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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

School leaders are put in a position of educating the community's most valuable asset, their children. School leaders must live their lives by the highest ethical standards to demonstrate to the community the importance of the district children's education.

A school leader needs to have a vision of what the school should exemplify in future years. Students should not only learn the academics, but should also learn to be good citizens. To be good citizens, the students of today must have knowledge of where our country has been in the past to better understand what we stand for today. To live in a democracy students must have values that all members of that democracy can live by and enjoy.

A Preferred Vision For Administrating Secondary Schools

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

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Gary D. Rippentrop

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Reflections on the ISSL Standards

My personal beliefs have changed and evolved through many years of teaching and coaching. My first two years of teaching were at a small parochial school. This school had one section of grades one through eight. I was hired to teach science in grades five through eight and physical education for all the grades. I was not of the Catholic faith and this was a concern when I accepted the job. My mother's comment about always doing the best one can do was on my mind when the contract was signed. These same concerns were with me the first day of school that first year. Being young certainly does not help in seeing one's limits. Only two of the eight teachers were male and the two male teachers were both first year teachers. Being male teachers gave us extra privileges that included supervising all recess periods. Some of my role models put in long hours without complaining and set a good example for me to follow. Those two years were busy, but went well. As a new teacher I made mistakes, but fortunately the mistakes were not too major. While employed at this school the realization set in that school was for the students' benefit and not the teachers. Doing what is best for the students was my new goal even if it meant more work for the teacher. Doing what is best for the students included setting high expectations for them. My teaching philosophy was starting to develop.

After two years, I moved to the public school in the same community. I taught physical education for grades seven through nine and seventh grade science. I also coached three sports each year at the junior high school. My schedule forced me to

organize and make good use of my time. Being organized and using my time wisely were other additions to my education philosophy.

While teaching and coaching, students saw that I dedicated much time beyond the teaching day for their benefit. Taking time to listen and visit with students helped make them aware that this teacher cared about their education and their well-being. The high expectations I had for myself were being passed on to my students. My philosophy of education continued to develop.

After five years of teaching, my values and beliefs of teaching had taken shape. Being fair, firm, and consistent was a major part of my goals and beliefs. Students wanted their teachers to be consistent so they knew the expectations. Students accepted discipline as long as it was consistent and fair for all students. Being fair and consistent allows me to be firm in my dealings with students. This fair, firm, and consistent policy has helped me become a better educator.

At the beginning of every school year I start the school year with a discussion about character education. Young adolescents want to be treated as young adults. When students are treated as young adults they will usually accept the responsibility that comes with the term. By treating students as young adults they know they are accountable for their actions. Young adults need to be reminded of this responsibility at times because they are just learning how to be young adults. Terms like trust, fairness, accountability, and doing what is right are all part of the discussion. Trust is a two way street. Students and teachers need to trust each other and both need to be reminded that trust can disappear quickly. Students cannot be expected to be perfect. Everyone makes mistakes. Just because a student makes a bad choice does not make that student bad. Students need

to know that the teacher believes in them as individuals even when they make poor choices.

School is like a piece of cake. A piece of cake is good, but it is better with frosting. Academics are the cake in this example. All the other activities in school are the frosting. Together they are very good. But you cannot have your frosting without the cake. Students need to always start with the academics and then enjoy the other activities in school.

Being a parent has helped me become a better teacher. My own children have helped open my eyes about how I teach and what I say in class. My children would tell me when I said something that students did not necessarily comprehend what I meant to say. After having my own children as students, I am more careful about how I say things in class. I want my students to hear what I want to communicate.

ISSL Standard 1: Visionary Leadership

Putting one's beliefs and values about education into practice is a goal for all educators. How to actually demonstrate one's beliefs and values should be the school's and the administrator's vision for a school building or district. The first ISSL standard states: "the administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community" (Iowa Department of Education., 2001, p. 1). Standard 1 implies that a school's vision statement should be a statement of the whole community. Most schools have vision statements that sound very good but are lacking in application. Larry Allen, in the December, 2001 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, states: "Students benefit when their schools

are purposeful places that not only clearly define what they want all students to know and be able to do but also clearly describe how they are going to bring about these desired results and how they will know if they have succeeded” (p. 292). Unfortunately most schools’ vision statements do not fit this description. The community, teachers, and administrators must make sure their vision is stated in a way that is accountable. If the district has a vague vision, it is easy to forget what they are trying to accomplish as a school.

