Quality Schools for the Next Century: a Reflective Essay

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Abstract
My formal education began in 1967 in a small school in north central Iowa. The world was a lot different then. There were 13 students in my kindergarten class. We all lived with our biological mother and father. Our fathers were the "breadwinners;" our mothers were the "bread makers." We read books about Dick, Jane, and Sally and completed thousands of worksheets. We memorized facts and sat quietly while the teacher did all the talking. We thought that once we graduated from high school we were finished with school forever. Words, such as drugs, computers, and AIDS, were not a part of our vocabulary. When we graduated 13 years later, ten of us had made the journey together. We had learned a lot about drugs, a little about computers, and nothing about AIDS. Today, 17 years after high school graduation, we know a lot about drugs, computers, and AIDS. Our society continues to change at a rapid rate, and education needs to keep pace with these changes. Even though our current educational system has changed slightly from that in which I learned, it does not provide our students with the skills necessary to compete in a global economy; therefore, as educators we must begin to move in a positive direction. We must work together to build quality schools. When we think of quality we must continuously think about what is best for our students.
QUALITY SCHOOLS FOR THE NEXT CENTURY
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
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My formal education began in 1967 in a small school in north central Iowa. The world was a lot different then. There were 13 students in my kindergarten class. We all lived with our biological mother and father. Our fathers were the "breadwinners;" our mothers were the "bread makers." We read books about Dick, Jane, and Sally and completed thousands of worksheets. We memorized facts and sat quietly while the teacher did all the talking. We thought that once we graduated from high school we were finished with school forever. Words, such as drugs, computers, and AIDS, were not a part of our vocabulary. When we graduated 13 years later, ten of us had made the journey together. We had learned a lot about drugs, a little about computers, and nothing about AIDS. Today, 17 years after high school graduation, we know a lot about drugs, computers, and AIDS. Our society continues to change at a rapid rate, and education needs to keep pace with these changes. Even though our current educational system has changed slightly from that in which I learned, it does not provide our students with the skills necessary to compete in a global economy; therefore, as educators we must begin to move in a positive direction. We must work together to build quality schools. When we think of quality we must continuously think about what is best for our students.
The only way we can produce quality schools is through change. These changes can be implemented through school transformation, curriculum development, and change in the organization's structure.

School Transformation

The American education system has received a lot of criticism over the last few years. Low student test scores, teaching rote facts, and curriculum fragmentation are only a few of the complaints we are hearing. Even educators themselves are not content with the current system. In order to address these issues, we need to make meaningful changes in our schools, so we may strive to do better at responding to students' needs. We need to transform (restructure) our current system. What is meant by restructuring? Cawelti (1994) provided an inclusive definition:

The central goal of high school restructuring is improving student performance on important outcomes contained in the curriculum of the future. Thus, restructuring involves designing fundamental changes in the expectations, content, and learning experiences for a curriculum appropriate to tomorrow's world. To achieve this goal, restructuring utilizes creative incentives, different organizational structures, new and
improved instructional technologies, and broader collaboration with community agencies and parents (p. 3).

Change develops at a rapid rate in our society, and we need to continuously address these changes by planning for the future. It seems that everyone wants change; however, the ideas that people have for change are as diverse as the people involved. Change must be planned for very carefully. As Dlugosh (1993) said, "Those who observe schools and those who work in them want schools to change....Professional educators must act carefully and rationally to guide their school districts through the maze of school reform" (p. 3).

Successful school restructuring involves not only professional educators, but a team of administrators, school board members, staff, parents, community members, and students. It should be a sample of the total population of the community. This school district transformation committee will work collaboratively together through a process for the benefit of the students. Once the committee has been established, they will need to gather evidence in support of why the district needs to change. A survey of the community is an excellent way to gather opinions of the total population of the district.
After the committee has the evidence necessary to support the change, the team should decide what they would like the district to look like in the future, determine common educational beliefs, and come up with a vision. The American Association of School Administrators (1992) believed that “transformation means more than making minor adjustments in curriculum or scheduling; it involves a shifting of beliefs and attitudes about what is possible” (p. 6).

A district should hire an outside facilitator; however most often the superintendent is the “team captain.” He or she may not always flaunt this role. Two of the most important characteristics of the team leader are the persons ability to have a vision for the district and their human relations skills. According to Guthrie and Reed (1991): “Persuading followers to accept a ‘vision’ of what an organization should be like, perhaps even coming to view themselves as having developed it, is as important a part of leadership as having a ‘vision’ itself” (p. 12). It is essential that the vision match the administrator’s values and beliefs as well as those of the community.

