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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

Educational administration is an extremely complex profession, which offers many opportunities and challenges. I am intrigued at the complexity of issues that administrators are faced with on a daily basis. The most complete field of study could not possibly prepare a person for every situation that will arise. School leaders of today have an awesome responsibility. Leadership is a key component of being an effective administrator. Leadership is a difficult concept to define and there are many definitions. Leadership is the ability to take someone where they could not and would not go alone.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Educational administration is an extremely complex profession, which offers many opportunities and challenges. I am intrigued at the complexity of issues that administrators are faced with on a daily basis. The most complete field of study could not possibly prepare a person for every situation that will arise. School leaders of today have an awesome responsibility. Leadership is a key component of being an effective administrator. Leadership is a difficult concept to define and there are many definitions. Leadership is the ability to take someone where they could not and would not go alone.

Leadership is leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – of both leaders and followers. And the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own and their followers' values and motivations. (Phillips, 1992, p. 3).

There are ever increasing demands being placed on school leaders of today. It is my belief that educational administrators must have the passion to lead. I believe that passion is the spark that lights the fire. I am confident that I have the necessary skills to enter into the administration profession. I believe that building and maintaining relationships is another vital component of leadership. "Good leadership includes teaching and learning, building relationships and influencing people, as opposed to exercising one's power" (DePree, 1992, p. 177). Effective leaders have the trust of the people they lead and this trust does not

come easily, it is built up over time as relationships develop. In order to gain this trust, leaders must be honest with their personal and professional interactions. Along with honesty, I believe leaders must live according to their personal values. If people see inconsistencies between the way you lead and the way you live your life, you will lose your credibility and their trust. In addition, leaders must have the ability to communicate effectively. Communication is crucial in any relationship especially with the broad spectrum of people that principals interact with daily. Many problems come about due to a lack of communication. A quality leader must be articulate, clear, and concise in their ability to communicate with others. Communication includes being a good listener, especially in the position of building principal, where one is constantly confronted with parental, student, and staff needs and expectations. Administrators must also be extremely flexible and have the ability to make difficult decisions. One piece of advice that a building principal gave me was to be patient and not react to situations too quickly. He encouraged me to respond, rather than react to the situation. I believe it is important to take time and dissect each case carefully, gathering all the facts before responding. It is for these reasons that I believe administrators must demonstrate flexibility and handle each situation on an individual basis. In the cases we have studied throughout the program, I have learned that each case has its own set of circumstances and individuals that must be analyzed separately from other cases and situations. Increasing pressures from outside sources are

adding to the complexity. State standards and benchmarks are holding districts more accountable, while putting administrators on the hot seat. Legislation, such as “No Child Left Behind” regulates school funding based on standardized test scores. In addition, schools not meeting these standards are placed on a watch list and these lists are being distributed through the media. It is the complexity of the profession and the challenges it offers is what is motivating me to become an administrator.

Educational Leadership

Educational leaders of the 21st Century must be effective leaders and managers. Many people use these terms synonymously, but there is a major difference between them and school leaders must be able to balance them. Covey (1989) differentiates between them stating that “effective management is putting first things first (and) leadership decides what ‘first things’ are” (p.148). In order to be an effective leader, I will prioritize my personal and professional life by first identifying what those ‘first things’ are and lead according to those beliefs. I will build trusting relationships and establish rapport with the learning community by empowering students and staff to make decisions and serve as leaders themselves. Leaders must have the ability to lead by taking the learning community on an adventure. Great leaders have vision and strive to take their group or organization to a higher level of achievement. I see this as one of my greatest responsibilities, yet one of the most exciting challenges of educational leadership.

While leadership provides a roadmap for a school, management includes the day to day tasks that keep the school functioning. I value the importance of being a proficient manager and as the building principal I will demonstrate the ability to develop a schedule that is conducive to student learning. I will also manage the budget making maximum use of available funds. I will implement procedures and practices that develop and maintain a safe and positive school climate. These are monumental tasks by themselves, however, if done effectively they will allow me to find that balance between leadership and management.

I know that as a building principal it is my actions not my words that will show who I really am. The principal is the most visible member of the staff, therefore, it is critically important for me to conduct myself in an ethical and professional manner in both my personal and professional life. I must also model what I value by communicating my beliefs and philosophies through my daily actions. If there are any inconsistencies between my words and my actions, I will lose credibility among colleagues, students, and the entire learning community. As a teacher, I see first hand that every decision a principal makes will be scrutinized throughout the building. "Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things that matter least" (Covey, 1989, p. 146). It is through my actions that others will see my strong commitment to being an effective school leader.

