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A vision for administrating Iowa secondary schools : a reflective essay

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Abstract

The role of secondary principals is always changing. The days of the secondary principal being the master of discipline no longer exists. Discipline is now only a minute part of a principal's role. A principal's role is moving more towards a team player and leader. Teamwork is needed to ensure all students receive the very best educational opportunities. The principal must play an active role in developing all the components necessary for students to succeed in the secondary schools.

A VISION FOR ADMINISTRATING IOWA SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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PERSONAL

As I reflect on my vision for education in Iowa, I must first examine my own background and how it has shaped me. I was born the fifth child of eight to Bobby and Evelyn Scott. My father only attended school until the eighth grade. After that he worked in the coalmines in southern Iowa until joining the army at age 17. My mother graduated high school in 1949. My parents were married in 1951. My father worked for a meat packing plant from 1948 until his death in 1972. He told me once that his goal was for all his boys to attend college and for his girls to marry decent men. He worked hard but did not like the work he did. He wanted his children to have a better way of life. College seemed the answer. Many times when I think of quitting, this lone thought and wish of my deceased father keeps me going.

I have seven siblings, some who now have grown children. I am the only who completed a four-year college degree. We read about the cycle of poverty and I see it within my own family. My education has allowed me to rise above this cycle. I have several adult nieces and nephews who have not graduated from high school. They have jobs, but the jobs tend to be low paying and unsatisfying. I know that they were raised with the idea that school was out to get them. It was never a team effort between parent and school to educate the children. Education was something they had to do until they were old enough to get a minimum wage job and so the cycle continues.

VISIONARY LEADERSHIP

As a future leader in education I realize that the only hope some students have is to further their education. As a secondary math teacher, I often advise students not to cut their options short too early in their lives. Not all students will listen or heed this advice, but they must be given an opportunity.

An Iowa secondary school principal's vision should promote the individual success of the students. As the demographics in Iowa continue to change, so will the needs of its secondary students. District to district, the climate and structure differ. Iowa principals need to recognize this and know the needs of each district's students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act has made meeting the needs of these children a law.

Tom E. C. Smith (2002) has written that Congress, however, needs to consider some of the flaws in the IDEA when they reauthorize it. He suggests we make it more like Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 gave educators a great deal more discretion about how to meet the needs of all students. He is concerned with a cut off determined by some formula developed by a bureaucrat. His point was that the difference between the educational needs of a student with an IQ of 72 and one with an IQ of 77 is not that great. However, one may qualify for help and the other may not in some states. My own experience with my stepdaughter verifies this. When she was in second grade she struggled to read. She was tested for special help and did not qualify. "Yes" they said she was low, but there were other students lower than her and

so she did not fall in the bottom percentage rank for help. She has since overcome this disability with the extra help of caring teachers throughout the years.

The role of secondary principals is always changing. The days of the secondary principal being the master of discipline no longer exists. Discipline is now only a minute part of a principal's role. A principal's role is moving more towards a team player and leader. Teamwork is needed to ensure all students receive the very best educational opportunities. The principal must play an active role in developing all the components necessary for students to succeed in the secondary schools.

Iowa secondary school principals need to effectively communicate the vision and mission of their district. This communication should not only be to staff, but also to the students, parents and community as a whole. The school vision should be developed with the whole community and implemented and monitored by this same community.

I find it ironic that the vision of many larger schools is to develop smaller groups within their school in order to give students a better education. But in Iowa there is talk in the legislature to combine all high schools of less than 200 students and form regional high schools. It has not happened yet, but I do foresee it in the near future. As an aspiring principal one should become familiar with learning communities. Vander Ark (2002) lists these four types of communities: Houses, Academies, School-within-a-school, and Small Autonomous Schools. If small schools in Iowa are forced to restructure any one of these could be used. For example, if three schools of say 125 students would combine the three separate buildings could be used for any of the aforementioned learning communities.

