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A Preferred Vision for Administering Secondary Schools: A Reflective Essay

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Abstract

Coming from the classroom into the Leadership program, I felt that administration was a way in which a good teacher could more effectively make an impact upon an entire system rather than an isolated classroom. It is the opportunity to lead a building in creating an atmosphere and climate where every student benefits, not just the few in the teacher1 s room. Moving into the secondary principals hip this year, I still firmly believe that to be the case. An effective principal can help to create the type of atmosphere where great things can happen in education.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

John Speer

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Coming from the classroom into the Leadership program, I felt that administration was a way in which a good teacher could more effectively make an impact upon an entire system rather than an isolated classroom. It is the opportunity to lead a building in creating an atmosphere and climate where every student benefits, not just the few in the teacher's room. Moving into the secondary principalship this year, I still firmly believe that to be the case. An effective principal can help to create the type of atmosphere where great things can happen in education.

Education is too important to leave to chance; a good building, no matter how strong the teaching staff, can not sustain excellence for an extended period of time without a good leader. Because of this it is imperative that we continue the efforts to cultivate determined, educationally minded principals who believe that administrators can and should make a difference educationally. To make a difference, the principal must be an effective leader, so the one question we must ask ourselves as we begin to cultivate good principals is what is a leader?

What is a leader? That question evokes a myriad of responses from different people and even varying definitions by the same people on different days; this happens because leaders come in many forms, hold various philosophies, and lead using numerous styles. Because of the elusiveness of the one "right" way to lead, each individual must mold his/her own leadership style based on beliefs and experiences using the best judgment possible. In order to forge this leadership style, a leader must possess, as Manthey and Thompson (1999) point out , a set of "core beliefs" (p.10), an adherence to values, and certain traits which guide judgment. These elements are crucial in the process of leading a school. To work without these things well in mind is akin to flying without navigation equipment or orienteering without a compass; it is haphazard at best and disastrous at worst. With a core set of beliefs, an adherence to values, and striving for exemplary traits, administrative decisions will be consistent, thoughtful, and sound.

Administrative Traits and Values

The key or bedrock of any leader in a leadership position is the exemplary traits one possesses and the values one covets and displays. Without these to guide a leader like a moral compass, a leader can not sustain consistent, trusted leadership over time. When times are tough and tough decisions need to be made, these underpinnings are what will allow the leader to go on with the support of a staff. If those being led know that decisions in a building are built upon a solid base of core beliefs and values, true leadership will flourish.

Honesty

School personnel must "model traditional values often lacking in today's society, [including] honesty" (Gribbin & Kenner, 1992, p.16). Quite simply, for many students the only place they will experience or witness the moral traits society covets is at school. The first of these traits an administrator should possess, honesty, defined as "not deceptive or fraudulent; genuine; frank;straightforward" (Mish, 1991, p.579), is an integral piece to the makeup of an administrator.

With the lack of role-models in society, it is imperative that administrators project those traits which are most desirable in society. The first part of the definition is of course essential. An administrator must never be deceptive or fraudulent. These two words will rob any administrator of all credibility. It is easy to see why one must avoid these two pitfalls because they are so egregious. The second half of honesty, frankness and being straightforward, are the more difficult aspects to achieve. When dealing with so many different people and groups in such a public and pressurized arena, the instinct for many is to tell people what they want to hear. This, in the long run, will only create problems. People by nature may not agree with decisions, but do respect someone who deals with them openly. Further, it is an administrator's job to deal with the truth even when it is hard or hurts--an administrator must deal with the truth and its consequences head on. Only through honesty can an administrator foster honesty and build trust. .

