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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Stephen P. Probert
University of Northern Iowa

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

The complexity of the principalship is staggering. The intensity of the various roles and expectations are immense. As schools are asked to do more, so are their principals. Elementary principals on any given morning may attend IBP meetings, counsel distraught parents, meet with the central administration, comfort troubled students, remedy leaking roofs, answer staff inquiries, and observe lessons in classrooms.

To say the principalship is multi-faceted oversimplifies the demands and responsibilities of the leadership role. It is not just the managerial tasks which complicate the lives of principals. They must also possess moral fiber. Values, such as honesty, integrity, compassion, excellence, and openness, provide a moral compass for collaboration with multiple stakeholders. This basis provides for the articulation and implementation of instructional vision. Principals must also have the organizational skills to make the vision a reality.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY 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

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by

Stephen P. Probert

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Victorial Robinson

_3/18/03_
Date Approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Robert H. Decker

_3/21/03_
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

_3/24/03_
Date Received

Head, Department of Educational
Leadership, Counseling, and
Postsecondary Education

The Elementary School Principalship

The complexity of the principalship is staggering. The intensity of the various roles and expectations are immense. As schools are asked to do more, so are their principals. Elementary principals on any given morning may attend IEP meetings, counsel distraught parents, meet with the central administration, comfort troubled students, remedy leaking roofs, answer staff inquiries, and observe lessons in classrooms.

To say the principalship is multi-faceted oversimplifies the demands and responsibilities of the leadership role. It is not just the managerial tasks which complicate the lives of principals. They must also possess moral fiber. Values, such as honesty, integrity, compassion, excellence, and openness, provide a moral compass for collaboration with multiple stakeholders. This basis provides for the articulation and implementation of instructional vision. Principals must also have the organizational skills to make the vision a reality.

Ethical Leadership: The Life-long Guidelines

All of the educational leadership roles are grounded in ethics. For years principals have utilized the life-long guidelines as the moral blueprint for their schools. The guidelines, personal best, active listening, no putdowns, truth, and trust, also guide the principals in the continual decision-making which makes the principalship so difficult (Kovalik, 1997, p. 25).

The notion of personal best behavior is a simple one: Perform to the best of one's ability. Though the notion is simple, it is not trite. Principals ought to be mentally prepared for the complexity of the their positions. Though this task is lofty, if not impossible, it should be attacked with tenacity. Effective principals gather the knowledge, display the disposition, and utilize the skills which prompt the best from themselves. They do not select endeavors based upon the predicted ease of completion. They choose them based upon their understanding of what is best for students.

Principals need to actively listen to understand the needs of all students and other stakeholders. Active listeners listen with their eyes, ears, heart, and undivided attention (Kovalik, 1997, p. 27). The concept of "no putdowns" is closely related to active listening because a listener does not belittle. The process of listening and affirming builds trust. The implications of active listening and no putdowns for educational leaders will be examined further in the study of collaborative leadership.

Truth and trust are inseparable concepts which define ethical leadership. "The architecture of leadership, all the theories and guidelines, falls apart without honesty and integrity" (Phillips, 1992, p. 52). Ethical leadership is unclear and distorted without integrity and honesty at its base, for they encourage the trust by which others follow.

Judicious decisions will create trust. The quickest way to lose credibility with students is to be the supporter of injustice. It must be noted that justice is not the same as uniformity. Though consistency is important, principals must treat each situation individually, deciding what is honorable and best for that child.

Parents must know the educational leader has the best interest of their child in mind. When the community does not believe the principal shares its goals for children, confidence erodes. Low confidence leads to a lack of community support and possible animosity. Clearly, a lack of ethics can undermine trust.

Staff must see the principal as their advocate leader, not their enemy. A history of honesty and integrity will develop a relationship in which teachers want to follow the principal. "Most individuals need to trust others, especially their boss. Subordinates must perceive their leader as a consistently fair person if they're to engage in the kind of innovative risk-taking that brings a company rewards" (Phillips, 1992, p. 54).

