

2004

A preferred vision for leading the secondary school : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading the secondary school : a reflective essay

Abstract

Why do I want to be a principal? When I started the UNI Educational Leadership program, I had no idea. I do now. I want every child to feel safe in my school. I want them to know they can come to school and learn without having to worry about being picked on. I want each student to be challenged and stimulated to learn with great teachers. I want the students to be healthy. I want to make a significant change in the lives of students. Teachers are not the only professionals who impact student's lives. Administrators can make an equal or even greater impact by providing a safe loving environment in which all students can learn and high expectations are the norm.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

And Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

By

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May 2004

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This Research Paper by: Cory Williams

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

A Reflective Essay

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

5/28/04

Date Approved

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5-28-04

Date Approved

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Second Reader of Research Paper

6-1-04

Date Received

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Why do I want to be a principal? When I started the UNI Educational Leadership program, I had no idea. I do now. I want every child to feel safe in my school. I want them to know they can come to school and learn without having to worry about being picked on. I want each student to be challenged and stimulated to learn with great teachers. I want the students to be healthy. I want to make a significant change in the lives of students. Teachers are not the only professionals who impact student's lives. Administrators can make an equal or even greater impact by providing a safe loving environment in which all students can learn and high expectations are the norm.

Being principal means acting in a professional manner at all times. No matter what your responsibility is in the building, you are a role model for children. Adults are under the microscope when students are around. The perception that others have of you is important. Equally important is the perception your adult peers have of you. One important thing I have learned is how people perceive you is their reality. In class, we completed a Life Styles Inventory (LSI). I evaluated myself and then gave copies of the LSI to five people that know me well. The assignment was designed to assess your personality, how you see yourself, and how others see you. The inventory I completed about myself was more negative than the ones my peers completed. I can say that I was pleasantly surprised at how my peers perceived me. It verified my decision about going into education. I became a teacher because I love to help

people learn. My ideal school would be filled with educators who feel the same way. The following sections map out my beliefs about leadership and education.

What I believe about Leadership and Education

When I first started teaching, I considered it a job and nothing more. Being young and fresh out of college I had the attitude that the world owed me something. At the time, I did not look at education as a career or a calling. I knew I wanted to help people, but I did not feel very passionate about teaching as a calling. I went through a stage of being unsure of myself and intimidated by the students. I think it takes a few years to really become comfortable in your own skin and realize how much of an impact you have on students. Now my attitude has changed considerably. I know how important good teachers are for the success of students and how important good administrators are for the success of teachers.

Every day I see students who have no meaningful adult contact in their lives. These children see school as a chance to get away from the very home lives that should be nurturing them. I love working with at risk students as much as students from loving, nurturing and supportive environments. All of the students I teach make me glad I decided to go into education. They make me thankful for what I have and for the things I can provide my own son. I am not naïve enough to think I can change the world, but I do know I can make a difference by helping students learn and by making them feel special. Students need to experience

success on a daily basis no matter how small, whether it is doing well on a test or just making it through the day without getting into trouble.

The role of administrator is important in making a difference in students' everyday lives. The principal has a great responsibility in both the student's lives and the teacher's lives. Even though the building principal may not see the students as much as the classroom teacher, he or she must make the students feel like they can depend on the principal to make their educational experience a rewarding one. Education is the foundation for life. The experience you gain in high school and college shapes you as an adult. The most rewarding times in my life were playing sports with my friends and being at school. At one time I thought teaching and coaching would be fun to do for a living because I really wanted to be like my volleyball coach. She was a strong influence on me, and I also wanted to have a strong positive influence on teenagers as a teacher and high school principal.

I entered the UNI Masters program with the sole intent of getting my degree. I now realize I want to make a difference as a high school principal for high school students. I have to admit that I am a little afraid; afraid of failing, afraid of not being a good principal, afraid that someday the students in my building will not be equipped with the skills necessary for success after graduation. Johnson (1998) asks, "What would you do if you were not afraid"? (p.48). The question made me think. I have done many things in my life that

appeared frightening at the time. Once you have completed a task that in the beginning seemed too challenging, you are more confident when a new challenge comes along. Deciding to go back to school was no different. I now know I made the correct choice and I am looking forward to graduation. I have talked extensively with my mentor about the responsibilities of an administrator. Someday I want to pursue a principalship; I know I will like the challenge. In education, you never know what each day will bring. The students make each moment different and exciting. A challenging day makes the hours go by fast.

