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Critical elements for leading secondary schools

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Critical elements for leading secondary schools

Abstract

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "living and learning must go hand in hand." I cannot remember a time in my life when this was not true. As a child, school was always a positive experience for me. I loved the challenge of mastering new skills. As I progressed through high school and college, I had the opportunity to develop my thinking and reasoning skills through challenging courses taught by master teachers. These teachers served as role models for me, displaying dedication and passion for their subject matter as well as their students.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS FOR LEADING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “living and learning must go hand in hand.”

I cannot remember a time in my life when this was not true. As a child, school was always a positive experience for me. I loved the challenge of mastering new skills. As I progressed through high school and college, I had the opportunity to develop my thinking and reasoning skills through challenging courses taught by master teachers. These teachers served as role models for me, displaying dedication and passion for their subject matter as well as their students.

I always thought I wanted a “power” career and declared mathematics as my major. My plan was to enter the field of actuarial science and make a lot of money. After a summer working with youth in a camp setting I had a grand realization. I could combine my love for mathematics and my love for working with youth. That fall I returned to school and changed my major to education. I felt like I had finally found my true calling.

Throughout my life, my mother has always been an inspiration to me. She grew up the second oldest child in a poor farm family with ten children. It has always amazed me that coming from a family with limited resources and opportunities, not only my mother, but her siblings too were all able to overcome obstacles to live successful, comfortable lives. The key factor of success in this case was education. I believe that the only means for personal improvement and growth is through education. Acquiring an education is the only way to truly change your lot in life. As Americans, we are fortunate to live in a country

committed to the education of all students, not just the elite. As the world becomes smaller and new countries emerge as global powers, all Americans have a vested interest in education. In fact, the fate of our democracy depends on an educated citizenry.

In this world that is changing so rapidly, the field of education must keep pace. Students are coming to school with a variety of different needs and learning styles. Information and technology are advancing at lightning speed. What a challenging and exciting time to be an educator. I enjoy being in the classroom and interacting with the students. However, I feel I am ready to take the next step. I entered the educational leadership program to become a principal because I know I can make a positive impact on the lives of students. My passion and commitment for education, my willingness to take risks, and my organizational skills are all qualities that will help me to be an effective educational leader.

The success of a school often depends on the effectiveness of the administrator. I believe an educational leader must possess certain beliefs and skills to effectively lead the school towards its vision.

The most important belief an educational leader should possess is the right of all students to receive a free, quality public education. The principal must act as an advocate for all students from the special education student to the gifted and talented student. High standards of learning are necessary for all students to succeed. It is the role of the principal to ensure that when students leave the

building they have the knowledge, skills, and values to be successful adults who positively contribute to society.

As the educational leader, I believe the principal must be knowledgeable about curriculum design, instructional strategies, and assessment. An effective leader empowers teachers with skills and knowledge through professional development and encourages collaboration in working towards the school's vision.

As chief steward of the school's vision, the principal needs to make decisions to keep the school progressing towards its goals. This often means taking risks and the educational leader should be prepared to do so. At times it is necessary for the administrator to make top down decisions while other instances require staff, parent, and community input. The educational leader should be open to ideas from all stakeholders realizing that the school and community serve as resources for one another.

Above all else, the principal must maintain a personal and professional code of ethics. In all areas, the principal should strive to treat people fairly, with dignity and respect. By demonstrating values, beliefs, and attitudes for high standards of learning and ethical, moral behavior, the educational leader can inspire those around her to higher levels of performance. In his manner, schools can truly move towards improved academic achievement.

There are four elements that I consider to be critical for the success of an administrator. To be an educational leader, one must be adept at managing conflict between others, using data to make informed decision, involving parents in the school, and building leadership capacity in others.

