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A preferred vision for leading schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

In order to be a strong leader, one must be able to implement change effectively, link curriculum to instruction, and be called to service. These three components are vital in order to be an effective administrator. Through out my paper, I have reflected on the ways I feel I can most effectively implement each criterion, and create life long learners in my teachers and students.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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and Postsecondary Education
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of the Requirements for the Degree

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by

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In order to be a strong leader, one must be able to implement change effectively, link curriculum to instruction, and be called to service. These three components are vital in order to be an effective administrator. Through out my paper, I have reflected on the ways I feel I can most effectively implement each criterion, and create life long learners in my teachers and students.

Beliefs about Leadership and Education

I developed an interest in education at a very young age. I recall being in kindergarten when my older sister was an education major at The University of Northern Iowa and would visit my kindergarten classroom during her breaks from college. I started to develop an interest in all the projects I saw her completing for her courses for college and wanted to always help create those projects.

I recall how positive of an experience kindergarten was for me and how much I admired my teacher. I wish I could say that first grade was just as wonderful for me; however, I dreaded going to school everyday and was afraid of my teacher. I can still recall how relieved I was when the last day of first grade finally came.

I believe that my desire to become a teacher would have started to really formulate in second grade. I was not anticipating going to school that year after such an unpleasant experience the year before. However, I was lucky enough to have an absolutely amazing teacher who changed my whole perspective on school. She proved to me that school can be a fun and safe place. She made

learning so much fun. Unlike first grade, I actually enjoyed going to school and found myself looking forward to attending school each day. I feel my second grade teacher helped me in determining what I wanted to do when I grew up. I had decided that no child should ever hate going to school and should enjoy school the way I did and I felt the only way I could ever make that possible was by entering the field of education. There I was in second grade and had already determined what I wanted to be when I was an adult. Strangely enough, I never gave up on that dream and continued to pursue that dream all through high school and college. I have never regretted choosing this career path and have enjoyed every opportunity I have had in the field of education.

Considering I have taught almost every grade from preschool through sixth grade and have had the opportunity to be an administrator for a short time, I have developed various beliefs about education. One of my beliefs is that all children can learn. I honestly believe that all children have the ability to learn, it is just that not all children learn in the same way and at the same speed. I also believe that children only perform as well as you expect them.

In my experience with teaching, I have always had somewhat high expectations for my students. However, I never expected more from them than what I knew they could produce. Granted, sometimes they were not confident enough in themselves to achieve what I knew they were capable of. However,

with some guidance and encouragement from me, successes took place at levels some students did not think they were ever capable of achieving.

As an administrator, I have some beliefs about the future of American education. I believe that as educators it is our duty to teach the core classes such as reading, writing, math, etc. I also believe that if we have teachers who are truly compassionate about their role as an educator they will teach a great deal of social justice by the way they manage their classroom and treat their students. The role of teachers and schools is further complicated by additional expectations from society. Not only is the primary responsibility of educators to educate society's children, but we are expected to fulfill the role of the parent as well. Sometimes, I feel that the role of educators within their field is getting too broad and they are being asked to do too much. I believe that society is trying to hold schools and teachers accountable for the way the children of our society are being raised. I do not feel that responsibility should fall under the school, but rather the responsibility of the parents. I feel that I have developed this belief over the last two years as I have worked as an administrator. I have had to deal with parents and often have to hear about what we should be doing.

The driving force that has pushed me into the educational leadership program is the belief that all children can learn. I am passionate about education and want to see children receive the best education they possibly can. One way I can help make that happen is as an administrator. I enjoy roles where I can be a

leader and am the driving force behind small and large successes. Granted, being a principal is not always a “bowl of cherries.” Many times I had to deal with conflict and difficult decisions, such as upset parents, uncooperative teachers, students with discipline problems, meeting state standards, and how the school can best serve the needs of all the students. However, I believe all of these situations have helped me become a better leader and have given me the opportunity to show what type of leader I can be.

Leadership is a quality that I feel all successful administrators must possess. Leadership is critical in an educational setting, because one has to provide leadership to so many individuals. For example, I have to be a leader for my staff, students, and for the members of the Board of Education. Depending on who an administrator is providing leadership for, the leader may take on different leadership roles. For my students I need to provide leadership by being a positive role model. For my staff I need to provide leadership in helping guide them in the direction our school needs to go. I also need to provide them with leadership to help them know what they are doing well and the areas they need to improve. Once those points are established, I then need to provide the support and resources they need to be successful.

