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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

All eyes are watching school leaders every day. According to Betty Hollas (2001) in *Keeping Your Staff Motivated*, administrators are the "CEO's (Chief Example for Others)" (p. 7). Staff, students, parents and the school community are examining and interpreting everything principals do and don't do, say, wear, and our overall behavior. Since administrators are under watchful eyes, we have to be positive, energetic, fair, and confident. My life experiences, including the education I received in the principalship program at the University of Northern Iowa and my goals as a future administrator based on the Iowa Standards for School Leaders have influenced my vision for the elementary principalship.

A Preferred Vision for Administering Elementary Schools

A Research Paper

Presented to

**The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling
and Postsecondary Education
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by

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All eyes are watching school leaders every day. According to Betty Hollas (2001) in Keeping Your Staff Motivated, administrators are the “CEO’s (Chief Example for Others)” (p. 7). Staff, students, parents and the school community are examining and interpreting everything principals do and don’t do, say, wear, and our overall behavior. Since administrators are under watchful eyes, we have to be positive, energetic, fair, and confident. My life experiences, including the education I received in the principalship program at the University of Northern Iowa and my goals as a future administrator based on the Iowa Standards for School Leaders have influenced my vision for the elementary principalship.

My administrative goals include striving to be an effective educator and continually seeking strategies to enhance student learning in a sincere effort to meet the diverse needs of every student. I will assist students in becoming successful, self-motivated individuals with goals for a life-long journey. In order to achieve these goals, I will need a supportive staff, involved parents, and a community willing to provide a learning environment with high expectations for students.

Are administrators solely responsible for ensuring the success of schools? Although some may answer yes to this question, the answer is without a doubt, no. However, successful principals are described “as the

key to the school, the instructional leader. The person who knows what effective instruction looks like, how to evaluate it, and how to help teachers improve instruction” (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, Jeffries, 2000, p. 19).

There are numerous challenges facing principals.

In the next decade, 21st century principals will need to develop skills and strategies that aren't taught in graduate school. Perhaps the most critical of these challenges is to provide a positive learning environment for a highly diverse student population (Ferrandino, 2001, p. 441).

Realizing that the job of becoming an effective administrator is one that will require numerous hours, I am willing to accept the challenge in order to provide students an opportunity to be successful regardless of their background experiences or lifestyles. As I address the issue of being an effective administrator, I will focus on the following Iowa Standards for School Leaders which have been the focus of my studies throughout the administrative program:

1. Visionary Leadership-Promoting the success of all students by providing a vision that is shared by the school community.
2. Instructional Leadership-Promoting success by being an advocate for the school community and developing a school culture that is conducive to student learning and professional development.
3. Organizational Leadership-Providing a safe, efficient and effective learning environment.
4. Collaborative Leadership-Collaborates with the entire school community, responding to diverse needs of the school population.
5. Ethical leadership-Acting fairly and ethically

6. Political Leadership-Understanding and interacting politically for the benefit of all students (Iowa Standards for School Leaders, 2000).

Visionary Leadership

As a visionary leader, continual reflection is imperative. Leaders have to seek self-improvement prior to looking at the needs for improvements in staff members and the student body. In order to provide the school community with a successful program, it is important that I be a proactive leader seeking growth for staff members. Professional development assists individuals in becoming better at what they do and must be a constant part of educators' goals. The needs of our student population are constantly changing. I have to be a change agent, leading staff members to become self-motivated and willing to meet the requirements of a growing diverse student populations in our urban communities.

It is imperative to reflect on strategies that benefit student achievement and eliminate those strategies that do not produce the results needed for success. There should be a visible mission statement that all stakeholders know and believe. The vision should be one that everyone upholds or at the very least agrees to support. Professional development for administrators, teachers, associates, and other staff must be a part of the school's plan in order

to experience continual growth. It is also imperative that parents and all other stakeholders feel they are a viable part of our school community and know they are always welcome in our schools.

Research supports the fact that

today's typical classroom is far more diverse and complex than ever before. Learning disabled students sit next to gifted students. Students with behavioral disorders and children who began life as "crack babies" join in cooperative learning groups with students whose parents don't speak a word of English (Sagor, 2001, p. 27).

