A reflective administrator to lead in learning: a reflective essay

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A reflective administrator to lead in learning : a reflective essay

Abstract
Like most educators today, a former teacher inspired me. This teacher taught a subject I thought was boring and turned it into something interesting and meaningful. He made me realize the power that an educator can have on an individual. His approach to education in the classroom changed the way I viewed education and its importance. Each person in his class could feel comfortable contributing and participating in the classroom setting. He had a way of connecting with students on an individual level regardless of their personality differences. I became an educator so that I could have a positive influence on those students who are not fortunate enough to have the type of role models I had in my life. As an administrator, understanding why you chose the educational field is an important trait if success is going to occur within the building you lead.
A REFLECTIVE ADMINISTRATOR TO LEAD IN LEARNING: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to
The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Garrick Teckenburg
May 2007
This Research Paper by: Garrick Teckenburg

Entitled: A REFLECTIVE ADMINISTRATOR TO LEAD IN LEARNING: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Like most educators today, a former teacher inspired me. This teacher taught a subject I thought was boring and turned it into something interesting and meaningful. He made me realize the power that an educator can have on an individual. His approach to education in the classroom changed the way I viewed education and its importance. Each person in his class could feel comfortable contributing and participating in the classroom setting. He had a way of connecting with students on an individual level regardless of their personality differences. I became an educator so that I could have a positive influence on those students who are not fortunate enough to have the type of role models I had in my life. As an administrator, understanding why you chose the educational field is an important trait if success is going to occur within the building you lead.

Teaching and having a significant role within the education field is the most important job someone can have. Every doctor, scientist, pilot, and judge had a teacher who inspired him or her to achieve. Education in America allows every student to get a free and appropriate education. Social standing and economic status do not play a part in a child’s opportunity to succeed. It is impossible to list all of the things that an education allows for an individual. There are, however, things that need to be improved and changed if the quality of education is going to increase.

In an attempt to hold schools accountable for the knowledge they bestow upon their children, schools are beginning to go the wrong direction in how they
teach. Politicians have a tendency to put the cart before the horse. Holding schools accountable and making sure that our future generations are educated is obvious. How we are going about it may lead us in the wrong direction. To make sure that our students stay proficient, teachers are sometimes forced to teach to the test and leave valuable instruction out of their curriculum. I believe that if education is to improve, educators need to stand up and make sure legislation keeps putting students and the whole child first.

Teachers are, and have always been, faced with the daunting task of trying to teach children whose knowledge and skill levels vary greatly. All students deserve the right to be integrated within a classroom setting. However, schools need to be careful not to water down curriculum and lose sight of those students at the top who can sometimes get left behind. I believe that educational leaders need to look at and reevaluate how special education programs are designed. Instead of pushing kids through, we need to make sure that each child will be able to achieve at the next level, or a level that will help them to succeed when they leave school. If our goal in education is to give a child the best education possible, we need to make sure that no child leaves our building without the skills necessary to succeed in life.

Preparing for my undergraduate teaching degree I always believed I would continue my education in an administrative role. As an educator, I have a renewed desire to obtain an administrative degree. I have always respected the
role of administration in a school district; however, I now have a greater appreciation for the impact, both positive and negative, that a principal can have on a school system.

Although I have a passion for being in the classroom, I feel I can make a bigger impact on the educational experience of each student by taking the role of an administrator. By achieving this degree I will satisfy my goals of academic advancement and will increase my capacity to create a school in which each child has a chance to succeed.

Another reason I chose to enter the administration field was to put myself in a position to make positive changes within the educational system. While there are many positive things about our education system, there are also issues that must be addressed in order to give children the best education possible. Taking this step will allow me to gain more knowledge about the educational system, as well as a degree that will put me in the position to make needed changes.