Once trust is earned, ethical leaders inspire those who work with them. Donald Phillips (1992) explains "values tend to be motives by which subordinates act . . . It is the leader's role to lift followers out of their everyday selves up to a higher level of awareness, motivation, and commitment" (p. 53). It is only after principals demonstrate honesty, integrity, compassion, excellence, and openness that the stakeholders will rally to meet shared goals.

Political Leadership: The Balancing Act

The moral compass required for ethical leadership also guides principals politically as they seek to meet the needs of a wide variety of stakeholders. The principalship is filled with ambiguous and, at times, competing expectations from those stakeholders. "A principal's professional life balances precariously in the middle of a tug-of-war between competing interests and multiple constituencies. To be effective, you have to develop a high tolerance for ambiguity and learn to function effectively where power is limited and the direction of the educational system is often unclear. The ability to survive, much less lead, hinges on your being able to successfully integrate special interests and multiple constituencies into a working unit" (Dunklee, 2000, p. 49).

In 2000, Dunklee addresses the cast of characters as an environmental factor which affects school climate (p. 65). Students, teachers, support staff, central office administrators, professional associations, the media, and the local community comprise the cast of characters (Dunklee, 2000, p. 51-53). Though each of these groups has their demands on the administration, principals are hired to represent the school board. It is to those boards that principals are primarily responsible. They are asked to ensure quality schools by hiring the best teachers and guiding staff development. At times maintaining quality teaching strains the teacher/principal relationship, but the balancing act continues as principals still

are asked to have a positive working relationship with their staffs (Dunklee, 2000, p. 27-28).

The relationship with the community is often the most fragile. Political leaders are also expected to build partnerships with the community. One segment of the community is parents. Parents are an incredible blessing or curse to principals, depending on the relationship. Developing partnerships with parents will be addressed in detail in the study of collaborative leadership. As explained earlier, their needs must be considered because their power of influence must be considered as decisions are made.

Partnerships ought to be built with organizations within the community as well. At Viola Gibson Elementary in Cedar Rapids, IA, the partnership committee endeavored to establish and maintain reciprocating relationships with the community. They partnered with a local Wendy's restaurant to hold a mutually beneficial event. On a specific evening, Gibson families were encouraged to eat at Wendy's. In return the restaurant donated a percentage of that night's profits to Viola Gibson Elementary. A partnership was also developed with Barnes and Noble. The employees of Barnes and Noble came to the building with books for students to preview. Both parties hoped to increase student interest in reading. Barnes and Nobles felt an increase in student interest would indirectly increase their sales.

All of these factors must be understood if goals are to be realized

(Dunklee, 2000, p. 32). Maintaining these relationships is a fine line. For

example, principals are expected to maintain effective student discipline, yet there

should be no late-night phone calls to the superintendent or board members by

parents. Teachers may expect a new principal to cover them for personal

appointments during the day because the old administration did (Dunklee, 2000,

p. 13-14). With so many competing interests, principals must be clear on their

first priority: Doing what is best for students.

Collaborative Leadership: Empowerment

Doing what is best for students is possible only when principals work with

stakeholders actively and collaboratively. Principals should not operate as a

separate entity from their staff, parents, and students. Successful collaborative

leaders empower stakeholders to develop knowledge and vision.

Effective communication is essential to cooperative endeavors. The best-

intended collaborative efforts will fall apart without communication, specifically

the skill of listening. Effective listening is the key to building the trust necessary

for collaborative efforts (Dunklee, 2000, p. 76). Collaborative leaders, or

effective listeners, listen to more than the circumstance, but attempts to listen to

the emotional investment of the speaker as well. (Dunklee, 2000, p. 80). Listeners

attempt to empathize, not distract themselves by continually contemplating their

next response (Dunklee, 2000, p. 75). Kovalik defined active listening as

listening with one's ears, eyes, heart, and undivided attention (1992, p. 26). This type of listening creates "an air of equality, mutual respect, and trust" (Dunklee, 2000, p. 81). Trust cannot be achieved in a belittling environment. "The goal (of putdowns) is to elevate the speaker to a position of being noticed, controlling the behavior of those around them, undermining the relationship between people, sidetracking the real issues, promoting him/herself by creating a laugh at someone else's expense" (Kovalik, 1997, p. 27). The person with these motivations is not collaborative. It is with the groundwork of listening and affirmation that cooperative efforts, such as empowerment efforts, may move forward.