In order for their diverse needs to be met, teaching styles will have to be diversified.

If current demographic trends hold, our student population will become more diverse, while the teaching population remains predominately white. The implication is that if teachers are to be effective, they will need to be prepared to teach children who are not white (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 26).

As a visionary leader, I will be responsible for motivating staff who may not be experienced in working in diverse areas to work toward effectively educating a diverse student population.

Team leaders or problem-solving committees are an asset in developing plans for students who are not achieving. From experience, problem-solving plans often provide temporary solutions instead of actually providing realistic measures that address the needs of students.

Most of the time in education, staff want to rush their thinking as they endeavor to solve problems. It is worthwhile, however to first think through what they know about the problem; think about the data that can assist students with a better understanding of the problem, understand all that data reveal, and clarify goals and desired outcomes before identifying solutions (Bernhardt, 1998, p. 143).

If students have been passed on to the next grade for years and if this practice continues to happen without first assessing their needs, we will continue seeing students perform below grade level. When problem-solving teams are in the initial stages of the process, students may be instrumental in the problem solving process. In the book,

Listening to Urban Kids: School Reform and the Teachers They

Want, a student informs the author about their feelings:

The key to success of the after-school program according to students, was that the atmosphere was more conducive to learning. With fewer of their peers around, the students were not as distracted as they were in their regular classrooms and as a result felt that they could put more effort into their work (Wilson, 2001, p. 122).

When we listen to students we discover their voices are crucial in establishing plans that lead to success. I want to equip students to be successful and the only way I can reach them is to know what their needs are. If we listen to students, we can discover their likes, dislikes, dreams and aspirations. When our students know we care they will be more receptive to us and in the process relationships will

be enhanced. Educators spend a great deal of time with students, therefore, it is imperative to develop relationships with students. We must be positive role models in their lives. In today's society the more positive the people involved in a child's life, the greater the chance they will succeed.

Educators need to take time to learn about students by becoming more culturally aware of their lifestyles. Learn about their worlds, assist students with developing life-long strategies in the areas of citizenship, being ethical, and developing friendships.

All teachers should try to accommodate students' background knowledge and skills as this information relates to the content, students' interests outside school and their cultural heritage. What students bring to the instructional event from these areas affects their experience with the material and the activities (Danielson, 1996, p. 43).

I strongly feel that we help shape children into what they will be in the future especially at the elementary level. When students have a good relationship with their teacher, they will excel. They will want to do their best for themselves and to impress their teacher. As a leader, I want to work with teachers who are willing to go the extra mile and who diversify their teaching styles to meet the needs of diverse learners. One student says of their favorite teacher and class, "It's my favorite because the teacher does more things with us, like

experiments. When the test come, you know what you're doing, and you get a good grade" (Wilson, 2001, p. 122). This should be the norm for teachers; teachers need to meet the needs of all students. As a visionary leader, I will encourage teachers to reach out to students, involve them in the learning process, teach cooperatively, use hands-on activities and ensure that technology is in use in classrooms.

Teachers also need to

let students make meaningful choices. The more options students are given the more likely they will be to engage in, persist in, and enjoy a task. Parents and teachers should provide students with at least some choice regarding the materials, tasks, and kinds of evaluations used in the classroom. (Bruning, 1999, p. 152).

When students are able to accept ownership in their learning, they are more apt to achieve.

In the book, Listening to Urban Kids: School Reform and the Teachers They Want, by B. L. Wilson & H. D. Corbett (2001) the author writes:

They interpreted how a teacher taught as an indication of how the teacher felt about them as students. Teachers who taught, cared; teachers who did not teach did not care. There was nothing technical about instruction. For students every action the teacher took was relational. It was all about relationships (p. 122).

Keeping this quote in mind reinforces the idea that teachers need to know how important their jobs are and be aware of the fact that students want to know their teachers care.

Instructional Leadership

Research strongly suggests that students in urban schools are struggling and continually falling behind. Communicating with staff members about the importance of having high expectations not only for students, but also, for themselves is imperative. In order to ensure the staff is knowledgeable of new technology, changes in education, and more effective ways of teaching, staff development and training are essential. As someone who is always seeking to learn, this must be a quality I seek in the staff. Education is constantly changing however, "I have to keep in mind that change takes years for adults to comprehend and digest; it "counts" for students immediately (McAdams, 2000, p. 127).