Quality leaders are necessary for the success of a school district. A school can have the best educators, but if their leadership is poor, everyone, including the students will have a harder time achieving. This reflective essay will focus on ways to make student learning and success possible. First, this essay will focus on my desire and aspirations to be in education. I believe successful leaders are passionate and understand why they are in the business of educating the youth of America. Second, a successful leader understands if change is going to take place
within the district it is important to first make sure the climate and culture of a school is addressed. Third, a successful leader understands and realizes the need for reform as students leave our buildings into a world much different than our parents. Fourth, if we are to not leave a child behind, leaders must have an understanding of how to motivate and teach adult learners. Finally, leaders must realize they must educate the whole child. Providing a child with a relevant education that focuses on the community and gives students an awareness of what it means to be a citizen in a democratic society is key to the survival of education today and our communities.

A visionary leader is one who clearly states the purpose of what he or she wants staff to accomplish. A leader links all involved with a personal connection and pride toward their school vision. When you walk through a school's door you should be able to feel how a building is run and what is expected of the students. A staff that is motivated and goal oriented will have students who are motivated and goal oriented. Communicating goals and expectations in order to achieve a vision is vital if the school is to be successful.

Having a job in education is one of the most rewarding positions a person can obtain. I chose to go into education for just this reason; however, changes are needed if our schools are to give children the best possible education. School leaders have the challenging task of changing education for the better. As a future administrator, I look forward to this challenge and making our school one where
every child feels comfortable and challenged to succeed to his or her greatest
ability.

Enhancing School Climate to Increase Scholastic Achievement

When entering a building for the first time, an individual can typically
make an assessment of how successful the school is by what they observe. How
does the school look? What types of things are on the wall or in the hallways?
What kinds of sounds do people hear up and down the halls? Similar to the
beliefs of Noonan (2004), I believe the climate of a school has always been, and
continues to be essential to a school’s success in educating children and preparing
them for a life beyond its corridors.

Various studies have examined how the educational climate or
connectedness of a school can enhance or impair student development and
achievement. Before implementing change in a school to promote a better
climate, it is important to define what school climate and connectedness means.
Peterson and Skiba (2001) define school climate as the feelings students and staff
have about the school environment over a period of time. A school’s environment
should be supportive of the students’ learning (or teaching), by being suitably
organized and safe. Wilson (2004) defines school connectedness as a sense of
attachment and commitment a student feels from his or her teachers and staff.
When measuring school climate, one must also look at the importance of school
connectedness.
Schools that have created a warm and welcoming positive climate have students and staff who feel safe and are more capable of achieving and learning at higher levels (Wilson, 2004). Conversely, students who attend a school with a negative climate are more likely to witness violence and struggle in the education process. Growing up and experiencing a positive school climate is fundamental for a successful transition into adulthood (Esposito, 1999).

I believe the quality of teaching and the level of learning that takes place in a high school directly relates to the climate of the school. If research suggests student perceptions and experiences of school climate affect academic, emotional, and behavioral development, then I feel it has to be a high priority when I become an administrator. There are a couple important steps an administrator needs to take when addressing and working toward a more positive school climate.

First, it is important to create a clear vision and set core values with staff. If results are going to happen, everyone must work together and take ownership in a school’s transformation. This also applies to students within a building. Working with the student council or other student leadership groups can assure they feel a sense of ownership within the school. Administration and staff must always remember students come first.

Second, sharing ideas at the beginning of the year and then reacting every time it does not work is not going to yield success. Staff members must be proactive and concentrate on working toward winning small battles. It is
important to celebrate victories with staff once the wheels begin to roll. If attendance is up a percent after a month, staff members must feel they played a crucial role in making it happen.

Finally, if the climate and culture of a school is going to change for the better, students must see teachers enjoying their job. Students are excited about coming to school if they are exposed to an environment in which they see teachers having fun at what they do. If teaching professionals are crossing the line and humor becomes unprofessional, it can have the reverse affect on students. The leader of a school must be quick to let teachers know if they are getting close to that line. Teachers are role models and must demonstrate to students proper ways to have fun within the building.

Students have the right to an educational experience in which they feel valued and respected. Their teachers and peers should clearly and actively support their development and learning. The learning environment should be free from fear, threats and harm (Hirsch, 1999). Ensuring this experience for all students should be the ultimate goal of all school leaders. When students, teachers, staff and parents collectively and consciously decide to improve a school environment, successful climate change is possible. For this process to take place, the principal has the most important job in a district.