Conflict Resolution

A teacher sends a student to the principal's office for disciplinary reasons. The teacher explains that the student's behavior is disruptive to the class. The student argues that the teacher is simply being unreasonable. Two teachers visit the building administrator on separate occasions. It seems they just do not see eye-to-eye and refuse to work together on the same committee. A parent storms into the principal's office upset about a school policy. All of these examples of conflict are common occurrences in schools. I believe the ability to successfully manage conflict is an essential quality for an administrator to possess.

Human interactions are abundant in the business of education. On a daily basis there are interactions between students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members within a school district. These interactions are generally positive, but anytime there are people from different backgrounds with varying beliefs, conflict is inevitable.

Conflict is defined in Webster's Dictionary as "to show antagonism or irreconcilability: CLASH". This definition carries a decidedly negative connotation. "For most schools, the traditional approach to dealing with conflict

is to hide it, ignore it, and never admit that it exists” (Coyle, 2000, p. 42).

Margolis states that organizations that do not stimulate conflict actually increase the probability of stagnant thinking, inadequate decisions and, ultimately, demise of the organization. Avoiding conflict and the anger usually associated with conflict does have consequences. First, the problem will go underground and become more destructive to the organization. Second, negative feelings will intensify and reemerge at unexpected times. Third, potentially constructive solutions will never be explored (Margolis, 1986).

Most people are not comfortable dealing with conflict and work hard to avoid it. However, well-managed conflict can be channeled into an opportunity for growth. There are many different strategies and steps that administrators can learn and practice to manage conflict in an effective, positive manner.

Broe describes the D+E+S+C conflict resolution model that can work for both children and adults.

- D (Describe) The administrator tells the person what he or she does not like. This statement should be accurate, leaving no room for argument over the facts, and it should not be judgmental.
- E (Express) After the facts have been stated, the administrator should express his or her feelings about the situation.
- S (Specify) The administrator should specify what change is necessary.

- C (Consequences) The administrator explains what will occur if the necessary changes are not made (Broe, 1995).

I believe the model described by Broe could be effective in certain situations, but it seems to be very one-sided and punitive in nature.

Davidson and Wood maintain that many times the underlying issues of a conflict are not clearly understood by both parties. Using certain conflict resolution models can help clarify the issues and lead to a win-win solution to the conflict (Davidson & Wood, 2004). When administrators mediate conflict rather than enforce a punishment, people learn positive methods to deal with conflict, which in turn generates improved relationships based on mutual respect and understanding (Quinlan, 2004).

With minimal research, I found a number of conflict resolution models that utilize the win-win philosophy. The method that seemed most reasonable to me and easy to implement was actually explained by Dr. David Else of the University of Northern Iowa in his course Personal and Professional Development.

- 1) Listen without interrupting. Taking notes is advised.
- 2) When the complainant is finished, state, "If I had the same information you have, I would be upset also."
- 3) State, "Let me share some information you may not have."
- 4) Ask, "What would you like me to do?"

- 5) Make contact with the person within twenty-four hours in order to touch base.

“It is the leader who explicitly or implicitly sets the tone as to what types of behavior will and will not be tolerated in the midst of conflict” (Uline, 2003, p. 810). By becoming familiar with and practicing effective strategies for conflict resolution, I will establish a non-threatening environment in which creative win-win solutions can be explored. I also feel that this philosophy can have a trickle down effect into the classroom. Staff development that provides training for teachers on various ways to implement conflict resolution strategies can help create a learning environment that values and supports cooperation, caring communication, appreciation for diversity, healthy expression of feelings, responsible decision making and mediation skills (Collins, 2003).

An administrator that is well versed in conflict resolution exemplifies Standard 3 of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders. A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. An administrator that is adept at conflict resolution uses effective problem-framing and problem-solving strategies. In addition, he or she is an effective communicator, possessing sound group-process, consensus-building, and negotiation skills.

Data-Driven Decision Making

Making decisions is an important part of an educational leaders' job. A successful leader must use data to make and support decisions that affect staff, students, and stakeholders. Data-driven decision-making is a critical element of an educational leader.

