

2007

An administrator's look at leadership and education : a reflective essay

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Musker, Mark, "An administrator's look at leadership and education : a reflective essay" (2007). *Graduate Research Papers*. 1238.

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An administrator's look at leadership and education : a reflective essay

Abstract

My goal in education is obvious: students will develop their own presence of learning. The positive experience they have in school will help them grow into world-class learners. As an educator I empower my students, for at least one day, to know that this is their day to be special. Then I repeat that process for all of them the next day, the next month, and the following years.

Leadership is easy to talk about but difficult to implement. A leader does not solve other people's problems for them. I do believe that a problem will no longer exist, if the problem holder or group has already brainstormed some ideas that may be evaluated in place of it. Why ask people to do a task and then tell them how to do it? I want to be able, within reason, to have faith in and empower my staff, administrative team, or committee members to think outside the box.

AN ADMINISTRATOR'S LOOK AT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Mark Musker

August 2007

Dr. Robert Decker

This Research Paper by: Mark Musker

Entitled: AN ADMINISTRATOR'S LOOK AT LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of
Arts in Education.

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9/24/07
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My first experience in public education began at Arthur Elementary School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. At that time I had no idea what my career would be as an educator. My main concern at that age was: is this the day I have gym class and what time is the next recess? In fact, I was ready to quit school in the second grade because of what I believed was a terrible mistake -- my gym teacher retired. As my third year of school began, it was time for my third-grade buddies to meet the new gym teacher. In a meeting on the playground my friends and I agreed the new gym teacher was cool and an added bonus was that he also coached football at Washington High School, the home of the Warriors.

Mr. Bob Hampton, my gym teacher, and I became friends over the years. I went back to visit when I was in high school and earned credit by helping him with his physical education classes. By the time I graduated from high school I knew I wanted to be a physical education teacher and coach.

I looked up to many of my teachers and coaches. Even though I was not the best student or player, I learned many lessons about life on the football field, in the training room, and in the classroom. While I was in school what occurred to me was that students, teachers, and administrators are all integral parts of an educational team. The students are learning about what it takes to mature, grow with knowledge, and learn how to socialize in a more civilized way. I was influenced by some of the comments that several of my former teachers and coaches said to me. Such sayings as, "the sky will always be blue" and "on any given day one can be at one's best," have had an impact on me as I often use them in my classroom today.

My beliefs concerning education are eclectic. The main one is that failure is a perception. What happens in my classroom is that everyday is a new challenge and we do not have time for failure. What we do have is an opportunity to let students realize, at the very moment of getting a wrong answer or failing a test, that they now know what does not work for them. They also need to learn new behaviors such as improving study habits, not rushing through a paper, not talking on the phone or to their friends, and so forth, in order to be successful. The students I teach have behavioral issues. They know my expectations and I know theirs. My job is to point them in the right direction.

My goal in education is obvious: students will develop their own presence of learning. The positive experience they have in school will help them grow into world-class learners. As an educator I empower my students, for at least one day, to know that this is their day to be special. Then I repeat that process for all of them the next day, the next month, and the following years.

Leadership is easy to talk about but difficult to implement. A leader does not solve other people's problems for them. I do believe that a problem will no longer exist, if the problem holder or group has already brainstormed some ideas that may be evaluated in place of it. Why ask people to do a task and then tell them how to do it? I want to be able, within reason, to have faith in and empower my staff, administrative team, or committee members to think outside the box.

Leadership of Action Learning:

Action learning is a continuous process. The one constant in life is change, and how it relates to individuals, groups, and communities in education. Jimmy Buffett has written a song that places action learning in perspective. The chorus of the song is:

“It is these Changes in Latitudes,
Changes in Attitudes,
Nothing remains quite the same,
With all of our running and all of our cunning,
If we did not laugh we would all go insane.”