The vision should be about what is needed by the school and not just wanted.

Elliot W. Eisner, in the April issue of *Phi Delta Kappan* (2002), states the following:

The kind of schools we need would make teaching a professionally public process. By “professionally public” I mean that teachers would have opportunities to observe other teachers and provide feedback. No longer would isolated teachers be left to themselves to figure out what went on when they were teaching; secondary ignorance is too prevalent and too consequential to depend on one’s personal reflection alone (p. 578).

At times teachers lack knowledge in a specific area. The instructor will then research and find the information. Some teachers are not aware they are using poor methods of instruction. If the teacher is isolated from other teachers, how can that teacher become aware of using poor instructional methods? An example of using poor instructional technique would be a teacher who calls only on certain students or teaches only to one side of the classroom. By allowing teachers time to observe other instructors and then offering suggestions would help eliminate teacher weaknesses. One’s vision should include time for teachers to observe and help each other become better educators.

The administrators are the visionary leaders of a school district. In a school building it is the principal who needs to help lead and guide the vision. According to Larson in *Principal Leadership: Middle Level Edition* (2002):

The principal of the school must have a clear vision for the school, act as an instructional leader, and provide staff members with the support necessary to realize the vision. Building a consensus among the staff for this vision is not easy and a small group of teachers who disagree with the principal's vision can stall, undermine, or subvert the change process at any point (p. 44).

One must remember that the vision should be the school's vision not just the vision of the leaders. The vision needs to include the entire school community. In order to achieve the vision one needs the ownership and commitment of the community. The principal may have the initial vision, but one must be willing to work with the staff and community to establish the vision as the school's vision.

The community needs to be included in developing the vision, but it is the administrator who is the true leader in making the vision. The school administrator is responsible to know what is current in the educational field. The leader must research to help guide the development and implementation of the vision. As society changes, the school must also change to fit the society. The administrator should have the knowledge to allow for these society changes to be part of a school's vision for the future. Before an administrator can lead a school's vision they must have a vision of their own. This vision must take into account their personal vision for education. Patricia Russel-McCloud, in her book, *A is for Attitude: An Alphabet for Living* (2002), states: "Aim high. As you read your vision statement, you should feel yourself inspired and pulled upward where

success awaits you, for a positive vision encourages you with the understanding that the way things are is not the way that they have to be” (p. 196). A principal’s personal vision will help influence the vision of the school. Striving for the best is the purpose of the vision statement. The vision must aim high so that the administrator, school, and community can all strive to achieve the best for the students of the school.

Richard Daft in his book, *The Leadership Experience, Second Edition* (2002), states: “Although good leadership for today’s organizations calls for actively involving everyone in the organization, leaders are still ultimately responsible for establishing direction through vision and strategy” (p. 493). Daft’s statement makes it clear that the administrator is still the leader of school and must provide the leadership to establish the vision for the school.

ISSL Standard 2: Instructional Leadership

The second ISSL standard focuses on the importance of instructional leadership. Again, the administrator needs to demonstrate leadership. “The kind of schools we need would have principals who spend about a third of their time in classrooms, so that they know firsthand what is going on” (Eisner, p. 579). Spending a third of a principal’s time in a classroom would be an ideal situation and principals should strive to do this by observing in the classroom. Currently, many principals feel they do not have time to spend in the classroom or the teachers do not feel comfortable while being observed. Either way, the principal should still strive to be in the classroom. When instructors are formally observed only once a year, it is easy for a weak teacher to perform well during that observation period. If the teachers are stressed by frequent visits, it should be the principal’s responsibility to make the teachers feel more comfortable. By emphasizing

the purpose of the classroom visits is for the principal to know how and what is being taught, the administrator can offer suggestions on teaching strategies. The visits allow the principal to suggest resources and fellow staff members who can offer suggestions. The visits should be to gain first hand knowledge of what is going on in the school, not to spy on the instructor. A school in Texas, trying to meet the Texas Assessment Academic Skills, requires its principals to visit classrooms daily (Schmoker, 2001). The instructional leader needs to know what instruction is occurring in their schools.

