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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

I believe that the role of the principal is vital in creating the workplace and learning community necessary to prepare students for the future. The principal serves many roles including communicator and leader. I know that I possess the skills necessary to fulfill these roles and effectively move a district forward. My vision for the future is not to use a top-down approach in leading a school, but a broad-based participation approach. The school in which I work will strive to enhance leadership in all teachers, form a community of lifelong learners, and grow and reflect individually as professionals. I realize that the challenges that lie ahead of me will be demanding and constantly changing. But most importantly, the challenges will be rewarding. Becoming an effective and successful elementary principal provides the opportunity to touch the lives of many children.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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by

Tami L. McLean

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Vision for Tomorrow's Schools

Throughout my graduate work I have had the opportunity to reflect upon who I am as a person and as a professional educator. My beliefs in education have evolved and I now see educational administration in a whole new light after three years in a leadership preparation program. This experience has been invaluable. It has taught me that schools serve students in a wide variety of ways and that the principal plays many vital roles in these services. These roles include communicator, leader, mediator, organizer, facilitator, planner, manager, evaluator, and problem-solver (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993). These roles are essential and blend together to shape an effective leader. In this paper, I will discuss my philosophy of education, the purpose of schools, and the roles school play in society. I will also discuss the elementary principal as a communicator and as a leader.

I believe in the educability of all students regardless of disability or economic, ethnic, or religious background. I believe the educational system is responsible for providing students with the skills essential to function in the present society and to adjust to society as it changes. Students need to know how to utilize skills essential in a world which is evolving and changing.

Purpose of Schools

I believe it is the responsibility of the schools to educate students for the future. Students need to be prepared with the skills that are essential to help them function in a society which is constantly changing.

I believe the school is a workplace that prepares students for a changing society. The school serves four purposes for the student: social, personal, vocational, and intellectual (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993).

<u>Social and Personal Purposes</u>

I feel that the social and personal purposes of a school cross paths often. They may even be considered synonymous. Both social and personal purposes help develop a child into a caring and respectful person. The role of the principal is to develop a caring, positive learning environment that enhances the social and personal development of students. "The challenge is to continually and consciously labor to achieve the goal - to make schools places where people like to be" (Hansen & Childs,1998, p.17).

Developing a positive learning environment can be done in several ways. The first way is to live by example. Modeling honesty, respect, responsibility, perseverance, giving, compassion, and self-discipline by administrators and staff can go a long way in developing a positive climate.

Infusing character education into the curriculum is another way to develop a positive environment. The ideal behind character education is to develop core characteristics such as respect, responsibility, perseverance, compassion, and self-discipline. These core characteristics are based on the mission and beliefs of the school. These core characteristics should be developed by the staff along with common area expectations. Common area expectations are the

specific guidelines for behavior that are developed for a particular area in the school. Common area expectations can be developed for the hallways, restrooms, lunchroom, and recess areas. These expectations help students understand what behaviors are expected in school. Developing common area expectations gives ownership to the staff. The ownership would result in a unified team effort. The staff can teach those core characteristics to the students while developing common area expectations.

Incorporating a character education program into the curriculum can result in improved social conditions. Students who learn to respect, persevere, and self-discipline will be more tolerant of others from different ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. The result can be a reduction of violence (Cohen, 1999). Research indicates that exposing students to different points of view early in life can avoid rigid prejudices later in life. Working with tolerance of different cultures and beliefs should begin in elementary school and continue throughout their educational lives (Canada, 2000).

I feel the social purpose of a school is to improve social conditions. Social condition problems can originate from poverty, racism, lack of safe havens, biological, and psychological problems. "Educators have the ability to prevent violence and promote the social health of students" (Cohen,1999, p. 70). Students can be taught to be tolerant of all disabilities and all economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Tolerance will provide students with the ability to live

successfully without social tension. This is essential to function a changing society.

I feel the personal purpose of a school includes moral and political instruction. Moral instruction should include skills necessary for students to make positive decisions. I believe this can be done without infringing upon the religious beliefs of others. Every student should have the ability to decide right from wrong. Students should also be aware of the consequences if negative decisions are made. Political instruction should include teaching students the political system and how it affects everyday life. Students can then decide on their own if they want to be a leader or a follower in our society.