Everett, Mouse, Parson, and Stephens (2002) said:

Here are key aspects of our small learning community model:

- Enrollment ongoing dialogue among students, families, and educators in course selection and other strategies for high school success
- Student advisory group: small groups of teachers and students focused on personal, academic, and skill development
- Career clusters: course sequences, work-based experiences, community partnerships, and aligned advisories in a broad range of career experiences
- Senior experience: senior-level coursework matched with nonschool experiences
- Professional community: the creative use of professional development, including common planning, teacher externships, and focused training.

I believe the format for secondary education within this nation and Iowa will be changed.

I do not think that the standard process of 40 minutes of math then 40 minutes of English is going to survive in the 21st century. The unfortunate fact is that education costs money. The politicians try to give students the best education they feel the taxpayers will support. If education had no limit to its budget we would all be better educated.

Since money is an issue with the quality of education students receive, principals need to become familiar with how to obtain as much as possible and budget it wisely. Levenson (2003) points out that while public schools have been struggling to meet the needs of all students, private schools and universities have been raising billions of dollars. The money comes from corporations, foundations, the government, and private citizens. Often times it may not be money. Sometimes equipment, such as computers, are donated. The school I am working for currently just received 40 plus computers for the

cost of picking them up. As businesses update their hardware they often donate the "old" to nonprofit organizations. Public schools are definitely nonprofit.

Grants and gifts may provide the extra money to help a school meet its vision for the twenty-first century. But those gifts don't often come knocking on your door.

Principals must go and find them. This goes against the way I was raised, one doesn't ask people for money. Over the years I have come to realize that there are people in this country who don't mind helping out a needy cause. Levenson says there are two types of campaigns, annual and capital. Annual campaigns are held every year and seek new donors plus ask old donors to increase their donations. Some examples would be phone-a-thons, direct mail solicitations, auctions, breakfast or dinner meetings, golf outings, marathons, 5k runs, and website solicitations.

Capital campaigns have loftier goals. Here the schools ask for larger sums of money over a specific time period. If there is some tangible outcome, such as a new music auditorium, people may donate funds to have a room named in honor of their family. As Levenson stated, "With proper training, leadership, and vision, public schools can grab a larger piece of the fundraising pie." (p.18)

We must remember the statement made by M. James Kedro (2003) "The bottom line in procuring and allocating resources is, of course, whether expenditures have improved student achievement."(p.20) Principals must keep in mind that there needs to be a connection to expenditures and increased student achievement. Data of expenditures and student achievement must be kept and analyzed to ensure that there is a correlation between the two.

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

As the vision and mission statements are developed, current demographics and changes should be taken into account. The plan for the district should include any local resources that could maximize student achievement and learning. Revisions of the vision and mission statements need to occur as the local demographics change. In rural Iowa the increase in single parent families has affected the outlook of many students.

Beattie (2002) found that adolescents of low SES origins might place greater weight on certain elements of the capital human formula such as the cost of post secondary education. She also suggests that status attainment research has demonstrated socioeconomic background can influence post secondary enrollment. These findings lead one to believe that if adolescents believe that post secondary education is an unobtainable goal because of financial hardships, their attitude about all education becomes tainted.

Secondary schools need to be aware that some students see no future in their own education. There are programs such as Upward Bound that encourage these students to seek post-secondary education. When I say post-secondary education that does not mean only the traditional four-year college education. Tech schools and A. A. degrees sometimes are what many students need and/or desire. Some students who have the means just do not have the desire to seek post secondary education. This does not mean that the school should ignore the educational needs of these students. These students should be given the background so if they change their minds in the future, they have a chance to succeed at what ever they attempt.

The number of alternative style high schools has increased in the last 15 years. These schools provide an education for students who can't succeed in the traditional school setting for a variety of reasons. All Iowa high schools should have this option available to their students. Principals should encourage and guide students who appear on the verge of giving up on school to try this route first.