The educational leader must be familiar with many instructional techniques if they are going to help teachers improve their teaching. Teachers may be used to using only one or two models in their teaching practice. In the text *Instruction – A Models Approach* the authors state: “In thinking about the learning needs of individuals, it is important to realize that students learn in different ways and that teachers have different styles of teaching” (Gunter, Estes, & Schwab, p. 4). The quote emphasizes that an administrator must have some knowledge about the many styles of learning and the different methods of presenting. It is also necessary for the administrator to understand how the brain works and how it develops. Without this knowledge it would be difficult for the administrator to help teachers facilitate learning more effectively for the different learning styles of students.

The book *Best Practice – New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America’s Schools* (1998), coauthored by Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, continues to emphasize the importance of using good practices in teaching.

While legislatures, blue-ribbon panels, and media sages have tinkered with the logistics of education, another quieter school reform movement has been growing.

Our national curriculum research centers, a dozen subject-matter professional associations, many capable individual researchers, and thousands of on-the-line teachers have been struggling to determine “what works” in the different school subjects and to clearly define “best educational practice” in each teaching field. ... Unlike the better publicized (and often more official) reformers, they do not see the failure of American schools as an administrative breakdown, but rather as a failure of what we teach and how (p. 4).

Even though the authors state that it is not an administrative breakdown, it is still the administrator’s responsibility to make sure their teachers are using the best practices to enhance the students’ learning.

The principal is responsible for the instruction of all the students. This includes minorities, and low economic students. Patricia George (2002) in her article “Barriers to Access and Success” states:

Only 47% of low-income high school graduates immediately enroll in college or trade school, compared to 82% of high-income students—although they are academically prepared. What is preventing underserved students from pursuing education beyond high school? A close look at what goes on in schools and classrooms reveals that instead of an atmosphere of high expectations and a conviction that students can and should achieve, many schools establish and perpetuate low expectations for some students on the basis of deeply rooted cultural beliefs that create barriers to access and success (p. 23).

The comments from George’s article provide insight into part of the problem. Educators must have high expectations for all students. These expectations are not meant only for

the low-income students, but also are intended to include all students including students with learning disabilities, gifted and talented students, physically handicapped students, and the average student. Students rise up to the high expectations from the teachers. If one has low expectations the students will live down to that standard.

If one considers the purpose of a school, this standard may be the most important. The overall purpose of the school is to educate the youth. The educational leaders must understand how the students learn. It is duty of the school leader to make sure the teachers are teaching to the best of their ability using techniques that are applicable to the grade level and subject area in which they are teaching. If a teacher is not being effective, it would be the administrator's responsibility to help that teacher improve. Today with the requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation, this will become even more important.

ISSL Standard 3: Organizational Leadership

The principals are also the organizational leaders of a school. They must provide a safe environment that allows for efficient and effective learning. One way of accomplishing a safe environment is to look at the organization of a school day. In the last twenty years, some schools in the United States have switched from the traditional seven or eight period day to a type of block scheduling. There are many types of block scheduling, but they usually involve fewer blocks of time in a school day. A standard block schedule divides the school day into four blocks of time. Each block now consists of two regular periods. An 80-minute block allows students to look at a topic in more depth. Traditionally in an eight period day the students pass from class to class seven times during the school day. By switching to a block schedule the students pass between

classes only three times per day. This allows for more classroom time which translates to more teaching time. Irmsher (1996) states the following in his article "Block Schedule":

Larger blocks of time allow for a more flexible and productive classroom environment, along with more opportunities for using varied and interactive teaching methods. Other benefits listed by Jeffrey Sturgis (1995) include: more effective use of school time, decreased class size, increased number of course offerings, reduced numbers of students with whom teachers have daily contact, and the ability of teachers to use more process-oriented strategies.

