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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

My decisions to teach, and to now become, an administrator has received much thought. This thinking has caused me to evaluate my personal value system, identifying the beliefs that are important to me. This reflection has also identified individuals that have had an impact on the development of my value system. These people have molded, formed, shaped me into the person writing this today. The lessons have been many.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

_____

by

Michael J. Panoch

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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My decisions to teach, and to now become, an administrator has received much thought. This thinking has caused me to evaluate my personal value system, identifying the beliefs that are important to me. This reflection has also identified individuals that have had an impact on the development of my value system. These people have molded, formed, shaped me into the person writing this today. The lessons have been many.

Another important part of the reflection was the identification of areas of weakness, or at least skills that need improvement. It is important to know weaknesses as well as strengths. A focus over the next few years is to work on these weaknesses, as well as further develop strengths as the journey to become an educational leader continues.

Many people and experiences have influenced and affected my belief in education. The most influential people have been my family. My parents are both high school graduates that have worked their entire lives on the factory assembly lines. My parents believed deeply in the American dream that children can achieve more than their parents were able to achieve. As a child, my parents reinforced the importance of school, and the benefit of an education. They wanted my sister and me to go to college and attain degrees. They understood that a college degree opens doors of opportunities, and they instilled this fundamental belief within their children.

My parents also believed in work. As blue-collar workers, my parents understood work. At an early age, they delegated the responsibilities within the household to my sister and me. These responsibilities taught me the value of work, a belief used throughout high school and college to finance my education. Perhaps this is the reason that students are always doing something in my class. It may be the current assignment, helping other students, or reading a book. Students are expected to be working during class. This helps with student achievement and student learning (Wong & Wong, 1998).

Another important value my parents taught me was simplicity. They did not provide me with the luxuries of life. In fact, they still have only one television, and they still use a rotary telephone. The clothes on my back may not have been name brand, but they kept me warm. My parents provided the essentials: a safe home, warm clothing, and hot meals. They also helped me develop a fundamental religious belief and a strong work ethic, which supports me on this journey of life. My parents built a strong foundation and tried to give me the tools to build from there. In my eyes, they were very successful parents.

Another person that has made an impression on my belief system is Lynne Vaske. Lynne was introduced to me during my freshmen year of high school. She was the youth minister for the church that I attended with my parents. My parents took me to church every Sunday, but Lynne introduced me to God. She also introduced me to teaching. Lynne had taken a similar job in a community

very close to the college I attended, and she invited me to help her work with the high school students in her church. The experience of working with high school students in a religious setting was a truly positive experience. This experience reinforced education as my future.

The final person that has led me to administration is my wife of three years. She is also a teacher, and she comes from a family of teachers. Her mother, two sisters, and many aunts and uncles are all teachers. As we were dating, we would talk about the future, and she was the one that helped me to think about my future in education. Where will my career be in five years? This is the question she has caused me to ask, and through much reflection I entered the principalship program at the University of Northern Iowa. The decision was a wise one as I now realize that my future in education is in overall school leadership.

This is my ninth year of teaching high school mathematics. My first five years of teaching were at Wahlert High School in Dubuque, Iowa. The educational philosophy implemented at Wahlert High School is outcome-based education. Outcome-based education focuses on three premises: all students can learn, success breed's success, and school can control success (Spady & Marshall, 1991). This is an optimistic theory in education, and the premises are similar to some of my personal beliefs. They are also among the values that should be

contained in a school's core of shared values, ideas, and purposes (Sergiovanni, 2000).

This theory can also be used in different settings. These premises are also a part of my coaching philosophy. As a coach, trying to put athletes in situations where they can be successful is a personal priority. For example, if one of the baseball players I coach is a terrible hitter, then do not use practice time to allow the athlete to hit against a live pitcher. Instead, have him do a variety of drills that will strengthen his fundamentals. Once the fundamentals are in place and the hitter has become successful in drills, the next phase is a controlled setting. The athlete may now participate in live hitting, but allow the pitcher to only throw fastballs. This allows the hitter to gain confidence in hitting against a live pitcher. The next phase is to put the player into a game. Because the batter developed some confidence in hitting through a controlled practice situation, the athlete has a greater chance to be successful. This process allows me to guide the athlete, and the athlete develops a belief in his ability. In my opinion, this is the spirit of high school athletics.

