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A preferred vision for administering elementary/secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary/secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

All students need a safe and nurturing environment to receive a quality education. Principals should treat students as individuals judged by their character and learning style as well as their capabilities. To be an effective administrator and to establish a strong foundation, the principles of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) are used as guides. I will discuss each of the ISSL principles and explain how they influence my philosophy of educational leadership.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTRATING ELEMENTARY/SECONDARY
SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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Xina N. Zanders

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All students need a safe and nurturing environment to receive a quality education. Principals should treat students as individuals judged by their character and learning style as well as their capabilities. To be an effective administrator and to establish a strong foundation, the principles of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) are used as guides. I will discuss each of the ISSL principles and explain how they influence my philosophy of educational leadership. The principles are as follows:

1. Visionary Leadership – facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision that shared and supported by the school community.
2. Instructional Leadership – nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
3. Organizational Leadership – ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe efficient, and effective learning environment.
4. Collaborative Leadership – collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
5. Ethical Leadership – acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
6. Political Leadership – understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996; Iowa Department of Education, 2001).

Visionary Leadership

A visionary leader guides all educational stakeholders to create a learning environment in which all students achieve success. The administrator's job is to lead and facilitate the work of others in the learning environment. Educators have a responsibility to students to guarantee that they receive a quality education in a setting that provides a feeling of security.

Getting parents involved in their students' education is pertinent to the nurturing of students. Most educators in the urban setting have become frustrated with the lack of parental involvement with their child's educational experience. A national study written by Hite & Young (1994) presents research on the amount of preparation teachers and administrators receive, in their pre-service training, to help them involve parents in the educational enterprise. Results of specific research have found that children perform better academically when their parents are involved in their educational experiences suggested Coleman, Comer, Goodlad, Henderson, Levin, (1994). As an administrator I would search to find professional development programs and/or workshops to help my staff develop strategies to get more parents involved in their student's education.

Resources such as diverse technologies are recommended and obtained to promote the implementation of the schools mission and goals. Technologies play a role in nurturing students to learn how to develop better problem-solving skills in the educational setting.

McKenzie (2000) in the book found that the primary value of new technologies lies in their ability to enhance thinking, decision making, and problem-solving skills.

There are stakeholders striving to help students gain an education by becoming telementors. These business people use technology to reach students and guide them to become problem-solvers of the future. It was suggested by Nellen (2000) that business and government have been making the most noise about education; telementoring is a way for them to contribute, instead of talking about the problem of education in this country. Telementoring would help develop students to the level of communication and problem solving skills that the work force says the educational institution need to provide to young people. It is important for principals to search out programs that will help educators communicate with stakeholders to

prepare and nurture students to become productive citizens in a complex society.

To insure that students receive a quality education in a safe environment, implementation of a student survey on how secure and safe students feel is important to implement annually. Students want to feel safe when they go to school:

Attending school in an environment where disturbing events are known to happen and have been witnessed may have an impact upon students' sense of security, potentially contributing to less effective learning. According to students, incidents of bullying, physical attack, or robbery occurred in schools at all grade levels, and a majority of students witnessed at least one of these incidents (Chandler, Davies, & Nolin, 1995, p.3).

It is important for administrators to assure that students feel safe in the educational environment. Requiring students to fill-out surveys to collect data on how secure and safe they feel in school sets the stage for educators to know how to secure safety in the school setting.

In recent years, many public schools have looked at the issue of students wearing uniforms to help insure a safe learning environment. Students wearing uniforms is not a guarantee for a safer environment. Studies show, however, that it can help students become self-disciplined:

In response to growing levels of violence in the Nation's schools, many parents, teachers, and school officials have come to see school uniforms as one positive and creative way to reduce discipline problems and increase school safety. They observed that the adoption of school uniform policies can promote school safety, improve discipline, and enhance the learning environment (Riley, 1996, p.1).

The opinions of parents are important in making the decision concerning students wearing uniforms in public schools. "The decision to adopt an uniform policy is made by states, local school districts, and schools. For uniforms to be a success, as with all other school initiatives, parents must be involved" (Riley, 1996, p.1).

Before the decision for students to wear uniforms was presented to all stakeholders, I would do research and visit public schools that adopted the plan to have their students wear uniforms. Adopting a uniform policy is a decision that I would hope to be able to implement with the support of all stakeholders.

Children can come to school with a lot of added luggage that they have gathered from the outside environment. This is true of children in an urban setting. I discovered a poem by Langston

Hughes that helps to describe how I view children, and my mission to develop productive citizens.

A Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Our crust and sugar over—

Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

Like a heavy load

Or does it explode?

--(Langston Hughes, 1975 p. 317)

Instructional Leadership

Instructional Leadership promotes the success of students by nurturing them in an instructional environment that will allow students to gain a quality education. It is important that students feel that teachers care about them receiving an education that will help them succeed in life. When students know their teacher is striving to help them learn and understand educational material, students are more than willing to let an educator know if they feel they are not learning. Wilson & Corbett (2000) in the book

Listening to Urban Kids explain how students react to teachers they feel do not give them enough structure:

They wanted teachers who “stayed on students” to complete assignments, went out of their way to provide help, explained things until “ the light bulb went on” for the whole class, varied classroom activities, controlled student behavior without ignoring the lesson, and understood students’ situations and factored that into their lessons (Wilson & Corbett, 2000, p.61).

Students appreciate teachers who have “with-it-ness”. These are teachers aware of what is going on in the classroom and in life.

Students also appreciate discipline when it is needed. Students express that a teacher may be “mean”, but they knew that teacher wanted to help them get a quality education. It is imperative that educators do not lower their expectations for students and that students are held responsible for their schoolwork. If a student is absent or knows he/she will be absent, the students should inquire about their make-up work.

As a principal, I would strive to communicate with teachers who do not set high or quality expectations for their students. I would be willing to help the teacher set appropriate standards for each student. I will ask them how do you know what you are doing is

working or how do you know the student is learning? If they respond that it is not working and they do not know if students are learning. I would assist the teacher with identifying appropriate individualized teaching strategies that produce measurable results.

The staff of a school should treat students fairly, with dignity, and respect. Yelling does not help any situation. It puts stress on the students and teacher. Furthermore, it can be a waste of class time. As an administrator I would work to make it possible for teachers to attend workshops that help them establish different strategies on how to discipline students such as a workshop based on the Control Theory. The title of the workshop sounds as if this concept encompasses how to control students. It is just the opposite; it helps teachers discover ways to control themselves, along with strategies to help teachers develop classroom management skills. Wilson & Corbertt explained:

Kids do not do the work. The teacher is hollering and screaming. Do your work and sit down! This makes the ones that want to learn go slower. It makes your grade sink-down. It just messes it up for you. The teacher is trying to handle everyone and can't" (Wilson & Corbertt, 2001, p.75).

Furthermore, one of the most important factors here is that when a teacher yells in the classroom it distracts students who are on-task.

I will explain to all educators that their job is to provide instruction in a manner where students are able to learn well. It is important that we help to change urban children's lives and help these students become positive citizens in society. The leader needs to indicate daily, by word and deed how to help these students become positive forces in society. Lorraine Monroe in her book suggested three ways instructional leaders can achieve this:

- That our work is about transforming children's lives, every day
- That the work takes whatever it takes
- That no one is The Way. The Way is any way that works, and the more ways you know, the more effective you are (Monroe, 1997, p.191).

As an effective instructional leader, I need to understand what is working and what does not work. I will need to work with teachers to help students receive a quality education. In addition, I will need to ask myself how to guide students so they receive an appropriate education.

The theorist, Howard Gardner, came up with an enlightening idea that we all learn in different manners and have different learning styles. Gardner goes on to say that intelligence involves the use of problem-solving skills that enable people to resolve genuine problems, create effective products, and find or create new problems (Gardner, 1996). He defined the following eight intelligence:

Linguistic - sensitive to meaning, sound, inflection and other orders of words.

Logical mathematical - strong in math and problem solving skills.

Spatial - has a strong imagination, likes to design, draw, read graphics etc.

Musical - appreciates sound, sensitive to rhythm, pitch etc.

Bodily-Kinesthetic - the ability to handle objects skillfully, using fine or gross motor skills.

Interpersonal - good peoples skills, able to make distinction between people.

Intrapersonal - enjoys solitude, likes thinking.

Naturalistic - the ability to work with nature, use nature to help others. (Thomas, Fitahugh-Walker, and Jefferies, 2000, p.3).

The variations in learning styles have allowed educators great opportunities to help students who may learn in different ways. It is important that educators help students realize that because they may learn in different manners does not mean that they can not learn, but rather that they learn in a different context, and it is okay.

“If the true concern is to enhance academic success in urban schools, then curriculum issues should also take into consideration the concepts of culturally-sensitive environments, learning styles, multiple intelligence’s, taxonomy of knowledge, and needs satisfaction” (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, & Jefferies, 2000, p.27). As an administrator when I learn of workshops or staff development opportunities in the area of learning-styles it is important that I inform staff and support their attendance. I would provide opportunities to staff to attend these events. The strategies that help students utilize education are very important, but educators need to be given the chance to learn how to implement these strategies.