Being a leader is not always easy and we are going to make mistakes. I feel that as a leader, if we make a mistake, it is okay as long as you acknowledge your mistake and use it as a learning experience and a way to grow as a leader.

A Reflective Practitioner

In order to become an effective leader of learning, one must be able to possess the skill of self reflection. “How effective you are as a leader is determined to a great extent by how aware you are of what lies within you” (Patti and Tobin, 2003, p. 13). I believe that through the use of self reflection, I will become more self aware, develop a strong set of core values and beliefs, and therefore, will become a stronger educational leader.

Patti and Tobin (2003) state “a good place to start developing one’s leadership might begin with self-awareness” (p. 13). Self awareness consists of emotional awareness, accurate self assessment, and self confidence. Self awareness also includes an individual’s understanding of their emotions and what may trigger particular emotions; it also includes what an individual’s core values and beliefs may be, as well as one’s own abilities.

Research on being a reflective practitioner has proven to be successful and has helped individuals become more effective leaders, and I can only hope that it will help me become the leader that a school will desire. I feel that I could benefit greatly from doing more reflection. I am an individual that is still trying to develop my set of core values and beliefs. I find that they continue to change quite frequently. Whitaker (2003) states that, “Effective principals have a strong core of beliefs-the principles that guide their decisions, touchstones that help them distinguish right from wrong, goals that define their vision for the school” (p. 89).

I believe that if I started doing daily reflections and focused on the decisions I make on a daily basis, I would be able to better see what some of my core values and beliefs are that drive my decision making.

I am also a person who needs to identify my emotions and why I am feeling the way I am or what has caused me to react the way I did. I often find myself in situations where it can be very difficult to keep emotions under control. I believe that if I would reflect prior to dealing with situations that I know may create conflict, it would help me to identify my emotions previous to the situation. I also feel that if I took time to reflect, even if it is very briefly, following conflict or tough decision making situations that it would help me release some of my frustration and I would not carry that emotion with me the rest of the day.

As a principal, I feel that through self reflection, I will be able to develop a very strong set of core values and beliefs. These core values and beliefs are what will drive my daily decision making and help me make decisions in the best interest of the students and my school. I also think that self reflection as an administrator will help guide me towards my school's vision and goals. As an administrator, I would have to do a lot of reflecting in regards to the school and where I would like to see the school move in the future. I would also have to reflect on myself as an administrator and think about my confidence level in regards to accomplishing these tasks to make sure I took the most effective course of action in order to achieve success.

By taking time to self reflect, I will learn what some of my weaknesses may be in regards to being an administrator. I feel that it is okay to admit I have areas that I may not be an expert and I may need to search out an expert to help or guide me. I feel that by doing the self reflection and admitting that I am weak in an area makes me a better leader. If I am always trying to convince the community stakeholders that I am an expert in all areas, and they consistently watch me make mistakes, they will begin to lose their trust in me as an effective leader of their school.

It is vital for me to have a trusting and honest working relationship with the stakeholders of my school. If I do not have this type of relationship, it makes it very difficult for me to carry out and implement the Iowa Standards of School Leaders (ISSL). As an administrator, it is my duty to reflect on where my school is in regards to each of these standards and determine how my school is going to improve in each of the six standards. One of my responsibilities as an educational leader is to create a school that is better, more nurturing, and more successful. The ISSL Standards provide school leaders with the common framework for attaining excellence (Wilmore, 2002, p. 14). As Wilmore (2002) states, "Everyone of us, each and every day, should be planning strategies and techniques to help facilitate our schools in becoming the nurturing, sustaining places described in these standards" (p. 15).

In order for me to develop the appropriate planning strategies to help facilitate my school, it will require self reflection as an educational leader. By being a reflective practitioner, not only do I reflect on myself, but also the interaction I have others. Self reflection is a skill that I must master in order to develop a trusting relationship with my school community as well as help my school respond to the changes that are taking place in our society.

Educational Change

Unfortunately, I believe that a lot of the changes that are taking place in the educational setting are not necessarily self initiated by the administrator or developed through creative ideas through the board of education. Over the last several decades many schools have not had the opportunity to plan and implement their own change initiatives. Changes in schools have been influenced by many external forces. Some external forces that are driving change in school are high-stakes testing and No Child Left Behind. “Rather than initiating change, organizations have to respond to their environment and implement changes that were determined by outsiders” (Hall and Hord, 2006, p. 1).