When I do become a principal, I want to be an educational leader who can lead by example. I feel that leadership is more than telling someone what to do. I have seen principals do just that. Another negative habit I have seen in principals is arriving just before the first bell rings. The message sent is loud and clear; it is not important for me to arrive early and prepare for the day. I want the faculty to look up to me and respect what I do. In other words, I will go the extra mile because I understand how important being a role model is. I have coached in the Davenport district for eight years. My athletes notice everything I do. I know that my experiences as a coach will help me as an administrator. After all, being a principal is like being a coach. I will transfer my coaching skills into my career as a principal. A very important thing I learned is to be fair and consistent when dealing with students, staff and parents. If that does not work, use common sense. I do not know how many times my mentor has said that to me.

I know the next phase in my life will be challenging. But, most importantly I know I will continue to grow. I feel strongly about wanting to connect with children. Helping children learn and having a personal connection with them makes education a very rewarding career. I have enjoyed my experience so far, and I know the next phase of my life as a high school principal will be just as rewarding. The six Iowa standards for School Leaders (ISSL) are identified as being critical for exemplary educational leadership. I believe principals must utilize critical skills related to the ISSL standards. The four critical skills I consider essential for leadership are Effective Instructional leadership, Effective Ethical leadership, Effective Collaborative leadership, and finally Effective Organizational and Visionary leadership. These are the essential skills I feel are the most important for me to create my ideal high school.

Effective Instructional Leadership

What does it take to become a great administrator? I think being a great administrator means supporting your teachers, developing relationships with students, and understanding how to make your building run smoothly. A good instructional leader is also aware of how funds are allocated in his or her building. As a principal, you cannot know how funds are spent if you are not in tune with the daily operations of your building. I think having a professional but caring relationship with teachers and students is another way for the principal to be kept aware of the daily happenings within his or her school.

A principal must take instructional leadership seriously, because it is the heart and soul of good administration. The building principal is crucial for the climate and culture of the school. An administrator must model high expectations at all times. By modeling certain behaviors, the principal can really set the tone for how that building is run. You immediately get an impression of how the facility is operated when entering a school building. A good principal is the facilitator of learning. Climate and culture determine how the public as well as teachers, staff and students perceive a school. If the principal is a weak instructional leader, the smallest of things can be overlooked. And sometimes the small things are the most important.

A principal who understands the importance of co-curricular and extra curricular activities knows from personal experience how beneficial these organizations can be. Benton (2002) states “A good school can become a great school with an active club program” (p.73). Another example of a strong instructional leader is when the administrators come to the school’s sporting events and cheer the students on. This support tells the student body they are important. When a principal congratulates a teacher and the students for winning the District Speech and Debate tournament, that teacher and students feel honored and want to work hard for that principal. The culture becomes one of high expectations for both students and teachers.

Ubben, Hughes, and Norris (2001) state,

The cultural force of leadership bonds students, parents, and teachers together as true believers in the school. It takes on almost a religious fervor and a special sense of personal worth and importance grow out of membership in the organization (p.45).

If the students can see that the principal really cares about what happens, they too will have an even greater sense of ownership.

Good instructional leaders must be inclusive, not exclusive. They need to facilitate ongoing professional relationships with everyone involved with the school: teachers, secretaries, custodians and cafeteria workers. Everyone must want their school to be the best it can be. After all, it is their place of work. A good administrator will know how to bring out the best in all workers and make them strive for a structured, but caring building. Teachers need to feel valued and nurtured every day in order to make their students want to perform. Principals can make a great impact on the stakeholders if they establish a sense of intimacy and trust. Doyle and Rice (2002) explain, “Intimacy is the single most effective way to establish your place as an instructional leader” (p.2). This concept is a very important aspect of being an effective leader. When teachers know they will be encouraged and supported by the principal, they will have the courage to be the best educators they can. I know from personal experience that feeling supported makes me want to work hard not just for my principal, but also for the students.

The administrator gives purpose to and creates an atmosphere of learning. As a teacher it gives me a sense of purpose when I see one of my students understand what I am teaching.

Without teachers, the principal would not have anyone to lead. School administration is a people business. Without personal relationships, a positive school climate and atmosphere, learning would not be a successful outcome for students.