Vocational Purpose

I believe that the vocational purpose of a school is to prepare students for the world of work. Students need to be taught skills to function efficiently and responsibly in the work force (Glatthorn, 2000). The perception of work is part of the responsibility issue. Students need to view work as a desirable process. Principals need to model a positive attitude for staff and students that work is a process of learning, not just of productivity. The job of an administrator is to promote a balanced and satisfying attitude towards work (Rosenberg, McKeon, & McNamara, 1999). Modeling is a guide to the staff in instilling a more positive attitude towards work in the classroom. Principals need to view their work as meaningful and as a process of accomplishment. Teachers need to present schoolwork as meaningful and stimulating.

They need to reward successful work with more challenging or prestigious work instead of eliminating work. When a teachers eliminates work, a negative message is sent that work is tedious and should be avoided or minimized (Rosenberg, McKeon, & McNamara, 1999). Developing positive work attitudes helps a student develop vocational skills. Vocational skills may be the means for students to move from one socioeconomic class to another. A positive attitude about work can help students make that move.

Intellectual Purpose

I believe that the intellectual purpose of the school is to teach students problem-solving and higher-level thinking skills. These skills help students compete in a changing society. One example is technology. Technology has changed significantly over the past decade. Many of today's jobs will be obsolete in ten to 15 years. "Teachers must make changes of huge magnitude to integrate new technologies in meaningful ways" (Schwab & Foa, 2001 p. 621). It will take higher-order thinking skills to keep up with these changes. Empowering kids with thinking skills will help them compete in a technological world that is constantly changing. The ultimate goal of a school should be to provide all students with the study of technological literacy. Technological literacy is the ability to use, manage, assess, and understand technology. "Technology should be an essential part of every student's basic education" (Dugger, 2001, p. 517). Principals need to create a technology plan that supports instructional goals and objectives of the

school, promotes technological literacy, and reflects strategies correlated with brain research (Holland & Moore-Steward, 2000).

Utilizing brain-based instruction in the classroom can result in improved student learning and help prepare students for changes in society. Utilizing brain-based instruction can maximize the brain. In order to maximize the brain through brain-based instruction, educators must provide an environment that is challenging, nurturing, enriching, and emotionally positive. "Educators must become critical consumers of brain research" (Caulfield, Kidd, & Kocher, 2000, p. 62). Keeping up-to-date on brain research will enable teachers to instill the thinking skills needed to compete in a changing society. Principals, as well as teachers, need to stay current with what is happening with brain research. Today educators know more than ever before about the brain and how it learns. Encouraging staff members to keep up-to-date on the latest information will be crucial and challenging. Offering support to staff members by encouraging staff development workshops and conferences on brain research will be important. "It would be foolish for teachers to ignore the growing body of knowledge about our brains" (Brandt, 1999, p. 238).

Communicating the four purposes of a school, social, personal, intellectual, and vocational is an important and necessary component of the principalship. The principals must be the catalyst in communicating to the public the importance that school plays in the life of a child. "Communication is a leader's responsibility" (Ramsey, 1999, p. 175).

Principal as a Communicator

"Leadership and communication are synonymous. Of all the essential tools of leadership, communication skills are the most important by far" (Ramsey, 1999, p. 171). Effective communication is at the core of every successful organization. Ramsey (1999) states "communication within an organization works only when it's a two-way flow " (p. 172). Effective communication is vital for the success of a principal. How does a principal institute solid, effective communication which is a two-way flow? Effective, two-way flow communication can be established by considering the following key questions:

1. What do you want to communicate?
2. Why do you want to communicate this message?
3. Who needs to ge the message?
4. How should the message be communicated?
5. When is the best time to to communicate it? (Ramsey, p. 172).

These key question can help a principal determine the content to be conveyed, the capacity of the intended audience, and the likelihood it will be understood.

What exactly is effective communication? Communication involves sending and receiving written, verbal, or non-verbal messages. Written communications include e-mail, daily bulletins, reports, and any other form of communication which involves writing down a message. Written communications should be clear and concise. Sensitivity, empathy, and thoughtfulness are essential in written communication as well as in verbal and non-verbal communication. Remembering and using sensitivity, empathy and thoughtfulness can help avoid problems

with miscommunication. "Every action by a school official sends a message that has the potential for being misread, misunderstood, misconstrued, or misinterpreted" (Ramsey, 1999, p.172).

