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A preferred vision for administering high schools

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A preferred vision for administering high schools

Abstract

Few people believe I grew up in Wyoming. It must seem far away, foreign and different from the Midwestern way of life. The rugged individualism that pervades Wyoming's culture is evident in the character of most Wyoming natives. We are raised to be independent and confident. Wyoming is a place where actions are valued above talking. People show their beliefs through their actions. When a neighbor needs help, help until the work is done, there is no need to form a "neighborhood association." Common social catch phrases and trendy social activities have a very short shelf life in Wyoming. What endures is loyal commitment to what is right and wrong and the understanding that nothing should interfere with the ability to demonstrate beliefs to family, neighbors, classmates or co-workers.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR
ADMINISTERING HIGH SCHOOLS

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By

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Introduction

Few people believe I grew up in Wyoming. It must seem far away, foreign and different from the Midwestern way of life. The rugged individualism that pervades Wyoming's culture is evident in the character of most Wyoming natives. We are raised to be independent and confident. Wyoming is a place where actions are valued above talking. People show their beliefs through their actions. When a neighbor needs help, help until the work is done, there is no need to form a "neighborhood association." Common social catch phrases and trendy social activities have a very short shelf life in Wyoming. What endures is loyal commitment to what is right and wrong and the understanding that nothing should interfere with the ability to demonstrate beliefs to family, neighbors, classmates or co-workers.

Please do not confuse this lack of demonstrative display of values to mean a culture devoid of strong beliefs. It becomes clear to all natives of Wyoming that values are very important. With so few people in our entire state, there must be some common beliefs to bridge the distances. As with most places, values are learned in families, churches and school. Children are taught about right and wrong; then taught to model those beliefs through actions. I still cannot cut the corner of my school's walkway to the parking lot because I remember Mrs. Walsh, my first grade teacher, saying that if she ever caught us doing something like that we might get a "U" in citizenship.

Because of that upbringing, it is not awkward to consider and clearly understand my own beliefs. However, it is quite difficult to write a paper that discusses my values and beliefs on something as important to me as education. Expressing my beliefs without being able to demonstrate how I practice these values daily with my students at Kennedy High School seems a little artificial. I will try to provide a thorough picture of my preferred vision of educational leadership in words. All the while, I will be aching to demonstrate this compilation of knowledge and attitudes I have acquired over the past three years into action, the true measure of what I believe.

Personal Characteristics (Values, Beliefs and Philosophies)

Many people helped mold my values and beliefs. My first teachers were my family and neighbors. They helped shape my educational philosophy because they taught me people are always learning and teaching. Some neighbors taught me how to ride a bike. I taught others how to dribble a soccer ball. My brother and I learned that everyone has unique skills and gifts that could be shared with others. Teaching others is as necessary as learning from others. Informally learning to become a life long learner and teacher in my neighborhood was one of the greatest gifts I ever received. This model of “learning” made a huge impression on me.

My neighborhood, which is about as heterogeneous as you can find in Wyoming, taught me about tolerance and respect. We had a neighborhood in the

fullest sense because we really knew each other, cared for each other and interacted on a daily basis. We knew our neighbors cared when we received a full week of meals when we moved in to the area. The old axiom “I don’t care how much you know until I know how much you care” is one of my strongest beliefs. Although I never heard the phrase until college, I knew when I heard it that it was my motto all along. I first learned this on Eleventh Street in Casper, Wyoming.

Educators must model empathy and caring. Any successful school is full of professionals who show tolerance and respect for their students. Dr. Jim Fitzpatrick (School Administrators of Iowa Conference, August 9, 2001) illustrated that point clearly when he said, “You may not be able to remember what a teacher taught you, but you will always remember how you were treated.” His comments remind me of some thoughts Arensen (2000) shares in his book Nobody Left to Hate: Teaching Compassion after Columbine. Aronson believes that schools would be wise to offer ways for students to learn how to interact with respect and consideration. Many schools offer “character education” classes that attempt this currently. Aronson, like Fitzpatrick, believes that teaching our children how to appreciate and interact with each other is an emerging duty of education. Certainly some neighborly courtesy and friendliness would have been welcome to the scorned and unincorporated adolescent Columbine gunmen.