Compassion

Compassion, the second administrative trait, must show itself on a regular basis in schools. An administrator must never forget that all decisions affect people ulitimately. Although administrators make tough decisions, they do not occur in a vacuum. Decisions and policies are far reaching-- peoples' lives will be affected. And often the tragedies or even bumps in the road of the lives of others will impact the school setting. Regardless of the cause of pain, school related or not, a leader must possess and foster "the deep feeling of sharing the suffering of another" (Mish, 1992, p.268). A compassionless leader is a tyrant whose goals and decisions ignore other's emotional needs. Compassion and caring for others "begins with knowing others" (Cash, 1997, p.24) and knowing others fosters a sense of caring compassion. When a compassionate leader "see[s] a wrong, [they] try to right it. When [they] see injustice, [they] try to make it right. When [they] see a. . . teenager struggling to survive each day, [they] try to help them. When [they] see teachers struggling to grow, [they] support and counsel them"(Metz, 1998, p.82). Because of

these types of actions, compassion does not connote weakness, does not undermine discipline, and does not hinder authority, but enhances each of these because an administrator who is compassionate and cares for people, maintains expectations while treating all constituents as people.

Passion

Regardless of what one calls it, the third trait, passion, intimates a love or excitement towards learning and schools. If a building administrator does not show passion for the building, it is quite hard for a staff to show that passion. The "intense, driving feeling or conviction"(Mish, 1992, p.860) an administrator feels and shows sets the tone for the rest of the school. Jeanie Cash in What Good Leaders Do states that "passion stems from hope. We cannot survive,much less progress, without hope. . . [and] we ignite a passion. . . by being passionate ourselves"(1997, p.24). It is the most overlooked of administrative traits because of the numerous tasks at hand, but a passionate leader can more easily lead. Being passionate alone will not get the job done, but if the other necessary traits are in place, it becomes increasingly easier

to build consensus and lead a large group of people using your·

passion and enthusiasm to help sell a program or philosophy.

In fact, these traits are contagious, and by modeling and

fostering them one breeds a staff which will work hard and

thoughtfully towards accomplishing the goal of educating.

Passion and enthusiasm are not cursory components of

leadership.

<u>Integrity</u>

Integrity is the overarching value which helps solidify

one's traits and enables one to adhere to his/her core set of

beliefs. It is much like the mortar in a brick building—just as

the mortar binds the bricks together into a sturdy structure,

integrity binds together an administrator's beliefs and traits

into a solid structure. Integrity involves honesty, but goes

much farther than that one word; it means a "strict adherence

to a code of morals"(Mish, 1992, p.628). It really is "an

ethical framework with a value system that [will enable one]

not just to do things right, but to do the right things"(Brown &

Townsend, 1997, p.12). This really is what people want; they

want that intangible feeling that their administrator will do

the right thing because he/she possesses impeccable personal qualities guided by principles. In all honesty, most fatal errors committed by administrators "often begin with an administrator's moral blind spot"(Jones, 1995, p.18). Not to say they are immoral, but momentarily they had a small lapse which was inconsistent with the schools values and beliefs. An administrator with integrity will use professional beliefs to guide decision making free of outside restraints. They must be unencumbered to do things right, and relying on integrity will allow this to happen.

Core Beliefs

Along with traits and the value of integrity, all administrators must have core beliefs about education, otherwise they have no direction. These beliefs outline the expectations and operating philosophy of education. The first two beliefs which must be present for a school to operate are that a learning community exists where each stake-holder feels his/her input is important. The third, high standards must be maintained and sought. The fourth, leaders and teachers lead and teach by example. The fifth, discipline

should be fair, timely, and a learning experience. These tenants, core beliefs, guide an administrator's school and educational process.

Learning Community

A learning community is vital for all healthy schools. A learning community or learner centered school indicates that it focuses concern on the learner—students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community. By emphasizing that all people are continuous learners, the school shows the importance of learning. The building principal must be an active learner if he/she is to build a learning community "Tomorrow's principals must. . . take charge of their own education by regularly enrolling in university courses and training programs to upgrade their skills"(Hoover, 1998,p.34). This shows all school stakeholders that education is vitally important and goes beyond being a school student. More importantly though, beyond modeling, a learner centered school requires students, teachers, and administrators to learn together, to help foster a sense of community. Whether it be through in-class projects, teamed units, or service learning

activities in the community, all learners must learn together because "good schools are collegial communities of learners"(Teschke, 1996, p.10). The primary importance of schools is learning, and learning is a life long process. One way to emphasize life-long learning is to begin building a community of learners.