As an elementary principal, I believe it is my responsibility to build a learning and professional community which serves the students as a workplace and prepares them for a future of lifelong learning. Building a learning and professional community can be accomplished through solid, effective communication with the many different constituents involved in the school. Communication with students, staff, parents, and the community is vital to enhance student achievement, promote a learning community, and to keep the learning community moving forward. "Effective communicators realize that they have a special communication obligation because everyone in town wants to know about the schools" (Ramsey, 1999, p. 172). The following are the key components of a principal's communication in a building a learning community.

Communication with Students

Communicating with students is a very important key in building a learning community. Students need to be informed about expectations at school and given specific feedback about their progress. Expectations for both appropriate behavior and student achievement need to be clear, concise, and appropriate for the intended age. These expectations need to be reinforced consistently. Communication between teachers and students is important. Students spend more

time with teachers than with their own parents (Stein, 2000). That investment of time with teachers creates an opportunity for teachers to communicate effectively with students. Communicating effectively with students sets the stage for a workplace and builds a learning community. This workplace will help students build social, vocational, personal, and intellectual skills. Students are the primary customers of a school (Chambers, 1998). It is the job of the principal to ensure that the stage is set for learning and that each student reaches his or her maximum potential.

Communication with Parents

Communication with parents must be a top priority. Effective communication can solve problems and help parents become active members in the learning community. As more and more students participate in open enrollment, communicating effectively with parents can help keep students at their home districts.

Utilizing a school newsletter can relay important information to parents and other community members about general student progress, curriculum, and school events. Informing parents about school events can increase attendance. Attendance at school events sends a positive message to students about the value of education. When students receive those positive messages, they internalize them. That internalization helps build the social, personal, vocational, and intellectual purposes of schools as a workplace and a learning community. The newsletter also provides an opportunity for staff

members to inform parents about what is happening in the classrooms and the value of the curriculum. The newsletter also gives parents an opportunity to get to know the staff members. This can be a valuable asset when setting the stage for further personal communication with a parent (Ramsey, 1999).

Another valuable tool in communicating with parents is the telephone. Phoning home to report to parents about the positive happenings in the school can help strengthen the bond between the school and home. A strong bond may be helpful to establish parental support in difficult situations that may occur at a later date (Gustafson, 1998). Phoning home also lets the parent know that the school cares about their child. A phone call home may also give the parent an opportunity to make inquiries about the school and a chance for the school to listen to what the parent has to communicate (Kernan-Schloss & Plattner, 1998).

Communicating with parents about student progress is a delicate but necessary task. Specific information regarding a student should always involve empathy, sensitivity and thoughtfulness. Lack of these three things can create a negative, unproductive environment. School personnel need to take into consideration the type of information being conveyed and the purpose of such communication.

Communication with Staff

Communicating with teachers as well as support staff is vital in keeping a school running effectively and efficiently. Praise is a key part

in this communication process. Chambers (1998) implies that it is important to let employees know that their efforts are important and appreciated. Praising teachers and support staff frequently helps promote a positive, enriching environment. The direct result is an increase in school loyalty and pride. This positive environment encourages growth of the school as a workplace and as a learning community (Connors, 2000).

Principals also need to communicate organizational information to teachers and support staff. Organizational information includes policies and procedures, as well as class, lunch, and duty schedules. Organizational information is important in keeping a school running efficiently. Communicating effectively involves being open-minded about listening to suggestions from the teachers and support staff (Connors, 2000). This action promotes a team effort which helps build a learning community. It also indirectly informs teachers and support staff how much you care about the school. Listening to suggestions builds trust among teachers and support staff and opens a window to develop leadership skills through shared decision-making. It is important to remember that anytime a decision is made in regards to a suggestion, the principal should inform the teacher or staff member of why that decision was made. An explanation should be given regardless if the suggestion is followed or not. Explaining why a decision was made lets the staff member know that you respect them as a professional and it encourages future communication.

