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A personal vision for quality leadership in elementary schools : a reflective essay

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Abstract

It is my belief that the future lies in our children. It is our mission as educators to help guide children to become citizens of the 21st century who appreciate and understand themselves and others, are life-long learners, are globally oriented, and are skilled in creative and critical thinking. Five areas stand out as the benchmarks of an effective administrator. Those five areas being: a clear and well defined vision; leadership style; supervision of curriculum and instruction; school climate; and school and community relations. It is these five areas that will be the focus of my reflective essay.

A PERSONAL VISION FOR QUALITY LEADERSHIP IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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As I begin my reflective essay, I feel it is important to look back at my perceptions of school principals prior to my entrance into the Educational Administration Program. I think what stands out most is the positive attitudes and ease with which the principals carried out their daily responsibilities. As a child I thought that the principal sat in the lounge drinking coffee with the counselor all day and I knew that he was the one person in the school that I never wanted to know on a personal basis. As I grew older, I began to recognize that the principal was responsible for a wide variety of tasks and was there to help both the students and the faculty.

As I reach the end of my program, I now know how fortunate I was to have had Dr. James Doud as my elementary principal and Dr. James Albrecht as my secondary school principal. Without my knowing it at the time, both of these men demonstrated strong interpersonal communication skills, a vision for the future, strong leadership and supervisory skills, as well as tremendous knowledge in curriculum and instruction. I can only hope to implement into my own practice some of what these two men modeled for me as an elementary and secondary school student and later as a graduate student in educational administration.

It is my belief that the future lies in our children. It is our mission as educators to help guide children to become

citizens of the 21st century who appreciate and understand themselves and others, are life-long learners, are globally oriented, and are skilled in creative and critical thinking.

It is obvious then that schools exist to serve their students. As I look back over my coursework and the experiences I have had, five areas stand out as the benchmarks of an effective administrator. Those five areas being: a clear and well defined vision; leadership style; supervision of curriculum and instruction; school climate; and school and community relations. It is these five areas that will be the focus of my reflective essay.

Developing a Vision

Defining a vision for a good school is essential for each building principal. We cannot lead others without understanding the direction our students, staff, and community are moving. The clarity of vision, the skills to share and actualize it, as well as an understanding of culture, the greater the chances of creating a strong, successful educational program (Boston, 1991).

Thus, in defining a vision I feel it is important to involve staff, parents, students and members of the community. Together they can work to develop a vision statement, giving a purpose and direction for all to work. It is essential for the principal to have an understanding of how to build a commitment to that shared vision as well as the know-how to

communicate it to others. (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1984). (S)he must act as a catalyst, continually focusing on goals and priorities based on the shared vision for the future.

In the video, The Power of Vision, Joel Barker states that “Vision without action is only a dream.” Change is not initiated by vision, rather by having a vision and establishing a vision committee, significant changes in an organization can take place. Again, it is the principal who plays that critical role, leading others in the development and acceptance of the school community’s vision.

This is obviously not an easy process. However, as a principal, if change is needed it is my responsibility to make the decision for change and lead others to see and accept the importance as well. Drucker (1985) shares four things to keep in mind when implementing change: (a) pick the future against the past; (b) focus on opportunity rather than problems; (c) choose your own direction rather than getting on the bandwagon; and (d) aim high, aim for something that will make a difference, rather than something that is “safe.”

Defining a clear vision is not an overnight process. I think it is important to look at where we have been, where we are now, and dream about where we want to be. A pragmatic

assessment by the principal is whether or not this is a place (s)he would like his/her own children to attend.

Characteristics of an Effective Leader

I feel that leadership can be looked at in a variety of ways. I would like to share what I feel are some basic characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors that are crucial for the principals of quality schools. I will include in this section a discussion of the importance of recognizing human needs, as well as leadership styles.

It is my experience that successful principals demonstrate strong leadership skills in every facet of their daily lives. It is through their attitudes and behavior that they demonstrate the values and beliefs that are essential to the school's daily operation. Students, staff, and members of the community look to the principal for inspiration as they work to achieve the school's vision.

Principals must have and convey high expectations for students, teachers, other staff members as well as themselves so that everyone is inspired and challenged to do their best. Personal characteristics of these individuals include: enthusiasm, initiative, a sense of humor, self-confidence, optimism, consideration for others, knowledge of current educational best practice, and a deep concern for what is best for the students. (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1990.)

