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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

As an individual practicing school administration in a small private school and a former classroom teacher, I feel that I bring with me a set of values and beliefs about education into the completion of my Masters of Arts in Education degree. These values and beliefs were and still are being formed by my upbringing, education and environment. As an administrator, I hope that I can model my values and through collaboration with all stakeholders of our school, use my beliefs and theirs to develop a vision for the school.

**A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

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**A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,  
and Postsecondary Education  
University of Northern Iowa**

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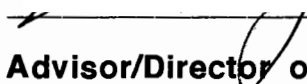
**by  
Michael Ward  
May 2000**

**This research paper by: Michael Ward**

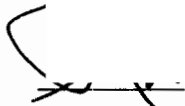
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
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**As an individual practicing school administration in a small private school and a former classroom teacher, I feel that I bring with me a set of values and beliefs about education into the completion of my Masters of Arts in Education degree. These values and beliefs were and still are being formed by my upbringing, education and environment. As an administrator, I hope that I can model my values and through collaboration with all stakeholders of our school, use my beliefs and theirs to develop a vision for the school.**

**I value my faith most of all. Through all of the trials and tragedies I have experienced in my life, it has been my faith that I have relied on and turned to in times of crisis. As a Catholic, I believe and follow the Catholic Faith. As a Catholic School Administrator I must model, teach and administer that faith. I turn to my faith when making many of our decisions.**

**I value my family. As a husband and father I value the time that I spend with my family. As a school administrator I put in long days. I try to start my day early so that I may feel comfortable leaving on time. This**

**provides more time with my family. This is not always the case, especially because of meetings. If my wife is working and I need to work at school on the weekends, I take the kids along.**

**I value many other qualities in people. I value honesty, integrity, a sense of humor, fairness and consistency. Since I value these characteristics in others I must also live them myself. I also try to instill them in my children at home as well as those I come in contact with at school. As Ralph Waldo Emerson stated: "The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil" (Bernhardt, 1999, p.62). If we as school administrators constantly keep the pupil's best interest in mind we can never do wrong.**

**I believe that all children are special. In the Bible we are told God created each one of us in his image (The New American Bible, p. 5). Since I believe this I do not believe in degrading children. I do not believe in being sarcastic with children. I believe in treating children the same way I would want to be treated.**

**I believe that all children can learn. I believe that children learn differently. McCarthy(1980) states that:**

**People learn in different ways. There are two major differences in how we learn. The first is how we perceive, the second is how we process. We perceive reality differently. We take things in in different ways. In new situations some of us sense and feel our way, while others think things through. (p.3)**

**All individuals develop beliefs and ideas about their work as they gain experience. Everyone has a vision of what they believe is the “perfect school.” Although this “perfect school” is never attainable in reality. It is a goal for each one of us. In the next several pages are my ideas and beliefs on what I believe a school should be like.**

### **Philosophy**

**My philosophical perspective on education is one that I developed before I even began my career in the education profession. Even though my graduate work is through a public institution, my roots are through the Catholic Church. This certainly affects my philosophy on education.**

**As educators we have a responsibility to guide our students to develop spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, and physically to their fullest potential. That does not**

mean that all students will leave each grade with a certain set of skills. It does mean that we must meet each student where they are in their development and guide them to grow as much as possible in each of the above areas during that year.

Spiritually, as a Catholic educator, it is our responsibility to help guide every child to develop a closer and more meaningful relationship with God. We must understand that each one is at a different place in this development. As Catholic educators, we must help them to grow from where they are. We must also share our personal experiences with God. Hopefully by sharing our relationship with God, our students come to understand God better.

Intellectually, we believe that each child needs to be treated as an individual and develop to their fullest potential. When you begin teaching a new concept, not every student will understand it as well as some. Some students will require extra help from the teacher or parents. We do not all learn at the same pace. We must find out where our students are and begin from that point.