Organizational Leadership

The job of administrator covers many areas. Students at all times should have a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. Students appreciate a teacher who is organized and has the ability to manage the classroom. When the teacher displays great management skills, it maximizes the opportunity for successful learning to take place. L. Lyman (2000) in the book How Do They Know You Care? cites, “Students did not want teachers to find

excuses to not teach them, to leave a student alone just because the student chose not to participate, or to let students decide on their own to work or not to work” (p.63). Students will push a teacher’s “buttons” to see how far they can go. Students have asked me, what difference does it make to me if they do not do their work. Moreover, you act as if you are my mama! I inform them that I care about them as a person, and as a teacher and by law I do play the role of parent away from home, (*parens patriae*). Most of the time they accept that response. Sometimes, they want to take it further. I will strive to let it stop there because conflict distracts the other students. As a principal, I need to support teachers in these types of situations. I must let students know that they are not going to get away with negative behavior. Studies show that students want discipline. They do not want to be allowed to get away with behavior that is inappropriate.

Educators should strive to help students except ownership for inappropriate behavior, and help students realize that they are disturbing the safety and the nurturing of the learning environment. If I, as an educator, can help students solve problems not only in

negative situations but also in positive ones, I am developing a person who will be able to make it in society. When a student can problem-solve, they experience a wide range of success. Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, & Jefferies (2000) state: "... risk-taking behavior is associated with culturally responsive teachers. That is to say, these teachers take risks. They believe all students can experience success when the right opportunity is presented" (p. 68). Leaders in the learning community want teachers to be able to help students problem-solve, and be able to correct their inappropriate behavior.

I feel that school districts need to be willing to invest monies in not only school buildings, but also in solid monetary investments to ensure students have all of the materials needed to allow solid-based learning to take place. Without teaching/learning materials, teacher and student morale suffers. It is difficult to achieve the instructional mission or to reach its objectives and goals, if teachers do not have appropriate resources. Financial support is not the only problem leading to low morale. It is the distribution of time allowed for teachers to meet with their peers that plays a great role in the area of morale.

When teachers or students do not receive substantial support from administrators, it can cause morale to decline among both teachers and the students. Teachers need to feel treasured just as the students want to feel appreciated. Administrators acknowledging teachers and students when they have demonstrated positive behavior can accomplish much by placing positive notes in teachers' mailboxes saying that the principal appreciates the work he/she is doing. For a student it is delightful for them to have their name in the school newspaper or announced over the intercom giving them accolades for an accomplishment.

As an administrator, I hope I can help teachers see themselves as productive educators in the learning community. When a teacher is not able to establish a classroom learning environment that produces cohesion of knowledge, there is a dire need to provide them support. Assigning a mentor or suggesting professional development programs are good sources for job improvement. All resources are important to help guide teachers. If teachers do not fulfill the job description of having good classroom management skills, educating students and developing their minds, and making sure they all learn so they can

graduate; teachers feel that they have not succeeded as an educator. It is the administrator's job to make sure that teachers develop appropriate classroom management skills. If these skills are not sufficiently developed it will be almost impossible for students to be educated by that teacher. Lorraine Monroe supported this idea, "They laid out for me that next morning the basic problems in the school; not surprisingly, they included lack of discipline, low staff morale, and some poor teachers" (Monroe, 1997, p.115). As an administrator, she toiled to develop strategies to strengthen weak teachers or ways to eliminate their positions.

As a principal, I would work to make the school building safe from all hazards. D.R. McAdams in Fighting to Save Our Urban Schools...and Winning! (2000) describes a school in Houston "...a portion of the roof collapsed at an elementary school leaving a 75-foot hole over the cafeteria. Fortunately, no one was in the cafeteria. It was determined later that the roof collapse was caused by extensive termite damage to wooden beams coupled with rains" (p. 206). For the learning environment to be safe, the administrator should work closely with the maintenance engineers to make sure all areas in the

building are in working order. If a principal builds a good relationship with the maintenance personal they will strive to stay abreast of the maintenance situations without the administrator mentioning it to them at every biannual inspection.