I believe all students can learn and this concept has allowed me to see the difference that confidence can make within a person. An example of this within my classroom would be when asking questions of students. If a student is struggling with confidence, then it is important to ask questions they will get correct. The student gains some confidence through answering correctly in front

of the class. This will only work if the environment is a safe environment (Principles and Standards for School Mathematics, 2000). Confidence can be created in the classroom just like it can be established on the playing field. It is the teacher's job to put students in situations of success in order to build confidence. There is some research that disagrees with the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), and disagrees with the idea that self-esteem produces academic achievement (Kohn, 1994). I choose to follow the research more closely aligned with my personal belief system.

Relationships are an important part of my educational philosophy. Teachers need to know students in order to teach them well (Sergiovanni, 2000). One of my personal goals is to talk to each student each day. This can be accomplished through classroom discussion, individual help during class, or by simply saying "Hello," as a student walks through the door. In my opinion, it is important for students to know how important they are to me. In fact, "No significant learning occurs without significant relationships" (as cited in Payne, 2001, p. 18). Effective teachers use names, especially when they want a student to do something or behave in a certain way. Teachers must say you are important to me as a person (Wong & Wong, 1998). Teachers must communicate with all students each day. Taking this one step further, communication is an essential skill for the first year teacher (Buckner, 1999).

I believe creating relationships is also an effective skill for students, and I try to foster this skill through cooperative learning. Cooperative learning can be defined as any time a group of students work together to achieve a goal. Face-to-face interaction and small group skills are two essential elements in effective cooperative learning activities (Bailey, 1990). Cooperative learning also assists students to form friendships and enables students to appreciate differences in learning (Artzt, 1997). Educationally, cooperative learning is an effective strategy for many students, but not for all (Fairhurst, 1995). Research also shows that cooperative learning experiences in mathematics classroom foster improved attitudes toward the subject (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). These benefits are the reason relationships with students and cooperative learning are a continued part of my educational growth as a teacher.

My religious faith also drives my personal philosophy, believing in the good of all people, students, and parents. Most of the time it is very simple to find the good in a student, but sometimes it takes a little work. However, this goes back to the idea that every student can learn (Spady & Marshall, 1991). Sometimes it just takes a little time.

The American dream is also one of my beliefs, the same American dream of my parents. Education is the way to make dreams come true. Graduating from high school opens doors, and as one attains more degrees, one accumulates more keys to open doors. It is my responsibility to model this idea to students through

continued learning. There is a proverb that states: "If you would plant for days, plant flowers. If you would plant for years, plant trees. If you would plant for eternity, plant ideas" (Hill, 1994, p. 2). Who knows what students may be inspired to do.

My experience in education has also taught me that there are flaws in the system. There are many burdens placed upon the school. Rather than focusing on learning, many administrators are saddled as caretakers and sophisticated policemen (Kaplin & Owings, 1999). The political candidates do a great job pointing out the shortcomings of education. In fact, those elected last term promised to fix education, as did their predecessors. However, it will be individuals that will be the solution to educational reform, not the systems that are created (Lezotte, 1992). I intend to be one of those individuals.

The education system is a fundamental American concept, and society has been looking to this system as a solution for its problems. Schools are expected to teach the children, but cannot expect them to do homework. Schools must model values and ethics, but do not allow God into the classroom. Schools need to prepare children for the future, but continue to work with budget cuts. State standards make sure that teachers know how to teach, but do not compensate them adequately for the work. Our society is looking to the educational system for solutions, but is also limiting the schools ability to solve the problems. It is a catch twenty-two.

My educational journey as an educator has taken me to three different high schools. The first experience was while attending college, and coaching high school baseball for my hometown. Because this was a summer job, my experiences within the philosophies of the school were limited, but the principal taught me one very important thing. He was a person, and not the disciplinarian that my classmates feared while attending school. He was more than the guy that sat with his family in the front of church. He had a personality, and he even smiled once or twice. This changed my perception of administrators. In fact, it was an eye-opening experience. Administrators were no longer business-oriented individuals that were not concerned with individual students. They were concerned about student success, just like the classroom teacher.

My second experience was my first high school teaching job. Don Miller was the principal at Wahlert High School during my five years there, and I have learned much from his leadership style. Mr. Miller was the protector of the school vision, and he took this very seriously. With the vision in place, the faculty was to come up with the outcomes and qualifiers used to demonstrate the means to reach the vision. The faculty meetings were focused on these outcomes. The faculty would have to come to consensus on the outcomes before going to the school board. Some of these faculty meetings were heated debates. Mr. Miller allowed the teachers to voice opinions and beliefs, never saying, "This is the way

it has to be done." Rather, he would officiate the meetings, and would allow the faculty to come to a solution with which we could live.

