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2002

# 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

Historically, schools have been viewed as an integral part of the problem and solution for our nation's social, political, and economic problems. Americans generally believe that the public schools should address the ever-changing needs of our society. I agree with this belief, even though school systems sometimes are ill-equipped to handle this responsibility. Schools have the best opportunity to reach students to make the needed changes. Schools have the opportunity to pass on to students prevailing ideas and values to help them adjust to present society and be able to transform future society. The ideal school in the 21st Century will continue to change to meet social, political, and economic needs. These changes will require strong leadership in schools.

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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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Lynne E. Wallace

May 2002

This Research Paper by: Lynne E. Wallace

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

in Education.

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School Role

Historically, schools have been viewed as an integral part of the problem and solution for our nation's social, political, and economic problems. Americans generally believe that the public schools should address the ever-changing needs of our society. I agree with this belief, even though school systems sometimes are ill-equipped to handle this responsibility. Schools have the best opportunity to reach students to make the needed changes. Schools have the opportunity to pass on to students prevailing ideas and values to help them adjust to present society and be able to transform future society. The ideal school in the 21st Century will continue to change to meet social, political, and economic needs. These changes will require strong leadership in schools.

There are several roles that I believe are essential to effective leadership. I believe that it is essential for administrators to be educational leaders who are capable of developing and implementing a vision that is shared and supported by the school community. I feel that it is important for administrators to be transformational leaders who are capable of building leadership capacity among staff members. Being an excellent communicator, facilitator, conflict mediator, and reflective practitioner are just a few roles needed to be a transformational leader (Lambert, 1998).

An administrator must also understand his/her role in the social, personal, intellectual, and vocational purposes of the school. These four roles are critical in

preparing students for life. Without administrative support, teachers cannot fully prepare students for a changing and diverse society.

## School Purposes

School purposes can be categorized as social, personal, intellectual, and vocational (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993). Preparing students for the social life of a complex and rapidly changing society is a social purpose. Personal school purposes are those that focus on the development of individual responsibility and creating good citizens. Intellectual purposes focus on academic skills, knowledge, and lifelong learning. Vocational purposes prepare students for the workforce and career changes.

An administrator must be very clear about these purposes and the administrator's role in these purposes. "Organizations with a strong and clear purpose are likely to develop practices that are congruent with the values, beliefs, and assumptions embedded in their sense of purpose" (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 191).

### Social and Personal Purposes

I am a firm believer that it should be a priority of every school to model and teach students how to become responsible, caring citizens that are respectful of cultural diversity. All too often teachers and administrators complain that students lack manners, and are rude and disrespectful to adults and each other. According to Lockwood (1997) the dissolution of the two-parent family, the demise of traditional values, and a general lack of discipline contributes to

society's current behavior. Administrators and educators should not be willing to accept students' rude, disrespectful behavior as today's norm. Character educators seek to change student behavior from rudeness to polite conduct, and hope that youth choose moral behavior no matter what the situation. It is my belief that we cannot leave character development to chance. If students are not demonstrating desired character traits that were traditionally taught at home, then we must teach these traits at school. I feel that respect, honesty, responsibility, self-discipline, compassion, perseverance, and giving are important character traits to teach.

Many schools have implemented character education programs into their curriculum. One program is Success 4 which closely matches my own beliefs. The beliefs of Success 4 are that the education of the total child includes a balanced focus on both academic and social achievement and that school has an important role in developing personal and social competence. It is also the belief of Success 4 that student discipline is best achieved through instruction rather than coercion and there are no social, emotional or behavioral problems that the school, family, and community cannot address together (State of Iowa Department of Education, 1996). I feel that it is important for all teachers, students, administrators, and community members to understand that personal and social achievement are just as important as academic achievement.

The school's role in fostering positive social behavior is its most important role (The Social Side of Schooling, 1999). Strong social relationships among

students plays a crucial role in school life and has a powerful effect on student learning. At schools where students are socially "healthy", students have friendships with their peers and maintain respectful relationships with adults. If the social dynamics in a school are positive, teaching and learning can thrive.

Our mission as principals must be broader than just raising test scores, we must also prepare children for life (Ferrandino, 2001). We can do this by including character education training into our regular curriculum. Teachers can structure learning so that social, emotional, and civic skills are incorporated into the curriculum. Burrett and Rusnak (1993) describe several ways that teachers can make character education a part of every subject, not just another add-on activity. By having children work in groups, they learn collaboration, cooperation, conflict resolution and responsibility. These are important skills that students will need to use their entire life.