My family taught me about hard work and perseverance. My parents and grandparents worked hard. My younger brother and I were a part of many long

days at our sporting good store with my mother and father. We learned to appreciate the satisfaction of a job well done. I admired them because they worked passionately. They wanted life to be better for my brother and me. Sometimes I knew that less would have sufficed, but “Tafoyas don’t do it that way.” I learned that a job is an endeavor that should result in satisfaction and financial gain. I never heard my parents complain about going to work. I never figured out why my friend’s parents did their jobs because they complained about them so much. Learning that a job is supposed to be satisfying was another wonderful lesson from my parents.

My grandmother taught me that a job could also produce passion. I will always remember how proud I was to see my grandmother at work and how important she was for her company. After the accidental farming death of my grandfather, she raised four children without the need for sympathy or pity. She knew her family was not going to be fed with anything other than hard work. Her passion to provide for her growing family made her work hard. This passion to provide made her “Secretary-CEO” as her boss used to say. She was the third employee of a company that now employs over 5,000 workers. My mother and father both learned this and passed it on to me. Once I discovered my passion for education, it has been very easy to work hard for what I believe.

Despite all the wonderful experiences I had in my neighborhood and with my family, I did not fully understand the specifics of my belief system until junior

high and high school. My views emerged clearly after witnessing events and listening to people who I disagreed. Until junior high, I thought most people believed similarly to me. In junior high, I learned not everyone thought the same as me. I learned that it was wrong to make assumptions based on skin color. I learned it was wrong to treat people with disrespect if they looked and dressed differently than you. Teachers provided me examples of how people should and should not be treated. I crystallized my values as I watched the adults in my school interact with students. Even though I loved some of my junior high teachers, a couple of my teachers showed me the ugliness of prejudice and rudeness. I was not sure how I could reduce this ugliness from junior high world, but I knew I would make a difference where I was everyday. I decided to make school different.

I joined student government to help create the environment I wanted in our school. I participated on committees that helped make decisions for students. Through all of these activities, I discovered my passion for education and creating a school experience that I would have liked as a student. I knew I wanted to teach and then become a principal. I wanted to work in a school without such negative experiences as I had. I believed a principal could create a school where kids had fun and learned while they kept their dignity and individuality. My path toward administration began very early. One of the most sincere compliments I ever

received was from my favorite teacher in high school. She told me she would love to be a teacher for me some day.

In my life, I have developed a personal philosophy through living. Since many of these experiences were in school settings, it makes sense that my educational philosophies and personal philosophies are sometimes indistinguishable. As I read and gain experience in education, I strengthen my own personal and educational views. I have learned to value other's opinions and perspectives as they help me to establish and reestablish my own beliefs. As a thoughtful and reflective educator, I have a new opportunity each day to broaden my perspective while challenging and strengthening my own personal philosophical views of education.

As an undergraduate student at Wartburg I studied American History and Spanish. I formed part of my educational philosophy while studying the way our Constitution considered establishing education. The foresight and vision of our forefathers to design an educational system was incredible. Each state received the responsibility of developing a system of education appropriate for their state that would ensure a society of educated citizens. Educated citizens would ensure the safety of the state and the union (Alexander and Alexander, 1998). Since then, schools have evolved into one of the most important pieces of the American fabric.

School is now much different from the schools of the 18th century. In many communities, the school is the centerpiece of social activity. I am not sure if today's system would be recognized by our forefathers. However, the system they created has allowed us to create the current system that is still effectively educating all America's citizenry.

Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes and Orientation from Experience and Coursework

The coursework of the last two and a half years have helped me in two ways. Primarily, the instructors and coursework have challenged and stretched me. I have learned skills and gained knowledge that would help me even if I never serve as a principal. I am very sure that I will some day, but this fresh knowledge has proved valuable in many different situations. I am pleased and encouraged every time I can share knowledge with a colleague that I have learned in our coursework. I love academic challenges and the knowledge and skills I have gained in this program have provided me new ways to view my profession. I still have much to learn.

The coursework has given me a confidence I have educational administration is something I will be well prepared to handle. As the attendance facilitator at Kennedy High School, my first educational job outside the classroom, I could see my confidence a expanding. I was given important tasks that I knew I could handle. I could practice what we learned in class on Wednesday night at school

on Thursday. The practical application of any course is always a challenge for the instructor. I hope my instructors appreciate the application of their knowledge as much as I appreciate their willingness to share and challenge me.