I feel that this research applies to me as a leader, because “as long as we have schools that need to be improved or improvements that need to be sustained, the role of the principal will be important” (Lambert, 2003, p. 43). It will be up to me to implement change that will be for the betterment of my school community, even though the change may not always be self initiated. As a leader, it is my

responsibility to make sure that my school is operating effectively, efficiently, and showing academic growth on a yearly basis. As Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) state “leadership is considered vital to the successful functioning of many aspects of a school” (p. 5). However, the change process involves the entire staff of a school setting and is not the sole responsibility of the administrator. It is important for the administrator to get the staff “on board” if the implemented change is to be successful.

I will incorporate this research into my practice, by keeping in mind that change will be met with some resistance. Many people do not like and have a great sense of fear when it comes to change, and would rather continue doing things the way they have always been done. People often resist because “there is uncertainty about what will be expected and self-doubts about one’s ability to succeed with the new way” (Hall and Hord, 2006, p.151). To help reduce resistance and to allow staff members to ease into the change process it is important to communicate with them what is coming ahead of time. This gives them time to think about the change before the implementation process will actually begin. It is also important to give them small pieces of information over a period of time rather than to just make one announcement and overload them with information.

Throughout this whole process we need to make sure that we are addressing our staffs' concerns, "feelings and perceptions about the innovation and the change process" (Hall and Hord, 2006, p. 134). As principal, I will constantly be monitoring the change process through regular and ongoing assessment with all the participants involved. Hall and Hord (2006) suggest this monitoring be done through the use of, "one –legged interviews, open concerns statement, and stage of concern questionnaire" (p. 144). These techniques will allow me to monitor where my staff is with the change process and who is progressing forward and who still needs some guidance in regards to moving forward with the change process.

As an administrator it is vital for me to be able to implement change even though the change process can take years. It clearly states in the ISSL Standards that our main responsibility as an administrator is to promote the success of all students. I do not feel that I am promoting success of all students if I would let a school continue to operate the same way as they have in years past. As an administrator, I must stay current with research, teaching practices, and the demands of our society and culture.

Improvement for Learning

What our society and culture demands of our students is always changing, therefore, the way our students learn and the expectations we have of our students is always changing as well. As a school, we need to be able to meet the demands

of society. I believe that if schools are not able to produce individuals that are able to contribute to society in a positive way, society has the belief that our school systems are failing. Therefore, as an administrator it is my responsibility to facilitate and implement changes so standards are meant and student growth is being made on a yearly basis.

As an educational leader, it is no new discovery that all learners, adults and students, learn material in many different ways. There is no one magical way to teach new material so that everybody in the learning environment will learn it to the same extent. I have always been taught to use many different teaching strategies in my classroom in order to meet the different learning styles that exist within one classroom. As an administrator, I know this also holds true for promoting adult learning within a school community. Not all staff members will perceive the same information in the same way when attending staff meetings and inservices. As a facilitator of professional learning “no matter how meaningful the initial learning, it is what happens after that matters most. It is the job-embedded practice, the follow-up and support that most often lead to sustained improvement in professional practice for the majority of educators” (Tate, 2004, p.xiii).

Tate has developed twenty strategies that take advantage of the way a person’s brain works best; this pertains to young people as well as adults. “These strategies support both learning style theory and brain research, they enable all

teachers to plan and deliver powerful, memorable presentations' (Tate, 2004, p. xiii). The strategies and techniques we would like to see teachers using in their classrooms to instruct their students are seldom used during presentations or workshops with our teachers. For this reason, Tate (2004) states, "many teachers abhor staff development workshops and courses" (p. xiii).

This research applies to me as a leader, because it stresses how important it is for me to implement with my staff the techniques I want them to use in their classroom to facilitate student learning. The best way for me to incorporate these practices would be to use them with my staff during workshops and inservice opportunities. This provides them with first hand experience of how various teaching techniques can be used in the classroom. By verbally explaining various teaching techniques, I am providing my staff with how the techniques work and the advantages of those particular teaching methods. I can then follow up by actually demonstrating specific teaching strategies and get the staff involved. Therefore, I am attempting to reach the different ways my staff learns, but also hopefully providing a meaningful delivery in such a way that they will remember the material and try to implement the teaching techniques in their own classroom in order to help benefit the students and their various learning styles.