A good instructional leader is the symbol of the school. As stated in *Seven Steps to Effective Instructional Leadership*, “The principal should become the symbol of what is important and purposeful about the school” (McEwan, 1998, p.13). If the school’s sports teams are performing poorly, that will reflect on the principal. People will start to ask questions such as, why are they so bad at football. Does the principal even care about athletics? The principal may care very much about athletics, but does not know how to help the program. A good instructional leader will make sure the right coaches are hired and then give them the support they need. If the school does not have the right coaches, the principal will do whatever it takes to change that. This principle is also true for teachers. A truly effective Instructional leader will focus not only on student achievement, but the non-educational aspects of the building.

Critical elements for being an effective leader of learning occur when the principal models positive behavior. I feel being a good instructional leader is an

important way to not only serve as a great principal, but also as a person who makes a significant contribution to society. Effective instructional leadership is creating an atmosphere where students feel safe, the teachers receive effective professional development, data is used to make informed decisions, and the principal demonstrates best practices in teaching and learning.

All standards are important in leading a building, but I feel instructional leadership is the most important. If a principal can master the art of instructional leadership, then chances are that he or she will be effective in the other areas.

Effective Ethical Leadership

Operating from a strong ethical foundation is another critical element in being a good administrator. Some school leaders demonstrate strong ethical backgrounds, while other leaders operate from a very weak ethical background. However, having a good ethical foundation and serving as an ethical role model are essential for the building principal.

Principals are forced to make decisions everyday that require ethical judgment. In my work as an intern, I was asked to decide on a situation that happened in my school. The school sponsored a Variety show which featured some of the most talented students at West High School. The Variety show is a fundraiser for Charity Week. To participate in an extra curricular activity, students must attend four periods of class on the same school day as the activity. One particular student did not come to school until the last period on the day of

the Variety show. My mentor wanted me to deal with this student. I explained the attendance policy and informed him that he would not be participating in the Variety show. He became very upset and had his mother come to the school. The building principal agreed with my decision and enforced the school policy. I remember how uncomfortable I was, but at the same time I felt good knowing I made the right decision. My mentor said that a principal would make more than one ethical decision a day, some easy and some very difficult. I felt confident because I showed character in making a tough and unpopular decision.

Lickona, Schaps, and Lewis, (2003) discuss the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education. Rule number nine states, "Character education requires moral leadership from both staff and students"

(www.character.org/principles/index.cgi). Out of the eleven principles, I felt this one confirmed my beliefs about the importance of being a good role model.

Leadership is required from everyone in a building, including adults and children alike. I can say from my experiences as a coach that strong moral leadership from the upperclassmen on my team makes my job much easier. However, I also do not let my guard down and trust the upperclassmen to assume my ethical leadership role. If I have certain expectations of my team, then I need to exhibit nothing less than those qualities myself. Being a good leader means being a good role model. If the principal shows good ethical character, it easier for the teachers

to do the same. In reality, acting with ethics provides teachers and students the opportunity to act the same way when it may not be the popular thing to do.

In the textbook *Educational Leadership*, the authors, Cunningham and Cordero quote Craig (1994), “Virtue can be developed through arduous practice” and “treating others justly and respectfully over a long period of time may result in a virtuous person” (p.134). If we as educators expect students to act a certain way, we must treat them in that same manner. We have to be mindful as teachers and administrators of how we behave in front of the students. Our actions tell a story about the values we hold dear. Role modeling is both important and effective when you have an administrator who acts with integrity at all times.

Many years ago it was expected that teachers would teach morals and values, but now teachers and principals must be careful because educators are now told it is not their job to teach morals. In today’s society, teachers are told to not impose values on students. I am concerned about that position taken by schools because I can see that morals and values are also not being taught at home. Some of our most troubled students do not see anything wrong with how they act since their parents act the same way. It is so important for educational leaders to act in an ethical manner at all times and to be consistent, fair and equitable in the decisions they make. If teachers know that their boss expects everyone to act in an ethical manner, then their own behavior will carry over to the students. I know that we do not live in a perfect world and unethical

behaviors are modeled daily. But, if an administrator takes on the role of the ethical leader, then positive actions from the students and staff should follow. The role of the ethical leader is squarely placed on the shoulders of the building principal. A principal can not decide to be a good ethical leader overnight. An administrator must start with a strong ethical background then incorporate that prior knowledge into their style of leadership.

Effective Collaboration

Communication is an important skill in any leadership situation especially for collaborative and political leadership. The CEO of Cingular needs to effectively be able to communicate directives to his employees for them to provide good service just as the principals of Davenport West High School need to effectively communicate their expectations to the teachers and students, and to provide a productive learning environment.