The secondary principal should not overlook current needs of students when looking towards the vision of the future. The students and their development are the main focus of any district. I have often felt that some secondary teachers see their sole purpose is to create college students. This attitude often leads to neglect of the needs of the students who will not attend college. An article in Newsleader (Diploma Options, 2004) reports that the National Center on Educational Outcomes found there are 34 states that have more than one diploma option, and four states have five or more alternatives. Some of these options are individual education/special education diplomas, certificates of attendance, and certificates of achievement. I have thought that some of the discipline issues that arise in a secondary school setting are linked to a student's attitude about being in school. A shortened intense program designed to let a student finish in less than the normal four years may better serve some students. I believe many students who are not seeking post-secondary education may be more involved if they believe they could finish in three years instead of four. I understand that the issue of funding comes into play with this idea. If the legislature would come on board with this idea though, the funding issue could be solved. Schools, which have programs that allow students to graduate in three years, could receive funding for those students the following year.

A school culture that promotes the success of all students is perhaps the most visual aspect of a secondary principal 's duties. The behavior of students is very noticeable to community members in the hallways and at activities. Students that are treated with fairness, dignity and respect, have behaviors that reflect it. By treating students and staff in a respectful manner, they will feel valued and important.

If there are barriers to student learning, these barriers must be overcome. Often these barriers are not from the students, but from staff and the community. As demographics change, curriculum will also change. Change is difficult and staff barriers may arise. Zimmerman (2002) states, "Managing change in today's world is like trying to dance with a gorilla. You don't stop when you get tired. You stop when the gorilla gets tired."(p.1)

The staff needs to be aware that change is coming and that they may need to change with it." The only time people change is when they are confronted by strong leadership, crises, or both."(Zimmerman, 2002)

Even though he was not talking about education per say this quote is appropriate. There is an attitude within the public that education in this country is in a crisis. There is going to be change. If principals want their schools to change than they must be strong leaders. Strong leaders have certain qualities that make them strong leaders. Zimmerman (2001) thinks the first and most important is integrity. His staff must trust a strong leader. To develop this trust a principal should be open and honest with the staff. Communication is the main ingredient in honesty. Keep the staff informed of all decisions and changes that may occur.

Zimmerman (2003) writes:

General Douglas MacArthur said it quite well. He said, "There is no security on this earth, only opportunity." If you're a leader, a leader of change, you need to grasp the full meaning of MacArthur's comment. He's saying you may never find a way to make people like change. After all, most people don't want it. They want security. All you can do is make people feel less threatened by the change. And that, my friends, is one of the key tasks of every leader. You have to do some things to reduce the fear of change. (p.1)

I see this fear in teachers every year. Teachers who have been in the classroom for 30 years fear change. I don't think all of them believe they are too good to change, but instead fear that they don't have the skills needed to implement the change. One good example was in the mid 1980's and 1990's when computers first began to be integrated in classrooms. Many veteran teachers feared computers. Actually, I believe they feared their own ignorance of computers. Professional Development and changes in district policies forced them to confront their own fear and ignorance of computers. Now most of these teachers don't know how they ever taught without one!

Curriculum needs should be based upon sound research and the expertise of the teachers. Curriculum needs should be monitored and revised as needed to promote student progress. This is what Data Driven Leadership is about. Irving Elementary School in Dubuque started this almost a decade ago. Data must be analyzed to enhance the educational process. Collecting data and then just writing down and reporting it does not help to improve the educational process. I see no value in assessing benchmarks if schools don't analyze the assessment student by student. To say "Oh we have 80 percent

of our 8th grade students proficient at math standard 3 benchmark 2." is not helping the 20 percent who are not proficient. The data needs to be analyzed and tracked student-by-student, year-by-year. To do this, teachers and staff must be trained. Training takes time and money. If the state is serious about these changes then money needs to be allocated so schools can afford to do it correctly!