The building leader must also be consistent in making decisions and dealing with problems as they arise. Being consistent does not mean handling every situation the same way. Consistent to me means to be patient and gather all the facts before acting. I hope to respond to each situation individually rather than react to them. Once I have gathered all the facts then I can be fair and consistent in my decision making. A lack of consistency will lead to a loss of respect and credibility among staff, students and parents.

The main reason I entered the teaching profession seven years ago was out of a genuine love of children. Over the past several years, through teaching and coaching, that love has continued to grow. It is because of this love of children that I am motivated to take on the leadership role of building principal. As the building principal I will make it a priority of mine to spend quality time with the young people in our school. I will empower both teachers and students thus building a community of leaders and learners. I believe the more responsibility entrusted to them, the greater emphasis they will place on teaching and learning. The only way I can have this type of influence is by being visible throughout the building. I want to be a hands-on administrator. I plan to be in the halls circulating with staff and students during passing times. I want to be in classrooms interacting with students in their environment. I know that everybody says this as they enter the profession. I have heard my administrator tell us every year that he plans to be in classrooms more this year and we never see him. The reason

administrators do not uphold this pledge is because they fail to make it a priority. As the building leader, I will make it a priority and I will set aside time each week that will allow me to be out in the building interacting with staff and students. I would even like to serve as a substitute teacher from time to time; this will allow me to stay current with the latest teaching strategies. If I hope to have an impact on students and influence them in a positive way, then I must continue to work with them.

The first thing I will do as an administrator is work to develop positive relationships with staff members. In my opinion, one of the most important elements of building relationships is developing trust and rapport. As a leader, it will be crucial to attend to the needs of others while following through on commitments and keeping promises. By acting with personal and professional integrity, modeling strong character and lending an empathetic ear, I can develop the trust and rapport needed in our school. I will make it a personal goal of mine to get to know each member of the staff personally and professionally. I will not over involve myself in their personal lives, but I will try to learn as much as I can in order to get to know them as people. It is very important to establish trust and build rapport with the entire staff. Trust is the key to any successful relationship. I think I can do this by being open and honest with staff and allow them to see me as a person. It is imperative that they see me acting in different roles. I will allow them to see me as a husband, father, friend, teacher, and principal. Once this trust

is established, I will make every effort to maintain it, because once trust is broken it is very difficult (if possible at all) to re-establish. This will become my first priority with the staff.

Once the trust has been established we can begin to develop a shared set of values and beliefs for our school. I believe that teachers are professionals and deserve to be treated as such. As a principal, I will treat teachers as equals and will look at them as colleagues and not subordinates. I want to establish a learning community where administrators, teachers, and students are working together toward common goals. I feel if teachers are empowered to make decisions they will work more passionately and take pride in their profession. This sense of pride comes from a feeling of ownership in their school. I also believe that teachers, in turn, should empower students in the classroom. Giving students the feeling of ownership will build an environment of pride and teamwork. Schools should be a positive environment where everyone is working together towards common goals.

The ability to communicate effectively with the entire school community is imperative to the success of any administrator. Communication is more than just speaking in a clear and concise voice; it also involves listening to others. In fact, listening may even be more important in a leadership position. I have successfully completed Cognitive Coaching, a district offered professional development opportunity, which focuses on both verbal and nonverbal communication. As the building principal, it will be vital that I understand the

importance of effective communication. I will utilize a variety of tools and methods in communicating with the learning community, focusing on the needs of others. I will strive to develop a common language in our school.

I will work along side staff members in a collegial relationship. I believe that a quality principal/teacher relationship is one based on mutual respect and both parties are learners and teachers. Empathetic listening, "listening with the intent to understand, not the intent to reply, control, or manipulate" (Covey, 1989, p. 240) will allow me to be more compassionate towards others in communication with them. "Seek first to understand, rather than to be understood (Covey, 1989, p.240) is a creed that I will follow. I have learned through practicum hours and subbing in the office, that in an administrative role, I will be faced with many situations that will require patience and understanding. In addition, I have also learned that sometimes people just want to be heard, they do not always want you to fix the problem, they just want to vent; that is why listening is so important in effective communication. It is my hope that by showing teachers the proper respect they deserve and treating them as colleagues, rather than subordinates, and being compassionate of their needs I will develop a positive school climate.

