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A preferred vision for administering high schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering high schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Whether it be efforts to develop state and local standards, new forms of assessment, innovations in technology, or application of new approaches to teaching and learning, changes must occur in the place our society calls school. The complex nature of our education system requires courageous and responsible action on the part of individuals who believe in preparing our children for life in the 21st century. This is both a national priority as well as a moral responsibility. Business at school as usual is no longer an option. Change in the culture and instructional practices of today's school requires the dedication and effort of an administrator who is willing to undertake the challenge to work for change. It is with this thought in mind that it became a personal decision to embark on a career change. The decision was made to leave the classroom to pursue a degree in educational administration in order to become an educational administrator.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING HIGH SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

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Master of Arts in Education

by

James E. Zajicek

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Whether it be efforts to develop state and local standards, new forms of assessment, innovations in technology, or application of new approaches to teaching and learning, changes must occur in the place our society calls school. The complex nature of our education system requires courageous and responsible action on the part of individuals who believe in preparing our children for life in the 21st century. This is both a national priority as well as a moral responsibility. Business at school as usual is no longer an option. Change in the culture and instructional practices of today's school requires the dedication and effort of an administrator who is willing to undertake the challenge to work for change. It is with this thought in mind that it became a personal decision to embark on a career change. The decision was made to leave the classroom to pursue a degree in educational administration in order to become an educational administrator.

Since the initial steps were taken to pursue this career change, the question has been posed many times "why?" Although there is no one single answer, the following are reasons why the decision was made to become an administrator. First of all, there is that point in one's career where there is the need for a challenge. Being an educational administrator will provide that opportunity. My experience the past two years has confirmed any thoughts about that challenge. Secondly, it is my feeling that I relate well with others and can command the challenge of dealing with a diverse population of people. There is an interest in being a leader in the educational community as well as working with an established base of intelligent people.

I consider myself to be a person who is thorough, painstaking, hard-working and patient with particulars and procedures. I can and will do the "little" things that need to be done to carry projects through to completion. My perseverance is to be commended. I do not enter into things impulsively, but once I make a commitment, I am difficult to distract or discourage. My conservatism compliments my concerns for accuracy, organization and consistency. I take pride in collecting facts which are necessary in supporting my evaluations and decisions. Colleagues have described me as fair, kind, tactful, and genuinely concerned about people and their needs. As a classroom teacher my goal was to help students achieve success in their endeavors. As a principal I will continue to help students as well as teachers strive for success. Pursuit of success is vital in motivating people at all age levels. Achieving that success is the stepping stone to greatness.

The course work at the University of Northern Iowa has opened other avenues and broadened the knowledge base in the field of educational administration. Each class in the administration curriculum has offered new insights and perspectives plus has provided a plethora of information for the aspiring principal. At times it was overwhelming to think that one would need to know about so many different topics in order to have the title of principal.

As I wrap up my graduate program and embark on my career change, I can definitely attest to the fact that my experience the past two years has provided ample evidence that the future holds many challenges. During my first year as an administrator, I was a part-time high school assistant principal and a part-time elementary principal. It was a great experience that provided many situations which

I heard about in my graduate class discussions but didn't actually think they would happen to me. The second year began and I was again serving the district in the same capacity. However, life is full of surprises and I encountered one. Shortly after the beginning of the second semester, the principal submitted his resignation effective immediately. I was asked to assume the role of principal for the balance of the year.

The first couple of weeks were overwhelming. Beside the daily routine, there was the unfinished business which had to be completed. Plans had to be made for completing the school year as well as make preparations for the upcoming year. Registration and graduation took priority. The advice of a veteran retired principal helped immensely but needless to say there were many sleepless nights that first month! The one thing that probably will be remembered most were the words of encouragement from a very supportive staff. However these same staff members would inquire about what would happen to the evaluation of their job performance. As I started to find out, many of these teachers did not have any formal evaluation for the past three years. With rumors of staff reduction this was most significant to them because of the formulas etc. that were taken into consideration when reducing staff. That situation was compounded by the fact that the district was putting together a new evaluation tool. Having been appointed to the committee drafting that instrument was a factor in doing the research for this paper. That factor plus being offered the job next year defined my choice of the topic. The choice was to focus on educational leadership because it does affect teaching, learning and education. Here are some of the reasons why. Our teachers are our best investment

in our schools. To affect their teaching, educational leaders must be pro-active and lead by example. Without a positive role model our teachers cannot be expected to change. Schools are constantly changing to meet the never ending challenge of new standards and regulations. Regulations cannot transform schools into how we want them to be; only teachers with assistance from administrators, parents, and community leaders do that. Educational leaders must establish strategies for reform by investing in stronger teacher preparation and professional development. Our teachers need us to assist them in their quest for excellence. This is directly how educational leadership affects teaching.