Just as there will be barriers to student learning, there will also be accomplishments. A principal must acknowledge both. Staff development should be encouraged and recognized as well. A principal should employ a variety of supervisory and evaluation models to acknowledge accomplishments. When I first taught at Albia Community Schools they had the Renaissance Program. This was a program supported by local businesses that awarded students for academic success. This program included attendance, high grade point averages and also improved grade point averages. A student who improved say from a grade point average of 2.2 to a grade point average of 2.6 would also be recognized. An assembly was held and awards given. The students received, among other things, a colored card that was for discounts and merchandise at participating merchants. Anyone who had perfect attendance for four years of high school received a watch. I was not at the school before the program was established, but it was deemed successful by teachers who were employed at Albia Community Schools prior to its implementation. Attendance had improved and more students tried to be successful academically.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Iowa secondary principals need to have organizational leadership qualities to manage the operations and resources needed to ensure a safe, efficient and effective

learning environment. As I learn more about the duties and responsibilities of a principal I see time management skills to be of great importance. I have been a coach for over 20 years and realize that education is not an 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. job. I am used to putting in long days. Time management is a necessity. I think a good secretary for a principal is crucial. I believe a personal planner, lap top computer and maybe even a palm pilot could help with my organization. The principal calendar we developed last summer needs to be utilized.

Potential problems will need to be identified and resolutions readily available.

Organization leadership is not only about my own organization, but also the organization of the school. Professional Development, staff meetings, student assemblies, and daily activities all need to be included here. Any professional educator who has attended an unorganized professional development session probably left frustrated and irritated about the wasted time.

I have been in charge of several sports banquets for the athletes and their families over the last 20 years. People appreciate a well-organized and time efficient event. I have become irritated myself after sitting in a meeting that took twice as long as it should have. Sometimes it was evident that the only reason the meeting took so much time was because that was how much time was allowed for the meeting. So the meeting was dragged out to make sure all the time was used. As a math teacher I have determined that I do not need to lecture students for the same number of minutes for every topic covered. I may have Algebra students for 46-minutes every day, but there are days when only a fraction of that time is needed to explain the material. I believe in letting the students use the rest

of the time to work and if they finish their math they may work on something else.

Students are busy people also and need time management as well.

The school plan, equipment and support systems need to be organized to continue to operate safely, efficiently and effectively as local demographics change. I also believe to ensure the school's goals, financial, human and material resources should be aligned and managed responsibly. Budget cuts will always come around so a principal must be able to organize resources to provide the best learning environment possible during both prosperous and not so prosperous times.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Community involvement in the school is an essential element of collaborative leadership. An Iowa secondary principal needs to be highly visible within the community. A working relationship needs to be maintained with all community leaders whether they are political, religious or part of a service organization, etc. All local resources need to be identified and used appropriately.

The staff within the school must realize the importance of collaborating with the community and with each other. It is the principal's job to help communication flow between staff. Gary Stager (2002) suggests that a few simple changes incorporated into every day routines will increase communication more than forming a committee. He says "Hiding in your office under a stack of paper works against your interest and those of the students you are employed to serve. Organizing with your peers may lead to ways of distributing your noninstructional responsibilities. You even rebel. No matter how irksome the tasks required of you, your first obligation is to create rich learning

environments in which communities of practice serve the children and nurture the soul of a school." (P.26)

As demographics change within the district, diversity should be recognized and valued by all members of the staff. Local businesses and higher education institutions can be used to meet the district's goals and strengthen programs. The local media can also be used to keep the community informed and amiable. The media is part of the community so it too will reap the rewards of a quality school. Some districts have someone in charge of public relations. This is part of the principal's job in most districts however. It may be the most important and difficult part of a principal's job. An article in Newsleader (*Building Relations with Media, 2002*) says that principals should identify the most important media outlet for the information you wish to deliver. Before making contact the principals should focus their goals and objectives. When an editor or reporter agrees to meet with them, they must be prepared. Principals should provide a press kit, a business card, and some basic information about their schools. Follow up procedures should be done. Regular contact by phone, e-mail, fax or an occasional note must be done. The article says there are 10 rules to keep in mind:

- 1.) Be cooperative. Work with the media and policymakers in a way that will benefit both parties.
- 2.) Be accessible. Make yourself available to the media and policymakers, not only on your schedule but theirs as well. Let them know you are available for questions.
- 3.) Be direct. Remain upfront and honest with media and policymakers. They do not have time to waste.