Communication with the Community

Communicating with the public is vital in keeping the school an effective, functioning part of the community. Today a majority of the taxpayers do not have children in school. It is important to keep those taxpayers informed about the positive happenings in the school. Keeping taxpayers informed helps build a positive rapport between the community and the school. This can be vital in the future when school bonds or other important political issues arise (Kernan-Schloss and Plattner, 1998). Building a positive rapport with the community also helps model respect and promotes the social and personal purposes of the school.

There are several ways for a school to communicate with the entire community. Sending the district newsletter to every taxpayer within the district is one way. Utilizing a local newspaper and the district's calendar are other ways to communicate with the community. Too often the media reports only the negative happenings in a school. Promote the positive happenings in the newspaper. Stories and pictures can keep community members connected with what is happening. Also, enlist local television and radio stations to promote the school. Invite them to the school when special events are occurring (Boylston-Bohen, 1998). Building a strong volunteer program with the community can help connect the school and community. Carefully seek out individuals from the community who have knowledge and skills to share with the students.

Effective communication is an everyday part of the principalship. Principals use communication everyday as just one tool of effective leadership. Leadership also requires the talent, commitment, and involvement of many people within the organization (DeBlois, 2000). Principals must be the catalyst in developing the the breadth of participation and the depth of skill in leadership that exist within an organization. Building leadership capacity is another effective tool of leadership.

Principal as a Leader

I have already discussed the importance of communication in an effective leadership role. However, leadership in itself is very important in creating a learning and professional community within the school and a workplace for students to prepare for the future. A principal needs to be several types of leaders at one time. A principal needs to be a leader of leaders, a leader in curriculum and instruction, and a leader of change (DeBlois, 2000).

Leader of Leaders

Effective principals encourage and develop leadership skills in others. "Leading is a shared endeavor..." and ..."everyone has the potential and right to work as a leader" (Lambert, 1998, p. 9). Principals must mold that potential and utilize it to enhance the learning and professional community within the school. One way for principals to build and mold leadership in others is to let staff members participate in decision making. Participating in decision making promotes unity and

ownership among the staff involved. Lambert (1998) states, "Staff members also have a shared sense of purpose, engage in collaborative work, and accept joint responsibility for the outcomes of their work" (p.11) when decision making is shared. Shared decision making helps build leadership capacity and moves the school forward to the top spot in Lambert's Leadership Capacity Matrix. Lambert (1998) maps out four types or quadrants of schools in the Leadership Capacity Matrix. Each quadrant describes the style of administrative leadership, the leadership skills among staff members, and the result of student achievement. Quadrant 1 is the lowest level of Lambert's matrix. Schools in this quadrant experience autocratic leadership and as a result there is low participation and low skillfulness in leadership among the staff. Student achievement is very low in Quadrant 1.

Quadrant 2 is the next step up from Quadrant 1. Schools in Quadrant 2 experience laissez-faire leadership from the administration. Teachers experience more leadership roles, however the skill level is lacking. Student achievement in this level is static.

Quadrant 3 is the next step in the matrix. Schools in Quadrant 3 begin to make progress. Leadership skills of the administration are still developing. Strong leadership exists in a small group of staff members. Leadership among the staff is highly skilled, but participation is low. Student achievement is static but it does show slight gain.

Quadrant 4 is the top step. Schools in this quadrant experience high skillfulness and high participation in leadership from the staff.

Achievement is based on both student and adult learning. The overall results are phenomenal in this quadrant. Other characteristics of schools in Quadrant 4 include:

1. Broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership.
2. Inquiry-based use of information to inform decision and practice.
3. Roles and responsibilities that reflect broad involvement and collaboration.
4. Reflective practice/innovation as the norm.
5. High student achievement. (Lambert, 1998, p. 13).

