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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

Quality administrative leadership is a major component of the successful education of our future. Leaders have the responsibility to identify trends and patterns to plan for the future. "With these demographic changes inevitably come cultural changes that we must confront and accommodate" (James, 1997, p. 22). The traditional methods of instruction and leadership no longer meet the needs society has placed upon the educational system. There are three questions that leaders must be able to answer: (a) What is in our future?, (b) What skills will we need?, (c) What do we need to get there? These three questions allow leaders to form a vision which must be effectively communicated and implemented within their educational system. Successful leaders demonstrate skills that develop and implement change for a better tomorrow.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Master of Arts in Education

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By

Ryan J. Lewis

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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of  
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Throughout history the importance of an education has changed. Only a few years ago, one could find a job to make a living without even graduating from high school. In today's society that is not necessarily true. Employers are demanding their workers to have more skills than ever before. Society has evolved rapidly with the development of new technology. In addition to the basics such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, workers need specialized skills to do their jobs. Consequently, schools have been influenced to change to meet these needs.

The meaning of the word education within the school setting has been ever evolving. No longer are teachers able to teach just the basics such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. During a school day, time is also spent on developing social skills, which is a tremendous task. Children are not receiving the same care and attention at home due to a variety of contributing factors. Due to economic changes, nuclear families are the exception rather than the rule. Mothers and fathers are both working to support the family, thus leaving less time spent together. Conflicting schedules reduce family time even further allowing issues to go unnoticed that need attention. Relationships need time to develop strong bonds. This time is not made available for many children and their parents. Children need the support and guidance of their parents for the sole purpose of fulfilling their basic need of being loved.

With 50 percent of American children living in something other than a married-couple family with both biological parents present, and with the tremendous variety of male and female responsibilities in today's different families, the time for abstract pronouncements about good or bad family structures and correct or incorrect parental roles is past. How a family functions is more important than its structure or its formal roles. (Coontz, 1997, p. 157)

There are many issues that impact the philosophy and decision making process of an educational leader. Beyond the development of curriculum and technological advancement, educational leaders are responsible for people. Demonstrated in their leadership are advanced skills in communication, conflict resolution, evaluation, and professional growth.

### Curriculum

Curriculum will be developed to meet these challenges presented by society. "The relationship between schools and society is characterized by three roles reflecting philosophical viewpoints of reproduction, readjustment, and reconstruction" (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 177). Schools attempt to preserve culture while also looking to improve it. When cultural changes develop, readjustment must take place whether or not the schools were responsible.

"Besides the pressure from business and government, schools are being affected by social forces: increasing immigration, that brings many cultures and languages into the classroom, environmental pressures, drugs and alcohol, ongoing poverty, and increasing violence among children" (Erickson, 2001, p. 8). Changes in

today's society have brought the role of reconstruction into the forefront. Schools are becoming more proactive in promoting programs that will affect students in a positive manner. Reconstruction works to better society by reducing problematic areas in student development.

Therefore, the primary purpose of school has been to develop students that will have a positive impact on society. Through these positive influences, society will become more stable. Productivity will improve, while less time is spent correcting and more time on the process of improvement. Admittedly, this is not an easy task to accomplish. Only through commitment, dedication, and hard work are these ideas attainable.

Effective educational leadership creates a school environment that can develop students and staff to be contributing members of society. This is not a simple task for the profession of education. Teachers are ultimately as responsible for the end product as the administration; however, it is the leadership of the administration that creates the vision to be reached. "It is especially important for the principal to work closely and collaboratively with district leadership in the ways indicated rather than acting independently" (Glatthorn, 2000, p. 149). Action alone as a teacher or an administrator will not get very far in the grand scheme of things. The concerted effort of many is much more than the work of a few. How to develop the correct vision depends entirely on its constituent population and resources available.

Children's needs must be evaluated and curriculum developed to meet the challenge. Educational leaders meet this need through effective leadership and communication. In many ways, the advancement in technology has improved this process while also instituting additional issues that must be considered.

### Technological Advancement

Education continues to add to its curriculum by attempting to keep up with technology. "Technology can and does matter, but it is highly dependent upon the context in which it is used" (Latham, 1999, p. 87). New and better products are continually being developed to do a task faster and better. Students must have exposure to these developments because of the possible implications on their lives. Technology has also created new developments in education by providing the resources to do things never dreamed possible. Computers are a tremendous resource for students to use to enhance their learning. Projects are being created all over the world by students and shared over the internet. Communication has become easier with distant places using email and the World Wide Web. Better resources and communication provide opportunities for the creation of new ideas. "Significantly improved test scores, a high level of student excitement, and renewed staff enthusiasm are the results of a successful technology program" (Conyers, Kappel, & Rooney, 1999, p. 82).

Ultimately, education must overcome any obstacles that society presents. Yes, the family has changed and it has affected the children attending school, and



new technology has presented a challenge. These are the aspects in which society has affected the education provided by our schools and its curriculum.