Leadership

Learning is affected by educational leadership through adopted curriculum, assessments, and local standards. Educational leaders are the ones making the decisions that affect what is taught in our schools and how it will be assessed.

Education is a balanced combination between excellent teaching and effective learning. Educational leaders are responsible to seek out excellent teachers who provide ample opportunities for their students to discover, calculate, communicate effectively, decide, formulate, improvise, and expand their personal knowledge base. These excellent teachers, along with the proper materials and resources, shape our educational systems. Educational leaders are accountable for identifying the needs of the school and to take action in fulfilling those needs of the educational system.

Teacher Evaluation and Assessment

Teacher evaluation and assessment is a significant and vital tool in the education process. The purpose of teacher evaluation and assessment is two-fold. The primary purpose is to provide direction and opportunities for professional growth. This applies to the vast majority of the professional teaching staff in all school systems. The second purpose of teacher evaluation is to provide direction for those teachers in need of assistance. These can be beginning teachers or they can be veteran teachers who have become satisfied with mediocrity and have become marginal at best. What these teachers need is an assessment instrument which is not merely a checklist of weakness and strengths, but a guide to develop their professional growth. Since many of these teachers will stay on staff, an assessment program needs to be developed to provide direction for professional growth as well as help those teachers in need of assistance. According to Glickman (1991), fewer than 2 percent of our teachers are terminated from the teaching profession due to incompetence. Teacher evaluation programs have cost millions of dollars. What would happen if that money was spent to help teachers in need to become better skilled in the art of teaching? Personal experience the past two years has provided evidence that there is a need for the principal to be a strong leader in the area of supervision, evaluation, and assessment. New theories and techniques appear in print suggesting what can be done to nurture competent teachers as well as assist beginning teachers in transition from student teacher to status as fully qualified teacher. It is the goal of this research to have the principal in a leadership role using a number of new strategies which might provide direction and

opportunities for professional growth as well as provide assistance for those teachers in need. The first step is to establish a working definition of leadership.

According to Sergiovanni (1992), defining leadership is not easy. Even though he proposes three different theories of leadership, his conclusion is that school leadership connects people to their work. It involves teaching and learning, collegiality and developing character by helping individuals grow. Sergiovanni (1992) maintained that it was the principal's responsibility to tell teachers how to teach. However Reitzug and Burello, in their article, How Principals Can Build Self-Renewing Schools, portray the principal in a different light.

... principal behavior in the self-renewing schools we studied motivates teachers to examine their teaching in order to determine which practices are appropriate. Dominant sources of teaching expertise in these schools shifted from principals and formal research to teachers and their practice. The role of principals changed from dispensing information to facilitating processes in which teachers could discover knowledge (Reitzug and Burello, 1995, p 50).

Leaders and Leadership

Ornstein (1993) maintains that successful principals allow teachers to contribute to decision-making, as well as provide challenging work opportunities and opportunities for career development. However, they are mostly concerned about people rather than accomplishing tasks. They must be able to change in order to accommodate the views and needs of others. Whether or not one can ever come up with a complete definition for leadership in reference to a principal is not the point. The point is that in today's role the job of a principal is challenging. Many principals must reflect on what their role is. With trends and issues such as site based management, restructuring, school improvement, standards and benchmarks,

mentor teachers, peer coaching, staff development, instructional leadership and professional growth plans, it is no wonder that principals are resigning, retiring, or experiencing burnout. Whitaker (1994) suggests that leadership skills need to be developed so that future principals have strong foundations on which to make difficult choices with all the new trends in education. Understanding personalities, personal characteristics, and politics are vital for one who will succeed in directing parents, teachers, and policies. Checkley's article, The Contemporary Principal, maintains that the definition of effective leadership has changed significantly. Today's principal must do more than manage the tasks that have been associated with the traditional school. A composite ad in a newspaper summed it up best.

Wanted: Exceptional School Leaders - must know how to implement change that helps ensure the academic success of all students. Must be an instructional leader and have the ability to promote teacher growth. Must be dedicated to creating a shared vision of an outstanding school through collaboration with faculty, parents, and community members. Must have strong interpersonal skills, excellent communication skills (Checkley, 2000, p.1).