Instructional leadership certainly is a focus of all successful principals. They work diligently to provide both the human and material resources necessary to provide their students with the finest education possible and the desire to be life long learners. The principal is active in development and implementation of the curriculum, as well as in working with teachers to determine effective methods of instruction. They must demonstrate knowledge and understanding of research findings on instructional practices. They promote professional development for teachers and staff, encouraging them to share information they gain with others at faculty/staff meetings. Quality principals recognize that schools are a place where leadership responsibilities can be shared. They encourage students, teachers, staff, and parents to take an active role in helping to achieve the school's vision.

Principals must be well organized and effective problem solvers. They need to be active listeners, able to make decisions based on the information available. They must establish effective communication with all segments of the community. This will allow them to share the school's accomplishments and needs with the community at large (NAESP, 1990).

I feel that as effective leaders, quality principals need to keep in mind Maslow's theory of human motivation.

Knowledge of the basic human needs (physiological, safety, self-esteem, belongingness, and self-actualization), can provide insight and direction for principals as they interact with students, teachers, staff, parents, and community members (Guthrie & Reed, 1991). Quality principals will insure that lower-order needs are met, thus allowing for higher-order needs to be addressed through recognition, rewards, opportunities for professional growth, and involvement in shared-decision making.

An effective way for leaders to address the hierarchy of needs presented by Maslow was discussed in a one day workshop on Interaction Management: The Challenge of Leadership (Development Dimensions International, 1988) and Handling Complaints (Development Dimensions International, 1987). The presenters discussed three key principles that enable a leader to better relate to other organizational members:

- a.) Maintain or enhance self-esteem.
- b.) Listen and respond with empathy.
- c.) Ask for help in solving the problem.

By focusing on these behaviors, positive, participative, and productive relationships will develop, thus creating a positive and productive work environment.

The model entitled Handling Complaints, (Development Dimensions International, 1987) gave tips that allowed leaders to resolve complaints quickly and fairly while maintaining

everyone's self-esteem. These models promote harmony among group members and encourage an open, communicative, work environment. I feel strongly that quality schools and organizations need to strive for this type of work climate if they are to achieve success. As we reduce the number of "people" problems principals and leaders must address, increased time can be spent on more productive educational endeavors.

I believe the effectiveness of one's ability to lead is dependent upon individual leadership style and one's interpersonal communication skills. Today's effective leadership in schools necessitates a variety of techniques to identify and resolve problems (NAESP, 1990). As I continue to develop my own leadership style I have determined that I am most comfortable using an eclectic approach. In the back of my mind at all times is the premise that leadership style is dependent upon how one views subordinates. Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Y, expresses the belief that management strategies used by leaders result from one of two notions. Theory X, the exercise of authority or control being necessary to motivate people to work toward the accomplishment of organizational goals or Theory Y, a belief that people themselves want to perform well, thus working to meet personal and organizational goals (Guthrie & Reed, 1991).

As a person and as a leader I believe that a leadership style based upon Theory Y will produce a more positive work/school climate thus leading to the achievement of organization goals.

I am also comfortable with the idea of situational leadership. Blanchard and Hersey (1976) discuss determining the demands of a situation with relation to the amount of direction (task behavior) and the amount of social/emotional support (relationship behavior) a leader must provide. Task behavior refers to the amount of one-way communication the leader must engage in to explain what, where, how, and when tasks are to be completed. Relationship behavior refers to the amount of two-way communication the leader engages in as (s)he provides social/emotional support and feedback, and engages in facilitating behavior.

The theory of situational leadership is based upon the interaction between (a) task behaviors, (b) relationship behaviors, and (c) the maturity level that followers demonstrate while working together on a particular task that the leader has assigned to them. Maturity refers to the ability to set high, but attainable goals, the willingness and ability to assume responsibility, and the experience/knowledge of the individual or group (Blanchard & Hersey, 1976).

In theory, situational leadership moves through four dimensions: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating based upon the maturity level of the individual or group. To be

effective, a leader must know his/her staff well enough to assess their needs in each specific interaction. Over time, individuals and groups develop patterns of behavior and ways of functioning. As the maturity level of individuals and groups change, an effective leader must also adjust his/her style to meet their needs (Blanchard & Hersey, 1976).

Change is often difficult, but can be achieved through careful planning, respect, and trust. A quality principal will work along with the staff to set goals, develop a plan, assess work along the way, and support positive measures, thus building confidence. In this way, situational leadership, if used successfully, allows schools to reach their goals through a collaborative effort in which all can take pride.

At this point I want to emphasise that while knowledge of the techniques of cooperative leadership, active listening and strong communication skills are very important, the daily demonstration of these interpersonal skills are what fellow educators, students, and parents will notice. Strong interpersonal skills do not become part of your personal value system until you act on them. This is what others see as the real person/leader you are. Our daily actions will speak much more loudly than mere words that we express to be our values relative to leadership.