An essential personal school purpose is creating caring and responsible citizens. At home and at school, we need to develop students that believe in fairness, compassion, inclusion, and respect for all of mankind. If we do not do this when a child is growing up, these traits will not suddenly appear when the child becomes an adult. The future of our society relies on students acquiring these traits. "Children grow up, and the kinds of habits of mind they bring to both the workplace and the polling place will determine our common fate" (Meier, 1995, p.6). We do not want adults who are unfair, uncompassionate, and have no respect for mankind voting for politicians who share those same traits.

Intellectual Purposes

With brain research, teachers understand more than ever before how students learn and recall information. Brain research has given teachers much needed knowledge on how to improve student learning. Brain research confirms that when learning is linked to real-life experiences, students retain and apply information in meaningful ways (Westwater & Wolfe, 2000). Teachers now recognize that if the brain can retrieve stored information that is similar to new information, it is more likely to make sense out of the new information.

Emotion influences learning. In the past few years, teachers have increased their understanding of the role of emotions in learning.

> People retain more of what they learn when the brain recognizes
> an experience as useful: Positive emotion can facilitate that
> recognition. Conversely, if a student perceives an experience
> as threatening, learning shuts down. Unless educators create an
> emotionally positive and engaging environment, learning is
> compromised" (Caulfield, Kidd, & Kocher, 2000 p. 62).

There is so much more for teachers to learn. An administrator needs to allow time for teachers to continue to learn about brain research and more importantly to incorporate this knowledge into daily lessons. Administrators can arrange for teachers to participate in programs such as Susan Kovalik's Model Teaching Week. In Kovalik's program, teachers learn the theory of brain-compatible practices then apply them in the classroom. There is opportunity for teachers to ask questions and discuss what they have seen with the model

teachers, the students, and their fellow participants. To further their professional development, teachers discuss brain-compatible strategies with consultants (Caulfield et al, 2000).

Today there is a legislative push for increased student achievement to the degree that students' Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores are published in newspapers. Administrators are responsible for helping teachers to increase achievement for all students and to decrease the achievement gap of minority and low-income students. Administrators can do this by making sure that the school has high standards, a challenging curriculum, and good teachers.

Having high standards for all students is crucial. "Clear and public standards for what students should learn at benchmark grade levels are a crucial part of solving the problem" (Haycock, 2001, p. 8). Every teacher, administrator, parent and student should be clear on what knowledge and skills should be mastered at each grade level.

All students must have a challenging curriculum. "To maximize the brain's capacity to grow connections, teachers must provide an environment that is challenging yet nurturing. The brain wants to learn, but when educational experiences are too easy or too hard, learning falters" (Caulfield et al, 2000, p. 62). "Research shows the positive impact of more-rigorous course work even on formerly low-achieving students" (Haycock, 2001 p. 9).

Administrators must see to it that the teachers know their subject content and know how to teach the subjects. Administrators play a critical role in making

sure that this happens. I strongly believe in mentoring programs for beginning and at-risk teachers. With mentoring, beginning teachers have a role model to emulate effective teaching practices. Poor teaching practices can be pointed out and eliminated before they become a bad habit. Mentors can help a teacher in need of assistance or a beginning teacher build a repertoire of effective teaching strategies. I feel that it needs to be a priority for every administrator to identify ineffective teachers and provide the help that they need to improve their teaching. In order to do this, principals must be able to recognize effective teaching strategies and curriculum content. An administrator must be able to recognize active learning and purposeful teaching and know what to do if these elements are not present.

Vocational Purposes

One ultimate goal is to turn students out into a world where they are prepared for the work force and career changes. It is the responsibility of every kindergarten through twelfth grade teacher to incorporate career and employability standards into their curriculum to help achieve this goal. According to Singer, (2000) career awareness should be another important element in every school's curriculum. Career awareness should be introduced at the elementary level through class discussions, speakers, and career fairs. This should be followed in middle school by career exploration that is tailored to each student's aptitude and achievement testing. Actual work experience needs to be available in high school through internships or job shadowing. Career fairs provide elementary students with opportunities to talk with people in a variety of occupations. "Employing

career pathways is a great way to begin to give kids a sense of what opportunities there are for them. Research tells us this is a real career motivator, and helps kids learn more" (Singer, 2000 p. 32).