- 4.) Be fair. Provide equal treatment to all reporters and policymakers.
- 5.) Be a resource. When you cannot answer or help a reporter or policymaker, try to recommend another contact.
- 6.) Be an authority. Know your school, the district, and its policies on key issues. Gain an in-depth understanding of the media.
- 7.) Be an educator. You are the most knowledgeable person about your school. Share your knowledge with the media and policyholders. You and your school will benefit greatly.
- 8.) Be an advocate. Favorably present your school to the media and policymakers.
- 9.) Be a strategist. Know the right time to pitch a story and the right time to serve as a resource.
- 10.) Be a team player. Rely on the district office for support. Stay abreast of current topics, and provide information on what has worked well for you. They can share your strategies with others around the district and vice-versa.

I believe that collaborating with the media can lead to a great rapport with the whole community. This successful collaboration will take time to develop. A little cooperation, sharing information, a bit of humor and above all else honesty, will help develop this successful collaboration. Effective communication and problem solving skills will allow for minimal problems toward achievement of the schools goals.

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Acting with integrity, fairness and ethics are requirements of all professional educators. I believe, however, that what is fair in one person's eyes is unfair in another's. An example is playing time in sports; some people only see the game time. The issue of fairness may extend beyond to the amount of time a player may have put in practice or the off-season. The individual who has attended all practices and been a model student may not agree with someone in the stand that thinks that the playing time is not fair. As a role model to staff and students, an Iowa secondary principal must demonstrate these values at all times. Any unethical behavior tarnishes the school's image and interferes with the district's goals and visions. This behavior carries over to one's personal life outside of the school. Right or not this is the way things are. As educators we are held to a higher standard.

As local demographics continue to change, a principal must strive to protect the rights of all students and staff. In some smaller schools the established population often does not accept newcomers with open arms. The new students or staff members are often treated with disdain and rudeness. Iowa has an open enrollment policy in effect. Students may enroll in a school district that they do not reside in. I have been at schools where students open enroll to another school not for academic reasons but for social reasons. Teenagers can be very harsh toward each other. I know of one small district that the principal's two daughters open enrolled to another school because of the treatment they received. I believe as I become established in a school it will be my job as principal to welcome all students and staff to make them feel part of the school's community and to ensure that others in the school do the same.

Principals must apply all laws and procedures wisely. In today's American society there are many students who are transferred from foster home to foster home. As important as education is, it sometimes takes a backseat to the physical well being of the student. There are often legal proceedings that must be kept confidential. All staff must be sensitive to the diversity in the school community. Diversity of cultures should be treasured as a learning experience.

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

As the trends within the political bodies located in the state change, a school principal must keep politically active to ensure quality education for the district's students. These trends must be communicated effectively to staff and community. Currently in Iowa, the comprehensive school improvement plan is a political tool for an assessing a school's progress or lack thereof.

Political leadership includes working within the community with diverse community groups to attain the school's vision and goals. An Iowa secondary principal needs to have a working political relationship with the community's elected officials such as the school board, county engineers, county sheriff and county supervisors. I believe that principals must now become political activists. The state legislature is in control of the major portion of the funding to schools. All educators must become more active and vocal about the needs of the schools. The "squeaky wheel" gets the grease in politics. I know that the education unions have strong political lobbyists, but I often think they are a bit self-serving. I am by no means a political analyst, nor do I confess to fully understand the whole scope of the state and federal budgets. I do know that public schools can use as much funding as they can get.