Supervision of Curriculum and Instruction

A building principal's highest priority is the assurance that students receive effective instruction in a non-threatening environment. In their role as supervisors, principals focus on four basic elements: curriculum, instruction, performance, and evaluation (NAESP, 1991).

A well-defined curriculum provides professional staff with a framework that allows them to work productively towards the school's overall goals and expectations. It serves as a guide as to what students learn, what skills they master, and what values, attitudes, and habits they are to acquire. It is representative of what the staff, school administration, school board, and the community want students to learn, while reflecting the requirements of state laws and regulations. It is critical that the curriculum be built around specific, measurable learning objectives developed for each subject at every grade level, and provide expected student performance levels.

The methods employed by teachers during the implementation of curriculum should be monitored on a monthly, weekly, and in certain situations, daily basis to assure the use of proper curriculum guides and courses of study. Student progress should be measured regularly through daily observation, small group performance, assigned daily work, projects, as well as testing and other forms of

assessment (student portfolios). When necessary, modifications in the curriculum, methods of instruction, and materials should be made. Through the evaluation of established goals, the principal ensures the success of students and teachers, while providing an environment that is safe, exciting, and motivating (NAESP, 1990).

It is my belief that the development of a school's curriculum is an on-going process. The world we live in is continually changing, as must the educational environment. Therefore, I believe that schools today need to encourage students to become actively involved in their own learning, expanding the curriculum beyond the traditional activities of reading, math, science, social studies, and language arts. Tomorrow's world will require students to work along side others in planning and implementing ideas, being flexible in their uses of technology, using creative higher-order thinking skills, and communication skills (Walker, 1985).

An effective principal must be knowledgeable in child development. An awareness of developmentally appropriate practices for young children should be reflected in both curriculum and instruction.

Schools alone cannot meet the needs of today's youth. The community in which the school exists needs to become active and participative in the educational process. Leaders in

both the school and community need to plan activities that enrich the curriculum at all levels. Partnerships with community businesses provide an opportunity for academic enrichment as well as financial support for educational programs. Parents can be involved in classroom activities, sharing their information, and expertise, as well as assisting with instruction when appropriate. However, it is the building principal who must act as a catalyst, leading students, teachers, and community members to this shared common goal.

In today's schools an effective principal must also serve as an instructional leader, guiding the instructional program toward the achievement of clearly defined goals and objectives. The program of instruction must be consistent with the goals identified in the school's mission statement and expressed in the curriculum (NAESP, 1990).

As a building principal, one must carefully assess whether program goals and objectives are being met. This can be achieved through collaboration with staff, and the use of assessment tools. Upon the examination of the various forms of assessment, the principal and staff can determine which programs should be maintained, modified, or discontinued (NAESP, 1991).

As the principal assesses instructional programs, (s)he must also assess teaching methods and strategies to ensure that they are age and developmentally appropriate.

A final area of supervision that needs to be discussed is that of evaluation of instruction. Cangelosi (1991) defines the process of evaluation as either formative or summative. Formative evaluation is used to provide information that is useful in determining how to teach. Summative evaluation is a judgement of instructional effectiveness and may influence administrative decisions regarding retention, salary, and promotion. Both forms of evaluation are important in building a self fulfilled and productive staff.

Exercises in preconferencing, observation, scripting, and postconferencing helped me to gain experience and confidence in the area of evaluation. Chirside (1984) states that the purpose of evaluation is for the improvement of instruction. This can be best achieved through a process that maintains a trusting environment and ensures fairness and consistency. It is also important to conduct evaluations in an appropriate manner at an appropriate time with appropriate instruments and methods. Building principals and teachers need to work together to establish evaluation methods and time that allows both parties to prepare so that the evaluation process is both productive and successful.

If one is to be an effective evaluator, knowledge of current teaching styles and strategies is necessary. Therefore, it is important that principals not ignore their own need for professional growth and development. Self

assessment as well as allowing faculty an opportunity to assess your work are important concepts for principals. Taking the time to assess and reflect upon professional interactions, decisions, and personal behaviors will enable continued personal growth.

Student performance is another area closely monitored by an effective principal. Building principals need to be knowledgeable about strengths and weaknesses of a variety of assessment tools and encourage their implementation. Careful examination of an assessment method will reveal areas of strength and weakness of student achievement. However, it is very important that building principals, faculty, and the community have a well informed awareness of the limitations as well as strengths of all formal evaluation instruments.