Having defined leadership, the next attempt will be to examine different evaluation models and examples and reflect on the role of the principal as a leader. The principal's primary role is two-fold: providing direction and opportunity for professional growth; and assisting those teachers in need.

Evaluation

The role of strong leadership in the development of effective evaluation is a must. The most obvious need for this instructional leadership comes from the principal and to be successful, it must be an active leadership. It can not be conducted from behind the desk, nor can it be the attitude, "I'm the boss, and this is

how it's going to be done." When it comes to evaluation, this leadership must be dispersed and shared with staff involvement either in the form of committee or the advisory group process. Members of these groups must in turn display their leadership by influencing the rest of the staff. These members then become "experts" in instructor evaluator/assessment and can serve as promoters of this type of initiative. Rooney's (1993) article, Teacher Evaluation: No More "Super"vision, provides a very good amount of insight as to how effectively a new program can be created. She is a principal in Community Consolidated School District 15, Palatine, Illinois. She and her teachers are in the second year of a program that encourages learning from one another. What follows is a summary of how the process appears to be working.

The traditional evaluation model of preconference, observation and postconferences was not working according to Ms. Rooney. Although the conferences went well, she did not feel that she was motivating her teachers to try innovative strategies. A change was needed. However, because of the evaluation system negotiated by the union, any changes had to stay within contracted parameters. After consulting with the teachers, they decided to "bend" the system to create a new evaluation program. Having gained ownership of the improvement of the instruction model, a new program has emerged. The following are specific highlights. First, barriers between teachers and classrooms are breaking down. Second, peer coaching is becoming the norm. Third, individual differences in teaching are respected. Teachers are more tolerant of Principal Rooney and each other. Fourth, a co-teaching model program has been devised for special education

students. When asked about incompetent teachers, Rooney (1993) replied that they are given a great deal of assistance and direction. Nevertheless, the evaluation system provided a process for termination. Her concluding remarks were impressive.

"What has changed in our system more than anything else - is the concept of the principal. I am no longer the one responsible for a teacher's behavior. Teachers are now responsible for their own professional growth-both schools. To think that we also have some kind of "super" vision is simply ludicrous. Teachers are and should be instructional leaders in our schools. We must rely on the collective expertise of the staff to bring our schools into the 21st century (p. 44)."

Another example of successful leadership in supervision is described by Black (1993), who is a professor of the Graduate Studies at Elmira College, New York and an educational consultant and researcher in the Elmira City School District in upstate New York. The traditional surprise evaluations some principals consider a tiresome chore which takes time from their busy schedules may be an item of the past. Teachers who are not enthusiastic about them and dread the principal coming into their classroom with a clipboard do not mind seeing them disappear. Why are the teachers and administrators optimistic? The main reason is that many schools deep into restructuring are designing evaluation systems to fit with new theories of teaching and learning. The hang-up in the district however, was caused by union contract language. After many negotiating sessions, a new evaluation system designed by union officials and district administrators, was hammered out. The main reason was that both sides realized that antiquated evaluation checklists no longer made sense. Teachers wanted to become more involved in planning their own evaluations since they were not accepting one person's evaluations. When

teachers felt administrators threatened their academic freedom, they began to turn to the bargaining table to reaffirm their rights.

According to Black (1993), redesigning teacher evaluation systems are an omen of changing attitudes on the part of administrators. They see themselves as mentors, coaches, and helpers rather than as an authority on the effectiveness of teachers. Conferences before and after classroom visits are used as teaching tools where principals offers tips or resources to teachers who need help. More attention is being paid to such things as curriculum, resources, teaching styles, and student achievement. Some principals communicate regularly and show a genuine regard for teachers feelings. Better working conditions and higher staff morale are evident. The most satisfying outcome is seeing administrators and teachers talk about teaching and learning. Black's closing comment is most encouraging:

"The principals in this district see their roles changing almost daily. But, even though time is still a problem and they still need to attend to roofs, playgrounds, parents, and fundraisers, they see their most important function as teaching instruction. For starters, they are finding that they can take that lead through the teacher evaluation process (p.42)."

The Alianza School in Watsonville, California, established an alternative evaluation process titled Professional Partnerships. According to Strobbe (1993) the project grew out of a structured collaboration. One of the principals suggested making the process a part of the evaluation system. In this school system, teacher partners supervise each others' classrooms on a regular basis. What the teacher partners do is monitor each others' progress which become a part of the evaluation process. The principal will conduct formal and informal observations which are added to the teacher's evaluation. This provided a complete overall evaluation

picture. Over a period of time, trusting relationships are established which enable sincere conversations about teaching. This, in turn, translated into teacher empowerment. This is how one of the principals described his experience.