The list of advantages is quite significant when looking at a school day. If the block schedule has a four block day, the students have fewer classes to prepare for each day allowing them more time to concentrate on their subject material. The fewer class preparations should allow students to have a better understanding of the material. Teachers must also adjust their instructional strategies to encourage these higher expectations of learning.

Another benchmark for standard 3 states that the administrator leader is responsible for providing a safe environment. In a school setting most discipline problems occur during the students' passing time between classes because the time is unstructured and no adult is specifically in charge of the students. Using the block schedule, the students are unsupervised for fewer minutes each day. When students have less unstructured time during the school day, the number of student altercations also decrease. If student achievement is not diminished by block scheduling, the safety factor should encourage any principal to examine this type of scheduling.

Are there any negatives to block scheduling? The question needs to be examined before a school switches to block scheduling. The first concern would be convincing an existing staff that a block schedule would be beneficial over a traditional eight period day. Teachers would have to adjust their teaching styles. Suggestions for teaching in a block format revolve around the idea of using three teaching techniques per block. Some studies say the class block should be divided into explanation, application by using different activities, and synthesis. Teenage students should not be expected to sit in an eighty plus minute block of time engaged in only one activity. Regardless of the advantages and disadvantages in setting up the school day, the school leaders must use the system that they and their staff feel is best for their school. It is the leader and staff's responsibility to study more than one method of arranging a school day.

Another approach of dealing with the safety of the students is to examine the school environment. Ever since the Columbine disaster in 1999, schools must thoroughly look at their students' safety. Elliot Aronson has written a book that examines the school environment. His book looks at the root causes of violence in our school settings. In his book, Aronson (2000) asks the following questions:

Can the general social climate of exclusion that exists in our schools be changed?
Can youngsters be taught compassion and empathy for other human beings? Can they be taught specific ways of living happily and productively with different kinds of people without excluding them, without putting them down, without humiliating them? (p. 91).

These questions need to be examined in our schools today. Many schools today are trying to eliminate such problems by using programs such as Character Counts. This

program has six pillars that are integrated into the entire school and community hoping to make the students and community aware of acceptance problems in our schools and society. The six pillars are trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. The pillars are incorporated into the school curriculum and lessons are taught for each of the pillars. Community and staff members are trained as to the expectations of the Character Counts model. The Character Counts model has been used nationwide and has documentation that the program helps reduce unwanted behaviors in school settings.

Another part of student safety is how students get along in the school or the school's culture. One of the major problems is the "bullying" that goes on in schools. Administrators must be aware of this problem if they are going to provide safety to all students in a school. In the February 2002 issue of *Principal Leadership*, Ken Serl states: "Schools have a moral responsibility to provide a healthy physical and emotional educational environment for each student. As long as one student is victimized by bullying, school communities need to do more" (p. 37). Bullying behaviors in schools are a tremendous problem for administrators and teachers. Administrators need to remember that bullying must be addressed to ensure the safety of all students.

ISSL Standard 4: Collaborative Leadership

As collaborative leaders of a school the administrators must be aware of working with the community, the staff, and even the students. Traditionally, parent involvement is high at the elementary level. As the students get older, parents still have a concern for their children's education but are less sure how to demonstrate their involvement to the students and the school. In many situations, teenagers do not want their parents to get

involved with their education. These teenagers feel that they are adults and want to progress on their own accord. Unfortunately, this attitude by students puts their guardians and parents in a position where they want to help and stay in contact with the school, but at the same time do not want to go against their children's wishes. Principals, teachers, and parents need to work through this problem. The parents must remember that they also are responsible for their children's education and need to stay involved with the school regardless of the grade level. It is important to maintain an active communication not only with parents but also with the community. In the May, 2002 issue of *Principal Leadership: Middle Level Edition*, George states: "Although parent involvement at the high school level is traditionally low because of disinterest, a variety of culture-related barriers may actually inhibit the participation of parents of underserved students" (p. 25). George's statement makes one aware that different cultures may lack the knowledge to know how to help in their children's education. The administrators must be aware that the same solution will not work for all groups.