It has always been the goal of educators to prepare students for the work force, but it has only been since 1994 that there has been such an emphasis on career awareness. The 1994 federal school-to-careers initiative with its goal of making education relevant to the real world of work has stressed increasing the workplace knowledge of all teachers (Ries, 1999). As a result of this initiative, many teacher internships and other work-based learning programs have been offered to educators. These programs offer educators the chance to see what careers are out there, what is new, and how it all relates to what students are learning in the classrooms and labs.

I feel that is important for administrators to encourage teachers to participate in these internships and work-based programs. "It is encouraging when teachers can relate to what they have been teaching to what goes on in the workplace. Some teachers do not realize how much of what they teach is applied every day" (Roberts, 1999, p. 26). An administrator can help teachers to understand the benefits that these types of programs offer. According to Ries (1999), these benefits are:

1. Heightened knowledge of jobs and career fields.
2. Better understanding of industry's requirements.
3. Cultivating connections for students.
4. Equipment and other resources.
5. Increased credibility with students. (p. 17).

An administrator can help a teacher to understand that there is no substitute for hands-on learning and insider career information. All teachers use the words "employability skills" but do not necessarily know what they mean in practical terms. Work-based learning programs for educators and teaching internships can provide teachers with the knowledge of what specific employability skills are needed for that particular career (Ries, 1999). Educators who establish relationships with employers by working for them can call on those employers to provide work-based learning opportunities for students. Businesses and industry are great resources for donated equipment and money. Veterans of work-based learning experiences feel that their credibility with students goes up because students realize that teachers are not just someone out of college with limited work experience.

I feel that all four school purposes, social, personal, intellectual, and vocational are equally important. If schools leave out one of these categories, then students may not become well-rounded, successful adults. All students need the technological and vocational skills to prepare for the future workplace and career changes. Many of today's jobs will be obsolete in ten to fifteen years because of ever-growing technology. Lifelong learning will be a necessity to keep up with new technology and over-whelming information. As a nation we will not be strong if we do not improve social conditions and become responsible citizens. Quality of life would be questionable if people did not care about others, and if they could not coexist in a culturally diverse setting.

All four school purposes, social, personal, intellectual, and vocational, serve as the underlying principle for my educational vision. My educational vision statement is to "Create successful, well-rounded adults". The key word for me is "well-rounded". I feel as educators and educational leaders, we have missed our mark if we create adults that are successful in the work world but are failures as compassionate, caring human beings. I feel that it is important for students to not only be responsible but to act responsibly concerning the treatment of the environment and of all mankind. As an educational leader, it is my responsibility to create successful, well-rounded adults.

## Educational Leadership

Speck (1999), asks that principals clarify their beliefs about how people learn and their personal educational philosophy. These beliefs provide a foundation for what the principal does as an educational leader. My educational vision or philosophy of creating successful, well-rounded adults will be the foundation for the educational decisions and actions that I make as an educational leader.

## Educational Philosophy

I believe that all students can learn and achieve if appropriate modifications are made. All children develop at different rates. If instruction is at a developmentally appropriate level for the child, learning will take place. Since all children do not learn in the same way, multiple teaching styles need to be used in teaching. I also believe that children perform according to expectations and that

each child can be expected to develop to the fullest of his/her potential academically, physically, mentally, and socially. Brain-based research has shown that connections need to be made between what the child already knows and new concepts. Education is not one size fits all. Since children learn so differently, modifications need to be made and alternative programs need to be tried so that all students can learn and succeed. An administrator must believe in the educability of all.

An educational leader promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth. Modifications, alternative programs, and utilizing multiple learning styles are necessary for all children to learn and achieve. Glatthorn (2000) suggests that if students are not mastering the content, then teachers need to make the following adjustments:

1. Using a simpler vocabulary to explain key concepts.
2. Giving more examples of concepts.
3. Using visual representations of the concept.
4. Taking additional time to explain.
5. Providing students with concrete experiences with the concept.
6. Using students who have mastered the concept to explain it in their words. (p. 129).

An administrator needs to provide direction and support for these positive adaptations in student learning. Multiple opportunities to learn must be available to all students.

A variety of techniques is needed to assess student learning. Teachers should frequently monitor student learning. "Monitoring can take many forms:

observing students at work, evaluating student products, asking questions, interpreting nonverbal signals of confusion, encouraging student questions, having students write brief statements of what they are learning, and giving brief written quizzes" (Glatthorn, 2000, p. 129).