One of the most remarkable things I have learned in the last four years is about the role of the principal. The principal's role has changed dramatically in the last fifty years. Jamie Vollmer (2001) points this out accurately when he lists some of the added responsibilities to school curriculum (and the principal's duties) in recent years.

In the 1950's and 1960's, Advanced Placement courses, consumer education, driver's education, career education, sex education, expanded music, art and foreign language education were all added. In the 1970's, special education, Title IX, drug and alcohol abuse education, Head Start, character education and school breakfast programs came into schools. In the 1980's, we saw the emergence of computer education, ethnic education, multicultural/non-sexist education, English as a Second Language, early childhood education, full day kindergarten, sexual abuse prevention education and mandatory child abuse reporting. The 1990's brought HIV/AIDS education, expanded computer and Internet education, inclusion, School to Work programs and gang education to name a few. All of these have emerged due to needs of students in our communities. Schools have become much more than just a place to learn to read and write. Schools have also

been given a social and developmental role that goes well beyond the academic scope. These expanded roles have changed the job of principal incredibly.

The paradigms of educational leadership have shifted as well. Schools have changed and the administration of those schools has changed to keep up with added responsibilities. John Jay Bonstingl (2001) illustrated some of these paradigm shifts.

For example, schools used to have limited numbers of winners and others considered their work inferior. Now schools aim to show growth and development for all levels of students. Work (teaching) was not intended to produce satisfaction and joy previously; now teachers look at work as challenging, invigorating and meaningful as they prepare students for their lives. School used to be considered a place where students were taught to/at and were considered passive observers. Schools now consider themselves interactive learning communities for students, teachers and administrators. Administrators used to be viewed as the natural enemy of teachers. Now administrators are considered partners and elements of change for teachers' goals. Administrators used to have authoritarian control over all parts of the school and compliance was demanded. Support, vision, pride in continuous growth and improvement are more important to principals today. Along with that authoritarian control over command, administrative decisions were highly centralized and hierarchical. The staff was rarely consulted for input. Site-based management teams are now very common

and seen as necessary for the benefit of staff, students, parents and administrators. Parental involvement may be the biggest change for administrators. In the old paradigm, parents were considered unwelcome intrusions on the schooling process and distractions for the “experts.” Most schools now see parents and partners, suppliers and customers. Disenfranchising parents is a quick way to get a principal on the hot seat with his or her community. Administrators now view parents as allies who help reinforce, refocus and support.

Personal Professional Vision for Administrative Practice

The principal, as the educational leader of the school building in today’s schools, has broad responsibilities and duties. A school building has its own culture that is complex and constantly evolving. No responsibility is more important than ensuring that a school has a healthy learning environment. The strength of this environment is the strength of the school. A principal must also keep in mind what the community values and ensure that school practices mesh with the community’s view.

High school principals have a tough job in establishing that community. This is due to the size of current high schools and the tremendous effect of society on today’s adolescent. Society and communities mold children long before students enter kindergarten. Therefore, by high school, it is very challenging to ensure that the school’s culture is positive and nurturing. Accepting all students and positively helping them towards fulfilling academic goals is a grand challenge.

Sergiovanni (1999) states, “The principal’s greatest challenge and primary responsibility is to develop a caring community in the school, a place where strong character emerges from shared purpose that allows and encourages students to be successful learners.” Although this seems like an overwhelming challenge, an effective administrator can create this type of environment. Kids deserve this type of environment.

To develop this caring culture of education within a school, a principal must try to create a school of character. Developing a school with strong character requires individuals that can integrate such qualities as integrity, reliability, moral excellence, a sense of purpose and firmness of conviction (Sergiovanni, 1999). When people with these qualities make school decisions, a school assures itself of a culture that is productive for students and staff. A quality leader must base each decision is on sound judgment.

Determining what is sound and unsound judgment is not easy. Starratt interprets this dilemma in his model of warrant for decision-making, policy and practice. Asking, “Who benefits from this action?” helps us to analyze each decision. Finding a balance between caring and justice is difficult. Justice helps to ensure that individual rights are not put above the importance of the common good. While caring accepts each individual with his or her unique perspectives and gifts (Kowalski and Reitzug, 1993). A school of character can find the proper blend of these two ideals.