The school needs to acknowledge that the school district population has ownership of its school. Many of the community members have been in that community for many years and will still be there when the administrator leaves for another school. A collaborative leader must be aware that the school belongs to the community and decisions should not be made without serious consideration for the entire district. In Iowa at the present time, several communities are looking at reorganizing their school districts. When a town loses its school, many in the community feel that the town dies. Administrators must take into account the feeling of the community since the school does belong to the taxpaying public.

Administrators can increase their collaborative leadership by following some of the transformational leadership qualities. This process allows the teachers and staff to take on some of the leadership. By giving them some ownership, the school will become a more closely related community. In his book *The Leadership Experience, Second Edition* (2002), Richard Daft states:

1. Transformational leadership develops followers into leaders.
2. Transformational leadership elevates the concerns of followers from lower-level physical needs (such as for safety and security) to higher-level psychological needs (such as for self-esteem and self-actualization).
3. Transformational leadership inspires followers to go beyond their own self-interests for the good of the group.
4. Transformational leadership paints a vision of a desired future state and communicates it in a way that makes the pain of change worth the effort (p. 148-149).

By including the staff in a collaborative method, each member will be more willing to take on their fair share. By attacking change in this way, the pain of change will be minimized so all are more willing to help with the change. An example of collaborative method in action is most districts' comprehensive school improvement plan. The district's school improvement plan was meant to include administrators, staff, and community members so all could take ownership of the plan. The importance of these plans to the school necessitates the involvement of everyone in the school district.

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.” (Iowa Department of Education, 2001, p. 5). When one looks at ethical leadership one needs to look at leading in a fair way. As an administrator, one must always make the best decision based on the information available considering the circumstances. Thomas J. Sergiovanni (1992) in his book, *Moral Leadership*, addresses ethical leadership. “The other source is moral authority, in the form of obligations and duties derived from widely shared values, ideas, and ideals. When leadership practice is based on moral authority, teachers can be expected to respond to shared commitments and felt interdependence” (p. 31). Principals leading with this form of leadership have enabled their teachers to help share in making decisions and goals. Since the goals were collaboratively developed with the teachers, all stakeholders will take ownership of these goals. The end result is that the entire staff, teachers and administrators are working toward a common shared goal. When everyone is working toward these common goals the entire school community will be working with integrity, fairness, and ethical behaviors.

“The principle of justice is expressed as equal treatment of and respect for the integrity of individuals. Accepting this principle means that every parent, teacher, student, administrator, and other member of the school community must be treated with the same equality, dignity, and fair play” (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 105). Sergiovanni’s statement suggests that if a shared common goal is adopted, then every staff member will hopefully follow through with this sense of moral value. By having a common value each member will take ownership of that value and no one individual will detract from

that value. The common value will lead to a community of stewardship toward these goals and beliefs.

Richard Daft (2002) states: “The leader’s behavior is an important tool for shaping ethical values. The single most important factor in ethical decision making in organizations is whether top leaders show a commitment to ethics in their talk and their behavior” (p. 217). His quote puts a large burden on the leaders of a school district. They must lead by example in order to expect their staff to have high moral values. Unfortunately it takes only a small mistake to undo months and years of building one’s ethical reputation.

Honesty should be considered when discussing ethical leadership. Teachers will not follow a dishonest principal. Principals will not follow a dishonest superintendent. At times, honest communication may be very difficult. How do you tell a good school district that it needs to improve in certain areas? How do you tell parents that a building must be closed? In difficult situations, one needs to use a blended style where one recognizes the good and still list the reasons why these difficult decisions must be made. Being honest will give an ethical leadership more integrity.

