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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

As I reflect upon my vision of effective teaching and leadership within a school, I am energized to implement the many ideas and concepts from this paper into action. The school administrator plays a pivotal role in establishing the climate and mission for a learning community. My leadership efforts need to be visionary and move the school to its desired state. I must create the atmosphere, with the help of others, that transform the dreams of the learning community into reality. I look forward to stepping into this role someday and impacting the lives and futures of the students, families, and staff that I work with.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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The leadership roles in American schools today are taking on an ever changing, complex definition of administration. Society is handing more and more responsibility for America's children onto the school systems. It is more imperative than ever for school leaders to have a clear vision for the benefit of our students, parents, and staff.

Being a leader is a position I have always gravitated towards throughout my whole life. Growing up the youngest of seven children on a farm in Iowa, I always saw my older siblings taking on positions of leadership in school, community, and church activities. This role modeling was extremely powerful in influencing me to step forward into leadership activities myself when opportunities arose for me. The importance of school and achieving in education was not only reflected in my siblings, but in my parents as well. In addition to the influence of my six overachieving older siblings, two of whom became teachers, I also heard my whole life from my mother that if she had been provided the opportunity to go to college, she would have sought the career of a teacher. Part of her goal became instilled in me and I soon realized that education was a privilege to be grateful for, not something that was automatically provided. With my parents, it was not a question ever if I was going to college, but rather how. It was just an unwritten rule in our household, that everyone continued their education beyond high school. I saw my brother who farmed with my dad, attend

Iowa State University for agronomy before settling into the routines of farming for my family. When I was in junior high and high school, three of my siblings were all in college at the time, one even in veterinary school. I saw through their examples how scholarships and lots of hard work made further education possible. So I knew to begin early.

I began doing everything to save my money, from beginning to babysit at age nine, and detassling corn from the time I was age twelve, knowing I needed to save every penny for my college education. I worked all through high school doing jobs that taught me a lot about managing my time and how to relate to people. It seems amazing to me now looking back, how without my parents ever verbally saying it, I always got the message loud and clear that a college education was so important to my parents. Ironically, there was no way they could ever financially help us get there. That's what made the goal even more sacred. This is how education became so precious to me, and has driven the decisions about my future.

Currently, I am in my eighth year of teaching in the classroom, and during my first five years, I worked under five different elementary principals. I have seen firsthand over and over the powerful impact, both positive and negative, that a new leader can make within a school setting. Many of my views on educational leadership have been shaped by these five administrators' leadership styles. Some

had strengths with students and not at managing paperwork, while others have been very organized yet lacked the interpersonal skills that are so necessary for being a successful leader. Four of the five principals have been women, which has given me insight on how to balance motherhood and career within the administrative role. I have gathered pieces of wisdom from all five, and have molded their teachings into my own leadership style. I hope I have gleaned all of the qualities that I want to emulate from each of them and feel fortunate to have worked under that number of leaders in such a short time.

Personal Professional Vision for Administrative Practice

My vision as an administrator is focused on three key elements: personal responsibility, commitment to children and families, and high achievement by each team member, including both staff and students at the school.

Personal responsibility encompasses the direct responsibility that I have as the administrator for effectively leading the schools towards our goal of high achievement. This would include my management of people, as well as resources. It would also emphasize each teacher's responsibility of meeting the demands and expectations of being a role model for all students. For the students, this would entail their personal responsibility for learning and taking the responsibility for their own successes and failures. Parents would also have a personal

responsibility for supporting their children to foster good values towards personal best in school and respecting all people.

My commitment towards children should really focus all of my decisions as an administrator. I want to ask myself, "What is really best for this child? How will this decision affect this child and his/her future?" With these questions at the forefront of my mind during critical choices, I believe my motives will be in the right place as an administrator. I would attempt to internalize this belief for staff members and change the focus for some adults from themselves onto students' growth which is our common goal. I want values to drive decision making.

High achievement for all is my last component of my vision. By this term, I do not mean a test score at a certain level, or a certain minimum competency for all students. High achievement for all means that all children and staff are striving to do their personal best. They are open and willing to stretch themselves and go one step beyond their comfort zone to achieve this personal best. This would involve me also in striving for excellence and taking some risks with new ideas and approaches to challenging situations. If we all focus on this personal best and high achievement, the school should be a celebratory atmosphere where even small improvements are looked upon as accomplishments. The pendulum for students needs to sway from picking out what students are doing wrong to analyzing what they are doing right. This positive framework is contagious and

should infect all attitudes involved. Who likes to have what you are doing wrong pointed out? We don't do this to our coworkers, or our spouses, so why do we do this to kids' initial attempts? All beginning attempts are steps towards excellence and should be looked upon as such.