At the beginning of the 2000-2001 school year, a middle school in Waterloo, Iowa had a big problem with mold. It was on the ceiling tiles, desks, books, and bookshelves. Some staff members would come to work, become sick, and leave. Students also got sick and parents would have to come and take them to the doctor or home. Throughout the school year staff and students developed illnesses that were not explainable. Finally, a student who came to school looking normal, went to a certain part of the building where her eyes became swollen. The mother came to take her to the doctor. The school facility was under investigation all year. Learning and teaching were not effective with these types of conditions. If this could have been foreseen by the administrator, these situations could have been prevented.

Collaborative Leadership

It is important for the principal to draw on all resources to make sure students are educated and have success in the learning environment. Principals need to collaborate with families and community members. Often this is the site-council's job. The main reason to have a site-council is to allow all stakeholders to take part in the development of the educational system.

Middle Schools often use mentoring programs. Mentoring programs use parents and people from the work force to work with students who have behavior problems. The program is an incentive for students. It was developed through using the collaboration of all staff members. There is also a Partners in Education (P.I.E.) Program. These partners come from the workforce, religious organizations, and educational institutions to work cooperatively with members from the school to construct activities to show appreciation for the students and teachers. For example, they give incentives to teachers on Teacher Day. PIE holds special events to build teacher morale. Furthermore, they help to send students on field trips, hold special activities for students, and chaperon dances and outings.

Parents play an important part in students' education not only at home, but also by making themselves visible in the learning environment. To make a positive impact on students' education, the parent needs to have a collaborative relationship with the educational staff. Knowing that parents are concerned with their student's education helps teachers strive harder toward helping the student succeed. I feel that there is less difficulty working with a student whose parents work collaboratively with school personnel toward building their child's education. Lyman (2000) emphasizes that, "knowing children by name, meeting with parents, and encouraging teachers to visit the home about forming relationships of partnership with parents all illustrate Houston's understanding of reciprocity in caring relationships" (p. 34). When I taught fourth grade and kindergarten at an elementary school, the principal suggested that teachers make home visits. My fellow peers and I decided that we would do home visits. It was a true revelation. I believe that visiting a student's home enables you to not only to see the child's home and meet the parent, but also allows you as an educator to understand your student. Parents are met in a positive environment; it is explained that

you want to meet them and let them become acquainted with their child's teacher. In middle and high school, it is difficult to do home-visits with all of your students. I like to send letters to parents in the beginning of the school year to introduce myself to parents and explain my objectives in the curriculum area. In the letters I emphasize that I will work with them to ensure their child's success. Administrators should realize that it is necessary to give educators the time and opportunity to build a relationship with the parents of students. This is a great time to let parents know you care about their student and the education they receive. Lyman (2000) explains that "Teachers need to display a level of care for children and their families and have expectations for the children...If teachers do not care for whom they teach, then it is a technical experience...When a teacher does not have this care for a child, it shows in their actions, remarks, even body language" (p.35).

It is very important to establish collaborative learning skills. As a principal, I will strive to understand what is happening in a classroom and observe students orally expressing themselves with their peers. There are many strategies used in establishing

collaborative skills. The job of educators is to help young people learn how to work with their peers cooperatively. Business leaders indicate that schools need to equip students for the workforce by giving them cooperative skills before they graduate from school. One strategy used is the jigsaw method discussed by Aronson (2000) in the book Nobody Left to Hate, “Just as a jigsaw puzzle each piece-each student’s part-is essential for the production and full understanding of full product” (p.135). This strategy allows each person in an established group to contribute something to help reach a specific goal. In a business, each team member should contribute something to the team to reach a productive outcome.

Ethical Leadership

Two of the most important characteristics of an administrator is being fair and having honesty. It is extremely important for all students to feel that they can trust and expect confidentiality with the administrator. Being in a leadership role, I will strive to be a positive role model. That means that I would treat people equitably and with dignity and respect. I will work to make sure that all people in the learning environment display integrity and exercise ethical behavior.

Furthermore, as an administrator being ethical means practicing being fair, I do not just want to “talk the talk, I will walk the walk”. Aronson (2000) suggests, “Before we rush in with an intervention, we must understand the deepest origins of the problem and the consequences of each proposed intervention” (p.10). Before making a decision concerning an issue, investigate both sides. When administering the consequences the negative feedback should be appropriate to the behavior.

Caring leaders make a difference. Caring leaders who protect and nurture are critical to maintaining schools that are good (Lightfoot-Lawrence, 1983); leaders grounded in an ethic of caring transform schools by embracing complexity and making an emotional investment (Beck, 1994); and caring leaders who advocate for the needs of individual students are critical to student’s success, particularly in culturally diverse schools (Dillard, 1995). I feel that the educator’s, responsibility is to make sure all students receive an education and should not have a prejudiced bone in his/her body. As an educator, we should be able to work with all students no matter their ethnicity. We need to focus on making sure

children get a quality education, and “become the best they can be.”

