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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

Society will continue to change, and schools will have to meet the challenges of those changes. To meet these challenges, it will be vital to keep abreast of innovations and current trends in education. Motivating teachers to examine and reflect upon their teaching, and empowering them to implement their ideas and programs will be keys to a successful school.

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A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership,

Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Lisa C. Loecher

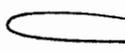
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This Research Paper by: Lisa C. Loecher

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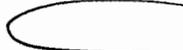
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A parent walks into the office and demands that a popular book in the library be removed because she feels the material is inappropriate. A concerned citizen calls to inform the school that there are three students smoking behind the building. The superintendent has informed me that basic skills scores have fallen and wants my input on why. The janitor would like to know what is being done to prevent the mud on the playground from being tracked inside the school. Susie Smackum and Martha Lefthanded were sent to the office for fighting in homeroom. A student has reported her coat stolen from her locker and suspects May I have it as taking it. At ten o'clock I need to be at the courthouse to testify in a child abuse case, and at the end of the day I must inform an excellent teacher that he will be released from his contract due to staff reduction while a "dead beat" teacher refuses to try anything new.

I look at the above incidents which are often the realities of the principalship and truly wonder "Why would anyone desire this position?" But then I read of principals like Deborah Meier, who succeeded in transforming some of New York's public schools into places where children and teachers participate actively in learning (Goldberg, 1992); and Harold Borden, whose leadership style of empowering teachers produced huge gains in school morale and school achievement (Wilkins, 1996). They have inspired their faculty, students, and community to become advocates of education.

As I begin this phase of my career, I need to envision the role of leadership. How does one prepare for the many challenges that a principal will face? It is my intent in this paper to share my motivation and beliefs in the purpose of the

principalship and discuss leadership, the principal as a communicator, an instructional leader, and a manager.

#### Motivation

When I was growing up, my mother would put quotes on our refrigerator, as she said, "to keep our lives in perspective." One quote by Oliver Wendell Holmes (as cited in Covey, 1989) has stayed with me: "What lies behind us, and what lies before us, are tiny matters compared to what lies within us" (p.96). Through my reflection of what lies within me, I find a belief that I can make a difference.

I believe to be an effective leader one must come to understand who one is, and what one truly believes. This foundation will assist me in making difficult decisions that I will make as a principal.

As I watch my three-year-old son's endless desire to learn about himself and the world around him, I ask myself, What can I do as a principal that will create an environment that encourages all children to want to learn? I believe it is providing an environment that helps kids learn to be powerful people and a place where they can learn to use their minds. Enabling children to be incurable optimists, believing they can do anything, is my commitment for them.

People should enter the principalship to make a difference in children's lives, not for higher earnings, increased status, or because they simply need a change. Our kids are our future and deserve an unselfish commitment from their leaders. As Arlene Blum (as cited in Kouzes & Posner, 1995) states, "The greatest rewards come only from the greatest commitment" (p. 3).

Positive and productive leadership gives way to the purpose of education. Clyde (as cited in Hodgkinson, 1991a) best relates the purpose of education when he stated:

Education is not the art of training and subjugating people to serve the profit of others. It is the art of helping people to know themselves, to develop the resources of judgment and skills of learning and the senses of values needed on facing a future of unpredictable change, to understand the rights and responsibilities of adults in a democratic society and to exercise the greatest possible degree of control over their own fate...(p.29)

It must be my mission as a principal to ensure that we are enabling our students with skills that will make them successful in an ever-changing world.

#### Leadership

Kouzes and Posner (1995) view leadership opportunities as "voyages of discovery and adventures of a lifetime. They're challenging explorations under vigorous conditions that require pioneering spirit" (p.49).

Educational leaders are pioneers. As a leader I must take risks, probe uncharted areas, and have committed followers who share in my beliefs and goals. I must realize I cannot make changes alone. It takes a group effort and ownership to make positive things happen. Lo Tzu's "The Reward" (as cited in Hider, 1985) sums up this view perfectly in stating:

The wise leader is not collecting a string of successes. The leader is helping others to find their own success. There is plenty to go around. Sharing success with others is very successful.

The single principle behind all creation teaches us that true benefit blesses everyone and diminishes no one. (p.161)

What qualities, then, must I demonstrate if I want others to "get on board" and commit themselves freely to action? According to Kouzes and Posner (1993) people look for and admire leaders who are honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent. I would also add "compassionate" and "empathetic". These qualities build the foundation of a leader's credibility. Earning credibility as a leader will take time. I will need to question what I believe, evaluate my competency in the areas of administration, and determine the level of confidence I possess to know the level of commitment I will be able to make.

Through defining my values I will know what to do and what not to do. My conduct and decision-making will be consistent with my values, and over time the staff will recognize my core beliefs and realize on certain issues I will not waiver.

Competency in different areas of administration will enhance my credibility. The knowledge base I will take with me after graduating from this program will be a foundation for the skills needed as an educational administrator. I realize I must dedicate myself to learning and improving. If I fail to keep abreast of new knowledge and techniques, the credibility I will have earned over time will be threatened.