Action learning sometimes can also be somewhat insane. I really liked what Elaine Wilmore says in her *Principal Leadership: Advocating, Nurturing, and Sustaining* are the important lifeblood of the school. (2002, p. 33)

Of the six areas in Standard One of the ISLLC, the most important skill is effective communication. An administrator must be an effective communicator to sell the vision of the district to his teachers, giving them a direction and goals to develop and accomplish. The students should also become aware of the vision and what they are expected to achieve. The administrator needs to communicate a direct plan of the building through small or large group parent meetings. (Martin, Wright, Danzig, Flanary, Brown, 2005, pp. 66-68)

An administrator's vision looks toward the success of the students, teachers, and how the school represents the community. In action learning an instructional leader insists on content and instruction that ensure student achievement. Data collection and analysis are important to guide the school in a positive direction.

Standard Two of ISLLC about Instruction and Learning expands further on the role of action leadership. It looks directly at the curriculum for students, teachers, and administrators who are planning the future for the students. The administrator would surround himself or herself with curriculum specialists, department heads, and teachers who will be planning and teaching the new curriculum. An administrator of the school must facilitate the changing of the curriculum, but not give the curriculum committee too much direction on what he or she wants and how it should be done. The committee needs to create curriculum and to know that the administrator trusts and believes in their creativity as educators, instead of being told what is expected of them and how to do it.

Bennis believes that the world is the product of great teams consisting of creative persons who have banded together to achieve remarkable successes, that would not have been possible through a traditional hierarchical approach. The research on group process in schools finds that leaders who trust and believe in others and model these traits will accomplish much more and attract devoted followers. (Martin, et al., 2005, pp. 66-68)

The last area of action learning involves the community. The community is very important in developing curriculum for those college-bound students and those who will be transitioning into the work force. The working world's prerequisite is that the students need to know the basics and they will be taught the rest. This makes sense for them in their transition from high school into the real world. Colleges across the country are looking for the brightest and best students coming out of high school. This course of action has always been a standard. As stated in *The World Is Flat*, the urgency at this time is that we are falling behind the rest of the world in technology and in smarter ways to do things (Friedman, 2005).

In the year of 2006 and beyond, action learning will be the responsibility of all parties that have a stake in the education of our students, children, and adults. Curriculums will change as we continue to improve technology and find smarter ways to teach in order to keep up with countries such as India, Japan, and China, to name a few.

With all that is happening today in the world of medicine, engineering, and technology, action learning should and will continue to define the education of America. This will teach us all to bring our curriculums into the now with action learning.

Leadership of Educational Change:

An administrator's role in educational change is significant. Administrators are asked to anticipate educational changes within their school as well as support the changes throughout the district. An administrator practically has the role of a used car salesman at times of educational change.

For example, a student, a teacher, and a parent are all looking for a used car, each has a different rationale for doing so. As all three potential car buyers are eagerly looking for the perfect car on the car lot. The used car salesman walks over to the student first to find out what he intends to buy. The student says, "I need a flashy car to impress my friends and take my girlfriend to the prom next month. I have been saving money from my job and want to buy this red Mustang." The salesman thinks for a minute and tells the student, "Flashy cars are a dime a dozen. To really impress your friends, you might want to look at this Chevy Impala instead. With a Mustang, your insurance rates are going to be really high." The high school student thinks for a while and responds, "You are right. Even though I would look really cool in that red Mustang, I can not afford paying such high insurance rates." Likewise, an administrator also has to plant the seeds of change in the minds of the students to begin the process. The administrator should explain to the students that educational change is important and will help improve whatever they are planning to pursue after high school. Like the used car salesman trying to show the student all the positives and negatives about buying a flashy car, the administrator also must provide honest and useful information so the students can make decisions for themselves. Change is a process, not an event. (Hall & Hord, 2006, p. 4)