If it means having meetings to help people accept all races of people, then these types of meetings should be held.

For students to receive a quality education, an assortment of resources should be used. “If you have an idea that is about kids and encouraging their achievement that you would like to have supported” (Monroe, 1997, p.151). If teachers go to the principal’s office to ask for help or monies to create a learning tool, or go on a field trip, the answer or response should be “yes”, now identify the resources. The objectives and criteria of the fieldtrip should reflect the educational plan of the school. We want our students exposed to as many positive and different events as possible.

Another way an ethical leader creates a safe and nurturing environment is by helping the learning community celebrate differences in how people look and learn. As cited in Nobody Left to Hate, the author Elliot Aronson (2000) suggested:

We can find a way to teach students a greater compassion for and tolerance of students who are different. We can even teach students to appreciate these differences and to experience them as sources of joy and excitement rather than as automatic triggers for aggression and rejection (Elliot Aronson, 2000, p.5).

We are to work with students and help them understand the importance of not teasing their peers because they may seem different in the way they speak, look, and act. An educator must first help students see how it feels to have people tease them and how important it is to have empathy. Educators can use examples of incidents in the lives of students. For instance, most of the schools that had publicized shootings such as those that took place at Columbine, the perpetrators claimed they committed these crimes because of people teasing them. Although the results of Columbine may seem far away, there are everyday consequences to teasing that educators can use as examples. For instance, a young lady who felt overwhelmed by peer teasing was pressured into having sex at an early age which she will regret for many years to come. To help students reflect on how differences are good, educators can ask students how would the world be if we all were the same. Then they may have a “light-bulb moment” and realize that trying to hurt someone by teasing them because they are different is not the wise thing to do. People were created differently to add some excitement to the world. As a principal I would work with staff and students to develop a belief statement describing and

explaining why they should celebrate the differences among the peoples in our learning environment.

Political Leadership

Indicators in the political leadership performance area describe how politics play a large role in influencing the institution of education. The government develops laws that serve to protect students and the education they are to receive. As a principal, I want to promote the success of all students by knowing how politics and laws influence their education. I can accomplish this by staying aware of the effect of the economic, social, legal, and cultural context on education.

To ensure that students receive a free education not only for the poor, but for all, laws were developed. Politics and government help to assure that schools, children, parents, and employees are treated appropriately. The government can determine how and from where schools will bus students. They also determine the economic criteria for students to receive free and reduced lunch. The school system circulates within the borders of policies, laws, and rules put forth by local, state, and federal authorities.

Parents and advocacy groups also have a huge influence on what happens in education. These groups monitor schools to make sure that education takes place in an institution that operates equitably. The people who help make decisions to improve the educational environment should receive recognition for the contributions that they make. McAdams (2000) expresses, that when a citizen had been active in his community for many years he received the NAACP Unity Award for founding Ministries Against Crime, a coalition of black and Hispanic ministers established to fight violence in public schools. This is one of the reasons it is important for administrators to work closely with the public and treat them with respect.

To prevent violence and hostile situations, the community can come together to prevent these situations from occurring. I remember several years ago a child sex offender was released from prison, and his residence was close to the school. The people of the community came out to support and discuss how the community could work with the school to protect it. This man lived across the street from the school. They helped get identification tags for the staff and visitors

and suggested we keep all but the front doors locked. As a result, of this collaborative effort, the school was made to feel safe even with the presence of the sexual predator living across the street from the school.

Furthermore, I believe that we should model to students how to keep conflict out of the school. If staff members or any person that works in the educational setting, does not display respect for one another, students feel the tension...and may act out what they feel. “The board was divided. Mutual respect had given way to bitterness and anger. (Modeling...confusion with adults can spread throughout the schools to the students)”, (McAdams 2000, p.113). Educators should work to keep anger from home or work out of the learning community because young people can discern those feelings and display negative behavior in the classroom and other areas the learning community. Therefore, we as educators should stay aware of our behavior around students.

In conclusion, I believe that schools are meant to be a safe and nurturing environment where students are educated and treated according to their individual learning styles and are not compared to

others but treated as individuals. An effective administrator should establish a strong foundation on the six ISSL to guide their educational staff to help all students receive a quality education. The six ISSL Standards provide a framework that work to make strong and productive educational leaders not only in the urban settings but also in all types of school districts. As an administrator, I will need to remember that I am still an educator just in a different capacity. As a principal my focus is student learning.

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