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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

The world has become a very complex and dynamic place. Students today are required to make sense of a world that increases its base knowledge at an alarming rate. These students have a general idea of what lies ahead of them when they become adults, but cannot nail down what future employment might look like. Fortunately there are dedicated professionals who understand the importance of an educated, informed and resourceful public. Educational leaders must gather these dedicated professionals with a common vision.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY  
SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Master of Arts in Education

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by

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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the  
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As we head into the 21<sup>st</sup> century we must reflect on the accomplishments of the public school system and examine current societal changes that will transport pedagogists into the future. Healy (1990) has concluded “currently, technological and social change have seized the accelerator, propelling us into an uncertain world- of video, computers, the ‘global village’” (p. 45). Public school employees know that comparing present day education to education twenty, thirty, or even forty years ago is futile. The challenge, for those in charge of educating our nation’s youth, is to understand the complexities of today’s families and the environments in which they live. Schools must develop effective environments in which students can establish skills that they will need for future employment in addition to nurturing within these students the intrinsic desire to become lifelong learners.

Those assigned to this charge are not underestimating the task. They understand the road to change is not smoothly paved and future societal needs are often unknown. In the classic book, Endangered

## Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It,

Doctor Jane Healy describes a typical day in an urban school setting:

First to arrive each morning, the “neighborhood” children emerge from the sumptuous lobbies of their apartment buildings, accompanied by nannies or smartly clad parents. Chattering busily, they set about the activities of the morning as they await the arrival of their classmates, who come by-bus from a welfare hotel. These youngsters started the morning in cramped rooms, usually without kitchen facilities, where as many as four children and a mother share two bunk beds. More silently, sometimes somberly, they enter the classroom and begin the school day (Healy, 1990, p. 235).

Healy has identified the decline of the traditional family that teachers and administrators have been experiencing over the last three decades. This decline is defined by widening gaps in equity between ethnic groups and a basic distrust among Americans that public schools can succeed.

Present day school administrators must show an ability to lead in a multitude of ways. They must have a vision for their school and initiate instructional practices that will allow these visions to take place. Speck (1999) indicates that “it is incumbent upon a principal to serve as a role model for collegiality and foster such relationships

among teachers and staff members through a clear focus on student learning” (p. 107). Administrators must understand the need for collaboration between their school and the surrounding community and be aware of legislation and political trends that influence school operations. Finally, administrators must maintain a level of moral and ethical leadership that serves as a model for all members of the school community.

#### The School Administrator as a Visionary Leader

It is imperative that an administrator develop a vision for the direction in which to guide a school. Dwyer, Bassert, Lee, and Rowan (1983) in studying principals found that “all successful principals had a vision to guide their action” (as cited in Speck, 1999, p. 117). From the inception of the vision, the administrator must make sure that representatives from the entire school community participate. At the heart of the vision, and at any attempt to restructure, are the administrator and his teachers. McAdams (2000) stipulated that “the reality is that unless teachers and principals are at the center stage of

any restructuring efforts, and unless they buy into and are trained for the new structure, the effort will fail” (p. 9).

It should be noted that students play an integral part of the visionary team. Wilson and Corbett (2001) observe that “regardless of students’ familiarity with the particulars of a reform, their accounts of what they and their teachers do in the class should serve as indicators of whether the reform has penetrated to the classroom level” (p.2). If what these authors claim were true, it would be logical for students to be instrumental stakeholders in the creation of a school’s vision. Although many stakeholders should develop and share the vision, it is crucial to remember that teachers and administrators will be the principle agents of change.

Along with the guidance of the family, the school has the responsibility of providing students with an environment that enriches both their academic and social well-being. In a well-documented case in Norway, the school community initiated an attempt to curb a tide of bullying that had become increasingly prevalent in the schools. Elliot



Aronson (2000) recounts the three-tiered process that the Norwegian government, in conjunction with the schools, sponsored to change the social dynamic that bred both bullies and their victims:

First community-wide meetings were held to explain the problem. Parents were given brochures detailing symptoms of victimization. Teachers received specialized training on recognizing and dealing with bullying. Students watched videotapes designed to evoke empathy and sympathy for victims of bullying (p. 104).

The people of Norway realized what harmful ramifications bullying was having on its children and communities. They instituted change, not merely for the sake of change, but for the sake of the community. As a result, in less than two years bullying had decreased by fifty percent. This is an inspirational example of vision.