The salesman then walks over to the teacher who is interested in buying a reliable car just to take her to work each day. She chooses a Chevy Trailblazer with plenty of extras. The salesman tells her, "I do not think the Trailblazer is the right car for you. It has all these unnecessary features, such as a four-wheel drive and extra-large tires, which will cost you more and break down faster. You should get a Ford Escort with only the

basic features, which will make it a more reliable car for your uses.” The teacher likes his assessment and gets the Ford Escort. This is similar to an administrator who has to communicate effectively with the teachers, define the direction of the district and the administrator’s plan, and take the school to a positive direction. He or she knows that teachers must be involved in the process of educational change and provides them room for creativity. A teacher-lead initiative will give the teachers a feeling of ownership and will make change possible. (Dunklee, 2000, p. 145)

Finally, the salesman approaches the parent who is looking at a Dodge Caravan to transport her children to and from school as well as their activities. The salesman recommends a Hyundai Entourage instead. He explains to her that the Entourage has side airbags which make it safer on the road, and it has better gas mileage than the Dodge Caravan because she drives the van mainly in the city. The parent sees the advantages of the Entourage and gladly takes the salesman’s advice. This resembles an administrator who has to attend a monthly meeting with a group of parent leaders who are concerned about the change in the curriculum for the new school year. The administrator has to listen to all their concerns, and use those concerns to show how the school will head for a positive direction. He must also provide data and examples of how the new curriculum will help the students improve their test scores and, in turn, help many students win scholarships and the district earn federal funds. By then, bond issues will most likely be a last option. As a result, the parents not only have their doubts removed, but they also embrace and welcome a change. Parents as leaders is not a new concept, however, it may bring parents and community members to think of fundraising, volunteering in their children’s classrooms, or even reading the monthly newsletter from the school.

Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement (2003) discusses the change in parent leadership in school as it involves educational change and significant change such as *Co-leading* with teachers, children and other parents, with respect to all children in the school; *Participating* with others in the school community as it relates to educational practices; *Advocating* education to other parents, community, and policy makers; and, the last and most important bullet in my opinion, *Assuming* collective responsibility for the learning of all children.

An administrator's role in educational change is significant, because he or she has to accept the challenge of leadership of the school or even manage the environment. For example, at an administrator's conference at the Lake of the Ozarks, after a keynote speaker spoke on the administrator's role in educational leadership and how it is a daily commitment, two administrators are talking after dinner on the dock. One of them has been a principal for twenty years at different educational levels, and the other has had twelve years of teaching experience and has just been named a high school principal in his district for the up-coming school year. The topic of their conversation is educational change. Both men agree that educational change is a constant progression. The younger principal admits that he is somewhat nervous about his new position, but he has some good ideas about educational leadership. The wise and older principal then tells him a lesson he learned from a former administrator many years ago. He says that educational change, along with leadership in a school, is as simple as dropping a rock in the water. The older administrator then picks up a rock and throws it a few feet off the dock into the water. As the rock hits the water, it sends ring after ring of ripples away from the splash. The rings become bigger away from the rock but very small from where the rock goes in. He explains how an administrator is like the rock and as he proposes change, he will send out information that will continue to spread and grow farther as do the ripples in the water. Educational change affects everyone, it touches students, teachers, certified personnel, and community members. To create educational change, one must keep throwing rocks into the water. Ripples are like communication. The more ripples one creates, the more people one will reach. This will allow a principal to support, sustain, and drive the direction of educational change in the building as well as the district.

Instruction and Learning could be one of the most important of the six Standards of the ISLLC. A few key words are really important in this standard: curriculum, supervision, instruction, motivation, technology, measurement, assessment, co-curricular, change, process, discipline, student, and services. Any administrator should look at those words and be able to define educational leadership.

To achieve educational change in a school or a school district, an administrator needs to provide an appropriate climate. Thomson states that school climate has been described as the way things feel within an organization as well as the way things are done

in society. It is important to think about how climate and culture create a powerful concept of what the school or school district values, what their expectations are, and the image their projects will build. (1993, p. 33)

An administrator must be able to create a positive climate toward educational change, be a leader and not a manager in this process. Change is constant and a leader is not supposed to change the world, but to lay a good solid foundation and to continue to throw rocks in the lake.