"I've never been involved in such a powerful evaluation process. Observations followed by shared conferencing are critiqued and analyzed in a highly focused and in-depth manner. Time and setting allow for true collaboration to take place. The project is an ideal opportunity for principals to share leadership. The trust that is built... encourages staff to take creative risks in bringing about an enriched and challenging curriculum for students (Strobbe, 1993 p.41)."

The previous examples showed how innovative supervision techniques aided teachers as well as exhibited leadership by the principal. In their article, Whalen and DeRose (1993) identified those intangibles which a principal provides that teachers appreciate and need. First, there was the support from the principal which was critical. This support establishes trust for future communication which was a key for future evaluation and assessment. From this support came encouragement which was also needed. If the principal provides meaningful evaluation and assessment, faculties will establish a positive working relationship. Professionalism will grow with support and encouragement when staff members are allowed to pursue many different avenues.

Every teacher gains from successful techniques in assessment and evaluation. However, the person who benefits most is the new teacher who must now make the transition from the college course to the classroom. If there is any person who is in dire need of assistance, this is the person. The new teachers coming out of college have been encouraged to be independent, creative,

enthusiastic, as well as self-assertive. Many fail to realize the full impact that this profession will have on them and, at times, will be overwhelmed with the demands and expectations that are placed on their shoulders. Some of these lead to frustration which in turn result in burnout and ineffectiveness. A potentially successful career can end in the short space of one year. This is the time for the principal to intercede and play a major role in molding these teachers to be the future leaders in their profession. Since teachers will probably learn more during the first year, visits and conferences need to occur frequently to help the teacher grow.

Teitelbaum (1992) in his article "Supervision of the New Teacher" emphasizes the main points that the principal needs to use when guiding a new teacher through the process of evaluation and assessment. Even before the principal considers this process, making the new teacher feel comfortable is important. During the first weeks of school, visits should be frequent and with the intention of being helpful. Making one feel that someone cares and is interested is important. Sparring criticism and pointing out mistakes need to be kept at a minimum. Suggestions for teaching the curriculum, structuring the material, formulating relevant questions, stimulating class discussion, and getting students on task are vital in helping the new teacher get started. Since these teachers are just out of college, the tendency to imitate favorite college professors is a strong tendency. It is easy to forget that they are not dealing with college students, but students who are required to be in school. Some of those students do not even want to be there! A very helpful and practical strategy is to arrange for the new teacher to visit other

teachers' classes and observe their techniques. The principal could cover the class while the new teacher is learning by observing.

Supervision of the new teacher and the manner in which it is done is a dynamic process. It is a way of looking at a new teacher and the potential for professional growth. It can open new avenues for collaborative teaching and learning. Supervision starts with the assumption that the new teacher is a trained professional with the ability to solve real problems in the classroom. While the new teacher has a great deal of theory, it is the need for practice of that theory. The teacher is in a position to test theory and experiment with new ideas.

Handled properly, the supervision of a new teacher by a competent principal is not seen as a threat. It can be used to solve problems or exchange ideas without the threat of being judged or evaluated. It is seen as helping, sharing, and caring. Helping to make decisions about the course of one's career and professional growth is empowering. Teitelbaum (1992), who is now retired, had suggestions made to him some thirty years ago which are still valid today. The principal can help the beginning teacher to find a purpose in teaching. He can enable the beginning teacher to visualize instruction, to act professionally, and to develop a sensitivity to the students and the dynamics of the classroom.

In an age when so many demands are placed on the principal to be a leader, the future looks bright with promise, but clouded with uncertainty. Leadership in the area of assessment by the principal can set the tone in the school when it comes to the importance of institutional improvement. Not all teachers will respond enthusiastically to attempt new techniques or strategies. However, if there will be a

commitment connecting teacher assessment to instructional improvement, it must originate with the school's instructional leader, namely the principal (Airasian, 1993). The following statement accurately summarizes what is in store for principals as leaders in assessment.

The principal will no longer be viewed or allowed to operate as the "supervisor," "assessor," or "inspector" of teachers and teaching but rather will become a colleague and promoter of dialog about teaching. This, of course, is the historic role of the person who used to be called the "principal teacher" in a school. Teachers, in turn, will be viewed not as individuals in need of supervision and inspection, but as professionals who individually and in groups can provide their own self assessment and teaching improvement (p.59).

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