Hollyce Giles in her article entitled "Parent Engagement as a School Reform Strategy" provided common collaborative characteristics of successful school reform initiatives. Giles spoke of viewing the relationship between schools and their respective communities as ecological. Collaborative leaders must "view a school and its surrounding neighborhood as a part of an interdependent social ecology that must be understood as a whole in order to identify problems and develop solutions" (Giles, 1998). The first stage of implementation of the ecology mindset is to "build relationships based on common concerns." Collaborative leaders must spend time listening and understanding the concerns of all the stakeholders (Giles, 1998). When appropriate, educational leaders should involve the stakeholders by involving them in the committees which will address their concerns.

Providing leadership training for the stakeholders is another valuable step in the collaborative process. With expectations increasing for the educational leader, the ability and willingness to delegate will be essential. Knowing that stakeholders are competent and possess a similar vision, allows principals to truly be collaborative.

With empowered stakeholders, principals must prepare themselves for the new dynamics of this collaborative relationship. Gordon A. Donaldson, Jr. in his article, "Working Smarter Together," used a five-step model to explain the behaviors of the leaders who promote collaboration. Criticism, self-examination, goal setting, new efforts, and consolidation are the components of this model (1993).

Being able to take criticism from staff and parents about policies, procedures, and practices is essential for the promotion of collaboration. Being defensive will shut down communication. The best way to avoid excessive criticism is self-examination and reflection. If collaborative leaders can correct themselves before someone else has to, the process of improvement is more efficient and less painful (Donaldson, 1993).

Though people are empowered, they may need the principal to facilitate growth. Helping the stakeholders set achievable goals and nurturing their new efforts to meet those goals empowers them further. It will also develop a sense of respect and support for the principal. Collaborative leaders then monitor results

and celebrate staff and student success. Donaldson refers to this component as

consolidation.

Instructional Leadership: Making Relevant Connections

Only when collaborative leadership is developed, may instructional plans

be put in action. Effective instructional leaders challenge themselves to stay

current on educational theories and balance that information with experience.

They must be well grounded in curriculum design, implementation, evaluation,

and refinement.

Current instructional philosophy insists on relevant connections being

made by the learner. Politano and Paquin (2000) contend, "To the brain, making

meaning is more important than receiving information . . . . The brain makes

meaning through patterns, relevance, and emotions. Without meaning, we are

dealing with bits of isolated data; when we can make meaning, we can assemble

the data and make sense of it" (p. 21). Constructivism operates under the

assumption "that students learn best when they apply their knowledge to solve

authentic problems, engage in 'sense-making' dialogue with peers, and strive for

deep understanding of core ideas rather than recall of a laundry list of facts"

(Windschitl, 1999, p. 752). Brooks and Brooks (1993) said, "Each of us makes

sense of our world by synthesizing new experiences into what we have previously

come to understand" (p. 4).

An instructional model which dovetails well with constructivist theory is
Integrated Thematic Instruction. Susan Kovalik (1997) first introduced this
instructional model to the educational community. She derived a number of
principles which she calls "memes" (p. xvi-xx). These memes should guide the
instructional leader in 21st Century.

"The purpose of public education is the perpetuation of democracy"
(Kovalik, 1997, p. xvi). If freedom is going to continue, America will need a
generation of problem-solvers. Public education should facilitate the acquisition
of problem-solving skills (Kovalik, 1997, p. xvi-xvii). Problem solving should be
at the core of all curricula.

"The curriculum for the 21st century must be based in reality" (Kovalik,
1997, p. xvi). In order for students to make meaning of new information they
must decide how that new information coincides with old knowledge. Having a
curriculum which does not unnecessarily bind itself to the traditional disciplines
allows students to explore their world (Kovalik, 1997, p. xvii). Sometimes it is
difficult to have students experience the curriculum due to the nature of the
curriculum. For example, historical events are difficult to experience, but
activities can be designed which allow the students to experience the mindset of
the people who surround that historical event.