Leadership of Learners:

I believe that I am a leader of learners. Education is a chosen profession and many people choose to become teachers for countless reasons. There is an old saying that states, "*Those who can do, those who can't teach.*" Over the years, I have heard many of my colleagues joked about how they got into teaching for the money. It is my personal belief that those who earn a degree in education and choose to teach are not going into this profession just to get a job. These neophytes are heading into education because they feel they can make a difference with the young people.

As an administrator and leader of teachers, students, and the community, I need to have a plan or strategy to help lead this diverse group of individuals in school improvement. Each diverse group has its own issues and will need guidance. Things will either get better or worse, but they seldom stay frozen waiting for someone to fix them. I choose to work for continued improvement of the school and the community.

Setting the tone of a school can be very difficult for a new administrator. Entering a building for the first time as a school's new principal can be overwhelming. As a leader of learners, I consider communication to be crucial and at times it can make or break the connection I have with others. "Too many people fail to realize that good communication goes in both directions" (Purdy, 1977, p. 2). Communication can also make or break a staff meeting. The same topics are often being brought up again and again. Certain people seem to be monopolizing the discussion each time. To make matters worse, each individual interprets what transpires according to his or her own experiences, expectations, and perspectives, thus little is done to advance collaborative

thinking, much less mutual understanding among the staff. Frankly, nothing really meaningful is accomplished. (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 74)

The second area that is a must for all leaders is to be an effective listener. Administrators have to field many different questions, and deal with many different situations throughout the school day. Effective administrators are successful in deciphering and making intelligent sense out of the disordered jumble of impressions they must deal with daily. "Their ability to construct sensible meaning begins with deep listening" (Shotter, 1993, p. 74).

Communication is the most important tool in being a leader. For example, an administrator expects teachers to step forward and take the leadership role in their departments and with their students. If good communication is not present, an administrator will set aside what is expected to be accomplished and tip the meter that measures progress in reverse.

The leader of learners is also a person who is very good and gets better at putting together the many pieces of an intricate puzzle to make the school day flow. The start of each new day brings a new puzzle and the help to put the puzzle together has to come from everyone. Associate principals, department heads, teachers, and students will all help to place the pieces in the puzzle. A leader of learners is to help everyone place his or her pieces until they are able to do it on their own.

The administrator has to be involved at all times, day or night. These include early morning meetings, staff evaluations, parent calls, teacher concerns, student concerns, lunch duty, afternoon meetings, a band concert one night, a football game the next night, and a volleyball tournament the following weekend. A leader of learners must also be ready to incorporate what may happen unexpectedly within a twenty-four hour period. No high school opens its doors at 8:00 a.m. and closes them at 5:00 p.m. Administrators across the country are operating little cities that incorporate many things that other adults may encounter in a regular workday. For example, the day begins at Cedar Rapids Kennedy High School at 5:30 a.m. as the football players come to lift weights, and it concludes around 11:00 p.m. as the show choir finishes, play practice completes its nightly run-through, and the third shift begins for the building engineers.

Administrators who take on the responsibility of being leaders of learners communicate effectively, have good listening skills, and building culture and climate in the school and community. “School culture and climate are often intertwined and are both related to organizational behavior and productivity” (Fiore, 2001, p. 8). School climate includes the different aspects of the school that influence behavior and affect how people interact with others. School climate is essential and could be linked to the morale of the school. It can be divided into two different areas that define the school: academic and social. A school’s academic climate is the result of how the school uses rewards and praise, the effectiveness of teachers and the principal, and the collaborative process that exists within the school. A school with a good climate will run smoothly and the opposite would happen if the climate is stagnant.