As an attendance facilitator, I have learned that decisions may not be as simple as they look from the outside looking. I remember as a teacher how easy some decisions looked, without having the benefit of all the information. Seeing these decisions from the inside has changed my perspective completely. Not everything is black and white. In fact, the hardest decisions I have made were vividly gray. Few questions need little thought. Sometimes these difficult decisions must be made very quickly too. Understanding how a decision can affect a student and their family, a school and the entire staff is not simple. A knowledge of your personal beliefs and having a school based on set principles and visions can make these difficult decisions easier.

Determining the various roles of an administrator can be challenging. Some simplify the roles into managing and leading. Although this may be an oversimplification, administrating has become a combination of both of these activities. Kowalski and Reitzug (1993) combine these two roles and refer to them as the administrative components. These components are evaluating, mediating, facilitating, managing, leading, organizing, planning and representing. These tasks illustrate a more detailed look at the roles of an administrator. Each one of these roles requires different abilities and skill sets. Each component demands various amounts of time as well. Only experience can help an administrator learn how to effectively perform these roles.

Experience alone however is not a guarantee for success in administration. Knowing what has worked in the past can give valuable perspective to an administrator. However, in our modern school climate, a principal's knowledge must constantly expand. Renihan and Whiteside (1999) note that as teachers become better qualified, principals must do the same and work to improve their knowledge of current educational strategies. A survey of experienced Washington state principals indicated that principals perceived large changes in recent years. Washington high school principals indicated major changes toward site-based management, state reform legislation, truancy legislation, increased diversity, increased interaction with parents, special education changes and external relations as major areas of change in the last five years (Portin, Shen, and Williams, 1998). These examples show us the diverse issues that each principal must face in addition to traditional roles mentioned earlier. Understanding the current educational environment is part of an educator's duty. In today's educational culture, you are either moving forward or regressing.

One important current movement that principals should be aware of is the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium's standards adopted in 1996. The ISLLC Standards have six facets of effective leadership. Each standard divides the components by knowledge, dispositions and performances (Sharp and Sharp, 1998). These components make the ISLLC Standards more specific and

useful because the standards are general. These standards have become nationally recognized as current educational administration guidelines.

Inevitably, an administrator's job comes down to decision-making. There are multiple factors that affect each decision an administrator makes every day.

Moral character, sound judgment, experience and knowledge of current educational thought all help an administrator to make decisions. However, those important factors of an administrator's background do not make the decisions.

An administrator must make decisions appropriately and determine what decisions to make (Kowalski and Reitzug, 1993). An administrator should try to make decisions that do the most good for the most people. Not every decision will make everyone happy. It takes courage to make difficult decisions that affect other members of the school community. One should never think that everyone would be pleased every time you make a decision. The strength and the wisdom to make sound decisions make an administrator effective.

An administrator trying to establish this culture of collaboration, cooperation, equality and learning certainly has much to do (Blase and Blase, 1999). Only a foolish person would think they could accomplish all of this without the help of others. An entire building community must work together to achieve this. A principal must learn to inspire people to see a common goal. Establishing this common vision gives everyone the same goal and a united sense of purpose. This vision can inspire the group to collectively achieve more together.

Leadership is often evaluated when the stakes are highest. With testing results as public as stock market quotes, administrators must be prepared to deal with schools and students who are not achieving and at risk. Cher Tufly, (2001) the principal at Colorado's Finest Alternative High School offers some outstanding advice for administrators dealing with students who are at-risk academically.

Her first suggestion is to speak to students honestly about their current level of proficiency. Students tend to believe that if they are in tenth grade, then they are proficient at least to the tenth grade level. Unfortunately, this is not always true. Administrators and teachers have sometimes been hesitant to discuss insufficient performances with students and their families. Tufly believes it is unfair that students have never heard straightforward information from the educators closest to them. Ensuring a faculty is frank and straightforward with students and their parents is important. This is vital to ensure proper academic performance instead of masking minimal growth by advancing the student from year to year without proper notification.

Tufly also suggests that educators clearly tell students that they are mostly responsible for their success. Although this seems like a common sense statement from Tufly, high school students sometimes think if they just put in their time, everything will work out and they will get a diploma. Educators should empower students to believe the most important factor in their achievement is their own effort.