"Learning is a personal affair" (Kovalik, 1997, p. xvi). Not all students
learn in the same way or at the same rate. As students attempt to make meaning,

opportunities must be offered to allow students to learn and demonstrate their

learning in different ways. Howard Gardner's research of the multiple

intelligences brought to light the importance of choice (Kovalik xviii). "The more

ways we present information, the more chances we give our students to

understand and remember material" (Politano, 2000, p. 22). "Instructional

strategies should provide students choices which allow for their unique ways of

learning" (Kovalik, 1997, p. xvi).

"Curriculum should be framed so as to reduce 'telling about' and be based

upon exploration, discovery, and application of concepts to the real world"

(Kovalik, 1997, p. xvi). The best way for students to make personal relevant

connections about information is to discover the knowledge themselves. They do

that by studying their topic in the topic's "natural context." Kovalik would call

those moments "being there" experiences (Kovalik, 1997, p. xviii-xix). Eleanor

Duckworth (1996) explains why it is so important for students to explore,

discover, and apply their learning. "Most areas of study that are at all worth our

attention entail far more complexity than is acknowledged in our curriculum; and,

further, people's intellectual engagement, when they are given the chance to

pursue these complexities according to their own lights, is extraordinary (p. 148).

"Assessment should be reality-based" (Kovalik, 1997, p. xvi). "Focus

should be placed on real life problem-solving and/or on producing a product

which has a real life usefulness and standards" (Kovalik, 1997, p. xx). All

students learn differently, therefore the learner ought to be involved in a variety of

problem-solving tasks and assessments. The assessment should be as relevant as

the instruction.

Visionary Leadership: The Foundation Principles

Mark Windschitl explored the different aspects of leadership in his article

"The Challenges of Sustaining a Constructivist Classroom Culture." Windschitl

contends that constructivism is more than a method of teaching, but it should

permeate the culture of the school or "The culture risks becoming a fragmented

collection of practices that fail to reinforce one another" (Windschitl, 1999, p.

752). A system must be put in place to implement that vision. Dr. Susan Leddick

of Profound Knowledge Resources Inc. presented a model for school reform

called "The Foundation Principles."
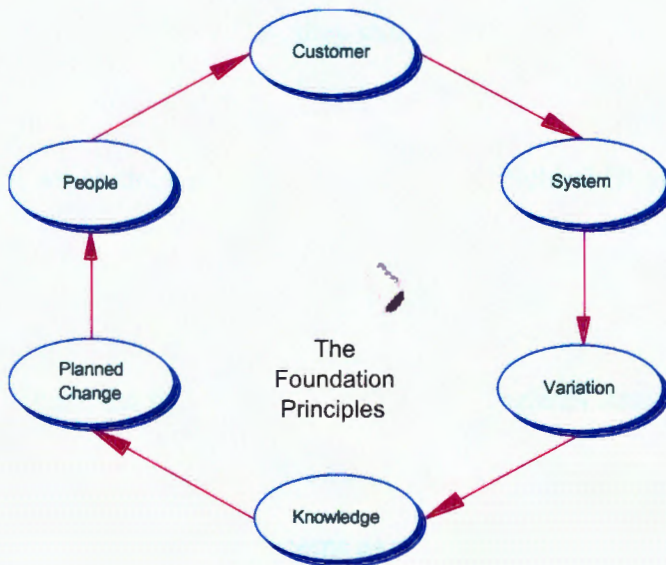
The first component identifies the customers, who "are those individuals and groups whom you serve." It is the knowledge of customers, as well as their needs, which allows schools to create focus, purpose, or aim. It is this knowledge of purpose which allows educators to justify practices (Profound Knowledge Resources, 2000).

Organizations exist to serve the needs of their customers. If schools are viewed as organizations, they have many different customers. Society, parents, students, and other educators all play the role of customers. Leddick wrote about two types of customers: external and internal. External customers are those people for whom you exist. Students are our immediate customers. Parents and society often place their customer expectations on schools. Internal customers are our colleagues, which have additional and complementary expectations. Though schools have diverse customer bases, they still must discover the needs and expectations of people they serve (Profound Knowledge Resources, 2000). The math curriculum which the Cedar Rapids Community School District adopted in the primary grades emphasized conceptual understanding of math over rote memorization of addition and subtraction basic facts. The complaint of the intermediate teachers, the internal customers, is that students struggle when they are expected to know the basic facts. Two external customers, parents and the legislature, were also expressing concerns as well. The teachers were feeling

tremendous pressure to teach math exactly as the curriculum suggests, but they were not seeing the results their customers wanted.