### Leadership

Educational administration's most important role is leadership. Principals provide a vision for their building. They are role models for students and staff. Many long hours are spent problem solving a variety of dilemmas. Administrators are also held accountable for student achievement. "Leadership is more than a set of skills: it relies on a number of subtle personal qualities that are hard to see but are very powerful. "These include things like enthusiasm, integrity, courage, and humility" (Daft, 2002, p. 19). Possessing these kinds of characteristics allow leaders to interact with people successfully. The job description of an administrator includes many tedious tasks which require various skills; however, none of them are any more important than the ability to communicate with people. Education is about providing everyone the opportunity to be successful in society. Educational leaders use their best personality traits to improve the education provided by their building and staff. Knowledge of themselves and others within their environment is essential.

Successful leaders know themselves well and work at getting to know others in a similar manner. "As a leader, the most important earthly relationship you can cultivate is your relationship with yourself" (Blanchard, 1999, p. 152). There is no question that an administrative position brings stress. The ability to

handle the most difficult of circumstances depends upon the knowledge and values one has and recognizes. This kind of knowledge comes from careful reflection with one's self and personal friends. Individuals desiring a position containing leadership responsibilities must carefully prioritize those ideals that one holds in highest regard. These values must not be compromised since they determine the type of leader one would like achieve. The vision of a leader is based on the values they have and would like to pass on to others. Without knowing one's personal values there will not be a clear vision. Lack of vision leads to ineffective leadership and effective leadership determines the length of the leadership experience.

Administrators within the educational setting have the perfect opportunity to use leadership skills to positively affect society. "Leadership is found in a person's ability to move an organization from state A to state B, that is to higher level of performance" (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 5). The ultimate task for a leader is to get work done through other people rather than operating alone. When people are actively involved in a project they tend to take ownership and pride in their work. There is no better feeling than being a part of a success story. Working together creates strong ties and better communication among staff.

### Communication

Communication is a key to effective educational administration. Stimulating open lines of communication allows an administrator to maintain a

broader knowledge base of building and community issues. This type of knowledge allows for proactive decision making and planning rather than reactive. It is important to communicate to the public and staff members the decision making process and the facts used to make decisions within a building or district. Whether or not community and staff members agree on those decisions made may not be the most important issue. Decisions should be based on what is best for the students. People in general are more willing to accept initiatives after they have been given the opportunity to introduce their ideas, and have been kept informed regarding all the available information. Anytime an individual feels they have been left in the dark they become more defensive and difficult the next time a situation arises. By maintaining an open door policy, truly listening to concerns, and providing all available information will create a more positive environment for staff members and students. "Leadership means communicating with others in such a way that they are influenced and motivated to perform actions that further common goals and lead toward desired outcomes" (Daft, 2002, p. 317).

Ultimately, students will benefit from satisfied community and staff members who will carry that positive attitude over to their home environments.

Educators have the responsibility to inform the public what it takes to do the job of educating children right. The public must hear that in order to have effective public education we need their support. People will only gain a greater appreciation of the accomplishments teachers achieve in their classrooms when

they see the effort and reasoning behind classroom instruction. Teachers cannot do the job children deserve most effectively without community support. Schools need volunteers in the classrooms to assist teachers in reaching all students, which may include their very own children. Schools must educate their communities as well as their students in order to become more effective learning communities. Parents and community members will not recognize the need on their own and come to the aide of the schools without knowing what to do or how to do it.

In order for schools and communities to cooperate for better education for all students everyone must do their part. Schools must improve lines of communication with all community members, not just parents. Public promotion of school activities both large and small is essential. Celebrate successes and accomplishments of students and staff with the public. Let your school be a place where all community members feel welcome to participate and proud to send their children. Communities will rally behind their schools when they know their efforts and opinions are valued in order to provide the best education for their children.

### Conflict Resolution

In the event that an unpleasant situation arises it is essential to remember conflict resolution skills appropriate for administrative action. Conflicts will happen despite measures put in place to prevent these occurrences. It is important to identify the real source of conflict. After identifying the conflict, evaluation of

the diverse perspectives causing the friction determines the options available.

Upon selecting an option it is time to implement and evaluate the decisions made.

Learn from each decision and its evaluation. Experience is a tremendous source of knowledge. Never assume that one knows too much about any given subject.

There is always more to learn and skills to attain which will improve performance.

The profession of elementary administration continues to be challenging. In becoming an effective administrator, one's commitment, dedication, and hard work must never cease. Positive results will arise from developing open lines of communication and refining conflict resolution skills. "A profession is defined not by the business a person is in but by the way that person does his or her business" (Wong & Wong, 1991, p. 293). What other profession can have a more influential impact on society? Educational administrators have the opportunity to make changes and lead the future in a positive and productive direction. Practical evaluation of staff and instruction enhance this opportunity.

