlying belief that all children can succeed and that it is the schools’ responsibility to ensure that this happens" (Wilson & Corbett, 2001. p.117).

The principal is the leader in the quest for future planning and students success. This needs to be a priority in establishing a twenty-first century learning environment. The Dick-and-Jane books shared an imaginary world, in which we all remember the dog running and playing and Dick and Jane exploring new adventures. Looking and exploring was fun and exciting, I believe a principal can make the future of a school fun, exciting, and important if they communicate, trust, evaluate, and most of all “look” at the present and the future.

**Standard 2: Instructional Leadership Performances**

This standard correlates to the wisdom of, “be aware of wonder” (Fulghum, 1988. p. 7). This ISSL standard describes a
leader who believes in the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a learning culture that is conducive for all who are a part of the school community. Learning is a life long process and everyone affiliated with the school should feel valued and respected in his/her commitment to learning. Diversity is looked upon as a challenge, not a hindrance. High expectations for learning are given to self, staff, and students and celebration occurs when at all possible.

According to the Webster’s Dictionary 1987, to wonder is to be curious or in doubt of. If a principal fosters an environment where learning is an adventure that is utilized to make oneself better, the school environment will be a successful place to grow. Students in the book Listening to Urban Kids, shared that they wanted teachers to make sure they did their work and that there weren’t any excuses for failure. The students wanted to be a part of the reform process in that they knew what was working and what wasn’t. They wanted teachers who pushed them to do better. Directly the students stated that, “They
wanted to spend their classroom time in the company of adults who were eager to help students without playing favorites, who were strict but nice and respectful, and who took the time to explain work clearly without becoming tediously repetitive" (Wilson & Corbett, 2001. p. 32). Utilizing what the students say in creating a trustworthy instructional environment where all can prosper allows the culture of high expectations to grow.

In the book *We Can Have Better Urban Schools*, the authors write, “We believe that discussions focusing on multiple intelligences, integrated curriculum, critical thinking, and understanding the children we teach help teachers develop, and sometimes remember, the attitudes that stress that fact that all students do learn” (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, Jeffries, 2000. p. 79). Involving the students and staff can allow trust amongst the learning community and allow the school to be organized and aligned for a variety of learning methods and abilities.
Not only do principals need to understand and include those stakeholders at the building level; they also need to collaborate with the state and district stakeholders in the curriculum processes. “If principals understand the functions at each level, they can provide effective leadership in their schools” (Glatthorn, 2000. p. 15). By role modeling the multilevel curriculum process in a positive manner, the principal can show building personnel that “everyone” has ownership in learning.

In order to have a safe and supportive school the principal needs to have a direct connection to the learning environment. Curriculum decisions need to be based on the expertise of his or her staff, research, and the recommendations of the learning professionals within the community. “Caring leadership builds a learning community that includes everyone involved with a school” (Lyman, 2000. p.11). “Knowledge is power. Fortified with knowledge of proven, effective classroom interventions, parents and teachers can take action to make their children’s school not only a safer place, but
also a more humane and more compassionate place” (Aronson, 2000. p. 19-20).

Learning needs to be meaningful and I want to be the kind of principal that incorporates the concerns from my stakeholders to create a learning environment that thrives on individuality and group work. “The issue of trust must become entwined with respect. We must place trust in our students’ abilities to discover some of their own connections for learning” (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, Jeffries, 2000. p.73).

Today we know more about how people learn and how important the role of technology is in promoting student learning and staff professional growth. I feel principals need to apply that information and those teaching techniques to the students and staff of the 21st Century. In a 2001 article, Polonoli states, “finding new methods to teach content in a manner that results in greater educational gains for students is the quest that all educators undertake.” The article also discusses the increased role that
technology plays in educating our twenty-first century students. In
order for this learning to occur some teachers must change their
approach to instruction if they are to integrate technology into their
classrooms.

By the principal playing a major role in instructional growth,
teachers as well as students, can create a positive atmosphere allowing
growth to occur for all. If we are to take our learning environments
into the next century we must allow our students and staff to
"wonder."

**Standard 3: Organizational Leadership**

I correlate this standard to the wisdom of Robert Fulghum's
book to "when you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold
hands, and stick together" (Fulghum, 1988. p.7). This ISSL standard
describes a leader who promotes the success of all of his/her students
by managing the organization, operations, and resources of the school.

The principal is to monitor the overall operations and
developments of the school. Collaborating with stakeholders in the
decision making process is a vital role the principal must take in order to create an environment where people trust one another. In the Redefinition of a High School: A Vision for Iowa (2001) authors Hogan and Determan from the Dubuque Community Schools write,

A successful high school leader will be able to do the following:

- mobilize the talents of staff to tackle tough problems
- leverage the dynamics of the system within which the group operates
- demonstrate leading as a learner, not an authoritarian
- develop a keen sense of self-awareness of personal and professional values. (Hogan & Determan, 2001. p. 12)

Creative risks should be taken to improve the schools growth process by including staff in the development of new and challenging tasks. Monroe (1997) writes in her book Nothings Impossible, that the first and foremost a school should “get a leader who is fearless (or perhaps crazy) enough to take well-educated risks. Fearless enough to enjoy taking a leap in to the void” (Monroe, 1997. p. 10).