With these few attitudes in mind, I am confident that the elementary school where I am principal will possess a passion for excellence by all members of the school team; the students, parents, and staff. As the school leader I will take my responsibility seriously and give it the attention this vital role deserves in today's school. I want to be a leader that really makes a difference in people's lives by leaving an impression of quality relationships and a commitment to excellence.

Personal Responsibility

The characteristics that stand out the most dramatically about myself are my positive attitude, enthusiasm and extroverted personality. I am extremely comfortable in situations where I am the center of attention, and am not inhibited to initiate interaction with others. I feel these skills are critical as a leader, for a given expectation is to make others feel at ease and comfortable with you. Being in front of a large group is actually very exciting for me, and is where I feel I am most effective in my communication. I am equally as comfortable in small group

situations, and feel I can convey a very sincere listening approach that is going to be a necessity for teachers, parents and students.

As a leader I value participatory involvement by all affected with the decision making process in a building. Motivation is built through ownership, and I feel there is no better way to foster this than with shared decision making. Teachers need to feel involved with the choices and consequences that affect their students, and the power of choice is a very crucial factor in building staff rapport and harmony. Utilizing the leadership capacity within all of the staff members in a school creates a much stronger internal responsibility within the building and stimulates everyone to take responsibility for the direction of the school. Leadership goes well beyond the principal as "leader" and can encompass the energy of all who work together to shape the values and decisions of the school (Lambert, 1998).

William Glasser's (1990) "lead management" (p.31) collaborative approach to management much more fully matches my style of leadership and interactions with people. With this lead management style, which has become the basis of Glasser's Quality School movement, teachers and students are treated in a way that eliminates the domineering control that can occur in subordinate/superordinate relationships.

Contrary to lead managing is "boss managing" (Glasser, 1990, p.25) which deals with coercion and manipulating people into agreeing or conforming. This leadership style can unfortunately be implemented in teacher-student relationships, and principal-teacher relationships. This is a negative leadership style that provides a no win situation within a school. It is a style that I do not want to be associated with. Glasser (1986) also provides insight into how all people have five basic needs (survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun) which need to be met in order for motivation for learning to occur. Boss management disregards the necessary balance of people's basic needs and results in resentment.

The research of Alfie Kohn (1999) on motivation directly supports Glasser's (1990) lead management theory for teachers and principals. The overuse of reward and punishment systems in schools manipulate and thwart our students' intrinsic motivation to achieve and learn. True authentic motivation can be achieved through much less controlling means if schools foster more collaboration, allow for personal choice when at all possible, and provide meaningful content for people to be involved. Students, teachers and parents will all reap the benefits of an environment in which learners are not enticed into compliance, but rather hold a deep commitment to the values of the school.

A person's reputation speaks volumes about them. If I had the chance to analyze what my reputation as a teacher is, I feel I would be described by coworkers or my family as warm, hard working, outgoing, intelligent, ambitious, and an overachiever who goes the extra step. This coincides with my Life Styles Inventory (1990) results, wherein my highest personal domain scale was the Achievement category. The LSI description for the Achievement category describes a person with a, "focus on achieving a standard of excellence in those things they value and are motivated to succeed by their own beliefs. These individuals take a self-directed approach to their work, preferring to set and accomplish their own goals" (Human Synergetics, 1990, p. 106).

I feel the responsibility of being a role model constantly and do not balk at the pressure of this expectation. I feel that a child's teacher should be one of the top two respectable people they encounter daily; number one should be their parent(s), but number two should be their teacher, the person they interact with daily for seven hours.

Unfortunately in America, the responsibility of being a role model has become unimportant to some parents. Frequently, the demands for time and energy from two working parents make it difficult for them to fulfill their roles as mentors. Divorce rates, economic stress, and working mothers have greatly changed the dynamics of today's American families (Coontz, 1997). Family

structures are no longer reminiscent of the 1950s two parent "perfect" homes. But, coming to terms with these changes in society will enable all to understand their roles more clearly and allow us to move forward in ways to foster these families' hidden strengths. Families can follow some simple steps to promote stronger family relationships within their hectic daily schedules. Turning the television off and setting goals that put aside time for family can help establish priorities. A set minimum amount of daily quality time with their children can provide those together moments that so many families are lacking (Newman, 1998).

