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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

I believe that competent and effective administrators must possess and clearly demonstrate all six of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) representative of exemplary education. Effective administrators are organized, efficient, interact well with everyone in a professional manner, and are personal. An effective administrator interacts effectively with everyone in the building. They are knowledgeable about topics and are good listeners. I value these components in any job, but most importantly in principals I interact with as a teacher. Highly effective administrators are open-minded, but also have a tendency to stick to the task at hand.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY

SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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By

Amy Rallis

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Being an educator was a dream of mine from a very young age. I have a passion for education and would like to extend the passion beyond the classroom and into an administrative role. I have always advocated for children whether it was through my various jobs or volunteering. I see children with endless opportunities for learning, and I would like to have an opportunity to lead a school where the children can be successful. Children need the support and reassurance that they will be successful in school and it not only comes from quality teachers, but a school with a quality leader.

I believe that competent and effective administrators must possess and clearly demonstrate all six of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) representative of exemplary education. Effective administrators are organized, efficient, interact well with everyone in a professional manner, and are personal. An effective administrator interacts effectively with everyone in the building. They are knowledgeable about topics and are good listeners. I value these components in any job, but most importantly in principals I interact with whom I interact as a teacher. Highly effective administrators are open- minded, but also have a tendency to stick to the task at hand.

I read many journal articles during the first semester of my masters program, and I found them to be very informative. The information in those journal articles helped to create a path for me and a better understanding of what effective administrators look like and what skills they possess that helped them become effective leaders. I read an article called *Principal leadership and student*

achievement (1987), and became fascinated by the line, “there are some bad schools with good principals, but there are no good schools with bad principals” (Andrews & Soder, 1987, p.10).

I believe I have the drive to succeed. I have always had a passion that leads towards education, and teaching is a great passion I have. I have another great passion and that is to become an administrator. I feel confident that I know who I am and where I am going. I read a quote that reiterates that same notion. “Leaders must value critical thinking in ways that promote the consideration of diverse thoughts” (Thomas, Walker & Jefferies, 2000, p. 128). I am a confident, organized, focused and effective communicator. These are qualities that are essential in any good administrator. I believe that my strengths are a major reason why I am seeking to be an administrator. I also believe that weaknesses are an opportunity to build and enhance the areas to become a refined leader. Being able to function within a school organization is extremely important. The functions must include, adapting to the environment, achieving goals, and coordinating the various activities that take place in the organization (Parsons, 1960).

Our leadership training revolves around the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) standards. Those standards are:

ISSL Standard 1: Visionary Leadership

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

It is so important for effective school leaders to have a vision established for that school because it is what the goals stem from. Visionary leaders must have goals in place that match the vision and help to create a learning environment for everyone that centers on the important concepts or vision. Visionary leadership involves time, values, and adaptations, achieving and coordinating. Principals need to keep a focus that schools are really only institutions, and that education is the work of educators, not the work of the schools (Smith, 2001).

Principals must have a vision and see today, tomorrow and in the future. This can happen if the principal adapts to the environment, sets and achieves goals, and integrates the activities inside the school. I firmly believe that if principals set goals, they must be willing to grow and develop with everyone involved. I believe that I can sustain a vision within a school. A vision or goal takes time to implement, establish and sustain. I know the importance of that and I am confident that with my own personal practices, and the expertise of others that we can withstand visions for a school. There are a lot of components involved in creating a vision for a school, and I feel that it is important to involve

others within a school community to help carry out the vision and share in the success. I will rely on the voices and commitment of others who share and support a similar philosophy to help build my visions.

ISSL Standard 2: Instructional Leadership

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

Instructional leadership is one of the most important skills that effective administrators must possess, and they must be willing to make it a top priority for their school. There are other issues besides instruction that administrators must work with, but creating a balance and remembering the importance of instruction is vital. I see instructional leadership as being the pivotal role in a highly effective administrator. According to authors Karen Manheim Teel and Andrea DeBruin-Parecki who wrote *Making school count promoting urban student motivation and success* (2001), teachers need some guidance from their administrators to prepare methods and materials, implement them, and assess their impact on the students. Instruction takes time and a commitment to serve the students. It is also the willingness to change and implement the best practices in education into the teaching.

Pierce Milli stated in his article, *Support systems for instructional leaders* (2001), that principals must value curriculum, and give teachers goals and purpose for what they are doing” (Milli, 2001, p.17). Being able to lead and direct professionals in instructional practices is not always easy; therefore the administrator must be in that pivotal role to accomplish just that. A good instructional leader finds time and support systems within their school and district to build a high performance school. Instructional leadership must involve talking with teachers and getting them to reflect as well as promoting professional growth in all areas of education (Blasé, 1999).