I will be visible in all classrooms on a daily basis. This will help to set the tone for the day. Teachers will know my concerns and know I am willing to assist them in any way necessary and provide every opportunity possible for staff members to succeed. Our challenge as educators is

to teach the children who come, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, or gender, how to read, write, think, compute, appreciate the arts, speak well, and behave in socially acceptable ways, so that they can become economically independent, contributing members of society (Monroe, 1997, p. 32).

Once we commit ourselves to this challenge we are on our way to believing that nothing is impossible. When accepting this challenge we will seek ways to self-improve, be motivated by our achievements and will see our students as being capable individuals who are able to succeed. Our goal is to reach each child in a way that will assist them as individuals. We have to be certain all students regardless of where they live, what their socioeconomic status is, their race, or gender are prepared for learning and being successful.

Those students who are

poor and minority students should be afforded an opportunity to participate in interactive classrooms—classrooms that will enable them to analyze information to support a particular conclusion, inference, or generalization.” “It is this transition from the mundane to the profound that will create individuals oriented towards a life of active, self-directed learning—a process that will prepare them to reach higher academic heights (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, Jeffries, 2000, p. 86)

All students need to be afforded opportunities that allow them to succeed in order to have a chance to achieve throughout life.

Knowing that we live in a society that is forever changing and knowing that as an administrator I will be a change-agent, it is

important to base decisions on research and provide documentation to stakeholders to gain their support. I will be committed to making changes and allowing the time needed to perceive results. Monroe (1997) tells us “Don’t expect support from others for your creativity and risk taking. Only after your ideas work will support come—and credit be taken!” (p. 159). Sometimes decisions may be less than favorable with staff, but when the choices benefit students, I am willing to take the risk.

I have learned a magnitude of leadership strategies over the past year and a half. During this time my beliefs and values have not been compromised, they have been enhanced through the knowledge and experience gained during this program. I have grown as a leader and know that when the opportunity arises, I will be prepared to accept the challenge of becoming an administrator. Along with being an instructional leader I also have to become an organizational leader. Combining instructional and organizational leadership skills will enhance the educational program we have in place in our schools.

Organizational Leadership

Organization is an important aspect for any successful school community. Where there is no organization there will be chaos.

Chaos leads to behavioral problems and a lack of achievement.

Although I will be the facilitator, it is important to have specific goals in mind for staff, students and myself. Everyone in the building must be a part of the organizational process in order for it to be successful.

The organizational process includes the custodian providing a safe and clean school, associates being responsible and prompt, cafeteria staff being responsible for their tasks, teachers and administrators fulfilling their requirements, students wanting to learn, and parents and community members supporting the learning process.

In the book, How Do They Know You Care? The Principal's Challenge by L. L. Lyman (1994), Hinton (the principal) is described as being a role model. One teacher said of Hinton, "He does the teaming at the building level and then we do the same thing in our villages" (Lyman, 2000, p. 87). With Liz Crowley as my role model, I have gained a magnitude of experience. Liz is a committed administrator at Grant Elementary School. Staff members see how hard she works and follow her lead. They are a great staff, caring and committed to the school community. I am also a committed person and plan to use some of the leadership skills modeled for me while working with Liz. Being a team player creates uniformity thus

leading to success. With every staff member being part of a team and everyone knowing their roles are viable, they will make sure they do their best to meet the needs of students.

Classroom management sets the tone for learning. I have attended workshops relating to this topic. In some cases there is a lack of parental support which leads to disciplinary issues. Teachers are forced to become more of a disciplinarian than actually fulfilling their roles as educators. Students need to learn to behave because it is the appropriate thing to do, not because they think they will be rewarded. Rewards should not be expected for every positive thing students do. It's acceptable to give rewards for positive behavior on occasion, but if it becomes a routine it loses its meaning. "Offering rewards to individuals for performing a pleasant activity actually decreases the attractiveness of that activity (Aronson, 2000, p. 175). "One of the best ways to induce youngsters to do anything is by modeling that behavior" (Aronson, 2000, p. 176). Instead of giving rewards I will encourage teachers to model the appropriate behavior and to save the treats for special occasions.