There is no denying that schools play an integral part in the development of our young children. One supporting statistic to demonstrate the schools' increasing involvement in commitment to children is the threefold increase in the percentage of 3- and 4- year olds enrolled in early childhood programs since the 1960s (Coleman & Churchill, 1997). Many of these early childhood programs are provided by our public schools. This upward trend in early childhood education demonstrates the growing interest of our schools in establishing these enriching experiences for our children early on. With this even earlier intervention by our public schools, it will become increasingly important for our educators to become the role models who so many floundering children need. We need teachers today

that are willing to wear that teacher mentality "hat" all week long, including the weekend.

We also need to keep in perspective that schools alone cannot determine student achievement. Influences outside of school including harmful peer pressure, authoritarian and permissive parenting styles, and excessive hours students spend on jobs all contribute to our declining student achievement (Steinberg, 1996). Parental involvement in education is a personal responsibility and plays a tremendous role in children's achievement. Many positive outcomes have been identified as a result of positive parental involvement. When parents demonstrate an interest in their child's education, it is very likely that the children will earn higher grades and test scores, have better attendance, get in trouble less at school, and be more likely to graduate from high school and attend college (Ballantine, 1999). Building relationships and establishing trust with the parents in a school is the cornerstone for the foundation of a successful school. School may not be a place that parents feel comfortable and/or welcome if they are harboring negative feelings of their own past educational experience. Frequently inviting parents in for non-threatening school activities and celebrations of learning can offset some deep-seeded negative perceptions that some parents may possess about school. I believe it is critical that parents be in the school early in the year for something non-threatening. This helps them to establish an opinion

of the school, teachers, and me before they are possibly in for a discipline concern about their child. Parents need to feel relaxed and at ease for trust to be established, and I want them to witness me in various informal roles with the students while they are still formulating opinions about me. These early communications with parents, whether at registration, greeting students on the first day of school, or in the first newsletter speak volumes to gain or break my credibility with parents.

No matter how hard we work within our school walls, there will be some situations that are out of our realm of control as educators. Some of these tragic situations in America have been documented by the work of Jonathan Kozol (1995). His qualitative research has captured the sad tale of many children in America's inner cities of America. Kozol reflected:

So long as the most vulnerable people in our population are consigned to places that the rest of us will always shun and flee and view with fear, I am afraid that educational denial, medical and economic devastation, and aesthetic degradation will be virtually inevitable So long as there are ghetto neighborhoods, and ghetto hospitals, and ghetto schools, I am convinced that there will be ghetto desperation, ghetto violence, and ghetto fear because a ghetto is itself an evil and unnatural construction. (p. 162)

The desperation and pain felt by some school children and their families makes it even more imperative that schools take on the responsibility and utilize

creative means, such as grant money, to provide support networks that break the cycle of despair and abuse in some families.

Commitment to Children and Families

Commitment is one core value that is extremely important to me. I am the type of person who never does anything without giving it 100%. For me there really is no halfway approach of doing a task, and I think this will serve me well as an administrator. The job is very demanding and takes someone who is willing to make those commitments to do what is best for the school and the kids, even if it is inconvenient at times. I know this may be an expectation that will not be met by all staff members, but it will be a belief of mine that I hope to convey in every action I make. This profession is very sacred to me, and I want people to take it to heart as much as I do. I know myself well enough to understand that I have a very low tolerance for incompetence and unprofessionalism in teaching. As an administrator, I will really have to strive for understanding of individuals whose standards are not as high as my own. Collaboratively establishing clearly stated standards of high teacher expectations will assist in accountability. As the philosopher Goethe stated, "Treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is. Treat a man as he can and should be and he will become as he can and should be" (Covey, 1989, p. 301). Leading in a "proactive" (p. 70) fashion as Covey describes and realizing that change occurs from the inside out will help me to deal

with those who do not prioritize their profession to the extent that I do. Being proactive involves focusing my efforts onto things that I can do something about and have the possibility of influencing.

Because of my deep level of commitment to families and this profession, as a proactive leader I will aspire to do all that I can to see what needs to be done, and then immediately follow through to get results. As the school leader, establishing a climate that conveys warmth and caring will be priority.