By promoting learning in all students by trying to reach their different learning styles, one can only hope for increased student achievement. Just as students learn differently, not all students benefit from the same form of

assessment. “A useful function of classroom assessment, therefore, is to determine whether students are moving satisfactorily toward the instructional outcomes the teacher is seeking to promote” (Popham, 2005, p. 9). However, students need to be given the opportunity to demonstrate their success in a way that is beneficial to them. Not all students are successful at paper and pencil testing and therefore, should be allowed to use an alternative form of measurement to demonstrate to the teacher what they have learned. Therefore, not only do various teaching strategies need to be used in the classroom, but as an administrator, it also needs to be stressed that various forms of testing and measurement, other than paper and pencil, need to be used with students to measure their academic growth.

As an administrator and teacher we need to remember the focus of why we should be using assessment tools and the purpose they serve. As Stiggins (2004) stresses in his DVD, “the purpose of assessment is for student learning.” We need to use assessment tools as a process to promote and improve student learning. We need to inform students about their progress towards meeting the standards and show them how they are improving in their learning. That is why it is so important to use various teaching styles and assessment tools with our students.

It is my responsibility as a school administrator to provide an instructional program that is conducive to student learning and staff professional development. Therefore, I need to use various strategies and techniques with my staff in order to

help them successfully implement them in their classroom to promote student learning. I need to provide follow up and assistance to my teachers to ensure that the students in my school setting are receiving a quality education. Through all this, the overall goal is to promote a learning environment where all people can learn and therefore, a growth in academic achievement will take place.

Leader of Service

The administrator's role is constantly changing in regards to what is often expected of them. Most people view an administrator as someone who walks into the school in the morning and just takes care of the day to day operations. Many people forget about the entire decision making process that takes place on a daily basis and how the staff is often seeking guidance and leadership from their administrator. It is also becoming the responsibility of the administrator to focus on community education and community development as well. Therefore, the role of administrator is changing to a more collaborative one in regards to schools and community working together as a team. There is more of a focus on being a servant leader. The servant leader is one who serves others as a first priority and emphasizes increased service to others, a sense of community, a holistic approach to work, and shared decision making (Taylor, 1997).

As a leader of service we are called to do many things. The most important thing to remember as a servant leader is the fact that we are here to lead and to set a strong example that others will want to follow.

Taylor (1997) defines leaders of service as:

Those who make a deep commitment to listen intently to others; endeavor to understand and empathize with others; are generally aware and self-aware; recognize they have chance to help those they are in contact with; seek to convince rather than coerce others; stretch their vision to embrace broad-based conceptual thinking; have foresight; have a role in holding their institution in thrust for the greater good of society; are deeply committed to the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of every individual within the organization; and to seek to identify a way for building community within the organization. (p. 5-7).

These are high expectations and can be challenging for anyone called to be a leader of service.

Bogue (1997) cites four characteristics of effective servant leaders. The first characteristic is the ability to be compassionate to all the people who comprise the school family. As an effective leader, we need to understand that a school functions because of the dedication of the teachers, staff, and parents and not just because of a great leader. It is important to remember that we need those people just as much as they need a strong leader. A strong dedicated staff and an influential leader go hand in hand in order to ensure that the school functions smoothly on a regular basis.

The second characteristic that Bogue (1997) talks about is the ability and willingness to absorb the hostility of the ill-formed and ill-mannered. One of the hardest things to do as an administrator is to act professionally and tactfully when under the scrutinizing eye of the public. Administrators receive a lot of criticism from the public about the decisions they make. It is important to be able to handle this criticism and to do so with professionalism and in an ethical manner at all times. By acting in such a way can be a reflection of what kind of leader you are and how you handle situations under pressure. Sometimes the strength of a good leader lies in the ability to “take it” without thoughts of malice or vengeance.

The third characteristic “is the willingness to have one’s daily routine interrupted and to understand that dealing with interruptions is an important element of an administrator’s job description” (Bogue, 1997). To be a true effective leader, we must get out of the four walls of our office and see what is taking place in our school on a daily basis. That means visiting all the classrooms, roaming the hallways, and checking in on maintenance and kitchen staff. When an administrator takes the time to do these things, they get a better feel about the people around them and are able to determine who may need a lending hand.