One reason Mr. Miller could use this style is Wahlert is a Catholic high school, and much of the faculty had a common link, religion. The vision is religiously based, and the teachers worked for less pay when compared to public teachers, but the teachers were also working for the greater glory.

Another belief of Mr. Miller is the evaluation process. Each teacher was to create a yearly teaching portfolio with a variety of activities implemented. This process made me a better teacher. Things like gender equity were no longer words; they were educational issues that needed to be incorporated into my teaching.

My third experience, and current teaching position, is at Jefferson High School in Cedar Rapids. There is a distinct difference between Don Miller and Robert Tesar of Jefferson. Mr. Tesar is working in a much larger school in a much larger district. Mr. Tesar has trusted associate administrators to whom he delegates authority on the day-to-day issues. This allows Mr. Tesar to have an open door policy. Teachers may stop and talk to Mr. Tesar with issues, or Mr. Tesar may visit classrooms to see teachers teaching. Mr. Tesar is an instructional leader.

One trait of a good leader I have learned while at Jefferson is the importance of communication. Mr. Miller only talked to me when he had

something to say. Mr. Tesar talks to me. He asks me about my day, about my wife, and about the athletes I coach. He does this to all faculty members. He takes the time for us. Mr. Tesar believes in the importance of a relationship that is more than supervisor-employee. He believes in person-to-person relationships.

This is an important issue when I consider some of the obstacles I will face as an administrator. My goal is to be an instructional leader. I hope to avoid the growing problem of being a manager (Teitelbaum, 1990). I believe that it is important to have an open door policy that applies to my office, to the faculty lounge, and to the cafeteria.

These individuals have taught me many things, and there are many other traits other people have taught me. Coaching has taught me to pay attention to detail, to develop a plan, to create a back-up plan, and to communicate with the team and with parents of the players. All are important skills successful leaders apply with ease. These are things that have been taught to me by coaches.

My experiences and beliefs in education can now be used to help me prepare to become an administrator. There are many things that an administrator must know, must do, and must be like. There have been many practicum experiences that have helped prepare me in my future role. These experiences go beyond the classroom. This makes sense when one thinks about the number of hours the administrator spends in the public eye.

Creating a Shared Vision

I believe all educational leaders and all schools need to have a vision. It is the single most important thing in a school (Sergiovanni, 2000). Effective schools have a vision that includes learning for all students, and they effectively communicate this vision to others so they may share in the vision (Lezotte, 1992). My role as an administrator will be to protect the vision, and try to have all stakeholders aware of their roles in working towards the vision. I know my role is to be instructional leader. It is the principal's most important task (Shahid, 2001). Being an instructional leader involves defining the mission, managing curriculum, supervising teaching, monitoring student progress, and promoting an instructional climate (Fidler, 1997).

While I was at Wahlert, I was a part of the ongoing development of the vision, and ways to implement this into the classroom. Mr. Miller was the protector of the school vision, and would always challenge the faculty to focus on what we want students to know, what we want students to do, and what we want students to be like. This helped us as we worked to interpret and define the school's vision.

My experience managing curriculum and development has come with the writing of the district math assessment. I was a member of a group of math teachers that identified the major concepts taught district wide in geometry. This research led to the development of a district geometry assessment, which will

hopefully provide data that can be interpreted. However, this is only the second year in this process, and there is still much to be done on our measurement tool. The data will not be as meaningful until a valid assessment tool is created. This data will also be used to monitor student progress in geometry.

This process is for mathematics, but as an educational leader, it will be important to understand that each content area has struggles. Science is in the process of creating a measurement tool. There are many educational questions that will be asked. This process helped me be prepared for those questions, and perhaps, even provide some direction in answering the questions. Researching and working on this has taught me something important. One may not get it right the first or second time.

I have demonstrated my belief in the success of all students and creating a learning environment in my classroom as well as outside of my classroom. In addition to my years of teaching, one area in which I have been allowed to create and implement a vision has been through my coaching experiences. I have coached for eleven years, and I have been a varsity head swimming coach for the last two. There is a significant difference between an assistant coach and the head coach. The buck stops with me. It was my responsibility to take a program that was struggling, and create a positive experience for students. I met with the athletes, parents, and administrators. Together we created a vision, and set attainable goals for the athletes. The athletes were constantly trying to attain their

goals, and received weekly feedback on their progress. This feedback demonstrated growth, and it motivated them to work harder. This growth has caused me to look at the established vision. That vision was a guide for the first season, but it needs to be refined for the next season.