Even though our world has changed dramatically over the past several years, chances are that if someone from long ago walked into a high school of today, he or she would recognize it as “the same old
high school.” Little has changed inside the walls of many schools. The construction of the building may look differently, but the programs, the traditions, and routines are still a strong part of today’s high schools. Principals need to look at not only the structure of the school but also the programs that are taking place within the walls and make sure the programs are effectively reaching all of the students.

The twenty-first century has also brought us to a world where school buildings are no longer the safe haven for students and staff. Principals of this generation have to look at the possible problems and issues relating to school safety and security on a much a higher level. Principals need to be aware of the schools architectural design for safety, the administrative practices and laws for discipline, the neighborhoods for which the school serves, and the behavioral characteristics/backgrounds of the students enrolled in the school.

Safety today encompasses so many different areas such as the many forms of harassment, the legal issues dealing with separation/divorce/child custody, and of course the day to day
occurrences of student/staff discipline. In a 2002 article, Woods discusses how important the statistics are in showing the harassment that occurs in a school building. She writes, “Schools need to find a middle ground between a casual, laissez-faire attitude toward harassment that may be legally defined as neglectful and an intractable zero tolerance policy that causes staff members to overreact to questionable behaviors and that discourages conversations about the topic” (Woods, 2002, p.23).

Principals cannot ignore the “cries” of their students, staff and parents. By following of the basic rules like crossing the street and watching out for others the principal can facilitate a place where decisions are used to enhance the learning and teaching world of their building.

Standard 4: Collaborative Leadership

I compare this standard to the wisdom of Robert Fulghum's “share everything”(Fulghum, 1988. p. 7). This ISSL standard describes a school administrator who promotes the success of all
students by collaborating with families and other community members. The principal also responds to the diverse community interests/needs and mobilizes community resources. Collaboration and communication with all the stakeholders plays an important role in the success of the entire school building.

The principal and the school benefit in the utilization of other professionals and families in his/her building, in his/her community, and in his/her professional circle. “A highly centralized hierarchical system of governance cannot meet students’ needs. Schools are where decisions should be made. Central office must turn the traditional management pyramid upside down and become an enabler rather than an enforcer” (McAdams, 2000, p. 122). In the book, We Can Have Better Urban Schools the author writes, “Restructuring cannot evolve if a top-down leadership style remains. That style conveys that inequality is acceptable—that there are superiors and subordinates” (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, Jeffries, 2000, p. 51).
In order to make changes that are in the best interest of all the learning community it is important to understand the process and rules of decision making. The principal can play a vital role in facilitating an environment where trust, respect, and listening are fostered. A principal can utilize the community resources to help solve problems and achieve goals. By the principal leading the way in this collaboration, not only are his/her staff going to benefit from the process, but also the students and their families.

Like McAdams (2000) again writes in his book *Fighting to Save Urban Schools and Winning*, "Yes, there was confusion at the beginning, but school communities became stakeholders in their shared decision-making systems and began to gain experience in self-management" (McAdams, 2000. p.26). With patience and time partnerships in this adventure can be very advantageous for the well being of the student, family, and the entire learning community.
In this process of collaboration, the principal must remember to include the voice of the “outer community” as so eloquently described in the book Fighting to Save Urban Schools...and Winning,

Urban school reformers everywhere must deal with public opinion, the media, state education agencies, business interests, teacher unions, organized labor, political parties, taxpayer groups, neighborhood interests discrimination and ethnic conflict, and the core educational issues of curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment, accountability, and management effectiveness. (McAdams, 2000. P. 248)

I believe this is where the challenge of collaboration emerges for an administrator. In the book, Nothings Impossible, the author states, “No leader can single-handedly make an institution better. The leader can inspire, articulate the dream, monitor and evaluate and tinker with the series of actions that make the dream happen, but the people actually live the dream and make it real” (Monroe, 1997. p. 140). None of us are capable of solving every problem that arises in the passage of growth.
Therefore, collaborating with other professionals in the school community will help enrich the ever-changing process of educating of the whole person. High visibility, active involvement, communication with the school stakeholders and the larger community are priorities that a principal must set high in order to run an efficient collaborative learning environment. Reaching out and working with others model the goals and visions for an atmosphere where “sharing everything” takes hard work and determination.