The ultimate goal for a principal is to reach quadrant four of Lambert's Leadership Capacity Matrix. Reaching this quadrant involves some risk. Shared decision making carries risk with it. I do not believe that decision making should simply be turned over to a variety of individuals or groups. The principal must use judgment and care when determining which decisions the staff should be involved with. The principal must also be aware that each staff is composed of unique individuals. Some staff members will naturally come forward and get involved with leadership roles. Others will be reluctant and may not appear to have the qualities that accompany strong leadership. The principal must still provide opportunities for the reluctant staff members to lead. Reluctant staff members also deserve a chance to develop leadership skills (Lambert, 1998). Expecting all staff members to exhibit leadership skills at appropriate times sets the stage for building a learning and a professional community. I feel that when a principal sets high expectations for leadership among the staff, success will occur.

Principals need to identify, encourage, and support others in the organization to assume positions of leadership (DeBlois, 2000).

Leader of Curriculum and Instruction

Before a principal can be an effective leader in curriculum and instruction, two important steps must be achieved. First, the school must have a clear mission, goals, and beliefs upon which all decisions can be based. Once a school has developed these three ideals, the principal can move forward and develop step two, which is developing a caring and positive climate within the school. Staff members need to feel that the principal is approachable with suggestions, concerns, and questions (Glatthorn, 2000). Once this has been achieved, the principal can move forward in leading the staff in curriculum and instruction.

Trends and issues in curriculum and instruction are ever-changing. In order to lead effectively in these areas, administrators must keep versed in the current research, programs, and movements within the educational realm. Keeping current with trends and issues is possible if the administrator utilizes a variety of professional development opportunities. Attending conferences and meetings are one way to keep current. Educational journals also provide a wealth of information on current trends and issues. The administrator can also build a network of experts. Enlist the expertise of the local AEA and other administrators in the field. Developing a network of people or resources can be invaluable in keeping up-to-date in the educational world. Even members of the staff can be a resource for curriculum and instruction.

Staff members who possess strong leadership skills will also possess knowledge in current educational practices. Those two characteristics go hand in hand. It would be nearly impossible to be a strong leader in the educational field without keeping abreast in those areas.

Leader of Change

The principal is definitely placed in a position to be a leader of change. Being a leader of change involves many of the skills already discussed in this paper. Covey (1989) states that, "The rapidly changing environment in which we live makes effective leadership more critical than it has ever been" (p.101). Leading a school through change involves vision, trust, and communication skills. Vision is the guide that steers us down the road to change. A principal's vision needs to be principle-centered. What are the principles? Principles are the values that each person holds near and dear to his heart. Principles are the beliefs that make a person tick. Covey (1989) describes vision as a destination, and the compass is a set of principles or directions on the journey to change. The inner compass or principles will always give us the direction needed to go down the right path. I hold dear many personal and professional values. I value my family and friends, education and being a lifelong learner. I also believe in the "golden rule": do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I believe in respect, teamwork, honesty, sincerity, perseverance, reflection, and taking time to relax and smile. Principles are important. They guide the decisions that you make which result in the vision you hold.

Principals need time to instill trust among the staff. Trust is necessary for staff members to approach the administrators with suggestions and questions. But how do administrators build trust? Start small and be careful. Confidential conversations need to stay confidential. Treat others with respect and dignity. Also, provide positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement lets the teachers know how much you value what they do. It also sets the stage for teachers to become risk takers and to be open for change. Building trust with staff members helps also to develop leadership skills in among the staff.

Finally, effective communication skills are a necessity for change. "Lavish communication is crucial. Change is a learning process. The score for change, the cadence that the organization is being asked to perform during a change, must be communicated consistently and redundantly. Leaders and followers must be literate" (DePree, 1992, p. 147). Constant, effective communication is important in guiding the staff through the change process.

The role of a leader is just one of many that a principal serves in a school. The many roles of a principal weave together to shape an effective leader. An effective leader is vital in providing the services necessary to move a district forward.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that the role of the principal is vital in creating the workplace and learning community necessary to prepare students for the future. The principal serves many roles including

communicator and leader. I know that I possess the skills necessary to fulfill these roles and effectively move a district forward. My vision for the future is not to use a top-down approach in leading a school, but a broad-based participation approach. The school in which I work will strive to enhance leadership in all teachers, form a community of lifelong learners, and grow and reflect individually as professionals. I realize that the challenges that lie ahead of me will be demanding and constantly changing. But most importantly, the challenges will be rewarding. Becoming an effective and successful elementary principal provides the opportunity to touch the lives of many children.

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