ISSL Standard 6: Political Leadership

The sixth ISSL standard deals with political leadership. Standard 6 makes one aware that administrators are the leaders of the educational system in the community. The leader must be involved with all aspects of the school’s context to serve the students and their families effectively. Being the leader does not make an administrator immune from the political and cultural make-up on a community. An administrator leading the educational community must be careful not to antagonize a part of the community when

suggesting changing the educational system. In the May 2002 issue of *Principal Leadership: Middle Level Edition*, Larson states:

We were careful to frame our discussion about the data in a healthier, more constructive perspective; viewing the data as not only identifying what the school is doing right but also highlighting the challenges that must be addressed if the process is to continue productively (p. 44).

The statement emphasizes that one must also look at the good things when one is trying to make changes or improvements in a school district. The community members who have helped and supported a school district like to hear that they have been doing well and that the school could improve even more if the suggested changes are considered.

Leading a school district in this political age is going to be a major challenge.

James B. Hunt states five goals that will help his state of North Carolina become number one in the nation in education. His five goals are: “a smart start, excellent teaching, safe schools, high student performance, and business, community, and family support” (Hunt, 2002, p. 716). When one is implementing change these five goals should be kept in mind because very few people in the community will be opposed to these goals. All parents want their students to be part of a school system promoting these goals. The more important challenge is to convince the general public that the proposed change does have these goals. The five goals should always be emphasized so the stakeholders can understand the change has the same outcome. The change is another way of achieving the common goals.

As school leaders, political leadership will continue to grow as schools are held more accountable for their students’ academic performances. The current educational

reforms are putting accountability pressure on everyone involved with a school system. President George W. Bush is campaigning for a better educational system. Doug B. Reeves (2001) states: "There is no mystery to President Bush's educational objectives. Four overarching themes dominate his agenda. These include accountability, standards, testing, and choices" (p. 8). These themes are evident in the current No Child Left Behind legislation. The challenge is attaining the goals of the No Child Left Behind legislation. Administrators need to be involved in writing legislation that is meaningful and beneficial for the students of our states and nation. If one is not politically involved in this legislation, standards will be written that sound good but will not accomplish the improvement of student learning.

Conclusion

When one considers the major impact administrators and teachers have on a community through the school district, it is important that the leaders have a vision for the school system. This vision must include all the stakeholders of the community. By including the parents and general public in the decision making process, the school district will have more support from the general public. It is up to the school leaders to provide research so the stakeholders can make educated decisions. The research needs to occur in both instructional and organizational areas so the community will support the changes that need to be implemented. As changes are made, it is necessary to make sure that the stakeholders are aware of why the changes are being made in the school system. Administrators must have the knowledge, research, and documentation to support the needed changes.

Administrators must demonstrate integrity. Parents are not going to allow their children to be led by someone without high ethical standards. Community members may challenge the principal's ethical standards when the decisions are affecting them directly. Ethical decisions may not be popular but that should not change the decision.

School leaders are put in a position of educating the community's most valuable asset, their children. School leaders must live their lives by the highest ethical standards to demonstrate to the community the importance of the district children's education.

A school leader needs to have a vision of what the school should exemplify in future years. Students should not only learn the academics, but should also learn to be good citizens. To be good citizens, the students of today must have knowledge of where our country has been in the past to better understand what we stand for today. To live in a democracy students must have values that all members of that democracy can live by and enjoy.

In order to get change in our schools an administrator must be willing to be involved politically. An administrator will need to be actively involved in their district, community, and state to promote the needs of their students. The administrator should be the expert in the educational area and have a thorough understanding of legislation affecting the school systems. The administrator is directly responsible for the students' education and needs to speak out so others understand the implications of pending and past legislation.

A school led by today's administrator, should be educating the whole student. This school should provide every student with an education that will allow that student to succeed in the world as an adult citizen. The student should have the opportunity to have

a successful career in the area the student wants to be employed whether it is a doctor, lawyer, electrician, or an hourly factory worker. Every student should be able to attend school without fear for their own safety. Each student should have the opportunity to enjoy the extracurricular activities available in the school system. The school needs to be a place that ensures each student has opportunities to succeed and get a complete education.

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