In the days of No Child Left Behind, "data-driven decision-making" is a buzz word commonly used in conversations about school improvement. But what does this term actually mean? Educators and administrators in schools that are effectively impacting and sustaining school improvement know that anecdotes and instincts are not sufficient when important decisions about change need to be made (McREL, 2003). Empirical data is necessary when making decisions regarding school improvement and student achievement. Data-driven decision-making is the process of collecting student data in order to accurately assess student learning. Administrators, teachers, and parents can then make decisions based on data to change instructional practices to improve student achievement. Data-driven decision-making encourages teachers to tailor instruction to the needs of the students (Doyle, 2003).

The mere mention of "data-driven decision-making" in the presence of educators and administrators sometimes elicits sneers and groans. Why is data-driven decision-making met with such resistance? Doyle (2003) offers two reasons why such resistance exists. The first reason is fear. Data is viewed as the

enemy that could paint the teacher in a negative light. The second reason is that educators do not view data as an asset, but rather as a burden. School data neither simplifies life nor increases a teacher's sense of effectiveness as a professional.

When most educators think of data, they think of high-stakes standardized tests. These tests are a single and imperfect means of measuring student achievement. Yet they are, in some cases, being used to size up the effectiveness of schools, deliver financial rewards and punishments, and determine students' futures (Love, 2003). It is no wonder that data-driven decision-making is not viewed by many educators as a positive term.

So what are the advantages of using data-driven decision-making when administrators, teachers, and stakeholders are implementing changes to improve student learning? "Research show that teachers who use student test performance to guide and improve their teaching are more effective than teachers who do not use such information" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Three additional benefits for classroom teachers are given by Jenkins (n.d.). Data can validate or discredit teachers' instructional practices. Data gives teachers a voice regarding the need for change in school practices and instructional programs. Finally, data enables teachers to direct their own professional development.

There are advantages of using data-driven decision-making for administrators and stakeholders as well.

“Data-driven decision-making also promises real economies of operation—getting it right the first time saves money because it means an end to remediation and improved performance across the board. Equally important, improving educational performance means increased public confidence in schools, which will make it easier to muster resources for education. The stakes couldn’t be higher. Put bluntly, as the population in our society ages, competition for resources will increase precisely when it is essential to get greater performance from our schools. Today’s students are tomorrow’s taxpaying adult citizens, and the better educated they are, the better off society will be as a whole” (Doyle, 2003, pp. 4-5).

As an educational leader, there are steps that I can take in my building and in my district to facilitate the effective use of data-driven decision-making. Some guidelines according to Love (2003) include the following:

- 1) Build a professional culture. Take the time to have the tough conversations in a professional learning community, where teachers and administrators are clear about their vision and relentlessly focused on results for students.
- 2) Create collaborative structures. To improve student learning, teachers need time to meet weekly in department meetings, vertical teams, grade-level teams, or study groups.

- 3) Engage in data-driven dialogue and collaborative inquiry. Teachers need to make collective sense of the data, own the problems, and embrace solutions together. The group needs to come to a deeper, shared understanding of the data to hasten decision making.
- 4) Learn what you can from standardized tests. Teachers should be given the data they need to improve instruction. This includes disaggregated data and item-level data.
- 5) Use multiple measures, including common grade-level, subject area, or course-specific assessment. These assessments should be designed by teachers to assess the knowledge and skills that teachers agree are central to their curriculum. This provides a clear focus for collaborative inquiry into improving student learning.

An administrator that effectively uses data-driven decision-making to make decisions that influence student performance and school improvement demonstrates several elements of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders. The first is Standard 1: Visionary Leadership. A visionary leader uses assessment data related to student learning to develop the school vision and goals as well as relevant demographic data pertaining to students and their families in developing the school mission and goals. A second standard demonstrated by an administrator who effectively uses data-driven decision-making, is Standard 2: Instructional Leadership. An educational leader must use multiple sources of

information regarding performance and analyze, interpret, and use educational research to improve student learning. Finally, the third standard is Standard 4: Collaborative Leadership. An effective educational leader makes decisions based on information about families and community concerns, expectations, and needs.