#### Communication

I must be able to communicate my values, beliefs, and vision to others. To be an effective communicator I must use a give-and-take process. I must be able to receive information and interpret it in the intent that it was given, and then respond appropriately to convey the message was understood. Modeling behaviors and

expectations is the most important type of communication. I must lead by example. If I expect the teachers to provide a positive and supportive atmosphere for the students, then I must provide a positive and supportive atmosphere for the staff. Effective use of praise can help create a positive atmosphere, enable people to resolve conflicts, and create a sense of willingness among teachers, students, and administration to work collaboratively towards a common goal.

In addition to modeling as an effective communication tool, the principal must be able to: (1) write clearly and concisely so that the message is understood by the intended audience; (2) utilize basic facts and data, and recognize values when communicating priorities; (3) demonstrate skills in nonverbal communication, including personal impact, to communicate a positive image of the school; and (4) use current technologies to communicate the school's philosophy, mission, needs, and accomplishments (National Association of Elementary School Principals[NAESP],1991). I believe the principal must also be able to listen to and encourage staff, students, parents, and community members. A kind smile or a simple "nice job" can make a tremendous difference to the recipient and the observer.

Communicating one's expectations to one's staff, students, parents, and community is of great importance. These expectations need to be constantly reinforced through repetition, clarification and consistency (Blase & Kirby, 1992). What a principal does on a regular basis over time, will over time become the most important thing in the school (D. Else, personal communication, January 15, 1997).

The cleanliness of the school, the conditions of the classrooms, the maintenance of facilities, and how we treat people when they come to our school, relay a strong message to the public about the expectations within the school community. This form of communication should not be underestimated.

#### Instructional Leader

"Good leadership consists of motivating people to their highest levels by offering them opportunities not obligations. That is how things happen naturally. Life is an opportunity not an obligation" (Hider, 1985, p. 135).

I believe in order to be a successful leader one must practice shared leadership. People are willing to commit time and energy to projects that they feel are important. A leader provides his/her staff with opportunities to grow and develop as professionals. When people are treated with respect, positive things happen.

Rossow (1990) shows at least seven variables which are related to school effectiveness: (1) "high expectations for student success, (2) a safe and orderly environment, (3) a clear and focused mission, (4) strong leadership, (5) monitoring student progress, (6) staff training, and (7) site-based instruction decisions" (p.6). These variables are important in the development of students and the principal needs to work within the school climate to ensure positive student outcomes.

As an instructional leader, I will have to concentrate on four areas: (1) curriculum (what teachers are to teach and what students are to learn); (2) instruction (atmosphere and experiences used by the teacher to provide opportunities of success for all students); (3) staff development (opportunities

for participation in professional and personal growth); and (4) supervision and evaluation of teacher and student performance based on the school's mission and expectations (Hughes & Ubben, 1994, p.5). Each of these areas provides an opportunity for collaboration and ownership among the staff.

### Curriculum and Instruction

There has been much discussion recently on what should be taught in schools. Many believe that we need to "throw out" the "frill" courses of guidance, music, and art and concentrate strictly on the three R's. Others emphasize the need for a "hands-on" approach to learning that allows students to experience the "real world." I believe that if a school is going to be successful, the following areas need to be found in the curriculum: (1) a strong foundation in the fundamental skills of reading, writing, and mathematics; and acquiring basic knowledge and understanding in science, social studies, fine arts, health and physical education; (2) an emphasis on communication: speaking, listening, reading and writing, and being users of technology as a means of communication; and (3) development of a sense of self-worth and a respect and appreciation of the diversity of others (NAESP, 1991, p.10).

There also has been much discussion on how students should acquire knowledge and skills necessary for the real world. I believe the curriculum must possess brain-based learning. We need to get away from the "more is better" theory and subscribe to the "less is more" principle. Students may be exposed to less in brain-based learning but hopefully learning experiences will be more in-depth and of better quality. We must integrate academic disciplines such as history with language arts, and science with

math. We need to allow students to think and discuss their ideas with different people, and work in groups as well as on their own. I believe if we want students to use their minds well and prepare them to live productive, socially useful, and personally satisfying lives, we must have a curriculum designed to reinforce the connection between "school" knowledge and "real world" knowledge.

### Staff Development

Ernest Boyer (as cited in Sparks 1984) stated: "The only way we're going to get from where we are to where we want to be is through staff development...When you talk about school improvement, you're talking about people improvement. That's the only way to improve schools" (p.35).

The principal as staff developer is a critical part of the concept of the principal as an instructional leader. As a principal I must take an active role in my responsibilities of developing staff to ensure that meaningful school improvement takes place.

If staff development is about changing practices and beliefs, the vision to guide and motivate people within the school must grow out of their needs, hopes, and dreams. Staff needs to be involved in the creation of the school's vision. This participation of staff allows for "ownership" of the vision and the strategies for change.