Implementation of a vision manifests itself in three ways: development, implementation, and stewardship. Representatives of the school community get together and develop a plan that meets the needs of all stakeholders. The plan is then implemented and evaluated through standards of accountability. Finally, the plan is assessed and modified where needed.

An administrator must communicate the importance of this responsibility to the community and must continue to keep open the lines of communication throughout his tenure. The message of inclusion and equity for all students must be stressed as a component of the vision. Obstacles to achieving this vision must be identified, clarified, and addressed. Regular input by stakeholders of the vision must occur as well as continued assessment of the plan using data collection and analysis. According to Speck (1999), "A principal whose daily actions are not linked to an overall dream of what the school could be is a mere manager, doomed to fall short of the leadership that can elevate a school to the higher state of learning community" (p. 118). School management is an important aspect of daily school operation, but competent administrators find a way to balance management, vision, and instructional leadership.

#### The School Administrator as an Instructional Leader

According to Murphy and Shiller (1992), "Principals must be change agents, facilitating the change process rather than mandating it.

They must assume responsibility for creating those changes that will lead to high levels of student achievement” (p. 87). An effective administrator is one who advocates quality instructional practices.

As well as maintaining awareness of current instructional practices, an instructional leader must learn and apply motivational theories, as well as models of professional development.

As we progress into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, understanding the importance of technology and its ramifications is crucial. Speck (1999) insists that “technology provides vital links among individuals, schools, and other organizations; manages and accesses information that enables interaction; and allows learning to take place in new and dynamic ways” (p. 189). An administrator must facilitate a school-wide plan that addresses current technology and equips students with the skills to be resourceful in their future endeavors.

Above all, the principal must understand that these theories and practices create, nurture, and sustain a school climate that is conducive to learning for all students. With belief in the notion of equity for all

people, a school principal will ensure that educational practices truly benefit all students.

Primarily, the fundamental reason for the existence of a school is to provide an environment for students' learning. Ultimately it is to create, within each child, the motivation to be a life-long learner.

Diversity within a school enhances this environment and provides real-world experiences for future encounters. Cornell Thomas in his important book, We Can Have Better Urban Schools, stated, "A teacher who creates culturally relevant classroom environments and instructional content promotes active learning that affirms multiple ways of knowing and teaching" (p. 98). This type of instructional practice encourages a community to work together and enjoy its diversity. It is a principal's duty to model such practices and oversee such practices in their teachers' classrooms.

Tantamount to the success of a school is that all of its stakeholders maintain high standards for themselves and for those around them. Linda Lyman (2000) conceptualized this point in her

recounting of Kenneth Hinton, a widely revered urban school principal.

She notes Hinton's six themes in creating a caring school climate:

1. His use of time reveals his priorities;
2. he promotes and encourages others as persons;
3. he listens and solves problems;
4. he keeps the mission focused and central;
5. he does not limit himself or anyone else by or to a role; and
6. he treats every person equally and with respect (p. 88).

Mr. Hinton provides aspiring administrators with an important set of guidelines upon which to adhere. Theoretically, these guidelines seem very easily applicable, but to put such insight into practice takes a caring, compassionate leader who makes the success of the students, teachers, staff, and community his priority.

Thomas (2000) suggests that "being an agent for change has been considered at times to be an essential skill for principals, while at other times the primary focus has been one's level of efficiency regarding the planning and implementation of program development" (p. 19). Therefore, it is important for principals to understand the definition of their role in relation to current administrative trends.

## The School Administrator as an Organizational Leader

The current ISSL Standard 3 put forth by the Iowa Department of Education (<http://www.state.ia.us/educate>) states that an administrator be a leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. Staying abreast of current models of organization and the principles of school management is important to the daily operations of a school.

Cunningham and Cordeiro (2000) found that:

Considerable effort has been expended in recent years to spell out the specific functions of the school principal. One of the key themes that evolve in this analysis is that management functions and clerical chores must not be allowed to dominate the work of a principal. In fact, the most important responsibilities focus on vision and developing and motivating staff to achieve optimum student learning outcomes (p. 137).