When teachers and students feel valued through effective communication, the school climate and productivity will improve. As a teacher, knowing the expectations of the leader and having information shared through effective communication modes makes all the difference. I know a principal and a corporate CEO cannot tell a school staff everything that goes on, but enough information must be provided so all feel valued and informed. Withholding information is one method leaders use to gain control or show power.

Withholding critical information is one technique that eventually fails because the organization becomes stagnant.

Good communication can come in any form. When I walk into the main office before school starts it makes me feel good when my principal says Good Morning. I have coached track for four years and my athletes tell me they like to come into my office during the day and talk. These examples are minor, but I feel they are crucial to the everyday climate of the school. Good communication between all stakeholders and the building leader is a key strategy in helping people feel they are included in the school's success.

Collaboration with community partners is a perfect example of where good communication is critical. At Davenport West High School, we are getting a new YMCA facility that opened on our campus. I was asked by my former principal to serve on the Y committee. I have been on several committees similar to the Y committee where communication is critical for all involved parties. I found myself frustrated by some of the meetings. The WHS Physical Education staff was asked what we needed since basic needs were not being met. West High School needed a new gymnasium for classes and athletics. The only way to obtain the new gymnasium was through a partnership with the YMCA. The staff then would need to meet the YMCA's standards and comply with their rules. The frustration for staff resulted from being told we have to be certified as a YMCA staff member if we wanted to use any of their facilities. Their facilities are our

facilities and we already have our teaching certifications. We did not feel supported by our administration.

Since the beginning of this partnership, the Y has been in control. I fear that West High School will lose flexibility in how we schedule classes and events. The YMCA has gained a brand new facility with a swimming pool. The only thing the Y is responsible for is maintenance. The partnership proposed by the YMCA and the district sounds much better than it actually is. Communication has not been adequate; therefore problems such as confusion over when WHS could use the pool have resulted.

In *Principal Leadership*, Colgan (2001) discussed community partnerships and how important it is to have patience, training, resources, and the ability to listen. Listening, another form of communication, is just as important as any spoken word. Being on the Y committee really opened my eyes. I hope I never lose sight of what is important. Will my decisions be good for the students? I plan to use my experience from this committee when I am an administrator. I will remember to keep all involved parties informed of decisions. I will also remember that all involved parties can contribute no matter what their role in the school is.

In order for any school or business to be successful, the goals need to be clear. Most organizations have a mission statement. Every school in the country has a mission or vision statement. According to the website www.liberty

systems.net/missionandvisionworkshops.html (2003), there is a difference between a vision and a mission statement. “Your vision statement is the dream of what you would like your organization to be. It is a preferred future state. Your mission statement describes what business you are in and why you exist”. Both statements give people a clear understanding of your philosophy. Even though the website is geared toward the business community, it has important information that benefits the educational community. The author discusses the importance of communication and how a strong vision or mission statement can be a vital communication tool. A vision statement is a good beginning for any business, which is also true for education. There is not a school district in the country that does not have a mission or vision statement. Covey (1990) asks, “How do we turn a mission statement into a constitution-the supreme guiding force of an entire organization-instead of a collection of nebulous, meaningless, and cynicism-inducing platitudes?” (p.166). A vision/mission statement is to a school what a blueprint is to an architect; it gives the user a starting point and a direction to go. For education, the project is the children and it is ongoing.

I believe West High should have composed a mission statement with the YMCA before starting this collaboration. The mission statement would be aligned with the building mission statement used daily by educators and students. I do not think the goals were clearly stated and therefore the needs for our students were not met. I want to use this experience as a learning tool for my

future administrative career. I feel strongly that effective communication skills can make a school run very smoothly and ineffective communication skills can lead to frustration, feelings of betrayal, and distrust. I have learned through this experience not to assume anything. If open communication is used in the beginning of any project, then a good working relationship will develop. I know the school district has the best interest of the school in mind when this partnership began. I can not fault the downtown administration for trying to utilize resources effectively and efficiently for student learning. However, I plan as a future administrator, to see the big picture before I make any decisions.

Effective Organizational and Visionary Leadership

A critical part in being a successful administrator is being both a strong organizational and visionary leader. I do not think you can be one without the other. Finding the perfect balance between the two leadership functions is important to the success of a school. Wilmore (2002) states in her book, *Principal Leadership*, "there are administrators with great passion, but can not implement that passion." On the other hand, there are administrators who can "run the Library of Congress but have no passion" (p.53). In order to make your staff believe in your vision, you must be able to show how that vision will work. Teachers are usually a hard sell. If you just talk about your dream without making them feel a part of it, you will be swimming upstream. Finding an administrator with the perfect mix of a visionary's ability to dream big with the organizer's

ability to make the dream tangible is very difficult but necessary. The development of a school vision must be shared. Without that shared development with the staff, students and parents, the vision will not be implemented or be implemented poorly.