**If we don't, some of our students will only fall further behind. As a school we must decide if students will be held back when they don't meet the benchmarks. A goal of the Goals 2000 committee was that:**

**American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter -- including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography -- [and leave school] prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment. (Jennings, 1995, p.18)**

**Students not only learn differently, they also don't necessarily learn the same things at the same age. Some students can learn concepts at age 7 and other students are not able to grasp the same concept until they are older. An eighth grade teacher I once worked with never memorized her multiplication and division facts until she was 45. She couldn't do it when it was taught in school. Should she be made to return to the fifth grade?**

**Emotionally, we must help the students to develop a set of coping skills. We must not teach students the answer to every question. What happens when they meet**

**a new question? We must teach students how to solve problems. We must teach students how and where to go to help them solve problems. We must help them to learn how to deal with different situations. We must teach and guide students to be life-long learners. They must continue to educate themselves until the day they die.**

**Physically, it is the responsibility of schools to guide students to understand their bodies and come to an understanding of how to take care of it. We must teach the students a knowledge of life-long activities to help keep them healthy and physically fit. We put so much emphasis on athletics. How many of our students can succeed and make a living playing sports? Teaching students the basics of these sports may enhance their enjoyment of these sports. However, it is more important to teach them life-long activities that they can use the rest of their lives to keep themselves physically fit.**

**We must take a close look at coming trends in education and see that students are treated as individuals. The Goals 2000 report stated as one of its goals that “all students will come to school ready to learn”(Jennings,**

1995, p.18). This goal is very attainable to a certain level. All students who come to school can learn. We also know that each student that comes to school will learn differently and at a different pace. As educators we do not have any control over this. We cannot control what goes on at home. Parents have so much more influence over their children. In the foreword to the book, Awakening Your Child's Natural Genius Shari Lewis writes:

A couple of years ago, there was a study to determine what caused children to get high scores on the SAT's (Scholastic Aptitude Tests). I.Q., social circumstances, and economic states all seemed less important than another subtler factor. Youngsters who got the highest SAT scores all regularly had dinner with their parents (Calkins, 1997, p.14)

Maybe we should spend more time and money on improving family life in America and less on education. It seems that so much is dependent on the family and not at school. Perhaps if family life was better it would spill over and improve our student achievement at school.

## **Purpose Of Education**

**The purpose of education goes along with developing life-long learners. One of the purposes in education is to develop students who will grow to be responsible adults who can make informed decisions about themselves and the environment around them. Another purpose of education is to teach students skills that they can use as adults within a profession.**

**The former purpose is the most important. If schools cannot guide our students to become responsible citizens who can make informed decisions, the future of the country is at stake. It is easy to understand why having responsible adults is important. Having adults who can make informed decisions is also important. How many adults already go into the voting booth and just choose someone who has a nice name? How many adults vote for only one party whether they are good or bad or because their parents always voted that way? How many people sign a petition without even understanding what it is about? Every level of government in our country is dependent on the election process. If everyone went in**

and voted for the individual whose name looked good, how long would our democracy exist? As Abraham Lincoln stated, our government is “of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Angle, 1983, p.64). Schools need to be sure that the students leaving their buildings can make informed decisions. In Do We Still Need Public Schools 1996 it states:

Better educated people have higher voting rates. In the 1992 Presidential election, only 27% of high school dropouts voted, compared to 50% of high school graduates and 79% of college graduates. (p. 12)

The latter purpose of education identified can also affect our country. Schools must provide businesses with a population that can be or is trained to perform a skilled job or a profession. How do schools ever attain this goal? American schools have so far done a good job. This goal is never fully achieved, it is ever changing. Businesses are constantly in need of workers with different skills. Technology is a good example. Education had to take on the duty of providing companies with secretaries capable of doing word processing, skilled programmers, skilled

technicians, and etc. It was not very many years ago that computers were unheard of. How long will it be before every home will contain a computer?

One interesting aspect of this goal is also the fact that schools have to not only add new skills to their programs, they must also maintain reading, writing and arithmetic. How many more areas can they add to their curriculum before there is a drastic decline in the quality of our education? Is that already the problem in education? Glatthorn (1997) says "that we must structure our curriculum so that we can go into greater depth as well as the mastery of a limited number of objectives is better than a general knowledge of many"(p.10).

According to Speck (1999) "The principalship has developed into multidimensional roles: leader, educator, manager, and inner person" (p.8). Through these roles the principal can develop a school into a learning community. The roles will be discussed and what is involved in each role.