Effective leaders take on dual roles; on one hand they are visionaries, applying theory and personal philosophies, while on the other hand they are pragmatists, assuring the safe and fiscally responsible running of the schools. Speck (1999) observes that “the

ability of a principal to organize a learning community with the necessary systems and structures to work together is critical to the ongoing functioning of the organization” (p. 73). As school operations become increasingly site-based, more individuals become involved with making decisions. For an administrator to efficiently manage their time, they must be willing to share responsibilities through collaboration with and coordination of the teachers, staff, students, parents and the entire community. Erickson and Reller (1979) state that:

The burden of responsibility falls naturally upon the building administrator and the members of the faculty to seek alternative means to satisfy local needs and carries with it the need for accountability (p. 317).

Speck (1999) noted that “the principal, teachers, and other staff members must join together as colleagues, rather than work in isolation, if a school is to become a learning community focused on student learning” (p. 105). These shared responsibilities will not simply elevate time constraints felt by the principal, but will emphasize accountability and ownership for all stakeholders. By involving each

of the elements of the community in decision-making processes a larger community is created—by involving the students, their parents get involved; by involving the parents, their community gets involved. Once the community is involved, all stakeholders see the value of a quality education. With all employees focused on a common goal potential problems are more easily identified and solutions more readily sought.

### The School Administrator as a Collaborative Leader

Collaboration cannot end at the school's exits. Insuring that diverse community needs and interests are being addressed is vital to successful school leadership. Cunningham and Cordeiro maintain that:

In the real world of schools, problems are not solved independently. The complexity of the problems addressed by school leaders requires collaboration. Collaboration requires learning to listen to others, collectively reviewing outcomes, and responding to and partaking of relevant discussion (p. 372).

Establishing and maintaining resources within the community assures a system of support synonymous with strong leadership. A strong educational leader realizes the school is an integral part of the



community and parents are partners in the education of their children.

One of the characteristics that made Kenneth Hinton's school so successful was Hinton's open door policy:

Parents said they always felt welcome at the school. The principal's office door, right next to the main entrance, was never closed. All had access to the principal and the assistant principal, whether they were parents, teachers, students, classified staff, or outside visitors (Lyman, 2000).

Embracing this partnership and allowing community members to take part in decision-making processes are positive attributes for a collaborative leader. Community relations must be a priority as an informed public is a less skeptical one. Collaboration between a school, its stakeholders and an informed community will help to ensure a productive working relationship. An open line of communication consisting of feedback in both directions is necessary. Activities to connect the school with the community and vice versa comprise an active collaboration between the two.

For example, students could take part in community service programs and business leaders could be asked to consult with school personnel when designing a technology plan and its curricular development.

### The School Administrator as an Ethical Leader

Each school is filled with citizens who will go on to shape the community of which we will be a part. Robert J. Starrat (1986) explains, "The school promotes a moral way of being. A moral way of being involves three human qualities: autonomy, connectedness and transcendence" (as cited in Cunningham and Cordeiro, 2000, p. 202). According to Starrat, autonomy refers to how individuals make choices based on the constraints of our culture. Choices can be autonomous; however, they are ultimately shaped by culture. Starrat also believes that a person's connectedness with others helps one understand the ethical implications of being concerned for another's well-being. Finally Starrat believes that an important human quality is the ability to transcend beyond something greater than us. This transcendence may take the form of one's work for social change or

one's continued academic pursuits. The power we possess, as an institution, to influence impending generations, should be wielded with care and great forethought.

Upholding a high standard of ethical value can be difficult for an institute of learning. Some schools are attempting to address this obstacle with various forms of character education. Yet, as school populations become more diverse and families less structured the charge of the school to address societal needs becomes more difficult.

A school's influence on its students and neighboring community should never be underestimated. Lynn G. Beck (1994) succinctly states in her book, Reclaiming Educational Administration as a Caring Profession:

In recent years, school culture and climate have been popular topics in educational literature... Two thematic threads running through much of this work in the area have important implications for administrators. The first of these is that the culture of a school has important and far-reaching effects on the thinking and actions of students and teachers. The second is that administrators can do much to shape, define, sustain, or change a school's culture. Leaders seeking to operate under a caring ethic surely would seek to cultivate a culture where such an ethic could flourish (as cited in Lyman, 2000, p.122).

A strong administrative leader effectively communicates a vision for a school with high moral and ethical standards. Speck (1999) exhorted that “honesty and ethical behaviors guide the principal’s actions and demonstrate the sense of purpose and commitment that a school learning community expects from a principal” (p. 87). What is at stake is the future of the community.