Input and Voice

The importance and power of input and voice must never be over looked in the school setting. Part of building a learning community from above is giving all stakeholders a voice in the decisions and policies of the school. As Marsick and Watkins(1999) point out in their article "Sculpting the Learning Community", a building principal must "promote inquiry and dialogue"(p.81). As an administrator, by asking for advice or assistance from teachers, students, staff members, or the community one shows each group or person how important they are to the school community. "Our fundamental challenges in education. . . involve people at multiple levels thinking together about significant and enduring solutions we might create and helping those solutions come about"(Speck,

1999, p.11). The key is that people at "multiple levels" are discussing the issues which influence the course of the school. People who are allowed input and who are made to feel important strive to make education better because they "all know. . . all share and have an investment"(Saunders, 1998, p.21) in their school. Each stakeholder in a school community must be allowed to help control the destiny of education in his/her school.

High Standards

Maintaining high standards is key in fostering a healthy school. From students to administrators, meeting high standards is the only way to achieve all that is possible. Focusing on student standards though, teachers in healthy schools "set high but achievable standards for students [and] maintain high standards of performance"(Hoy & Tarter, 1992, p.76). As Cashsays, their are really only two critical factors an administrator has in "creating a successful learning organization"(p.22) and one is "increasing student achievement"(p.22). Through rigorous standards and implementing high classroom expectations student

achievement will increase. It is inarguable that teachers who have the most exacting standards and expect the most from students receive the best quality work—Students, like all people, will strive and meet the expectations placed upon them. Indeed high expectations for student achievement are critical for a successful school, just as high expectations for the entire school community are critical for a successful school.

Leaders Lead by Example

The belief that successful leaders lead by example really helps to bring all of the above issues about. It is easy to say something, but often much harder to do the things you expect of others. In essence, what one does is much more important than what one says. Nelson Mandela(Brown & Townsend, 1997) learned this lesson well when he discussed early in his life with a colonel the delicacy of leading people. The colonel told him that when leading or on "duty" one must "exercise authority with assurance and control"(p.14), but when you are off duty you must "conduct yourself on the basis of perfect equality"(p.14). In other words one must associate with those

under their leadership, one must share with them, eat with them, and not be isolated from them. Admirable advice until an enlisted man interrupted the colonel and Mandela bringing on a tirade from the colonel about how he was never to be disturbed when talking to important individuals and he was never to be interrupted when eating his lunch in his office(Brown, 1997, p.13-14). The colonel showed exactly what not to do as a leader and in effect negated the beautiful advice he had just given. The point is that the things that we do will often carry as much or more weight than the things that we say. So it is important to remember that "when the principal becomes the head learner and models an attitude of excitement for learning, it becomes contagious"(Cash, 1997, p.25)and just as easily an administrator can model a behavior which is less than desirable. With one's actions, the administrator can model both good and bad behavior, so one must remember to lead by example.

Discipline

A belief that student discipline is rooted in the overall health of a building, a belief that discipline is tied to the

appropriateness of instructional practices, and a belief that discipline should be timely, fair, and a learnig experience for students. First, by implementing sound instructional practices and working in a sound climate, the occurrence of discipline problems will be slight. Regardless of the health of a building though, discipline issues occur. When discipline problems arise, each of them should be dealt with in a timely manner, fairly/consistently, and as though each instance is a learning experience for students. These three aspects provide for good discipline.