Brain-based learning research has unleashed many simple things that schools can do to relax learners and guests. Many simple environmental things such as plants, lamps, music, and motivational pictures all have been found to produce relaxed states of minds in learners (Jensen, 1996). Furniture arrangement so that people can see each other provides the most visual enhancement and relaxation. Temperature, noise, and use of color also directly affect people's attention and comfort levels. Implementing some of these simple ideas could greatly enhance the climate that you convey the minute parents open the school or office door.

Increasing and maintaining parental involvement and support is a constant goal of schools in our ever increasingly busy world. The much believed concept that Americans are disgruntled and dissatisfied with public schools today is merely a myth as the results of the 2000 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the

Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools demonstrate (Rose & Gallup, 2000). The perception of American stakeholders from the poll shows an overwhelming view of support for what public schools are doing today. The poll also illustrates how essential parental involvement and support are in student learning. The 2000 results showed that the greatest effect on student achievement are parents (53%) not teachers (26%), and also that the most important factor in learning is parents (60%), not the school (30%). As an administrator, one must capitalize on these perceptions of the public and utilize parents as a key player in the partnership of education.

In my view, parent involvement is a direct consequence of effective communication. When outstanding efforts are made to make parents aware of what is occurring in school, they are more apt to participate. When parents are not given information, or misinformed, they lose faith in the school and trust is lost. Parental involvement in the school will plummet if the communication channels are not flowing. To do this, I will strive to keep communication to parents from the school regular and efficient. Weekly mailbags for parent information will be utilized, and monthly newsletters will be sent home from classrooms and the office. A wonderful tool to build communication efforts is a parent-teacher-student conference day for the first day of the school year. If this sort of day could not be established into the school calendar, then I would expect teachers to call

parents of students on their roster at the beginning of the year just as an introduction and public relations effort. Keeping stakeholders satisfied through clear communication positively impacts the public's perception of your school's effectiveness.

As important as communicating things to parents, is the act of listening. Effective listening techniques such as not interrupting, restating their concerns when they finish, being honest with them about plans of action, and then following up with them the next day if at all possible all show respect and concern for the listener's needs. Building integrity as a leader means that I must listen to parents' concerns, no matter how trivial, and validate their feelings as parents. Meetings with parents can have a tremendous ripple effect in the parents' and teachers' perceptions of my leadership capabilities. I want to do everything in my power to ensure that those ripples permeate positive connotations about me and not examples of ineffective leadership. All of these efforts will demonstrate to all that an honest commitment to families is what I value in a learning community.

High Achievement

As a teacher, I possess the skills of effective transmission of knowledge to students through many creative teaching methods. I utilize cooperative learning frequently in the classroom, because I feel this is a method that can motivate and challenge all students in a way that whole group instruction cannot. Our

classroom is very student-centered and I try to have my voice not be the focus of every lesson. Students have so many powerful things to say, and if given the chance in a comfortable setting, they will convey more information to each other than I could ever hope to accomplish.

During my undergraduate work, I chose Reading Education as my minor because I felt reading was the critical framework for all of the other skills in school. I learned so much about teaching reading and motivating students to read, that this is still my favorite subject to teach to sixth graders, even though they are well beyond the need for direct instruction in reading sub skills. Using high quality literature is the most powerful thing I feel I can do to get students to feel connected to the real world or the past. Writing is so intertwined with reading and can give students the chance to use their powerful voice that they all have. If given the opportunity to write about things that are inspirational to them, they will develop a desire to write that can change their lives (Atwell, 1987). Only when that desire to write is present will students want to publish quality pieces. I strongly believe that if we teach skills first in isolation, they will forever turn off to writing and never develop that voice. I have learned this through success and failure in the classroom, and feel that I have learned how to truly become an effective, powerful teacher of Language Arts. With this background as an administrator, I feel I will have an edge in leading curriculum development, as

well as motivating students. Capitalizing on students' intrinsic motivation to learn through student choice, empowerment, and ownership will ultimately enhance student achievement in the long run.