Because any administrator would want to have a school with few disciplinary problems, we are compelled to find the right formula for a

successful disciplinary plan. We need to address the student's social skills in the classroom, during lunch, recess and in the halls. Students must be prepared for life, to relate to people who are different than they are. "Our schools can and should play a vital role in helping students develop emotional mastery as well as academic mastery. A school's climate can do a great deal to either foster or hinder a student's skills in getting along with others" (Aronson, 2000, p. 91).

It is important for the learning environment to be free from behavioral difficulties so we must address these issues as they arrive and attempt to be as proactive as possible. One way of helping combat problems is to involve the stakeholders in the process. Parental support is a must and collaborating with others in the community will also be beneficial.

Collaborative Leadership

Collaboration is an essential component of a learning community. It is my goal for teachers to be able to teach and parents to become responsible for disciplining their children. When parents are involved in their child's education and students are aware of the relationship parents have with the staff, a better learning environment is provided. With an open door policy parents and community members begin to

build a feeling of connectedness to schools. Parents and teachers must communicate often. The following quote supports my beliefs about this community involvement:

If the ultimate goal of education is to prepare students to live productive and meaningful lives, adapt to change, and contribute to the continued growth of society, then it is imperative that educators working in urban schools be provided a foundation upon which to work cooperatively with parents and the urban community they serve. Such cooperative efforts must result in creating educational opportunities for the growth and economic survival of urban youth (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, Jeffries, 2000, p. 46).

As I reflect on my childhood being educated in the Waterloo schools, I don't remember many affectionate staff members. It seems as though most educators I came in contact with were there to do a job, nothing more. I will be the type of administrator who fosters positive relationships among staff, students, parents, and myself. I want to be an administrator who has the type of school where children love to learn and parents are excited about being involved. Knowing the importance of having supportive parents in schools, I will seek strategies involving parents in the daily activities of school. My goal is to assist in the development of supportive parents who know how to discipline their children which will allow educators the opportunity to concentrate on providing an education for students.

Growing up I had two very supportive parents who knew the importance of education. They had high expectations of all their children and wanted us to be successful. Because of their commitment and persistence, all five of their children attended college with four of the five receiving degrees. I hope to encourage parents to take the same active role my parents took as caring parents who were involved in my education.

Partners in Education have been an outstanding asset in schools. It is a program I will be very active to promote as an administrator. Collaboration between students, parents and the community will help build an excellent learning environment. Business partners can assist students in developing an understanding of opportunities available to them, be an encouragement to students, and inform them of paths that lead to career development. Partners can also be mentors or writing buddies with students building positive relationships with our youth. These relationships may open new doors to students who have never envisioned themselves in particular fields in the past.

I have become more involved in community events. This is another way to build resources for schools. Reaching out into areas that are diverse exposes students to an entirely diverse world, opens

doors full of excitement and new learning experiences, and encourages students to reach outside of the norm for opportunities that will create a desire to seek achievement often unforeseen to children in urban settings. Partners in Education can help break these barriers.

While working diligently to build relationships with stakeholders, it is also important to develop students' relationships with other students. Students must learn to work cooperatively in preparation to eventually become part of a workforce that expects them to be able to work together.

We can find a way to teach students a greater compassion for and tolerance of students who are different. We can even teach students to appreciate these differences and to experience them as sources of joy and excitement, rather than as automatic triggers for aggression and rejection (Aronson, 2000, p.72).

Life has changed since I was a child; children have changed; parents have changed; and expectations have changed. Unfortunately, the change has not been a positive one. Children are more disrespectful and angry and many parents seem to be less concerned about their child(ren)'s behavior, attitudes, and attendance and more concerned about satisfying the wants of their children. Parents have become consumers, consuming name brand shoes and clothing, expensive games and toys and not concentrating on their student's educational needs. It is imperative that we help parents get back to

the basics in raising children. Having parents who are committed will contribute to the success of our educational agenda.