If a school is going to improve and maintain its climate, a vision must be in place. Standard One and Two of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL)
clearly asserts that a leader will share a vision and promote a positive school climate. Standard three also speaks of school climate. Addressing current and potential problems within a school ensures a safe and effective learning environment.

A Leaders Role in Educational Reform

In the twenty-first century, public schools are under constant pressure to change and meet the high demands set forth by our government and community. It is no surprise that the dominating values currently guiding school reform focuses heavily on boosting test scores and standardizing outcomes. Eisner and Lee (2005) suggest that the principle goal of education in schools should be creating citizens who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done. Principals must be prepared to lead educators through research driven reform to meet these high standards.

Through extensive research, Marzano (2003) believes there are three principles that drive school reform today. First, reform efforts should look substantially different from school to school. Just because research indicates a particular program works well for increasing student achievement at one school does not make it a sure fit for all schools.

Pogrow (1996) echoes Marzano (2003) by stating that school wide change, while a nice idea, has never worked on a large scale and is probably not necessary. In some cases entire schools may need change, but there is no
evidence that entire schools can be changed on a large scale. Every school is
different and it is the job of school leaders to look at research carefully when
determining which factors apply to their school when implementing reform.

In his second principle, Marzano (2003) believes school reform is
characterized by a heavy emphasis on data. In order to know whether or not your
school is achieving you need to measure both its performance against a criterion,
and also its performance with other school districts (Eisner & Lee, 2005). Data
analysis is paramount when successfully identifying students who may be in need
of assistance. Teachers will be able to determine which students are falling
behind by using data. They can further determine as a team how to get them back
on track.

Finally, Marzano (2003) believes schools in the new era of school reform
should approach change on an incremental basis. Significant change can be
accomplished by taking a developmental approach, building in more and more
components of the change over time. Like Marzano, Pogrow (1996) believes
there is a conceived myth that the best way to achieve reform is through school
wide change and restructuring. Pogrow also believes the most important changes
in schools are incremental ones.

I believe constant reform efforts and increased demand in student
achievement has caused some leaders to forget the true goal of education. In a
recent journal (Eisner & Lee, 2005) it was suggested that to neglect the social and
emotional aspects of a child’s development, to focus all our attention on measured academic performance, is to blind us to these youngsters’ need to live a satisfying life. Scoring high on standardized tests is essential if a school is going to survive; however, it is only one of many ways to measure a school’s success. Through example and practice, I want staff to understand that the fundamental purpose of school is learning, not teaching. By articulating this, staff will develop a shared sense of the school they hope to become and better fulfill the purpose of learning for all (DuFour, 2004).

Zimmerman (2005) points out that if leaders want to encourage teacher risk-taking and innovation in instruction, they should provide support. As demands go up for teachers in the classroom and in their own professional development, it is easy for them to get frustrated and lose focus on what their job truly is. It is important to be a moral and transformational leader. Zimmerman defines a transformational leader as “One who stimulates others to view their work from new perspectives, creates awareness of the organization’s mission, and motivates others to move beyond self-interests and toward the benefit of the group or organization” (p. 34).

Any school in the United States can operate at an advanced level of effectiveness if it is willing to implement what is known about effective schooling (Marzano, 2003). As a leader I will help the school I lead succeed at high levels by researching and implementing the appropriate strategies for the school.
Collecting data solely to put in teachers' mailboxes is not going to accomplish the task. However, analyzing the data and discussing it with staff members will allow others to benefit and apply it to their curriculums. Finally, it is important to build on the successes the school has already demonstrated.

Leading a school through successful school reform aligns with ISSL standards One and Two. School reform relates to Standard One because if reform is to be successful, a leader must articulate and successfully implement the new or improved vision for a school's success. Reform also aligns with Standard Two. If staff members are going to be implementing new strategies, they must have quality and sustained professional development.