Parental Involvement

Involving parents in the educational process is a critical element of an effective administrator. Parental involvement is often a difficult undertaking for administrators, however. Three barriers that typically interfere with parental involvement are time, financial resources, and a history of miscommunication and distrust between parents and the school (Wherry, 2004).

“Relationships with schools are uncomfortable for many parents, particularly those who do not speak English or who once struggled as students. Add a list of problems that include financial stress, single parenting, demanding jobs, disabilities, and more, and it’s easier to understand why parents are not involved in school issues, despite their dedication to their children’s success” (Wherry, 2004, p. 6).

Furthermore, the framework for parental involvement in secondary schools differs greatly from the framework for parental involvement in elementary schools. Reasons for this might include a greater traveling distance to the secondary

school, more complex subject matter, multiple teachers at the secondary level, and the changing parent-child relationship that begins in adolescence (Leon, 2003).

Involving parents in their children's education is essential despite the difficulties that might stand in the way. Due to the increased pressure for high standards, accountability, and testing, schools and parents need to work collaboratively for student success (Machen, Wilson, Notar, 2005). "Parental involvement was a better predictor of school adjustment and engagement than other measures of parenting behavior, including monitoring and expectations (Machen, Wilson, Notar, 2005, p. 14). "Parental involvement in the child's school life—usually his or her main social world—is important during the secondary years" (Leon, 2003, p. 32).

There are steps that an administrator can take to encourage and develop parental involvement in their schools. The first step in encouraging parental involvement is to operate under the assumption that parents care about their children's school experiences and want to be involved. A good school becomes a great school with parental involvement (McTamaney, 2005). It is important when developing a home-school collaboration to focus on the following:

- Create frequent opportunities for positive communication between the school and parents.
- Work to eliminate any barriers that prevent parental involvement.

- Provide educational sessions for parents that serve to increase the parents' ability to be more aware of their children's academic potential and aspirations (Machen, Wilson, Notar, 2005)

McTamaney (2005) suggests seven ideas to increase parental involvement within existing school programs.

- Designate one person as the parent coordinator, and make sure it is not the head of the school. This could be a staff member or a willing parent.
- Ask parents how they would like to be involved. Provide suggestions for parental involvement but allow for suggestions from parents as well.
- Keep a master schedule of times when teachers may want volunteers in their classrooms or for school activities.
- Have specific, clear directions available for parent volunteers so they don't need to interrupt teachers. In addition, have all necessary materials prepared.
- Consider ways in which parents can be involved from home or in the evenings.
- Schedule parent education programs twice, or schedule them at alternating times.
- Select topics for parent education sessions that are meaningful and useful to parents. Consider a survey that identifies parents' interests.

It is important for administrators to remember that parental involvement is unique at the secondary level. Leon (2003) states that parental involvement in secondary schools is often from a distance and includes parents monitoring work and staying informed of student progress. He offers the following model:

Group Involvement: Parents find this involvement unimportant and, at best will support special groups in which their child participates.

Monitoring School Programs: Parents find the newsletter helpful; believe visits are a very valuable way to communicate; visit the school when the school invites parents to talk with teachers.

Teacher Contact: Parents want telephone and mail contact with the teachers and they will initiate this contact when there is a particular need or to assess student performance.

Academic Focus: Parents check report cards and monitor student homework; some parental interests in college-prep programs and postsecondary preparation.

Conduct and Discipline: Parents want to be quickly informed of any inappropriate behavior; believe it is the parents' job to handle serious discipline problems; believe problems require a team approach to find a solution.

School Events: Parents attend sport, musical, or other events when their child is involved.

Attendance: Parents rely on the school to report on attendance (Leon, 2003).