### Practical Evaluation

Teacher evaluation is an essential part in creating the best educational experience for our students. "Because teaching is complex, it is helpful to have a road map through the territory, structured around a shared understanding of teaching" (Danielson, 1996, p. 2). Improved student achievement cannot be achieved without improved instruction from the teachers providing it. "Emerging

teachers enter their first years of teaching with sound theoretical knowledge, but little practical skill” (Wasley, 1999, p. 13). Therefore, the goal for teacher evaluation should reflect the need for improved instruction resulting in higher student achievement.

In order to effectively assess teacher performance, a model must be developed or adopted and implemented within a district for administrators and faculty to follow. As Donald Haefele (1993) points out, “a clear sense of purpose should govern the design of a teacher evaluation system” (Danielson & McGreal, 2000, p. 9). The model should describe the districts expectations for its teachers and their performance. Teachers are as much a part of the process as their administrators since they are the people ultimately responsible for implementing instruction. The teachers have the most direct impact in improving student achievement. The process itself should not be overwhelming for teachers or administrators. The model has been developed to assess the teacher in their instructional strategies and to provide steps for professional growth.

After reading the research and combining it with my own personal experiences, it is my belief that evaluation needs to be taken more seriously in order to be effective. “Teachers have an enormous responsibility to send children soaring off to self-confident and enthusiastic learning” (Wasley, 1999, p. 9). Typically, observations are done just to meet requirements and corners are cut along the way. Many times no real thought is put into the evaluation. Teachers

often put on a performance just for the observation, which does not reflect their typical classroom environment or teaching strategies. The process of evaluation should be less intimidating for the teacher and more efficient for the evaluator. The relationship an administrator has with the staff sets the tone of the evaluation process.

Developing that relationship begins with building trust. Most staff members feel more comfortable when there are open lines of communication. Expectations must be clearly defined for all staff members to comprehend what they will be held accountable for. The description of expectations should reflect effective educational practice. These outlined methods will provide examples of what an effective classroom would look like for each category. This would be most helpful for new teachers entering into the profession as well as those just entering into the district. Teachers could model their instruction to meet the standards of the district, which should also be aligned with strategies that improve student achievement. "All good performance starts with clear goals" (Blanchard, 1999, p. 70) Therefore, educators must continue their learning through the development of a professional growth plan.

### Professional Growth

The most crucial part of the evaluation process is the component pertaining to professional growth. During the post conference, which will be lead by the teacher and facilitated by the administrator, goals will be developed to

improve instructional performance. Steps will be outlined in order to achieve that goal. The number of goals will directly relate to the level of the teacher. Goals should be achievable and manageable. "School districts have primary responsibility for providing the resources – time, money, personnel, and materials – that a school needs to implement programs and instructional practices through professional development activities" (Speck, 1999, p. 161).

It is important for teachers to feel successful as well. Incorporated into the action plans, mentoring could be involved. Teachers found to demonstrate high levels of performance could be an asset to teachers needing assistance. They could also play a more active role in that teacher's development. No matter what method is used to construct a professional growth plan (portfolio, professional improvement commitment, etc.) administrators must follow up. "The key to developing people is to catch them doing something right" (Blanchard & Johnson, 1982, p. 40). Most teachers will go that extra step if they know they will be recognized and complemented for their work.

Evaluation should be a manageable task that leads to professional growth and improved student achievement. "Individual teachers learn from their experience all the time, but there is no mechanism for them to share what they've learned with the profession as a whole" (Willis, 2002, p. 9). Time is too precious to waste on poor evaluation practices. Administrators and teachers need to use their time effectively in order to meet the needs of the district. The evaluation



process is intended to enhance the system of education and its effectiveness, not to break it down. Educators are responsible for providing the best education possible for the students in their communities. “Even the best professional development may fail to create meaningful and lasting changes in teaching and learning – unless teachers engage in ongoing professional dialogue to develop a reflective school community” (Routman, 2002, p. 32). The ultimate goal is improved performance by all.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, education is the key to the success of our society. Without the education provided by school districts across the nation there would be no or very little technological and social advancement. Schools must not only teach basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also social skills. This combination creates students who can be positive contributing members to society. Educators are essential in creating an environment where optimal learning can take place. Students must be actively engaged in their learning to become life-long learners and successful community members. This heavy burden falls upon our society as well as the educators within the system.

Quality administrative leadership is a major component of the successful education of our future. Everyone has the ability to recognize the ever changing demographic. Leaders have the responsibility to identify trends and patterns to plan for the future. “With these demographic changes inevitably come cultural

changes that we must confront and accommodate” (James, 1997, p. 22). The traditional methods of instruction and leadership no longer meet the needs society has placed upon the educational system. There are three questions that leaders must be able to answer: (a) What is in our future?, (b) What skills will we need?, (c) What do we need to get there? These three questions allow leaders to form a vision which must be effectively communicated and implemented within their educational system. Successful leaders demonstrate skills that develop and implement change for a better tomorrow.

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