Establishing a Positive School Climate

School climate, though difficult to describe, is easily recognized. It is a combination of qualities that affect the attitudes, behaviors, and achievement of the people involved in its operation (NAESP, 1990).

In effective schools, students and staff genuinely care for, respect, and trust one another. The principal demonstrates a personal interest in every student, staff member, and parent. (S)he not only recognizes and understands the unique needs, talents, and abilities each individual brings

to the school setting, but celebrates them as well. Activities that develop self-esteem are a valued part of the curriculum and conflict resolution procedures are used fairly and consistently.

Morale is high among students, staff, and the school community in these effective schools. Students and school personnel support one another as they work together. A strong sense of pride exists among all involved in the schools operation. It is important for the building principal to engage in a variety of formal and informal activities that allow the sharing of ideas, attitudes, and beliefs. Some examples can be in the form of staff meetings, weekly bulletins, monthly newsletters, school celebrations, written notes, formal and informal classroom visits, and by dining with students and staff members.

In the most effective schools there is still a need to develop a written code of student behavior. Effective principals have high expectations for all students and enlist the support of others in meeting common goals (Hughes & Ubben, 1989). This well planned code for student behavior is essential to its success. I believe it is important for students, teachers, parents, and the administration to share in the development of this code. Upon its adoption, parents and students need to be informed in writing of expectations and consequences. Teachers and staff need to have a clear

understanding of the code so that consistent policies can be maintained.

As the building principal, it is important to follow through with consequences for irresponsible student behavior quickly, fairly, openly, and without recrimination (Hughes & Ubben, 1989). It is also important to develop an efficient method for recording infractions making it easier to monitor children with behavior problems and see that a plan for appropriate behavior modifications is implemented.

It is unfortunate that the number of discipline problems continues to increase in our schools today. I believe that this is directly related to the diverse needs, abilities, and maturity levels of our students, as well as an all too common lack of parental involvement. A strong educational program, a caring, respectful, and trusting environment that addresses the needs of the "whole" child can provide a foundation for good discipline.

School and Community Relations

Society is pressuring schools to better prepare students for the world of today and tomorrow. At the same time, decreasing federal and state aid is causing schools to restructure in ways that may not always be in the best interest of student learning. It is for these and other reasons, that principals must develop and execute effective school and

community relations programs. A school's public relations program can no longer "just happen" but must be planned, implemented, and evaluated (Kindred, Bagin, & Gallagher, 1990).

The first step in developing an effective school and community relations program is to know and understand the community. Kindred, Bagin, and Gallagher (1990) recommend school districts conduct a sociological inventory of their communities. Such an inventory concentrates on customs and traditions, population characteristics, communication channels, community groups, leadership, economic conditions, political structure, social tensions, and previous community efforts. Attention is then directed toward the power structure or structures and decision-making bodies in the community. Through communication with these power structures, information regarding the current relationship between the school and the community can be learned. This is valuable information for the development of an effective school and community relations plan. Knowledge can also be attained through surveying the community-at-large or by conducting a needs assessment.

Knowledge and understanding of the internal public is just as important as knowing and understanding the external public. The internal public includes teachers, staff, and anyone else that contributes to the daily operation of the school.

After gathering and analyzing an acceptable amount of information about the school's internal and external publics a principal must begin the task of developing methods of communication that allow him/her to disseminate and obtain information from both publics.

An effective school and community relations program has a defined purpose and set of goals. Each activity has a target population, time line, budget, and person or persons responsible for its implementation. Obviously this type of plan will need to be monitored by the building principal or a designated staff member(s).

For such a program to be successful, an effective principal will allocate time in his/hers schedule for just this purpose. Additional monies may also need to be budgeted to carry out such a program.

Summary

I have discussed five areas that I feel will most impact my success as an elementary school administrator. I recognize the importance of developing, implementing, and evaluating a shared vision for my school that reflects the needs of its students, staff, and community. I realize that my leadership style and interpersonal skills are important to the realization of that vision. I must set high expectations for myself, the faculty, support staff, and students in an effort to create an

environment in which all students will learn and are challenged to take risks that allow them to acquire new skills. I will also invite both the internal and external publics to take an active role in the educational process.

I recognize the importance active listening and communication skills will play in my success as an elementary school principal. As a leader it will be important for me to model concern, respect, and trust. I will need to be enthusiastic, demonstrate initiative, have a sense of humor, be optimistic, and self-confident.

I remember during a discussion in the course Introduction to Educational Administration, Dr. Albrecht (Personal Communication, 1990) told us that we should only consider staying in the Educational Administration program if we thought we could make a difference. I am prepared for the future that awaits me and I am proud to say, I know I can and will make a difference.

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