Administrators who effectively develop and encourage parental involvement address the knowledge and skills necessary for Standard 3: Organizational Leadership and Standard 4: Collaborative Leadership. To develop and encourage parental involvement, administrators must use good communication skills, problem solving skills, group process and consensus building skills, and sometimes conflict resolution skills. Administrators also must believe in the value of working collaboratively with families to improve the education of all students.

Building Leadership Capacity

“The real leader has no need to lead, he is content to point the way”.

-Henry Miller

Before a leader can step back and point the way for staff to become leaders, steps must be taken to enable staff members by building and developing their leadership capacity. This is no small task yet it is a critical element of an effective administrator. The need for building leadership capacity increases with high turnover rates of administrators. Cultivating leadership teams, creating alternative paths for teachers to demonstrate leadership and developing succession plans provides for a broad leadership base to sustain schools even through changes in leadership (Blankstein and Noguera, 2004).

“It is more difficult to build leadership capacity among colleagues than to tell colleagues what to do” (Lambert, 1998, p. 24). The challenge for

administrators then is to take the risk, devote the time and energy, and promote leadership qualities in staff members.

Before an administrator can build leadership capacity in others there must be an examination of his or her own leadership traits. Douglas MacArthur developed a list of questions to guide him in his leadership duties. The following selection of questions from his list can aid in assessing how an administrator promotes leadership qualities in others.

- Do I heckle my subordinates or strengthen and encourage them?
- Do I develop my subordinates by placing on each one as much responsibility as he can stand?
- Am I a constant example to my subordinates in character, dress, deportment and courtesy?

Likewise, Lambert (1998) describes five assumptions that serve as the basic premises for building leadership capacity within a school.

- Leadership is not trait theory; leadership and leader are not the same.
- Leadership is about learning.
- Everyone has the potential and right to work as a leader.
- Leading is a shared endeavor.
- Leadership requires the redistribution of power and authority (p. 89).

A principal that possesses the qualities of an effective leader can then initiate building the leadership capacity within the school. “Leadership capacity building

can be defined as broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership”

(Lambert, 1998, p. 12). “It means using effort to elicit effort from others”

(Barkley, Bottoms, Feagin, Clark, n.d., p.1). The following action steps can be utilized to build leadership capacity in others.

- Hire personnel with the capacity to do leadership work.
- Get to know one another.
- Assess staff and school capacity for leadership.
- Develop a culture of inquiry.
- Organize the school community for leadership work.
- Implement your plans for building leadership capacity.
- Develop district policies and practices that support leadership capacity

(Lambert, 1998)

Building leadership capacity requires a shift in thinking from leader to leadership. This is quite a change from our society’s viewpoint of the “born leader”. Historically, businesses have been organized in a hierarchical format but businesses too are beginning to transition to more of a team mentality by developing leadership in employees. Schools need to follow suit in order to affect change and evolve to meet the needs of our students in the 21st century.

Moving from a focus on leaders to a focus on leadership has four components:

- Building trust: organizations with high levels of trust tend to be more successful than organizations without high trust.
- Redesigning jobs: define jobs in terms of leadership responsibilities rather than tasks.
- Changing organizational structures: organizations that are focused on learning and shared leadership require structures that are different than organizations focused on control.
- Creating a learning culture: the most powerful way to develop leadership capacity is to create a culture that values the learning most likely to enhance individual's capacity to lead (West-Burnham, 2004).

Empowering teachers to lead by building their leadership capacity represents quite a risk for administrators. It requires the administrator to relinquish control and redistribute the power. However, this redistribution of power is what creates the ownership attitude that everyone shares responsibility for the success of students. Baldoni (2004) summarizes the role of today's leader. "Managers do not do, they enable. Management today is a process of providing the help and the resources to others to enable them to do their jobs" (p.1).

An administrator that builds the leadership capacity of others demonstrates effectiveness in terms of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders, specifically addressing Standard 3, organizational leadership.

Building leadership capacity of staff members involves them in the decisions that affect the school. The responsibility for school improvement is shared in order to maximize ownership and accountability for improved student achievement.

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