Multi-year relationships with students can be a very strong benefit that promotes high student achievement. This concept of "looping," where teachers take the same group of students to the next grade level, is proven to enhance the school experience for children, especially those that struggle academically and also improve attendance (Bracey, 1999). Teachers obviously have more time to observe and problem solve for specific children's needs over the two-year period, as opposed to one year. They also reap the benefit of not having to start over each year with fostering parent and student relationships and identifying learner needs. Teachers can literally remove the three week period at the beginning of the school year that they spend getting to know students and establishing procedures. China has seen extremely positive results with looping and the resulting bond of students to teachers (Liu, 1997). In a time when teachers are constantly saying, "I don't have enough time in the classroom!" looping would serve as a means to maximize the school year and allow teachers to capitalize on much needed extra time. The advantageous aspects of looping for student achievement, as well as the benefits it would reap with parent involvement would be something I would want to explore as an administrator. Whether at the

elementary or middle school level, I will encourage the staff to understand the benefits of multi-year connections (looping) with students. This one implementation within a school could positively impact student achievement and parental involvement more critically than many other innovative ideas. It is something I would want to include within my vision for school improvement.

Impacting delivery of curriculum as the instructional leader in a school creates an area of great excitement and challenge for me. The continuous rich body of research on effective teaching methods from educators such as Eric Jensen, Renate and Geoffrey Caine, Howard Gardner, and David Sousa is something that I want to continuously peruse and share with teachers. I feel it is my professional duty as the instructional leader to stay abreast of the newest research finding and supply teachers with those articles and ideas that could directly impact and enhance student achievement. The current literature on brain-based learning (Jensen, 1996) is an area of vast knowledge for teachers. The biological basis of learning intertwined with such things as motivation, attention, assessment, and discipline are incredible resources for teachers to tap. I believe all children can learn, certainly not in the same way and not at the same rate, but the brain-based learning and teaching strategies do more to individualize learning than any other theory I have studied. The practical application strategies that

Jensen explains in his literature provide a wide assortment of choice and alternatives for teachers to use in accommodating children of all ability levels.

Staff meetings, as I envision them, should be professional discussions, centered around a previously distributed research article, where teachers share success stories, reflect, and debate teaching philosophies. I want day-to-day trivia to be handled via memos and e-mail, thus utilizing precious staff development time for just that-- staff development. If our goal is to always heighten student achievement (and certainly not only academic achievement) then teachers should be committed to the constant personal reflection and improvement that professionals do to consistently grow and change.

Another avenue I would use to promote the ongoing learning of teachers is study groups based upon books that support our school mission. Encouraging continuous learning as a professional development opportunity models to students and families the lifelong commitment and rewards that learning provides. Study groups allow the necessary reflection and discussion time that educators need to solidify professional values and beliefs. Having led professional study groups in the past, I adamantly support the concept of peers sharing and discussing personal accomplishments, failures, philosophies, and best practice. Study groups allow for the serious professional conversations that lead schools into reevaluating their

actions. Effective school change cannot begin without these basic opportunities for professional reflection.

Summary

I believe that quality relationships are really the foundation of every aspect of life. If one establishes those positive relationships and builds that sense of community as a leader, most of the other problems take care of themselves. I don't think anyone will willingly accomplish a requested task, especially with quality, if they do not feel cared for by their leader. As a principal, I want to really take some extra efforts to get to know teachers as people, and then once that sense of community is established, we can work for common goals for the good of the school. This basically comes down to the issue of trust and whether or not coworkers feel that they trust the leader's motives. As Douglas McGregor's (Owens, 1998) research indicated, leaders perceive people in two ways, Theory X and Theory Y. When workers have little trust and confidence in their leader because of imposed decisions and little communication, this is Theory X. On the contrary, Theory Y provides an environment where communication, trust, and group responsibility prevail. Encouragement and support permeate through the school.

To build a sense of trust, groups need to first develop relationships based on caring and compassion for each other. This is truly how a team is established,

and they will be willing to do this if they feel their values and contributions are respected. Teachers need the necessary time to develop these relationships. As the administrator, I must work to coordinate schedules and meetings so that collaboration and sharing can happen. This concept again relates to my earlier explanation of how a participatory leadership role is important to me. Teachers will not respect an administrator whose motives seem to convey a message of distrust.

In closing, as I reflect upon my vision of effective teaching and leadership within a school, I am energized to implement the many ideas and concepts from this paper into action. The school administrator plays a pivotal role in establishing the climate and mission for a learning community. My leadership efforts need to be visionary and move the school to its desired state. I must create the atmosphere, with the help of others, that transform the dreams of the learning community into reality. I look forward to stepping into this role someday and impacting the lives and futures of the students, families, and staff that I work with.

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