The fourth characteristic is “a sensitive use of authority” (Bogue, 1997).

In order to promote favorable responses from your staff, you must use your authority to serve rather than to be served. It is important not to use your role as a leader as a way to manipulate or control people, but rather as a means to lead by example.

As a principal, I believe there are many ways I will be able to incorporate my role as servant leader. A servant leader is committed to the growth of people (Stueber, 2000). As a principal, I will commit to the personal and professional growth of each individual staff member. I will do this by trying to find funding for personal and professional development. My goal will be to provide staff development activities that will build trust and self-esteem.

A servant leader has an ability to conceptualize and to communicate concepts (Stueber, 2000). I will have identified my core values and will communicate those to staff, parents, and community members. When faced with a difficult situation, I will think about how my decision will affect the big picture and not just the day to day realities.

Two other important characteristics of servant leaders that Stueber (2000) shares are the highly developed powers of persuasion and the ability to listen receptively to what others have to say. I want to be able to motivate others to be willing to implement change. The ability to be able to persuade rather than coerce is very important when it comes to service. In order to accomplish this, I will

have to develop widespread agreement among the school's stakeholders on goals, roles, and the direction in which the school needs to move. However, I will also need to be an active listener. When faced with a problem, my first response should be to listen before acting. It is important to hear other people's point of view, before making a decision in the best interest of the children and the school.

As a servant leader, I must also show awareness and perception (Stueber, 2000). I will try to have an accurate perception of the current strengths and weaknesses of the school. I will be aware of the most effective education practices and how those practices will affect the learning of the students and the teaching techniques of my teachers. Therefore, I will make an effort to build an atmosphere of cooperation and teamwork. I want teachers, parents, students, and community members to work with me and be actively involved in the school.

Another important role as a servant leader is to empower my teachers to lead. This task is not easily done, because it is more difficult to build leadership capacity among colleagues than it is to tell them what to do. However, it is important for teachers to learn how to enhance their leadership skills and informal authority. This will involve creating collegial relationships instead of dependency relationships; it involves helping teachers realize that school leadership is a natural part of their role as educators; it involves sharing information and vision; it involves listening; it involves helping the group produce results that are

consistent with the school's mission, and it involves giving teachers a chance to grow in their confidence in leadership capacities (Kuck, 1999).

I believe that by using many of the descriptors of a servant leader, I am meeting many of the ISSL Standards. I will be encouraging success of my students through collaboration with family and community members while mobilizing community resources. A large component of servant leadership is acting with fairness and integrity, and in an ethical manner. I believe that by treating students with decency and promoting their self confidence and self esteem, my students will have success.

In a society that is always changing and children are faced with more difficult choices on a daily basis, they are often confused and do not know who they can trust or believe. As an administrator, I would like to ensure that all young people are supported in and out of school in their learning. Saskin and Huddle (1988) suggest that through conducive learning, establishing high expectations for teachers and students, setting school level goals, supervising curriculum and teaching, communicating effectively inside the school, and building parent and community rapport are effective ways to make this happen. If the expectations of the teachers and students are clearly outlined and communicated effectively to the appropriate parties involved, I would like to think that everyone will take an active role in supporting young people through the learning process. Working with your community is very important in your

role as administrator. Many communities have programs that students can participate in before or after school to help them stay focused on their schoolwork and not be pressured into negative activities by their peers. Some programs may involve athletics, where as others may focus on academics such as tutoring or homework help. Some places to inquire about such programs would be your local Girls or Boys Clubs, area churches, libraries, and even many high schools offer programs for younger students.

Conclusion

The role of administrator is forever changing and is becoming more demanding all the time. If an individual is entering into the administration field just to have authority over people or for that feeling of being in charge, they are doing it for all the wrong reasons. Administration is not a job about power and being the “man on top.” It is very much a collaborative effort with everyone involved in a school environment from staff, to parents, and community members. Kuck (1997) states, “There is little use for egotistical administrators. An effective leader quietly, consistently, lovingly works long hours behind the scene to make the school the best it can be” (p. 45). His statement is so true. Just like teaching, many thankless hours go into the job of being an administrator. There is so much that is done behind the scenes that many people, including your own staff, are unaware of.

I am entering into the field of administration because I want to take an active role in helping students learn. I believe that I can be effective in leading teachers to be the best they can be and guide them in providing the best learning environment possible for their students.

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