Social climate is a combination of the appearance, the comfort, and the orderliness in facility; opportunities that students have for participation in school programs, the opportunities that teachers have for communication within their departments; as well as opportunities for staff development and for them to observe others. (Sackney, 1988)

My opportunity for being a leader of learners begins in my classroom and spreads into the hallways, talking with other students, teachers, and even the administrators. It also comes from my commitment to education and how I role-model my commitment day in and day out. Being a leader of learners offers me a vast opportunity to become a more effective leader, provide a model for the school’s academic and social climates, and to run a school that promotes opportunity for all students and teachers to learn and grow in a positive system.

The administrator is the most recognized person in the building, at school events, and in the community. He or she provides service to the school district and community and continues to develop leadership and management skills. The ISLLC defines six standards that encourage service: *Vision, Instruction and Learning, Management and Operations, Community, Ethics, and Political, Social, Legal, Economic, and Cultural Context*. These six areas all help to set up the building blocks for the administrator when he or she seeks answers to provide service.

Teachers who become administrators are continuing their services from one level to the next. The difference between them is that a teacher provides direct service to the students and parents, whereas an administrator provides service to a much more expansive area. For example, he or she puts forth a vision to lead the school in a direction that will allow for strategic planning, data collection, collaborative decision-making, and relies on effective communication to offer a guide to students, teachers, and the community.

A school administrator is also an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating services for sustaining school culture. Instruction and learning are services provided by an administrator in such areas as school and program-scheduling, learning and motivation theory, the change process, student services, and staff development. Management and operations are also services maintained by the administrator. They necessitate leadership and coordinates of the core areas to keep the school doors open and the building running. They also include food service, office administration, personal procedures, facility and maintenance, student transportation, and, most importantly, safety and security of the building. If any of these areas of service deviates from the daily schedule, the school's structure will be weakened and the administrator must use collaborative decision-making with core staff to provide an alternative to keep the school running.

Leadership of Service:

A service administrator provides that is as important as keeping the school running is working with parents and community members. He or she will give the parents the opportunities to become more involved in school organizations, such as booster clubs for sports, band, choir, and the theater arts. These respective groups require parent support in such areas as curriculum direction, safety issues in the school, community service, and ideas to help the school run in a positive direction. Community interest would include the climate for cultural diversity, business partnerships, and bond issues.

Ethics is the discipline in dealing with what is good and bad, morale, duty, and obligation. Integrity is important to maintain when working with students and adults. An

administrator with integrity is a person that can be trusted to do what is best for the school district and the students. Interpersonal relationships are key in keeping the morale of the students, teachers, and parents involved and will continue to help meet the goals and requirements of the district and the personal goals of the administrator. “We put X number of students in that building with Y number of adults, and continuously deal with Z number of parents and patrons, all kinds of new, interesting, and challenging ‘social events’ arise” (Owens, 1998, p. 43).

Political, Social, Legal, Economic, and Cultural Context is a standard that baffles individuals who are not directly related to administration in education. The confusion can start with the interpretation of school board policies, state and federal laws, issues of conflict resolution, current issues affecting teaching and learning, and what the administrator considers to be his or her professional affiliations and the resources available for their use. For example, an administrator may have to explain to parents, due to the safety issues and the ensuing lawsuits if something should go wrong, why their children can not have a school-sponsored senior trip. Special education is another area that is heavily governed with federal and state laws. An administrator who is involved in special education will know that issues may arise quickly with students, teachers, and parents. The district must provide a service as stated in Public Law 94-142 to a student that has been diagnosed with a disability in many different areas. The administrator must be aware of such services, even though special education is still in its infancy stages.

In conclusion, it is important to continue to learn and test one’s philosophies in education, to grow along with the generations. Action learning has provided that experience for me. Educational change is a continuous process. As an administrator I shall lead with effective communication, active listening, provide guidance, be a leader of learners, participate actively, create a positive climate toward educational change, work with teachers to empower their knowledge of action leadership, supervise, motivate, and assess the outcome of the change. I can build upon the school culture by advocating for students, teachers, and other key people directly involved with education. When an administrator can pull together all these educational areas to fulfill the goals of the building and the district, he can create a positive environment that will continue to function well.

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