"Customer needs are satisfied through purposeful activities or systems. Once they are established, organizations set out to meet customer needs. The people in them purposefully design products and services; they develop processes to produce and deliver the products and services." The system is how the customers have their needs met. Now knowing the customer needs, a system must be developed which does not create suboptimization, a situation in which "one part of the system wins at the expense of the others" (Profound Knowledge Resources, 2000). Instant recognition of basic math facts could not come at the expense of conceptual understanding. Activities were developed or researched which allowed students to develop math understanding and practice basic facts at the same time. Hiawatha Elementary students have been taught basic facts for years, but because students were not held accountable for old knowledge when new concepts were taught, students didn't truly master their math facts. Lee Jenkins, a former principal and consultant for DataNotGuesswork, suggests most educational systems silently grant students permission to forget previously learned information, knowledge, and concepts by rarely requesting the use of this knowledge in future applications. A system needed to be devised to satisfy customers through denying student the permission to forget math facts.

When a system is in place, a method of data collection must be developed

which allows schools to determine whether they are meeting their customers'

needs (Profound Knowledge Resources, 2000). The data collection method at

Hiawatha also helped teachers deny students the permission to forget. Lee

Jenkins discussed the method of creating a list of critical skills or essential facts,

and testing those students over those facts weekly. The method required

knowledge of the number of skills or facts on the list and randomly testing

students on a portion of the list. The number of questions on the test was the

square root of the number skills on the list (2000). For example, if there were 100

items on the list of essential facts/skills, the teacher would randomly choose 10

from the list to put on the test. Every algorithm a primary student at Hiawatha

was expected to know at that point in the year was written on cards, which was

about 250 different algorithms. Sixteen algorithms were randomly selected for

the assessment. Because this was an assessment of basic facts, they ought to

know the answers immediately. The time allowed to complete a 16-problem test

was 90 seconds because the students were given 5 seconds per problem on

average. Ten more seconds were added for the students to write their names. As

time progressed, more algorithms were added and the number of problems on the

exam increased to 22.

A synthesis of the data collected gives the organization an opportunity to

examine variations. Variations, or differences, in data allow the organization to

look for patterns (Profound Knowledge Resources, 2000). Control charts allow

data to be examined more appropriately than to simply look at averages and

percentile rankings. The latter methods of data analysis do not allow educational

leaders the opportunity to determine whether their schools' performances were

special or common cause variations. Control charts allow the leaders to see if

their issues to are common to several groups of people or if they face this problem

alone (Jenkins, 2000). At Hiawatha a control chart of the math test results helped

determine exactly which students were special cause variations and needed more

help. With another group of students a control chart helped determine that they

had no special cause variations, but it was decided that there was a common cause

variation, something which all students needed to work on.

The information from the patterns on the control charts produces

knowledge of customer needs, which therefore gave the organization insight

regarding how to meet those needs. At Hiawatha the insight gained allowed one

teacher to see the need for individual students to receive help. According to the

data on the control chart, another class had no students which needed exceptional

help, but they had a lack of shared or common knowledge which needed to be

learned.

Planned change is the action step. It is at this point when an organization

implements the plan based on the knowledge and insight gained earlier. A

method is the data-supported way "to make planned change more effective and

efficient" (Profound Knowledge Resources, 2000). One classroom at Hiawatha

felt the data pointed to individual tutoring. Another classroom thought the data

encouraged them to participate in additional meaningful, concept-building

activities as a class.

With the method in place, people must drive the change. Individuals and

groups in the organization must implement the method (Profound Knowledge

Resources, 2000). At Hiawatha, a volunteer for the classroom with special-cause

variations was instructed on which skill a particular child needed practice. For

instance, if the exam suggested that a child is struggling with adding 9's, the

volunteers work with that child on strategies regarding adding 9's. In the class

with common-cause variations, the instructor provided additional meaningful,

concept-building activities which reviewed basic facts.