Once a vision for the future has been decided, the team should determine a mission that describes how the district will help the students to prepare for the future. The committee should then review the student
performance goals and district goals in the 280.12 and 280.18 plans, which are required by the Iowa State Board of Education, and revise them to fit the needs of our changing society. The National Goals 2000 could also be used to help guide the committee in their efforts.

After the vision, mission, and goals have been decided, the committee needs to develop an action plan. This plan will keep the district moving in a positive direction. The plan should be monitored closely and those involved should be given continuous evaluation and feedback. Establishing a time line for the action plan can help to maintain the focus. A time line should not be set in stone, but adjusted as necessary. In the words of Dlugosh (1993), "Planning, processing, and action are key ingredients that will lead to quality schools" (p. 3).

There is money available to help schools in the transformation process. The New Iowa Schools Development Corporation and the Goals 2000 Implementation Grant are two such sources. There is a lot of work involved in obtaining these funds; however, the benefits far outweigh the work involved.

Federal and state mandates do not produce meaningful change. The only way we can change schools is if the people in a community want change and are involved with the process. Local control of our schools
is what we want for public education. In the view of the American Association of School Administrators (1992) "When creating quality schools, the most important change in perception is to recognize the school--or really the school district--precisely as a single, connected system, and to manage it as one" (p. 8).

Curriculum Development

At the core of school transformation is the curriculum. Therefore, in a quality school we must also look at changing the curriculum in order for our students to be better prepared in our global economy. It is no longer feasible for teachers to rely only on worksheets and textbooks. Management consultant Robert F. Lynch (1991) told us:

Our entire educational system is designed to teach people to do things the one right way as defined by the authority figure. We are taught to recite what we hear or read without critically interacting with the information as it moves in and out of short-term memory. In this exchange the information leaves no tracks and independent thinking skills are not developed (p. 64).

When developing the curriculum the teachers and administrators need to look at the student performance goals and district goals which were written by the transformation committee with the help of the community.
The district will then need to provide staff development opportunities which will focus on how students learn and how the school can provide a better environment for learning. The school year should be expanded to allow for professional growth. In Cawelti’s (1994) view, we need to “move beyond teaching basic skills and factual information to developing higher-order intellectual skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, and to provide classroom learning experiences that help students derive their own meaning from learning” (p. 1). The basic skills are still important; however, problem solving, critical thinking, and the higher-level thinking skills will be important to the political, social, and economic achievements of our students as learning will now become a lifelong activity.

In a quality school the curriculum will be student centered. Therefore, for all students to be successful, the teacher will need to personalize instruction to meet the various needs and individual learning styles of all students. Currently most of our curriculum is centered around reading, writing, and math; however, not all students learn best in this way. A Harvard University professor of education, Howard Gardner, has developed the theory of multiple intelligences, and teachers should consider these intelligences when planning lessons and assessment. The following statement by
T. Armstrong (1994) described Gardner's theory: "The master code of this learning style model is simple: for whatever you wish to teach, link your instructional objective to words, numbers or logic, pictures, music, the body, social interaction, and/or personal experience" (p. 26). Although the master code of this learning style model seems simple, it takes a lot of time and planning for teachers to properly implement these styles into the curriculum. If we offer students choice and the opportunity to use various intelligences, we will see an increase in student motivation. We will encourage the students to set goals and accept responsibility for their learning.

Rather than a separate subject or isolated unit, the curriculum should be organized around a common theme. In Bozzone's (1995) interview with Dr. Ernest Boyer, he pointed out that when teaching students we want them to move beyond curriculum fragmentation of knowledge and to make natural connections, look for patterns, and see how subjects connect. Current brain research shows that chunking information and connecting it with existing schema helps store the information in long-term memory. According to Pat Wolfe (1995), brain compatible instruction:

(a) focuses on student understanding of content and ability to use information rather than on mastery
of relatively isolated knowledge of items and skill component; (b) requires learners to actively construct meaning to make their own sense of information, to generate examples and relate the content to what they already know rather than passively receive or copy data; (c) focuses on authentic tasks that call for problem solving, critical thinking, and/or creativity rather than just memorizing information; and (d) requires teachers to limit the breadth of content addressed and structure what they do teach around important ideas rather than to try to cover everything (p. 30).

By integrating instruction and connecting it around a central theme, we make learning more meaningful to our students. They can see how concepts are connected and interrelated.