Like all problems or issues, discipline issues should be dealt with in a timely manner. We expect our mail to be delivered about the same time each day, and the paper boy had better have delivered the paper on time all because the timely completion of tasks is expected in society. Expectations for student discipline in schools should be no less. Admittedly, some discipline issues take time to resolve, but the great majority should be dealt with in a timely fashion. After each disciplinary incident, the affected teacher needs to know what action the administration took and why it was taken. This

definitely needs to be done the day of the incident if at all possible. Several factors play into the need for immediacy of disciplinary action. First, the longer removed from the incident the discussion takes place, the less confident an administrator can be of the accuracy of the information received. Secondly, if discipline is to be a teachable moment, the longer removed the disciplinary discussion and action takes place from the incident the less likely it will be viewed or can be used as a teachable moment. Immediacy is crucial in dealing with discipline.

All educational institutions must "make sure that [they] consistently act upon the beliefs and values"(Brown & Townsend, 1991, p.13) they hold collectively. This is especially true in discipline. Discipline must be dealt with in a consistent and fair manner in all regards. This means that like infractions will be dealt with in a similar way regardless of circumstance. Does this mean that consistent means equal? No! This says that consistent means similarly and fair. Equal would say that a student with his/her third tardy in a quarter would receive the same punishment as a student with the tenth

tardy of the quarter. In no-one's eyes should these students be treated equally—they should not both receive thirty minutes of detention. The key is to strive for equity not equality. They should be dealt with fairly; this means that The students are treated similarly regardless of outside circumstances like grades, extracurricular activities and so forth. It does mean that the administrator needs to take into account other factors like the number of tardies amassed. All students really appreciate, when being honest with themselves, a fair and consistent discipline policy. In fact, Avellar-Fleming(1994)asserts that "students [will] understand that the school cares enough about them to carry out a fair and consistent disciplinary procedure"(p.34). All students, teachers, and administrators want consistent and fair expectations and consequences from class to class and hallway to library.

Lastly, the most effective discipline takes place when a school culture views it as a teachable moment. "Discipline is too often conceived by educators as a matter of control rather

than as a staircase to a favorable learning context"(Madhere, 1998, p.48). The best discipline occurs when students are held accountable for their actions, take responsibility for their part in creating the discipline problem, and are given the chance to learn from the experience. "Discipline that fosters a sense of responsibility and ownership reaps long-term benefits"(Krajewski, Martinek, & Polka,1998, p7). This is not a weak stance—it is in fact the most difficult form of discipline for students because they actually have to do something to help solve the problem. They cannot be passive acceptors of punishment; they must take an active role in what has happened. Assuredly some instances of discipline must be cut and dried—weapons violations and drugs are just two which come to mind, but for the smaller offenses, a consistent and fair punishment along with an active involvement by the student to solve the disciplinary problems at hand should be the model of school discipline adopted by buildings. This process of discipline also helps foster the learning community mentioned earlier because now they see discipline as an

opportunity to grow and learn and not just as a punitive measure. Discipline must be treated as a teachable moment for truly effective discipline to take place.

Summary

The administration of a school is a complex and demanding position which is constantly in the public eye. Administrators must lead a school while dealing with multiple constituencies including staff, students, and parents. This is an awesome responsibility which can best be handled by a person who is of unquestionable personal integrity. This person must be honest, compassionate,and passionate. Along with the above attributes it is imperative that a school administrator have a core set of beliefs about education and what education should look like in the building they lead. These core beliefs include: a) the understanding that a learning community or learner centered school shows the importance of all stakeholders in the school community being learners; b) the understanding that those who feel important and empowered in decision making perform better and feel better; c) the desire to maintain rigorous standards and expectations

academically and socially; d) the belief that what a leader does is often times more important than what they say--a true leader leads by example; and e) the understanding that discipline must be dealt with in a timely, fair, and consistent manner, always striving to make each disciplinary moment a learning experience for students. It is through values, traits, and beliefs that an effective administrator truly sets the tone for his/her building because the decisions on a day to day basis must be bases on those things an administrator believes and knows to be right.

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