As a principal, I must also provide a climate that is conducive to staff development. I must allow my staff opportunities for the freedom, collegial collaboration, and experimentation which foster school improvement.

The first step in creating a positive climate is providing empowerment for the teaching staff. Empowerment has been defined as "the degree to which the opportunity to use power effectively is granted or withheld from individuals" (Kanter, 1983, p. 18).

The benefits of empowerment upon individual motivation and performance have been acknowledged both within and outside of education. Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1983) found that organizations with a history of successful innovation aroused the desire to act among employees by providing them with the freedom to act. An analysis of research on excellent schools concluded that teachers within those schools enjoyed a great deal of freedom and autonomy (Sergiovanni, 1991).

The ultimate goal of staff development is to develop thoughtful professionals who have the ability to assess and revise their own actions in order to improve the success of their students. Challenging teachers to discuss the whys and hows of what they do is an effective way of developing their ability to think abstractly. If I am going to be an effective agent of change, I must make an ongoing commitment to ensure that this type of discussion happens on a continuous basis.

#### Supervision and Evaluation

My role as a principal will be critical in shaping the conditions in a school. A successful teacher evaluation program is not easy to implement. It will require thoughtful planning and continuous monitoring if it is to achieve what is sets out to achieve: increased teacher effectiveness.

In order for effective change to occur, there must be collaboration between teachers and principals. Goldhammer (as cited in Pajak, 1993) expressed this best when he stated:

Supervision ought to increase teachers' willingness and ability to supervise themselves and their colleagues. The relationship between teacher and supervisor, therefore, should be characterized by empathy and supportiveness for the purpose of promoting self-awareness and independence in schools, along with "a community of spirit and of enterprise" with others. (p. 27)

Clinical supervision aims toward collaborative assessment. It provides opportunities for verbal interaction between teacher and principal and enables the principal to become a coach whose function is to assist the teacher however possible in accomplishing his/her own goals. The use of this model allows the teacher to have control over his/her direction as an educator.

It will be important for me to convey to staff that my purpose for evaluation is to help them improve as educators. Recognizing behaviors, setting goals, and providing opportunities for self-growth are all ways that I can help teachers improve in the classroom.

It will be equally important for me to evaluate myself as a supervisor. I will need to explore my strengths and weaknesses, establish my goals, and recognize my own behaviors. These steps will allow me to continually grow as a principal.

#### Management

How I perform my role as a manager will have a great impact on the school's effectiveness. As an administrator, I must maintain a high level of consistency and manifest policies that are in place and will guide daily operations. This will help maintain a stable environment within a school that allows other aspects of the school to change in an unfrenzied manner.

Part of being an effective manager will be my ability to deal with routine matters in fair, efficient ways; to provide appropriate materials that will enhance the learning of students and teachers; to hire competent teachers that are willing to do what's best for kids; and to create a safe and orderly environment where kids are ready to learn. These are all demands that can consume a great amount of time and energy.

Hughes and Ubben (1997) define a *principal* as a person and the *principalship* as a collection of important tasks and responsibilities that must be carried out in order for the goals of the school to be efficiently achieved" (p.10). As an effective manager, I will need to involve my staff in certain areas of management by matching their skills and interests with tasks that need to be addressed to ensure an orderly and efficient school environment. Knowing when to involve staff in the management process is an important skill learned through experience. As a principal I must work to involve staff in meaningful ways and ensure that authority be given to those with ability.

Being a manager today means knowing where to find helpful information. Knowledge and the use of computers in the areas of budgeting, class scheduling, student data, record keeping, and accounting are valuable to the principal as well as office personnel.

As a principal, it will be my responsibility to establish the procedures, within the guidelines set by the district and the law, under which the record keeping and budgeting processes are carried out. I believe it is important to include staff in the budgeting process. This gives them the ability to make decisions that will affect them directly.

The role of the principal should not be taken lightly.

Failure to properly manage a school is more likely to get you fired as a principal than poor instructional leadership (B.Decker, personal communication, June 25, 1996).

#### Closing Thoughts

"Keeping things in perspective" will be important in my role as a leader. The book, Leading with Soul by Bolman and Deal (1995), provides an inspiring look at the importance of knowing one's soul and how this knowledge can bring effective change in others' lives. I believe they found the essence of what leadership is about when they wrote:

Your quest as a leader is a journey to find the treasure of your true self, and then [to return] home to give your gift to help transform the kingdom--and in the process your own life... Authorship, love, power, and significance are not the only gifts that leaders offer. Any gifts will work, so long as they affirm the fundamental moral percepts of compassion and justice. Fused with soul and spirit, gifts form the cornerstones of a purposeful and passionate community.

(p.102)

Society will continue to change, and schools will have to meet the challenges of those changes. To meet these challenges, it will be vital for me to keep abreast of innovations and current trends in education. I must continually examine and reflect upon my leadership.

What "lies within" those who are involved with children will determine the child's future. Motivating teachers to examine and reflect upon their teaching, and empowering them to implement their ideas and programs will be keys to a successful school.

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