## **Educator**

**As an educator, administrators will hopefully continue to study and learn about new ideas in education, especially those that impact or could have impact on their school. They must know what is going on in their schools. Phillips (1992) described a leadership quality of Abraham Lincoln as, "Get Out of the Office and Circulate Among the Troops" (p. 13). This speaks so true for school administrators. Principals cannot spend all of their time in offices. They must be out in the classrooms and halls and know what is happening first hand. How else can they know what state their school is in?**

**Administrators need to dedicate a lot of time working with students and trying to understand their needs. As a principal, it is their role to make sure they are meeting the needs of all the students. As principals monitor student progress, they also can be evaluating the instructional program. They look for areas that students seem to be struggling with. Administrators then try to provide teachers with resources or development in that area. For**

example, if students were low on the map skills area of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS), administrators may send teachers to a workshop that their local Area Education Agency (AEA) was offering on building map skills. Or, they may purchase supplemental materials that the teachers could use with their students in that area. Hopefully, an improvement in map skills will be seen on the ITBS over the next several years. But even if improvement is not seen at least the school tried to meet students' needs. If improvement is not seen the school will need to try a different approach.

As educators in Iowa, principals must continue to improve student achievement. This must be done each year to be in compliance with House File 2272. As stated by the Iowa Department of Education in the Technical Assistance for Comprehensive School Improvement (1999):

Comprehensive school improvement is a dynamic process aimed at advancing students learning. Within this process, comprehensive means all-encompassing, touching all aspects of teaching and learning-and improvement is measured by progress toward learning goals.



**If continuous improvement in student learning is to occur, there must also be continuous improvement in the education system. Schools and school districts that are successful in effecting positive change over time do so by creating integrated organizations with shared visions and shared goals, whose participants continually collect, analyze, and apply relevant information for better decision making. The result of this process is the transformation of schools to learning communities comprised of all school employees and students as well as other stake holder groups.**

**The school improvement process is never finished. As society changes, so do beliefs about what constitutes a productive and contributing citizen, the expectations communities have of their schools, and the needs students bring to their educational experiences.(p. 8)**

**Educators in Iowa must always have increasing student achievement as a top priority. As accountability becomes even greater this will only increase the responsibility placed on school administrators.**

### **Leadership**

**As the educational leader, administrators facilitate committees in charge of reviewing and evaluating curriculum in the school. Each year this committee**

reviews, evaluates and recommends to the whole faculty on one subject area. For example; this coming school year the committee may be working on the science curriculum. The first step will be looking at your school's standards and benchmarks for science. The committee will then evaluate the current science program and how well it meets those standards and benchmarks. If the current program does a fairly good job of meeting the benchmarks, purchasing supplemental materials to help in those areas that fail to meet the standards and benchmarks can be the solution. If the current program doesn't come close to meeting the benchmarks, purchasing an entire new science program will need to be discussed. A committee will evaluate these new programs to determine which ones will do the best job. This committee cannot go in with the idea of purchasing a new program but with the idea of what will be best for the students to meet the standards and benchmarks. Teachers know that a new program is expensive and time consuming for them to get acquainted with.

**Principals must continually look for new services for their school. Schools have expanded their Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) programs to not only the fifth grade but also shortened programs at the third grade and kindergarten level. Hopefully, by educating students at different levels and by different methods, DARE can prevent more students from ever beginning a life in drugs, alcohol or tobacco.**

**Other local programs are the Alcohol and Substance Abuse Program (ASAP) to work with third through sixth grade students on handling stress. With the number of teen suicides recently the principal needs to start working with children on dealing with stress appropriately before it is too late. Also by helping kids deal with stress another tragic shooting can possibly be prevented. Many other services may be available in the community and need to be sought out and used in the schools.**

**Area Education Agency (AEA) services are in most buildings. The principal should have the services of a school psychologist, speech and language pathologist, social worker as well as their staff available for staff**

**development. Principals must continually look for other ways to use the AEA personnel. If principals do not take an active role in pushing for these services in their schools they will not be there.**

**“Once Jesus began his work in earnest, he wasted no time in forming a team” (Jones, 1995, p.90). Just as Jesus used the help of a team in his work, principals must develop teams or committees to help them. Leaders must empower their staff. They must give the staff the ability to make decisions either personally or in committees. Principals must decide before the committee meets what their purpose is. If the committee has decision making ability, the principal must be willing to accept whatever the decision is. If they are advisory the principal must be willing to listen to what they have to say. Principals cannot put together committees and then take away the authority given to them by overriding their decision. Administrators lose trust and respect by doing that.**