One factor that I consider to be important is that principals must be in classrooms and implementing the practices themselves to know and act as a true instructional leader. Teachers and other school community persons look to and seek the knowledge of instruction from the building administrator. The administrator should be and must be informing the school community of the best instructional practices taking place, and the administrator should be one of the first demonstrators of the practice. This is simply setting an example for the school community that there is great value and trust in the instructional practice, and that the effort set forth by the administrator will help to create the importance and understanding of the instructional practice expectation. The administrator should be demonstrating the expected instructional practices within various arenas. Such as; classrooms, staff meetings, school board meetings, and parent group meetings. This sends the message to all stakeholders that the administrator

values the importance of the instructional strategy enough to learn and implement it along with others, as well as become knowledgeable and familiar with the instructional strategy and the expectations that go along with it.

Instructional leaders must be willing to work through change and to accept changes when it is considered important and needed. Change is an unavoidable part of education, but the focus must be to allow time and practice for the change implementation, and to involve the school community and its stakeholders for a better understanding of what the change is about and to help create some ownership of the change process. A good instructional leader must work through change in a positive manner and understand that not everyone will agree with the change, but to create a picture and give a better understanding of what the change is about and how it will take place. I feel that if stakeholders are informed and can be involved in a change process, then they will feel valued and may be more willing to respect the change decision, even though they still disagree with it.

ISSL Standard 3: Organizational Leadership

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.

I view organizational leadership to be a significant skill in any administrative role. Leaders today must understand diversity and be ready to challenge the problems, issues, and make equitable decisions related to diversity

(Cunningham & Codeiro, 2000). The conscious ability to remain focused and organized is critical. Leaders of schools must promote the use of an organizational atmosphere to help identify goals. The attainments of goals are made possible if others share the goal and work as a system and function to ensure the quality of what students learn (Glatthorn, 2000). I believe in the physical organization of the environment, but an effective administrator must be able to organize their thought processes so they can effectively organize what leadership skills to utilize. I value organization in both my personal and professional life, and I feel that I can organize my thought processes to deal with situations. I believe that organizational leaders should model achievement above the standards. I also believe that principals lead organizations that are among the most important in our society. "Leadership becomes a matter of how to be rather than how to do" (Cunningham & Codeiro, 2000, p.25).

ISSL Standard 4: Collaborative Leadership

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaboration with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

I find the collaborative leadership standard to be a critical component in an administrative role. Principals must believe that collaboration can positively affect learning. Principals must build internal and external collaboration

relationships for any type of change to occur, because change is essential in any school environment (Smith, 2001). It is important to realize the significance that change can have on a building, but the change is able to happen with a strong collaborative leader operating the school. Principals cannot think that a school can run itself, or that instruction can run itself.

Principals must understand that in order for a school to operate effectively they must be willing to work collaboratively with all the stakeholders to achieve the maximum results. Some aspects of the school may run itself, but only if the administrator has gotten the staff to that point through careful and effective leadership. The stakeholders within a school community are an essential part of the collaboration process. The internal stakeholders such as, teachers, associates, custodians, cooks and secretaries are the piece that facilitate, lead and communicate to the external stakeholders. Those are just as important, but in the sense of understanding and relating to the learning process occurring within the school. The external stakeholders are the parents, volunteers, business partners, school board members and community members that visit the schools.

Those people have a valued interest in the school and it is up to the internal stakeholders and the external stakeholders to work collaboratively for the best learning possible within the school. This occurs when the building administrator has built positive relationships with both internal and external stakeholders, and leads by example. Principals must be engaged and be a leader for the collaboration to operate. I believe that collaboration begins with trust and

a strong relationship. An administrator must build relationships toward a professional goal first, and then rely on personal interaction to follow. A principal needs to know their vision and goal for a school first. Second, the principal either begins to build relationships with staff, or enhances the ones already established in the building. Building or enhancing the relationships is part of the collaboration piece that needs to take place.

Principals must be willing to extend their beliefs and values into the hands of qualified professionals and know that the professional will work towards the ideal goal set by the principal. Principals must allow for open-mindedness during this process and allow for flexibility. Sometimes principals have a hard time releasing and delegating some of their requirements to others, but it's important if principals want to establish collaboration within the school.

I believe and value the idea of goals setting. Goal setting is a tool that can aid in creating an organizational approach towards something. Having a vision or goal helps to keep the focus on the end result. The process of goal setting is critical in establishing a collaborative leadership role. Principals must trust, coach and follow up on about anything that happens and occurs in a school.

ISSL Standard 5: Ethical Leadership

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

I see ethical leadership as something that is not taught from a textbook, but rather an approach similar to the case studies we read and discussed the first semester of the program. The case studies lead us into discussions about the importance regarding decision-making as it applies to a particular situation. The case studies encouraged us to think about a situation and apply knowledge or skills for solving a problem that is ethical in nature. The case studies made me aware that problems will always arise, but the manner in which they are dealt with is very critical. Reading about problems or situations occurring in schools gave me a better look at how important it is to be an ethical leader. The important factor for myself is to gain self-understanding and always question values that I am faced with. Making decisions or choices are part of our everyday life, but when the decision involves ethics or beliefs, an administrator must rely on some problem solving types of techniques.