Standard 5: Ethical Leadership

This standard correlates to the wisdom of Robert Fulghum’s, “play fair, don’t hit people, put things back where you found them, don’t take things that aren’t yours, and say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody” (Fulghum, 1988. p. 6). This ISSL standard describes a school administrator as a leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

To be an effective principal I believe you have to have the ability to communicate clearly what you believe, what you expect,
where you have been, and where you want the school to go. The principal needs to be strong in what he or she believes is the best for their school and to be able to uphold the principles and standards that they put forth. In doing this, the principal also needs to accept the consequences for upholding their principles and actions that they have taken:

Unless the principal exhibits strong leadership qualities, the restructuring process can never really begin. The key words are strong leadership. Strong can also be defined as secure-if the principal is secure, grounded, not easily intimidated, he/she can readily adopt a leadership style that will propel the restructuring process. (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, Jeffries, 2000. p. 50)

The development of a caring school environment starts with the principal and should be fostered throughout the building by the administration. Treating people fairly, equitably, with dignity and respect can enable a school to appreciate the diversity of their learning environment and encourage a safe and tolerant school. “How connected youngsters feel at school is an important factor in

The principal can be the role model for ethical ways to deal with important issues that arise in the school day. By appreciating and being sensitive to the wide diversity of the school community, the principal can teach students and staff to be cooperative, tolerant, and accepting of differences. In 2000 an article by Frankfurt states,

One of the most controversial diversity issues faced by school communities over the past few years has been addressing the increasingly greater number of students who are coming out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. (Frankfurt, 2000, p.64)

Being uneducated and uncomfortable with sensitive issues is not an option for principals of today’s schools. Understanding the needs of a diverse student body and staff are so important in making the best ethical decisions for the school community. Building a better world can start at the school door.

Legal and educational structural issues also must be considered in order to operate, control, and manage the schools. Daily, principals
need to protect the rights and confidentiality of each student and staff. Finding the balance between maintaining order and safety in the school environment without trampling on the constitutional rights and property interest of students and teachers is a challenge in itself. By updating oneself on the American public school laws, a principal can demonstrate to the stakeholders that he/she values the rights of all school members and strives to play fair, keep order, be honest, and apologize when needed.

Standard 6: Political Leadership

I see this standard in the wisdom of Robert Fulghum's statement of, "live a balanced life-learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some" (Fulghum, 1988. p. 6). This ISSL standard describes an administrator as the educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.
The national mandate to increase students' capabilities in the process to succeed in school as lifelong learners, employees in a global marketplace, and contributing citizens has brought principals and teachers under intense pressure. Schools are asked on a regular basis to change their testing strategies, their teaching styles, and responsibilities in order to create the perfect environment for all. The schools are expected to meet the needs of students' multiple intelligence, diverse cultural backgrounds, and varying challenges and abilities. In order for this to happen, principals need to be communicating with school communities concerning trends, issues, and potential changes in the environment in which the school operates.

In the article, The Principal as Political Leader, the authors Howe and Townsend write,

Principals must be skilled in dealing with a range of people, issues, and forces that are represented by individuals, by factions with single agenda interests, and by groups focused upon some specific cause that is at cross-purposes with the school. These individuals and groups have a need to bring pressure upon the
school and upon those who block, ignore, or interfere with their cause. (2000, p. 11)

By adopting a proactive approach in working with the public the principal will be well informed about issues that have the potential to divide a school community.

The principal needs to be an active member in the policy-making procedures and in staying up to date with the changes that occur within their own school community and beyond. It is important to remember when looking at school reform and change that the school environment is influenced on behalf of the students, parents, and staff. “Policy makers frequently rush in with half-baked solutions in their zeal to be seen as doing something. The solutions might seem sensible on the surface, but in reality they do not have much chance of working” (Aronson, 2000. p.177). I do not want to be the type of principal that puts programs into effect just so we are “doing something.” I want to make decisions based on facts, data, and information that will drive our school into the future.
Living a balanced life can allow a principal to maintain a school that is well adjusted in serving their students and staff through the political turmoil that is an ever-growing part of public school. Being a prepared principal can only enhance the chances of making the best decisions for his/her stakeholders.

Conclusion

Some may say that getting your basic philosophy from a kindergarten credo is not sufficient enough for work in a secondary building. But I believe it is. The credo shows how human relations can influence the beliefs and attitudes of those working in the school system to help themselves and others in achieving high standards. These standards are not only the academic standards that we all assume schools will develop, but also the standards of human nature. By fostering these standards in a school building the stakeholders can collaborate amongst all members to mold better citizens of today.

If a principal operates a building in a manner that is below the human standard, the building may not survive. If a principal takes the
belief that we are all created individually and should have our basic needs met, the building could thrive.

I believe it is important to be the kind of principal that looks at the whole person. Administrators and teachers may not be able to do anything about improving a student's home life, but there is much we can do to improve what happens to them inside the school walls.

Compassionate leaders strive to uncover why individuals behave and perform as they do; however, leaders do not excuse student behavior or achievement on the basis of this knowledge. Rather they help the student to view the influencing factors as motivation to improve performance. By this leadership relationships grow and positive performances increase.

The six ISSL standards can serve as a guide in the difficult task of running a building in a way that fosters the successful development of staff, students, parents, and community members. The kindergarten credo can serve as a positive option for leaders to
enhance the way they operate their building in making it a “safe home” for all who enter it.
References