The circle is complete, but not finished. The organization is back to the

customer component and must ask the questions necessary to keep the cycle

going. This allows the organization to remain vibrant and always serving their

customers. At Hiawatha the cycle was repeated each week. This allowed the

educators to be in constant awareness of their customer needs.

Vision is important, but without a method to implement that vision, it is of

no use. The Foundation Principles is a tool which allows the visionary leader to

know and understand what needs to be done instructionally.

Organizational Leadership: Management

To be a successful leader in any of the previously described areas,

principals must also show management knowledge, disposition, and skills

(Dunklee, 2000, p. 87).   Organizational leadership is the vehicle that takes

leaders to their vision. "Strategic goals are developed by leaders" (Dunklee,

2000, p. 110). "Managers develop tactical plans to implement strategies and

control resources in an effort to achieve organizational objectives" (Dunklee,

2000, p. 115). Most effective principals must manage financial and human

resources superbly.

Organizational leaders utilize budgets skillfully (Dunklee, 2000, p. 113).

Principals should not take the role of financial responsibility lightly. Accurate

records should demonstrate that the taxpayers' money is spent wisely

(Cunningham, 2000, p. 361). Though in most districts the principals do not have

to budget employee salaries and benefits, they will need to spend money on

supplies, equipment, building maintenance, school safety, staff development,

utilities, etc. (Cunningham, 2000, p. 366).

In an ideal situation the district supplies the finances for the items,

programs, and staff to create the optimum learning environment. In reality

principals have to find funding from other sources as well (Cunningham, 2000, p.

364). Grants provide a financial avenue to fulfill goals. Partnerships with

organizations can result in donated money, supplies, and services (Cunningham,

2000, p. 351). Strong parent/teacher associations or organizations can provide

support as well. As budgets get tighter, principals will have to become even more

creative in the funding, using opportunities such leasing the facilities to outside

organizations.

Once funds are found, they must be allocated. Knowing the instructional

vision of the school is the first step to determining how funds are dispersed.

There is never enough money to go around, so prioritization is the key.

Organizational leaders should spend money on items and services which are

effective (Cunningham, 2000, p. 364-365).

Principals should also spend money on items and services which are

efficient (Cunningham, 2000, p. 356). Sometimes choosing the second best item

for enormous saving is the correct choice. It takes organizational leaders with

ethics, understanding, and vision to make these difficult decisions.

Today's organizational leaders have to focus on much more than money.

They focus on people as well (Cunningham, 2000, p. 285). "The investment in

human capital or human resources is the most important one made within any

organization. The human resource functions support those who work within the

organization and help to link them to the organization's mission" (Cunningham,

2000, p. 284).

Organizational leaders maximize human resources though collaboratively-

developed schedules and procedures (Dunklee, 2000, p. 112). They must analyze

the jobs to be done and determine who completes those tasks most effectively and efficiently (Dunklee, 2000, p. 285-290).

Organizational leaders implement individual and group programs to improve teacher quality (Dunklee, 2000, p. 113). Quality can only be improved if needs are identified, typically through evaluation. Evaluation must be perceived as a non-threatening portion of staff development. After information is gathered, it should be used to inform teacher. Being mindful of the individual's pride, the organizational leaders validate and explain their suggestions.

Conclusion

The leader of the future must have a moral compass, the value of collaboration, an understanding of society, a curriculum that meets the needs of an ever-changing student base, foresight, and organizational structure. These attributes individually promote leadership excellence. The absence of just one of them leads to an administration which is not well rounded. As the character, Toby Ziegler, said in the September 25, 2002 episode of NBC's West Wing, "If we choose someone with vision, someone with guts, someone with gravitas, who is connected other people's lives and cares about making them better, if we choose someone to inspire us, then we will be able to face what comes our way and achieve things we can't imagine yet."

Educational leaders have the same opportunity and the obligation to inspire those they influence as well. They must know, appreciate, and utilize the

knowledge and abilities of their students, parents, and staff members. Most importantly, principals must possess the vision and the courage to stay committed to those things which are excellent in education.

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