Ethical Leadership

As a leader, there will be times when I make decisions everyone will not support. What happens at this point? “I have learned that when you have power over the future of so many young people, you must stand by what you truly believe, even if it is not popular and your decision keeps you up a few nights.” (Hibert, 2000, p. 19). If I have a strong feeling about an issue, I have to do what I know is right based on as much factual data as possible.

From a very early age my parents instilled in me the importance of honesty, responsibility, and respect. I am a trustworthy person and realize the way to gain the trust of staff members is by being trustworthy. “Without trust, the learning community cannot function. Trust is a key element of a learning community’s soul. Without this important level of trust, individuals will not fully participate or commit to the work of the learning community.” (Speck, 1999, p. 59).

Education is not a lucrative career. If one does not love what they do it will be difficult to remain committed. When we are committed we have feelings similar to Hinton in the following quote:

He remembers being overcome with emotion when the semester ended in early June. He put his head down on the desk and

cried when the class left for the last time. Hinton knew then he was a teacher and has not regretted the calling of his career (Lyman, 2000 p. 27).

Hinton loved his job, he gained the respect of his school community and he has prospered because of his dedication. He is, indeed, a role model for all educators.

“Basically what I would like to see take place is we need to live what we teach, we need to live what we want children to do” (Lyman, 2000 p. 87). Students model what they see. If they see adults being honest outstanding individuals, students are more apt to become the positive citizens we are striving for them to become.

Political Leadership

The political arena is one I have become more involved in since beginning this program. Politicians are often portrayed negatively by the media thus creating a vision of mistrust of politicians. By being involved politically and remaining ethical others can be encouraged to become more involved politically. School board members are not necessarily educators. Although students should be the focus of their decisions, they may not be as informed as they should be about particular topics. The school board needs input from school leaders. If leaders in the educational field do not become more involved

politically, “decisions may continue to be based more on whether they will appear as bold steps in the newspapers, rather than whether children will complete school more able to lead fulfilling and productive lives” (Zemelman, 1998, p. 287). As a political leader I will seek opportunities to be a voice for students. Parents, our business partners and other members of the community will also be encouraged to become more informed decision-makers in our school by becoming involved politically.

Everyone needs to understand that every child deserves a chance, including members of the board of education, community members, teachers, parents, and most importantly students. We can not discriminate against students for any reason. We need to have the same standards and expectations for students regardless of where they attend school and whether they are rich or poor. If we make differences we encourage some to succeed and others to fail. This is not our job. Our job is one of caring about all children and providing the right to a free and appropriate education for all. Houston has the right idea about education expressed in the following quote:

In Houston, the board of education takes the position that poor children can and will perform as well as middle-class children. We make no excuses for schools serving poor communities. We expect principals and teachers of these schools to develop

teaching methods that meet the learning needs of poor students (McAdams, 2000, p. 258).

If we believe children of all socioeconomic statuses can succeed, they will. If we believe they don't have a chance to succeed, chances increase that they won't. However, "What a school or district begins with its resources, students, and the like traditionally have had a critical bearing on what it is able to accomplish on behalf of students and their communities (Sagor, 2000, p. 21). We must ensure that all students are equipped with the tools necessary to succeed. I believe all students can achieve and I will continue being an advocate for them.

Conclusion

As an administrator I will be dedicated to meeting the needs of students, always being aware that school is about teaching and learning. I will continue learning as much as possible about the field of education by keeping current with literature, attending workshops addressing the needs of students and collaborating with others.

One of my goals as an administrator is to equip students with everything they need to be successful in life regardless of what they choose to pursue. With a motivated staff, willing community

workers, and concerned parents, our students have no choice except to succeed.

As educators, we must know that our accomplishments often go unnoticed. “Good works will be recognized—ultimately. But if you work for the recognition alone, you may be in for a long wait”

(Monroe, 1997, p. 88). Our rewards will come when students who have gone through our schools are successful or when we know that something we did or said opened a door that was previously closed. We have to love what we do because people often don’t realize how difficult our jobs are and don’t acknowledge what we do. Educators have to be self-motivated individuals with a passion for education in order to provide a successful learning environment which encourages success for students. With the six standards as my guide, a love for students and the educational field, a goal of seeing all students succeed, and a belief that regardless of where we work and who our students are, I truly believe that Nothing’s Impossible.

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