As a building principal, I will be the primary spokesperson for our building. A large part of my communication will be informal and personal, however, another portion of my communication will be formal. It will be important for me to articulate my vision and continually verbalize it to others. I

must clearly and effectively communicate with the public on matters such as student expectations and achievement through parent meetings and board presentations. This information should be communicated by preparing reports, keeping them simple, explaining them clearly, relating results to the school improvement plan, and sharing the responsibilities with others. (Bartusek, p.11)

I will make it my priority to keep people involved, make them aware of things as they arise, and continually communicate my vision with them. I will seek and dispense information throughout the school in order to keep all members of the learning community abreast of our progress and changes. I believe in shared decision making and will strive to make decisions that are in the best interest of the entire learning community. “Delegating decision making power to those closest to the point of implementation will result in better decisions, more support for school initiatives, and increased student performance” (Brost, 2000, p. 58). I plan to involve subgroups and committees in gathering information and making decisions, however, I also understand that as the leader there are certain decisions that I will have to make independently. Implementing this type of decision making structure will ensure that students, staff, and parents have a voice in our school. Proactively confronting problems as they arise, gathering information from a variety of sources, and seeking “win win” situations will demonstrate to others that I value their input and have their best interest, as well as, the best interest of the entire school in mind while making decisions. The more

ownership that students, staff, and parents feel in their school, the more pride they will take in making their school great.

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is yet another role that the building principal must successfully fulfill. The principal must promote a clear vision for the school. In addition, the instructional leader must establish a climate for, and create an atmosphere that encourages excellent teaching and successful learning. I take great pride in being the instructional leader for students and staff, because a principal who fails in this area, essentially fails the function of the school. In addition to promoting the vision, the role of instructional leader involves: hiring quality teachers, serving as a mentor to staff, implementing and maintaining effective teacher observation and professional development procedures, and maintaining the knowledge of effective teaching. It is obvious that the role of instructional leader is a huge time commitment and must be a priority in my daily schedule.

It is imperative that I create and communicate my vision of effective teaching. Through this effort, teachers will see that their efforts towards quality instruction are valued and that I care about the educational progress of all students. I will meet regularly with teachers individually and in small groups focusing on the impact teacher performance has on student achievement. Through frequent classroom visits I will gain a better understanding for each teacher and

their teaching style. It is my hope that by focusing on quality instruction and working closely with staff members, I will establish myself as an instructional leader.

The building principal must hire quality teachers, in order to continue to develop a climate that supports quality instruction. I must surround children with creative, highly motivated professionals who are willing to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to benefit their students. I will implement a quality hiring process by involving members of the current staff, however, I do understand that it is ultimately my responsibility to ensure that quality teachers are hired. I realize that as a new principal, I will not be able to hire all new staff members. One of the biggest challenges I will face is how I communicate my vision of educational leadership to the existing staff members. I look forward to working with and learning from this diverse group of experienced staff members and building a professional relationship with them. I hope to create a positive culture based on quality teaching and student learning.

Success for all students must be the primary focus of any school. The most logical path to student success would include success for all teachers. “Teachers and students benefit when principals function as learning leaders rather than instructional leaders” (DuFour, 2002, p. 14). The commitment to the success of all teachers begins with a strong emphasis on the success of new teachers. I will implement new teacher training and mentoring programs that partner beginning

teachers with veteran staff members. This type of relationship will be a rewarding experience, which provides professional growth for both the mentor and the mentee. I believe that a strong mentor program sets the foundation for teamwork, encouraging collegial relationships among staff members. This type of collaborative environment will be extended to all teachers as part of study groups, building committees, and other professional growth opportunities. Continued efforts towards ensuring quality instruction and building a collaborative working environment will have a direct impact on the success of all students.

Professional development of staff members is something I believe very strongly in. This professional growth must be a collaborative effort on behalf of both teacher and administrator and if well implemented can be a rewarding experience for both parties. Professional development requires an on-going, long-term commitment from both principal and teacher. The first phase of this process will involve a pre-observation or goal setting conference, followed by classroom observations. As stated earlier, I believe it is extremely important to be visible as the building leader. I will conduct both formal and informal observations throughout the process. I will give the teacher proper notice when conducting a formal observation. In addition, when conducting formal observations I will seek a copy of the teacher's lesson plans prior to the lesson. I also feel it is necessary to conduct informal observations as well. I am not out to get the teacher, I just want to be able to drop in and visit classrooms. When teachers know the principal is

doing an observation, they will try to be at their best and that is understandable. However, I want to have the ability to stop in unannounced and see what happens on a normal day in the classroom. Through multiple observations I will gain a better understanding of each teacher's individual strengths and weaknesses. Teachers will then receive specific feedback regarding their classroom performance. This feedback must be timely, honest, and based upon specific observations. Finally, we will work collaboratively to develop a plan to improve instruction and impact student progress. In order for a truly cohesive and collaborative environment to exist, teachers must view this process as an opportunity for growth. "Schools need principal leadership as much as ever. But only those who understand that the essence of their job is promoting student and teacher learning will be able to provide that leadership" (DuFour, 2002, p. 15).