One of my ultimate goals is to instill lifelong learning in students and adults. "If student achievement is to improve, the adults who work with students must also learn and grow" (Neuman & Simmons, 2000, p. 11). Teachers and administrators need to take responsibility for their own learning as well as their students' learning. As an administrator, I would recommend that teachers develop study groups or professional learning communities. Teachers would work together to foster reflective practice, collegiality, and collaboration. Each professional learning community would focus on an area of interest such as curriculum, best teaching practices, or a new skill. "When adults learn new skills and competencies, gain insight, construct knowledge, and reflect on and practice what they have learned, they better understand how their students learn" (Neuman & Simmons, 2000, p. 11). I would strongly encourage professional development so that educators can learn about emerging trends and current teaching and assessment techniques.

To help other educators achieve their learning goals, principals need opportunities to learn, reflect, and change (McCay, 2001). Principals can receive valuable feedback from area principals who are willing to provide ongoing mentoring, support, and opportunities to discuss issues and concerns. Principals

need time for reflection. Reflection allows principals to learn from their day-to-day experiences and to examine assumptions, challenges, and solutions. "Professional development for school principals should focus on developing qualities of active learning, reflection, and leadership" (McCay, 2001, p. 77).

I believe administrators need to work with teachers to develop a schoolwide vision. Caulfield et al. (2000) found that this schoolwide vision should "create a quality learning environment for all children by using brain-compatible instruction to integrate facts, skills, and concepts in meaningful and lasting ways" (p. 63). I believe that a common vision and brain-compatible instruction will increase student achievement.

Vision

Educational leaders must have a vision of high standards of learning that include the knowledge, skills, and values to succeed in a changing society. This vision must be clear and compelling and be the basis for your decisions and actions as an administrator. "One of leaderships' primary functions is to create a compelling vision and develop a strategy to achieve it" (Daft, 2002, p. 470). A school that lacks vision does not have a clear focus of its current state or where it should be going. "Articulating the school vision forces the principal and school to hold themselves accountable for acting in a way that is congruent with the vision" (Speck, 1999, p. 37).

Although it is important for an educational leader to have his/her own educational philosophy or vision, it is even more important for the administrator

to develop a vision that is shared by teachers, staff, parents, community members, and administrators. "The principal as educator must not only have a vision, but also facilitate, translate, and build it into a school community vision for educating students" (Speck, 1999, p. 37). This vision should be developed by examining the common values and beliefs that everyone in the community shares. The vision is then created by the common values and beliefs.

Schwahn & Spady (1998) believe that people do not change unless they share a compelling reason to change and unless they have ownership in the change. All stakeholders (administrators, staff, and community members) should be involved in the school's creation of a vision and direction-setting process. The stakeholders must become part of all significant decisions and actions or the plan will fail. Effective educational leaders use their new vision as the basis for every important decision they make. "Successful leaders of change also know how important it is to be effective role models...staff members need to know that their leader values the new vision, will stand for it, and will take risks to support it" (Schwahn & Spady, 1998, p. 2).

An administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, and implementation of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. This vision needs to shape the educational programs, plans, and actions of the school. The vision, mission, and implementation plans need to be regularly monitored, evaluated, and revised to meet the needs of all students. "Leadership is about

having a vision and articulating, ordering priorities, getting others to go with you, constantly reviewing what you are doing, and holding onto things you value" (Day, 2000, p. 57). An educational leader must provide direction and guidance for the implementation of the vision, to keep it constantly evident by words, actions, and daily practices (Neuman & Simmons, 2000).

An educational leader is also a transformational leader. It is both the educational leader and the transformational leader that develops, implements, and makes the necessary changes to achieve the vision. "The most significant role of the transformational leader may be to find a vision for the organization that is significantly better than the old one and to enlist others in sharing the dream" (Daft, 2002, p.149).

<div align="center">Transformational Leadership</div>

I strongly believe in becoming a transformational leader. "Transformational leaders are individuals who have a vision of the future, exhibit courage, believe in people, and possess the ability to encounter complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty in performing the role of change agent" (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993 p. 321). In my opinion, a transformational leader is a person who is capable of leading a diverse group of people to establish a common vision. The transformational leader is also capable of encouraging teachers to become leaders that are capable of implementing their vision and sustaining lasting change.