Being a political leader goes beyond the realm of elected officials. Principals must be political leaders within their districts to ensure smooth progress towards student achievement. For changes to occur in education the people closest to the innovation must buy into it. This is why political leadership must be applied within the school itself. I am currently employed at Turkey Valley Schools. Before I was hired the district was exploring block scheduling. At the time there was sight-based decision making in place. Over the summer the administration chose to make the junior high core classes into a four-block schedule. The teachers of these classes felt betrayed not only by the principal but also by the other staff who were not affected by the decision. The change pendulum has swung back around to where the junior high is no longer block scheduled. However, even though the decision was made almost ten years ago there is still animosity over it. Principals need to be careful not to violate the trust of anyone.

In the future I see political leadership becoming a bigger part of the principals responsibilities. If the No Child Left Behind stays in place, the accountability issues will force principals to be politically savvy at all levels to provide for the best learning environment for students. I don't think any paper written on education would be complete without comments about the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Every educational publication I read generally has at least one article or reference to or about the NCLB. The articles are often both pro and con towards the NCLB. I believe most educators agree with the general premises of the act. This is that all students should be given a chance to succeed. Educators are, however, concerned with the timelines that have been established for the accomplishment of this goal. There is also concern over the resources that it will take to meet these goals mandated by the NCLB.

An article in Newsleader (Federal Resources Insufficient, 2004) written about the study *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 2 of the No Child Left Behind Act* stated that according to interviews with U.S. Department of Education officials and congressional leaders, most federal officials expect no legislative changes to the NCLB any time soon. The article stated that most state and district leaders felt the law will increase student achievement over time. There is concern that not all students will be proficient by 2014, especially students with disabilities and English language learners.

Other concerns mentioned were:

- Schools don't have sufficient staff to carry out NCLB.
- Twenty-four of the 40 responding states report fiscal problems adversely affect their ability to carry out the law's requirements.
- Approximately half of responding states say local districts are hampered by financial problems that can be attributed to state budget problems.

I would agree that the state budget cuts are affecting student achievement. When administrators are spending a large amount of their limited time on trying to figure out budget problems, they are not spending time on improving the educational process. The district I am currently employed at is trying to make sure that the cuts in state funding don't cause student achievement to start to decline. As money is taken away, so are programs and supplemental materials, class sizes start to increase and outside resources begin to dwindle.

CONCLUSION

The six standards of leadership all come together for the one common goal all schools should have. That goal is for maximum student learning to occur. James L. Jackson wrote that research shows that the principal is the focal point of the staff.

" The more a principal facilitates collaboration among staff members, students, and parents on issues that affect the school, the more organizational climate will improve." (p.28)

He goes on to write if the principal doesn't effectively facilitate this collaboration, organizational climate and student learning may be affected. I believe this statement to be true. Over the years I have seen school districts that had the "us" against "them" attitudes. These attitudes spread from teacher vs. school board or teachers vs. the administrators to teachers vs. students and eventually to school vs. community. When this happens the learning environment is not at its best for students. As a principal I believe the most important part of my job would to build a team atmosphere. All the components from the school board down to the students need to be working toward the same common goal. That goal is for maximum student learning to occur. I know that the problem sometimes is that there is a disagreement on what is the best way to obtain that goal. Decisions have to be made. A strong leader will let all parties know that the decision was made in the interest of obtaining the main goal of the school.

I agree with the current trend toward data driven education. I don't necessarily agree with the way it is currently presented by lawmakers. However, I do believe that data should be collected and observed for every child. If we are to leave no child behind then the data tracking should be for each child, for each standard, and each benchmark

year to year. This would be my goal as a principal. When I look at a student's record, I would like to know what level they could read, write, or solve problems. A letter grade of C does not tell me what the student learned or failed to learn. This would be a great benefit to teachers, parents and the students themselves.

Teachers would communicate with each other about each student they shared or passed on. When a student was forced to change schools, their record would show the new teacher the knowledge base the student had. For this to happen teachers would need time for record keeping, parents would have to change their mindset of grading, and the school district would need to come up with the extra resources to implement the changes. I also would like the federal government to spend more on education to help with these new ideas. If education were to be funded like the military money would be less of an issue. (No, I don't think teachers deserve combat or hazardous duty pay!)

This is my vision for education.

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