Visionary leaders are dreamers who can look outside the box and see beyond the day-to-day decisions that run a school. Organizational leaders take care of the nuts and bolts; they are the data driven policy managers who keep all aspects of the school running smoothly. As an intern this year, I am on a committee to research alternative scheduling for West High School. West High School is the only high school in Davenport still on a traditional instructional schedule. At any given time, West competes with West Des Moines Valley High School for the largest student enrollment in Iowa. The task of finding a creative schedule that will benefit all students is a daunting one. Problems with the current schedule include study halls with no time to study, too much down time in the hallways during passing times, and not enough time in the classroom for instruction or guided assistance with course assignments. The majority of the teachers say they need more class time. The students say study halls are a waste of time because they need help from their teachers who teach their classes.

The study halls have so many students that by the time attendance is taken; only a few minutes remain. One way to solve the problem is to eliminate study halls to provide longer class periods with time in the period for individual

guided study. Another problem with the traditional schedule is having seven periods in the day. With seven periods, there are also seven passing times for the students. West has over 2300 students and having that many students in the hallways at one time can cause problems. An alternative schedule will mean fewer classes and fewer passing times. As a future visionary and organizational leader, finding a creative schedule to benefit all students is an enormous challenge. The dreamer in me can foresee a school day with no study halls, fewer students in the hallways, and more direct instructional time. The organizer has to determine how to utilize time to improve instruction. At the web site www.neasc.org/cpps/Leadership_Organization5.pdf. (NAESC), “a school philosophy means we prepare all students to become lifelong learners” (2004 p. 9). A strong organizational leader does just that.

The visionary leader knows how important a mission statement is. Having a vision means having direction. At the same web site, Leadership and Organization (NEASC), the block schedule was implemented by a sample high school, no name given. It was a huge success. The positive side of an alternative schedule was lowering teacher to student ratio, enabling teachers to get to know their students better by spending more time with them and allowing more hands on time in class. A good visionary and organizational leader understands how more instructional time will benefit the staff and students. Principals need to take

a vision and run with it. A good visionary and organizational leader will trust the teachers and other stakeholders to make the vision work for their school.

The majority of administrators do not have knowledge in all content areas therefore, they need to provide leadership indirectly by designing or creating instructional scheduling that maximizes student learning. If principals put the right people in the right place, everyone will benefit. An alternative schedule would benefit West High greatly. I have seen so much wasted time and resources trying to control traffic in the halls. If teachers had fewer classes to teach and longer periods in which to teach, they could really have a positive affect on the learning of their students. If students had fewer classes to worry about, they could improve their grades. I really feel strongly about moving forward with an alternative schedule. I know it will not be an easy task and will take time to convince the staff.

Leithwood, Aiken, and Jantzi (2001) state “excessive behavioral change in a turbulent environment causes the organization to lose its sense of direction and stimulates such complex feedback that it becomes impossible to learn from experience” (p.31). I agree, change must be planned and structured in order for the staff to feel confident about the change process. If the alternative schedule committee hopes to have the whole school on board, then we need to start with a clear vision of why West would benefit from changing the current schedule. Davenport is going to raise the graduation requirements from the current 20

credits to 26 credits in 2005. Our current schedule will not accommodate the student's needs. A total four block may not be the best fit for West High since all courses do not need to be taught on the block. Each teacher needs to have the opportunity to weigh the pros and cons of an alternative schedule and how it will affect their classroom instruction. My job as the organizational leader is to utilize scientifically based research and current student achievement data to provide evidence the benefits will outweigh any negatives this change may bring. To facilitate the adoption and implementation process of block scheduling at West High School, I will need to do my homework to eliminate the negative feedback that will come from the staff. After all, teachers and administrators are here to educate students in the best way possible. I am excited about the opportunity my new mentor has given me to chair the Alternative Scheduling committee. I believe I have the passion and wisdom to get the staff excited about the possible changes for the future of West High and also the organizational leadership capacity to see those changes implemented.

Conclusion

My ideal school would look similar to this:

- Every student wants to be in school.
- Every teacher feels valued about what they have to contribute.
- All stakeholders know they are a part of an inclusive community.

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