A Reflective Practitioner to Lead in Learning

Professional educators have always been faced with the rewarding, but challenging task of educating future generations of America. Today, however, the implications of not reaching every child have potential catastrophic effects for schools and their communities. As demands for student achievement go up, so do teacher qualifications. Ensuring achievement goals are met, teachers must increase their level of learning and change some of their practices as new research emerges (Borko, 2004). One of the top priorities of a principal is to ensure students are achieving at high levels. For children to achieve teachers must also be learning and using researched based practices.
School improvement and increasing test scores starts with teachers. Like Whitaker (2004), I believe there are only two steps a principal must take if school improvement and reform are going to take place: Get better teachers and improve the ones you already have. Adults and society in general are more apt to be stubborn and stuck in their ways of doing things. Most adult learners are not motivated enough to emerge from their comfort zone and into the action stage where their behavior, experiences, or environment are modified enough for a change in behavior to take place (Hunzicker, 2004). Resisting change is detrimental to student achievement; and if not addressed, the learning of both teachers and students is impaired.

Moving teachers out of their comfort zone and encouraging them to realize they can improve their curriculum and teaching skills by using different, but proven teaching techniques can be a challenge. However, making sure new strategies are presented repeatedly will allow change to be an easier transition. It is important to stress that the focus is not on changing teachers’ beliefs. These changes should be followed up on by administration (Hunzicker, 2004).

Continued education for teachers is optimal if administrators are going to achieve change in institutional practices. If a school reform is to be successful, the responsibility for change will not fall solely on the administration. New teaching methods and ideas are taken more seriously when other teachers present new practice and demonstrate how they have had success in their own classrooms.
Time and funding for staff development is always going to be a concern. Making sure staff have opportunities for professional development and time for collaboration is key if an increase in student and teacher achievement is to happen. However, presenting teachers with professional development is not enough. Professional development can only be a success when instructional leaders focus their efforts not just on action, but also on first changing the beliefs of the teachers.

Changing a teacher's belief system requires new information to be presented repeatedly over time (Hunzicker, 2004). Negative experiences in the past, situational conditions or distractions, and negative beliefs about the ability to use new skills or knowledge in the future are three things that cause teachers to resist change. As an administrator I am going to be in the position of evaluating teachers and giving advice for improved student achievement. By enquiring why teachers resist change ahead of time is going to help me understand why their classrooms are operated the way they are. If I know a teacher tried a new teaching technique in the past and it failed, I can provide another approach to help them deal with their negative association to past attempts at change. Positive, regular feedback serves as reinforcement for the pursuit of more learning (Zepeda, 2004). If we expect teachers to try new things and step outside their comfort zone, we need to pay attention and let them know how they are doing.
In her article, Borko (2004) states, “How teachers learn through participation in professional development communities reveals that records of classroom practice are powerful tools for facilitating teacher change” (p. 9). If we want new strategies to help children learn in our classrooms we must hold teachers accountable. Just telling them to try new strategies is not going to accomplish anything.

Zepeda’s (2004) ideology that principals should be leaders of leaders, rather than sole leaders mirrors a growing trend towards professional learning communities. Richard DuFour (2004) believes these Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a way to help reform schools but also help teachers embrace the notion that the fundamental purpose of school is learning, not teaching. PLCs consist of teachers and leaders that have shared missions, visions, values, and goals. Teachers work within collaborative teams and inquire amongst each other what best practice is to increase achievement. PLCs are driven by action, seek continuous improvement, and seek results rather than intervention. When PLCs are present, teachers and administrators continuously seek and share learning, which leads to an avenue for success.

Many schools, in an attempt to increase standardized test scores, sometimes forget about the students. As a future administrator and leader of a school district I must be prepared to lead educators though research driven reform to meet high standards. For a teacher it can be overwhelming with all of the
reform and urgency to improve test scores. School leaders must help educate
teachers about change and help them improve their classrooms. This complexity
will not make teaching any easier but rather add more things to an already busy
plate. However, it will bring education closer to the heart of what really matters--
the child (Eisner, 2005).

Establishing trust and rapport with teachers is what Zepeda (2004) feels
should be the first step in building a climate conducive to learning communities. I
feel giving constant feedback and setting up a system where teachers have the
opportunity to take ownership in their work empowers them. Once teachers begin
to take more ownership in making changes in the school, they will be more likely
to start looking at their own practices in the classroom.