I understand coaching a team is not exactly the same as being a school's educational leader. However, there are many parallels. There is the need to create a handbook to outline policies, communicate expectations to those with a vested interest, working within the confines of a budget, be held accountable for one's actions, and be in a publicly visible position where every decision is debatable. I have learned much from my coaching experiences, and I feel this will benefit me in my role as an educational leader.

As a future administrator, I understand that developing a vision will take time (Davis, 1998). Teachers and staff members will be in different places philosophically. An important step to create a vision will be to alter behaviors and beliefs (Moore, 1993). One way to accomplish this is train the faculty in an effective program. Taking in-service time to train the faculty in the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* would be an example. This would create a common language for all to use, and could be a starting point to take the steps necessary to implement change.

Another important aspect of being a visionary is to understand what needs to be done, how to do it, and what it will look like when it is finished (Davis,

1998). One of Steven Covey's (1990) habits is to begin with the end in mind. Since the faculty is trained in the 7 Habits, they will be able to understand this concept as the school grows and changes.

<div align="center">Building Relationships</div>

The most important thing I have learned from coaching that will be beneficial as an educational leader is the importance of relationships. There are the relationships with students, parents, and the community. I have witnessed many tremendous teachers work with young adults. Even though the teachers all have different ways of delivering the message, I believe there is a common thread. These tremendous teachers care and are concerned about the students. Successful teachers care about the children in the classroom. Dr. James Comer states, "No significant learning occurs without significant relationships" (as cited in Payne, 2001, p. 18). These teachers address students and create a learning environment that is inviting for learning. When students are invited to learn, the students care about learning (Tomlinson, 2002). The teacher and the students are partners in learning.

I believe an educational leader must create relationships. Educational leaders are the key individuals in facilitating school improvement (Bailey, 1990). In fact, educational leaders cannot get anywhere without relationships (Fullan, 2001). Schools get better when relationships improve (Perkins-Gough, 2002).

There are many different relationships I would need to create. The first group is with the teachers and staff in the building. These relationships can be created in professional settings by implementing a two-way open-door policy. The teachers are welcome in my office, and I am welcome in their classrooms. Faculty meetings will be used to recognize teaching accomplishments. Hallway discussions will focus on how the teacher is feeling, how their family is doing, and asking about ways I can help them.

An educational leader must create relationships with parents. Although I could never be fully prepared to deal with every situation that may arise, I feel my coaching experience will be helpful. I have met with parents regarding their child's playing time. I have issued suspensions. I have celebrated with the parents in times of joy, and I have cried with them in times of sorrow. I know and understand the importance of these relationships and how they can affect a child. I have benefited from these experiences and will use them as I work with parents discussing educational concerns, or implementing discipline strategies. I believe a healthy relationship will benefit the child, and I will try to be proactive when communicating with parents. I will also try to instill this philosophy with the teachers by using e-mail or phone conferences. Addressing parents proactively can reduce the impact of negative news. It also provides time to create some form of intervention strategy. This intervention strategy could be implemented in

different content areas because teachers will be working collaboratively to help the student.

Educational leaders must also create relationships with the community. I hope to create a collaboration with the community. I have witnessed and participated in these collaborations while teaching at Jefferson. This has been accomplished with Jefferson's business alliance. There is a strong business relationship with certain community businesses. We also have committed staff to nurture these relationships. In fact, there were building in-services where teachers toured the facilities of our business partners. These were tremendous tours. The faculty spent the day at different sites touring buildings and learning the skills necessary for the future employee. I toured an investment firm that helped reinforce the mathematical skills necessary to be successful.

As an educational leader, I see the benefit of these relationships and collaborations. Businesses can be a great resource. Integrating an afternoon in-service at the finance firm will reinforce many positive things teachers are doing, and identify the things that teachers need to do to prepare students. This is useful and immediate feedback to the faculty in a non-threatening manner. It encourages continued learning and identifies the changes made in the business world; the world these graduating students will soon be joining. Relationships with the community allow for the creation of such a business alliances. These alliances

create a positive community image, and the relationships provide resources that the school may be unable to provide.

Organizing for Efficiency

Another common characteristic that I feel is essential in order to be an effective educational leader is organization. In an article entitled *How Can Principals Spend More Time on Instructional Leadership*, Barbara Shahid (2001) identifies these time management and organizational tips:

1. Analyze your own use of time. This can be a "real eye opener." Many principals do not realize how ill spent their time is.

2. Emphasize the concept of a school as a learning community in revising your school's mission or vision, so that as you start spending more time on instructional leadership, your constituents will likewise understand what is important and what is not important.