DePree (1989) states, "Leaders are obligated to provide and maintain momentum" (p. 14). Momentum is a feeling among a group of people that they

are moving towards a recognizable goal. Momentum comes from a clear vision of what the school ought to be, from a well thought-out strategy to achieve that vision, and from carefully communicated directions and plans which enable everyone to participate and be accountable in achieving those plans.

An effective school and a good leader rely on the talent, commitment, and leadership of many people in that school. Highly competent leaders do more than perform at a high level, they inspire and motivate people to do the same (Maxwell, 1999). No leader or principal can be effective in overseeing, motivating, recognizing, and supporting every key individual in the school or community. Transformational leadership consists of identifying, encouraging, and supporting others in the organization to assume positions of leadership (DeBlois, 2000).

Shared Leadership

Collegiality, collaboration, inclusion, and a sense of community are integral parts of shared leadership (Bell, 2001). In a school where there is shared leadership, the staff is entrusted to make instructional decisions such as the selection of curriculum, materials, identification of standards and benchmarks, and selection of effective interventions to meet student needs. Faculty relationships are characterized by collegial respect that is based on the sharing of common vision and professional goals.

In shared leadership or collective leadership, the principal must be able to nurture relationships with teachers and share power to enable followers to become leaders and leaders to become followers, as the situation demands (Chirichello,

2001). By adopting a "we" rather than "me" approach, principals and teachers can share school leadership.

According to Lambert (1998), school leadership needs to be a broad concept that is separated from person, role, and individual behaviors. Leadership needs to be embedded in the school community as a whole. Everyone has the potential to work as a leader. Leading is skilled work that every member of the school community can learn. If schools are to ensure high quality education for all students, then leadership needs to be redistributed in ways that share responsibilities across the school community (Neuman & Simmons, 2000).

> Leadership requires the redistribution of power and authority. Shared learning, purpose, action, and responsibility demand the realignment of power and authority. Districts and principals need to explicitly release authority, and staff need to learn how to enhance personal power and informal authority (Lambert, 1998, p. 11).

"Leaders are responsible for effectiveness" (DePree, 1989, p. 16). Effectiveness comes about through enabling others to reach their potential, both their personal and professional potential. One way to improve effectiveness is to encourage roving leadership. Roving leaders are those indispensable people in our lives who are there when we need them. Roving leadership allows competent people to take charge and accept ownership of a problem. It demands a great deal of trust and a clear sense of interdependence. As administrators we need to count on each person's special competence because by ourselves we are limited, but together we can achieve our goals.

Principals must nurture and support teachers by giving them a clear picture of the district's goals and by aiding in developing communication and decision making skills (Holloway, 2000). An effective leader creates a climate that welcomes, supports, and rewards innovative thinking and problem solving. In this environment, creative thinking that is required for decision making is produced (Ramsey, 1999). Part of being a successful leader is knowing how to:

a. Promote innovative thinking.
b. Tap into staff and student creativity.
c. Sort out those ideas that really work from those that merely sound good.
d. Incorporate good ideas into the decision making process quickly and easily. Ramsey (1999), p. 14.

The current trend now in American schools is toward a more community-centered organization. "This shift requires a new style of school administration, one that not only permits and encourages such input but works to facilitate the strengths of each member" (Lowe & Swink, 2000, p. 48). Principals must take the diversity of their school population into account in creating and promoting a vision of educational excellence and in developing and implementing curriculum.

A transformational leader promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members. It is important to believe that families, community members, and businesses are valuable resources in strengthening programs and supporting school goals. I recommend establishing partnerships with businesses and institutions of higher learning. Communication needs to occur on a regular basis among the school community concerning trends,

issues, and potential changes. I think it is essential to send out surveys asking parents for their evaluation of areas such as discipline, school safety, school climate, and educational programs. This information should be used in future decision-making.

## Conclusion

The experiences that I have had in my administrative program at the University of Northern Iowa have shown me the importance of educational leadership. Administrators must be educational leaders that provide a positive, supportive learning environment in which students and staff can achieve success. They must be strong educators who make a commitment to learning, teaching, and school improvement. Administrators must also be reflective practioners that can assess their own growth.

Administrators must be transformational leaders who can develop and implement a vision that is shared and supported by the school community. Transformational leaders encourage and support staff members to become leaders. They have the capabilities needed to create and sustain lasting change. My goal is to be a successful transformational leader.

Effective school leaders have a full range of roles and responsibilities. They have the capabilities necessary to move from its present state to its desired state. An administrator's job is demanding, challenging, and rewarding. I look forward to the challenge.

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