Promoting leadership through continued learning by means of professional
development and implementation is what standards One and Two of the Iowa
Standards for School Leaders represents. Providing leadership by encouraging
staff to attend professional development training and following up with the results
helps in promoting and implementing best practice. Through continued research
and study, a principal can keep up with the most recent findings and help students
achieve higher standardized test scores.

Service Leadership

School administrators must look into every possible solution when
searching for ways to increase test scores and promote school improvement.
Many think this can only be done through more strenuous testing and homework for students. While both would have an impact, not every student fits into this mold. If we are to truly leave no child behind, we must reach all students and all learning styles. One solution to address this problem is service learning. As a leader of service learning, administrators have the unique opportunity to not only enrich learning for students, but enrich the community as well (Richardson, 2006).

Classroom teachers are often asked the question, "Why do we have to learn this?" The best service learning projects use, enrich, and enliven the material taught in school to answer this question (Richardson, 2006). As a teaching strategy, service learning motivates students by taking them beyond the classroom to address community problems they care about.

Seitsinger (2005) explains that it is important for educators to be interested in instructional strategies that foster student proficiency in higher order thinking and subject-matter integration. For this to take place, schools must offer a variety of experiences that provide students with a broad range of real-world experiences. Service learning provides students with these real world education experiences that promote public good. It also provides the opportunity to apply classroom developed knowledge and skills to a community problem. However, leaders of education must be careful when implementing service learning into their district.
Just interacting with the community does not make service learning a tool for success that will increase educational development (Sheffield, 2005).

For service learning to be successful, school leaders must realize there is a difference between quality service learning and community service. Internships and job shadows while effective, are not service learning. Students who advance the public good, connect with core content areas, reflect on their experiences, and have an understanding of why they are helping those in need are engaging in service learning (Richardson, 2006). If all steps are not taken into context, leaders are jeopardizing the learning and impact this powerful tool has on students.

As leaders within a community we are often asked questions about why this generation we are teaching is so cruel and disenfranchised with the community. Service learning provides us an opportunity as leaders to help students stay in touch with the community and send positive messages to those who doubt our youth today. As students serve in the community, they experience issues instead of simply reading about them. I believe this firsthand experience gives students direct knowledge of, and an active interest in, the area being studied, motivating them to enlist in their project and make a difference (Pleasants, Stephens, Selph, & Pfeiffer, 2004).

As a leader I must be willing to address service learning and implement it in a way that will benefit students at all levels. There is a fine line between community service and service learning. While both are beneficial, only service
learning can help students achieve at higher levels by making positive
connections to the classroom. For a new administrator it is also important to
show the community you are willing to make positive changes outside the school
walls. Getting the community on your side as an instructional leader can lead to
positive advancements in the future when times may get tough.

Service learning is limitless in its potential for success at every level and
in every subject area of our public education system (Sheffield, 2005). It puts
coursework into context, mixes rigor with relevance, and builds concrete skills.
When properly administered, service learning can result in a tangible community
benefit while building student skills (Richardson, 2006). For it to survive students
must first realize and put meaning into the service they are providing for the
community. When students have an understanding and meaning for their actions
within the community, service learning can be a tool unmatched by no other.

Service learning fits directly within standards Four and Six of the Iowa
Standards for School Leaders. To be a successful leader of service learning, it is
vital to understand and respond to diverse community interests and needs.
Leaders who successfully integrate service learning within their districts will also
be able to respond to and influence the larger political, social, economic, legal and
cultural contexts that drive communities of learning.

Leaders of learning today are faced with insurmountable tasks. I believe
success is possible and is founded in a leader who is aware of today’s changing
educational needs, understands reform and the need for urgency; holds an awareness and understanding of how students and adults learn; and recognizes the need to reach the community and make learning applicable for students. While the urgency demonstrated during the civil rights movement encompassed a deep rooting in social injustice, I believe educating our youth and the impact we have as leaders shares similar urgency. In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. stated:

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. We must move past indecision to action...Now let us begin...The choice is ours, and though we may prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial movement of human history (As cited in The Quotations Page, 2006).
REFERENCES