Educators must also assume students are capable regardless of test scores and trust them to retain and demonstrate knowledge. Being optimistic can produce big dividends. An administrator must constantly assess if his or her internal decisions and external actions support the eternal educational credo “all students can learn.” Many students give up on formal education because they feel education has given up on them. President George W. Bush asks that no student be left behind. Although some may see his request as naïve, Tufly’s suggestions give administrators a pathway to achieving this admirable goal and demonstrates sound leadership.

My administrative leadership philosophy is heavily influenced by the book Jesus, CEO by Laurie Beth Jones (Jones, 1995). Jones presents a historical look at Jesus as a leader. Her book is not a theological book as much as it is a leadership book. Excerpts from scripture and short vignettes are used to illustrate aspects of his leadership. The book is divided into three parts—I have tried to incorporate each one of these into my leadership style. They are: strength of self-mastery, strength of action and strength of relationships. Mastering (or even strengthening) these attributes will improve a leader’s effectiveness.

Strength of self-mastery is an area that we learned a lot about Dr. Else’s “Leadership” course in the fall of 2001. This section discusses how we must know ourselves well in order to be good leaders of others. Without being about to know your self and act based on your beliefs, an administrator is like a ship

without a rudder. Jones (1995) talks about things like doing the difficult things, sticking to your mission, not wasting time judging others and working through his fears. This section helped me see just how important having confidence in myself is for a leader to be followed by others. No one will follow leaders who do not believe in themselves. Strength of self-mastery was an eye-opening thought for me because I never thought about how significant internal discipline was for a leader. It made me realize that my core beliefs must be out for all to see every day without exception if I expect others to believe in me and follow my vision.

The second section is about the strength of action. The strength of action comes after your strength of self-mastery. After you know what it is you value, you then must make the appropriate actions based on those beliefs. Have a plan, call the question, break ranks, take the long view and ask “Why not me?” are some of the actions Jones (1995) explains in this section.

I needed to hear this section about strength of action more than any other section. I have always been sure about what I believed, but sometimes did not know how to focus my beliefs into action. I can remember being very frustrated in my first year of teaching because I did not think my actions were giving my students a strong enough view of how important my content area was to me. I vowed to only use Spanish in the classroom to illustrate my vision through my action. It worked and I found myself at ease philosophically. Jones writes about no one being able to ruin Jesus’ plan. I decided the same thing early

on—no one would spoil my personal outlook and how I felt it should be demonstrated.

The last section in Jesus CEO is about the strength of relationships. In Dr. Else's classes, I have learned that I tend to be more task oriented than people oriented. Although developing relationships and cultivating those has never been difficult for me, I tend to focus on what it is I am supposed to do, rather than whom I am doing it with. I enjoy working with people but know that I like to do a job myself if it is important. Jones' section about strength of relationships was so critical for me, I knew I should read it twice. I decided to read it twice to reinforce details and imagine how to implement these ideas in my daily relationships with teachers and students. Phillips (1992) also demonstrated Abraham Lincoln's strong commitment to this cause in his book Lincoln on Leadership. Lincoln believed in the value of walking among his people so they could sense his commitment to them and his comfort as one of them. Just as Lincoln's soldiers learned that he "came among them without fear", a principal must nurture human relationships inside the building in order for trust to develop. Even after a short time, I think I am better at cultivating and establishing valuable relationships because of my devoted attempt to improve these areas.

With seventeen years as a student and nine as an educator, I have considerable time to think about education. My background and personal experiences have helped to form the person I am today. I treasure the values I learned in Wyoming

from my friends, teachers, neighbors and family. I hope that I can create a similar environment for students here in Cedar Rapids, Iowa for my own children and students.

All of my preparation in this Master's program has broadened my knowledge of what an administrator must do to be effective. Conversely, it has narrowed my focus and inner passion even more intently on the profession I chose as a seventeen year old. I know that creating a school valuing dignity, effort and fun can touch the lives of children in a meaningful way. Educating is still one of man's most noble callings. I am proud to be an educator and I cannot wait to help enhance the lives of those students who come to my school every day trusting that they will leave as a better person because of what happened inside that building.

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