#### The Administrator as a Political Leader

Finally, a school administrator must understand that the role of a school in context to the larger political body of which it is a part. McAdams (2000) stipulates that “children and schools are important to everyone who wants to either change or protect the cultural, political, or economic status quo” (p. 260). Decisions made, whether they be social, economic, legal, or cultural, all impact public schools. Many political decisions regarding schools are made at the state level. State legislatures are often ill-informed of problems facing local school districts. Wood (1992) pointed out that “driven by a myopic concern with test scores and possessing little understanding of life inside

schools, the states, charged with control of public education, seem destined to continue making the same mistakes of over regulation” (p. 252). Those decisions made in the political arena often directly impact how an administrator manages a school. For example, school funding may hinge on the passage of bond issues or tax increases. These can be divisive issues for a community and educational leaders can help to mediate and inform. Administrators must be careful, however, when dealing with certain political issues. They must adhere to the letter of the law. Yet, establishing and maintaining an open line of communication with local political representatives will help inform these leaders of the expectations and the needs of their constituents.

A school administrator must also be aware of current trends in education that impact schools and the funding thereof. One such issue affecting public schools is the increasing popularity of home schooling. In the past, the general public had a passive voice in school policy, but as Finn and Rebarber (1992) pointed out, “Perhaps the greatest change has been the entrance into the political arena of representatives of

education's consumers (that is, students, their parents, and their future employers)" (p. 190). A principal must be keenly aware of such consumers and their individual needs.

Special Education is another component of school operations that has taken on a very political tone. In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was enacted to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities. In 1990, the EAHCA was amended and became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The purpose of the amended act was to further clarify and restructure the original act. Yell (1998) articulated that "the IDEA was enacted to assist states in meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities via federal funding of state efforts" (p. 72). Principals today must be knowledgeable of the IDEA and the impact the act has on school policy. Special Education concerns are consuming more and more of an administrator's day. Attention, therefore, must be given to the management of time as to ensure that none of the other leadership components are slighted.

## Conclusion

The world has become a very complex and dynamic place.

Students today are required to make sense of a world that increases its base knowledge at an alarming rate. These students have a general idea of what lies ahead of them when they become adults, but cannot nail down what future employment might look like. Healy (1990) states that, "Parents and schools will need to broaden, perhaps even redefine, traditional parameters of intelligence and learning, not simply because of the changing priorities of future technologies, but also because of present realities" (p. 345). This uncertainty must be daunting in the minds of today's youth. Fortunately there are dedicated professionals who understand the importance of an educated, informed and resourceful public. Educational leaders must gather these dedicated professionals with a common vision.

Today's school administrator must be a visionary leader, one who is willing to take chances, have a mission, and look at change as a school improvement opportunity. Lorraine Monroe, of the Fredrick

Douglass Academy in Harlem, eloquently elaborated this point when asked about what she looks for in a leader:

First and foremost, get a leader who is fearless (or perhaps crazy) enough to take calculated well-calculated risks. Fearless enough to enjoy taking a leap into the void. Fearless in that she is not afraid of getting canned. Fearless because, more times than not, smart risks are worth the gamble and they work (Monroe, 1997).

An administrator today must be an instructional leader who is aware of current trends in education and must be able to articulate this knowledge to the larger school community. Modern day administrators must be managers of the building. They must oversee the operation of a school, be aware of safety concerns, be fiscally responsible, and be sensitive to the needs of all of the employees of the school. An administrator must show a propensity to assemble members of the community and school employees for the greater good of the school and its students. Community resources must be sought after and maintained. McAdams (2000) indicates that, “business leaders can most effectively reform urban schools by using their money and influence to elect reform candidates to boards of education” (p. 259).



The development of business partnerships with schools is an excellent way to link the schools with business leaders. Parents must feel that they are partners in the education of their children. A quality administrator will have high moral and ethical expectations for self, staff, and students. He will model such behaviors and treat with fairness all stakeholders in the school community. Finally, a school administrator must be aware that a school is but a part of a larger political entity that is not static in nature and can greatly effect the operation of a school.

The world is heading into the unknowns of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our nation has shown great resolve in creating a public system of education that has the task of enlightening its diverse masses. This success will continue for generations to come as long as leaders with vision and determination are at the helm.

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