3. Reduce the amount of time spent overseeing aides and teachers who are responsible for the cafeteria, playground, and bus duty supervision.

4. Reduce time spent handling student discipline problems by conducting staff development focused on helping faculty better manage their classroom discipline systems.

5. Delegate so that mini-crisis situations are handled at the lowest possible level.

6. Prioritize the meetings you attend, and condense the time spent at each meeting.

7. Delegate to your secretary the task of setting up appointments and arranging meetings. (p. 506-507)

These are simple ways to help with time management so a limited amount of time is spent managing and the bulk amount of time is spent as an educational leader.

It would be easy for a classroom teacher to identify areas of organization. One thing I have been active in is the Jefferson Booster Club Auction. The booster club has identified the need to raise money to offset the budget cuts within our schools. One way of accomplishing this was to have an auction. I was on the item collection committee. The committee's job was to communicate with local businesses soliciting items to be donated and sold with the proceeds going to Jefferson. After the items had been donated, it was itemized and communicated to the public relations committee for advertisement. This year over six hundred items were donated, and they were auctioned off. The profits from this activity exceeded fifteen thousand dollars. This has been a very successful attempt by the booster club to raise money.

There are many different areas where my organizational skills will be beneficial as an administrator. Even though computer programs are able to create a master schedule, each school has its own unique priorities that need to be

addressed. My skills as an organizer will be beneficial in the creation of a master schedule.

Another area where my skills as an organizer will be beneficial is concerning the school budget. I would identify and prioritize the many financial concerns of the school, and develop a plan to address these concerns. At the same time, I would be proactive identifying major upcoming expenses. My organizational skills will benefit me as I strive to maintain a budget in a time of economic crisis.

Leading Ethically

The final characteristic that I feel is essential in an educational leader is an ethical code. I believe in God, I believe there is good in all people, and I believe in helping each other. While teaching at Wahlert, I had the opportunity to openly express my beliefs at religious retreats and camps. Since I have moved to Jefferson High School, I have gotten married, and I believe more now in the value of family.

As an educational leader, it is critical to maintain an ethical code at all times. Educational leaders are open to public criticism, and a question of ethics can destroy the school image and culture. People do not want to work with or work for people with a questionable code of ethics. More importantly, how can a person with questionable ethics be in a situation to influence impressionable minds?

I do have an ethical struggle. While doing some marriage preparation work with a priest, he asked me if it is better to be just or to be fair. At the time, I never really reflected on the difference. So, he explained it to me this way. If I walk into a room with a pie, and I share the pie fairly, I would cut it into five equal pieces. One person is not hungry, one is really hungry, one does not like this particular kind of pie, and one wants ice cream with his/her pie. In the end, everyone was treated "fairly", but no one was satisfied. Now, if I am "just" about the situation, I talk to each person before I begin cutting the pie. I find out about each person's needs, and I accommodate the best I can. In the end, each person is satisfied. So I ask myself the question, is it better to be just of fair?

I struggle with this in the classroom as I look at students. For example, two different students do not have their homework done. One openly admits that he forgot to do it, and the other explains how he had to work last night, then came home and cared for a sick sibling while mom was working third shift. Is it better to be just, or is it better to be fair?

The answer is not so simple; if a teacher gives the second student a break, the first student's parents will be on the phone screaming for "fairness." I struggle with this in my classroom, and I as an educational leader, I will continue to struggle with this issue.

Even though I struggle with justness vs. fairness, there are some things that I will be able to do to create an ethical environment. Leaders set the tone for

the ethical climate. They can create a clearly understandable set of ethical standards, and ethical violations should be dealt with swiftly (Eddy, 1997). It is important to understand that schools are to promote social norms, and it is important to act ethically in all capacities. Honesty and integrity are elements of successful leaders (Trigg, 1997)

I understand my role as an ethical leader will take many forms, but the fundamental premise will be the same. I will treat employees, colleagues, students, parents, and all community members with respect. I will value their involvement in the educational process. Essentially, I will try to follow the golden rule.

As I come nearer the end of this journey, I have found myself thinking about the man who was my high school principal. I was never in trouble, so he never disciplined me. I was not valedictorian, nor was I a standout athlete. I was a good student in a school of five hundred students. When I graduated from high school, this man was willing to give me a mock interview. He ended up offering me a job a month later, but I chose to not return home. I later found out that he called Wahlert High School on my behalf. Even though he was no longer a classroom teacher, and his calendar was full of meetings, he still took the time to help out a student. This is the type of educational leader I would like to be. I want to do what is best for the students.

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