In an article written by Lew Smith called *What are schools for? (2001)*, he wrote shortly after the September 11th, 2001 attacks our country experienced posing a question relating to the roles our school should play. Lew Smith believes that we need to create schools as caring centers and communities of connection and service. He is not implying that we change the ideas of our schools to serve as places of learning, but rather seriously consider what that learning ought to include (Smith, 2001). Education and curriculum are an important part of a school system, but the manner in which we interact with our stakeholders is a very important component of our system.

Making a decision too abruptly can result in a fatal error. Ethics are part of our school setting, and being able to reflect upon them is important in developing ethical leadership. Ethical leadership is demonstrating the competence to view any decision-making process or reflection as a comprehensive approach to leadership. An ethical leader does not guide their practices on only their own ethics or morals, but also through policies and procedures that underlie every school. The policies, practices and procedures are the foundation to build from for any effective ethical leader. Elizabeth Campbell stated in an article titled *Ethical school leadership: Problems of an elusive role*, that, “the values administrators transmit formally and informally in their daily practices, and the implications of these values for those with whom they are engaged” (Campbell, 1997, p. 292).

ISSL Standard 6: Political Leadership

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economical, legal, and cultural context.

I believe that there may be a shift in political leadership within schools. The political shift is placing more responsibilities for accountability at the local level, and less at the higher or state level, but the state and federal governments want to set the standards. The federal government is pressing for better decisions regarding assessment, as well as more emphasis about the accountability of those

assessments. President Bush addresses four broad themes in his education plan. They are: accountability, standards, testing and choice (Reeves, 2001). Bush stresses the importance of allowing decisions made regarding curriculum left at the local level. The shift of the urban principals seems to lie in added change or reform. They are faced with new challenges and ideas, but nothing is taken away. With new legislation and education reform laws, administrators must step up the role of instructional leaders, and continue to place emphasis on the importance of accountability and assessment. With budget cuts being at the top of the financial ladder, it is common that principals are having to do a lot more, no matter what is handed to them.

Political leaders are dealing with everything that surrounds an administrative role. The administrators, superintendent, and school board members are striving for improvements within every school. The principal involves everyone in the school, including the parents, and as much of community resources as they can. Being a political leader can be challenging, but also rewarding. Bradely Portin shares that, “principals must have the ability to understand the operating patterns of their school system and advocate for their school rises to the surface” (Portin, *The changing urban principal*, 2000, p. 500).

As I reflect upon the six standards and the importance of each of them, I must work to balance and place them into my “ideal” school. The ideal school must stem from a vision. I believe an ideal school can be attainable, if the vision

is shared with others. An ideal school is one in which passion and perseverance thrives. Goals must be an important factor for any vision. I think it is important to have a vision, no matter what a situation may be like. If my “ideals” are always part of my vision, then I know that I am truly striving for maximizing the best of others. In order for an ideal school to be created, I must rely on and trust my stakeholders. I must share and discuss the vision with those stakeholders. I must be willing to listen and build upon what I already know with the new knowledge I will learn. I must value the opinion of others and respect the decisions that come from a higher source.

My Vision For Leading an Elementary School

My ideal school would have smaller class sizes. Smaller class size can affect student’s social, intellectual and behavioral performances. Research shows that smaller class size does benefit student performance and behavior. I feel students enjoy the personal interaction with their teacher when there are fewer students in the class, and the teacher can focus time and effort on the student’s behavior and academic performance.

I would envision technology integration in all classrooms with collaboration and support from a media specialist. Technology integration involves a great deal of time and training. Teachers must have the support and also be willing to utilize the support for the best outcomes with students.

Most students enjoy and interact well with technology; therefore the integration in the classrooms would be very beneficial. With the growing changes of our world, we would not be doing justice to the students if we didn't incorporate technology into their curriculum.

My belief and vision is to work with people who are truly dedicated and contribute to the learning of all students. Being a caring and respectful person to both children and staff is essential. I envision a teaching staff with similar beliefs and philosophies about education. I believe in having a school with a strong and positive culture. It is known that strong and positive school cultures do not just happen; they are built overtime by people within a school who encourage and reinforce values (Peterson, 2002).

I would like to see active support from the superintendent, as well as any personnel at the district level. Administrators must be able to rely on the district's personnel especially when it deals with curriculum and assessment. An effective and successful school district most likely has strong and supportive district personnel in which everyone must work together for the successes of the students. I feel that if the support is in place from the district offices and administrators, then principals can concentrate on the leadership importance at their building.

Having mentors for both teachers and administrators is proven to be highly effective, and would be an important component in my ideal school. New teachers within a district must be given the skills and curriculum outcomes

through viable training and support during their first year in a district. If the new teachers are expected to jump in and teach what our school or district had been teaching, then they need adequate support from a mentor in order for them to be successful. I know that my vision for an “ideal” school is attainable if I believe and am persistence. I believe in myself, and my values and qualities will assist me in becoming a highly effective administrator.

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