Visionary Leadership

Visionary leadership is perhaps the most difficult phase of leadership. While the other phases are fairly concrete, being a visionary leader is quite subjective. A visionary leader must have the ability to think outside the box and challenge the day to day thinking of an organization. We have all heard the expression: that if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Well a visionary leader must be a change agent and think if it ain't broke, break it. This type of leadership requires an awareness of the past, an understanding of the present, and a clear picture of the future. "Vision is the essence of what the school communicates in a holistic

way through words, actions, and written material about what the school stands for and hopes for in the future” (Speck, 1999, p. 37).

It is a process of engaging constituents in conversations about their lives, about their hopes and dreams. Remember that leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue. Leadership isn’t about imposing the leader’s solo dream; it’s about developing a shared sense of destiny. It’s about enrolling others so that they can see how their own interests and aspirations are aligned with the vision and can thereby become mobilized to commit their individual energies to its realization. A vision is inclusive of the constituents’ aspirations; it’s an ideal and unique image of the future for the common good. (Speck, 1999, p. 37).

Before I can develop a vision for where we are going, I must first gain an understanding of where we are now. “Principals play a pivotal role in schoolwide programs by promoting vision and directing activities” (McChesney, 2000, p. 15). “To accomplish lasting reform, we need leaders who can create a fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and of the teaching profession itself” (Fullan, 2002, p. 18). In order to develop a group vision, I will seek input from students, staff, and parents within the learning community. I believe that involving the community early in the process is very important. If I am going to build a truly collaborative environment then I must involve students, staff, and parents in developing the vision for our school. This will allow them to feel ownership and take pride in the journey towards achieving our vision.

Vision should guide action therefore the vision of an effective school should guide everything we do. This would include our hiring practices, evaluation procedures, curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The achievement of this vision is a continuous process and one that requires a long-term commitment of everyone involved. It is imperative that all members commit to and continually review the expectations projected in the vision. This vision must be clearly articulated, published, and visible to everyone that enters the school. It is a constant reminder of where we are going as a school and what we hope to accomplish. The vision must be monitored, evaluated, and continually refined to meet the ever-changing needs of the learning community.

The building principal faces yet another challenge in shaping the culture/climate of the school. The culture of a school includes the deeply embedded beliefs and practices, which are a direct result of the shared vision. School climate is the attitude shared by students, staff, and the entire population of the school. The climate is more the ‘personality of the school’, which includes the individual feelings about the school. The culture has a larger, longer lasting influence than the climate does. “Transforming culture – changing what people in the organization value and how they work together to accomplish it – leads to deep, lasting change” (Fullan, 2002, p. 19).

I have stressed the importance of being a visible member of the learning community. I believe that I can have the biggest influence on the building climate

by being “out there” and involved with students and staff. I will make it a priority to be in the hallways and classrooms throughout the building. While out of the office, I must be productive. I will develop a plan to ensure that I get to all parts of the school on a regular basis. This visibility will allow me to demonstrate my commitment to teaching and learning, as well as, further develop relationships with students and staff. I can help to improve the climate of a building by being a positive and active participant. In developing the building climate, it is my ultimate goal to provide a safe and positive learning environment for all students.

Professional Growth

In order to be a productive and effective leader, I must continue to grow both personally and professionally. That starts with striking a balance between my personal and professional lives. To be a productive school leader, I must first prioritize my personal life. That starts with putting ‘first things first’, I will make it my number one priority to spend quality time with my family. If I become an effective time manager, I believe that I will be able to spend more quality time with my wife and children. In order to have their full support I must make them my main focus. In addition, I will schedule time for myself because I believe it is important to stay fit both mentally and physically. I believe that the amount of time I invest in scheduling time for myself and my family will in turn make me a happier, more productive leader.

I also believe that as the school leader I must demonstrate a commitment to life-long learning. As a life-long learner I must continue to be actively involved in the learning process. If I am going to expect staff members to commit to their professional development, I must first model that commitment. I will try to broaden my knowledge base through current literature and membership in professional organizations. “The person who doesn’t read is no better of than the person who can’t read” (Seven Habits, 1989, p.296). Another component of my professional development will include taking time to reflect on my progress as a school leader. Reflection is very important in growing as a leader. I hope to utilize a trusted member of the staff or fellow administrator to help with this process.

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