**In the leadership role do all that is possible to show the staff that they are appreciated. Leave notes of encouragement after visiting classrooms. Try to**

**acknowledge them whenever possible in weekly bulletins. Remembering and acknowledging birthdays can have a positive effect on morale.**

**The most important thing principals have to learn is to build trust and respect before trying to bring about change. The first year on the job is a good time to observe how every thing works. It usually takes a long time to build the trust and respect of the staff and use that year to assess how the building operates. Principals can't make effective change if they don't know how the building operates and they lose trust and respect when unnecessary changes are made.**

### **Manager**

**As managers try to delegate as much as possible. Items such as scheduling specials, lunch times, bus schedules and duty schedules can be delegated to other staff members if the principal chooses. It goes along with delegating and empowering staff.**

**Administrators are required by the Archdiocese to evaluate the staff at least once a year. The evaluation is**

also to include a teacher portfolio. The Catholic Educator Handbook (1996) lists the teacher competencies necessary to teach in a Catholic School. Each teacher receives a copy of the handbook when they are hired. This is a very important aspect for evaluation. Principals cannot know if every teacher is meeting every competency. But if every teacher is required to provide a portfolio with examples of how they meet each competency you can feel more comfortable that it is being done. It is also an opportunity for the teacher to show off what they are doing.

As principal, part of the day is going to be spent dealing with student discipline issues. Students whose teachers cannot or choose not to deal with them any longer will be sent to the office. This is the best known aspect of the principalship. The principal must decide what if any consequences will be given to the student, but also must communicate that decision to the teacher. If the latter is not done many times the teacher will feel nothing happened.

**Dealing with budgets takes up a great deal of the principal's time during the late winter and early spring months. Meeting with each of the different departments to figure out what cost increases are going to be necessary for the following year. The extra meetings with school boards and committees trying to set the budget takes up a lot of family time.**

**Paper work has to be one of the fastest growing parts of the principalship. Everything that the school is involved in seems to have its own paper trail. The reports for the state departments get larger and larger each year. Applying for grants to help supplement revenue is wonderful if you have the time to fill out the paper work. It seems that this part of the job bogs the principal down so much. The principal wants to get out into the classroom but this paper work does not wait. There are deadlines to be made.**

### **Inner self**

**Realize that there is more to life than work.  
Balancing work with family is a top priority. Families need**

to come before careers. Understand that no one can get everything done in one day. Most things will wait until the next day. Family time and personal time is important if you want to keep from burning out and enjoy those who are most important in life.

As Simon Potter told Og in The Greatest Miracle in the

World:

You are one of a kind. Rarest of the rare. A precious treasure, possessed of qualities in mind and speech and movement and appearance and action as no other who has ever lived, lives, or shall live. Why have you valued yourself in pennies when you are worth a king's ransom? (Mandino, 1975, p.98)

Thinking about yourself in this way how can you not take care of your own needs and your families.

Principals must also act ethically and honestly in all that they do. This is important in all aspects of life as principal. If students see or hear that the principal was unethical or dishonest how can they hold the students accountable.



**All of these roles are important for principals.**

**Administrators have an idealistic desire to be a principal who is a leader first, an educator second and a manager third. From talking to working principals the managerial part of the job requires the most time. Hopefully, there can be time to be a leader and an educator also. In**

**Leadership Styles, Lewis (1993) states:**

**Some researchers narrowly define leadership as mostly visionary and charismatic, even going so far as to say well-functioning schools may not need leaders as much as they need managers. Others contend that leadership is essential, especially regarding instruction. (p. 16)**

**The principal and his/her role has been a point of discussion for years in education. As much as principals want to be leaders and educators, the manager role continues to take front stage.**

**The principalship is a very complex position with many complex problems. Always remember that principals are human. Mistakes will be made. Learn and grow from those mistakes. Principals cannot be ready for all situations or problems that arise. Take each situation when it arises and using your education and common sense**

**make a decision that is best for the students. If we as school administrators don't look out for the best interest of the students, who will?**

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