In a quality school the teacher will provide relevant, developmentally appropriate experiences for students to develop lifetime skills including decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking, time management, team work, and communication. As mentioned earlier, the district needs to look at the goals; however, it is the process in which we reach these goals that teachers need to be concerned with. If we spend too much time focusing on the outcome, we do not improve
the process. According to Bonstingl (1992) W. Edwards Deming believed "The right time for attention to final outcomes in any production process--including the learning process--is at every step along the way" (p. 66).

In a quality school the process will be as important as the product. Sevick (1993) observed the following:

Not to have goals certainly seems to go against much of the education reform literature that has been published in the past few years. What Deming is really saying is that a well functioning system, with all members seeking improvement collectively, will already be goal-oriented and will not need to become goal-oriented or consider its goals as an after-thought (p. 9).

Educators need to pay close attention to the product and the process. Sevick (1993) also pointed out that Deming believes quality is not something that can be added at the end of the process but must be built in from the beginning. In the elementary schools too many students are being promoted before they have acquired the appropriate learning strategies and skills. Geiger (1989) believed that students who do not receive a quality education in their elementary years decrease the chances they have of a quality education in high school.
Since the process is as important as the product, standardized tests are no longer the best tool for assessment. We are beginning to see new techniques for student assessment, such as student portfolios and rubrics. In a student portfolio much of the work selected is the student's choice, and he or she evaluates the materials and sets personal goals for improvement. A portfolio can include writing samples, projects, audio and video recording, pictures, and numerous other samples of student progress. These authentic, multiple assessments will help the teacher determine what the child knows about a specific subject or skill applicable to the local curriculum and evaluate the process as well as the product.

Transforming the curriculum is an immense responsibility. According to Glatthorn (1997) "principals can best discharge their leadership role if they develop a deep and broad knowledge base with respect to curriculum" (p. 3). In order to be successful, transformation of the curriculum requires staff development and common planning time for the teachers. The teachers will need to work together, as well as with the students. The responsibility for quality work will be shared among all members of the community.
Organizational Structure

Currently in the American education system, the organizational structure of most school districts reflects a hierarchical arrangement of authority—a top-down model; however, we see this structure gradually taking more of an open systems approach. The nation’s economic and social needs are changing; therefore, the organizational structure must also change to meet the needs of a new generation.

Glasser discussed two management styles—boss-management and lead-management. The boss-management style is a top-down model, whereas the lead-management is more of an open systems approach. In the boss-management style, the leaders set the tasks and are in control. In the lead-management style the leaders enlist the help of others. Lead-management is the management style that is needed to support transformation in our schools.

According to Glasser (1992) there are four required elements for lead management:

(a) the leader engages the workers in a discussion of the quality of the work to be done and the time needed to do it so that they have a chance to add their input; (b) the leader shows or models the job so that the worker who is to perform the job can see exactly what the manager expects, while the
workers are continuously asked for their input; (c) the leader asks the workers to inspect or evaluate their own work for quality, with the understanding that the leader accepts that they know a great deal about how to produce high-quality work and will therefore listen to what they say; and (d) the leader is a facilitator in that he shows the workers that he has done everything possible to provide them with the best tools and workplace as well as a noncoercive, nonadversarial atmosphere in which to do the job (pp. 31-32).

The noncoercive lead management style should be used in all aspects of education from the state departments of education to the classroom teacher. To be an effective administrator, one needs to develop his or her own leadership style. A style that reflects the person’s values, beliefs and philosophies.

School districts need to hire administrators who support inclusionary models that move the decision-making process to the most appropriate level. Parents and the community have to begin taking an interest in the responsibility of educating our students. Schools need to become involved in shared decision-making.

Berry (1993) stated that:

Reform efforts have focused upon shared decision making as an organizational solution to improve
student learning. School buildings and the professionals in them are not independent islands of learning, but collaborative partners in educating children as they move through a dynamic and ever changing system (p. 3).

In shared decision making, the administrator becomes a facilitator, and the teacher, parents, community, and students help share in school governance. According to the American Association of School Administrators (1992) “One important tenet of systems thinking is to involve those closest to the ‘action’ in the decision-making process” (p. 16). By sharing school governance between administrators, teachers, parents, students, and the community, we will be able to continuously evaluate and give feedback. We will have a better understanding of how our students learn and of how we can help them reach the district’s competencies. These competencies are based on outcomes that reflect a collaborative effort of the aforementioned and reflect what we want students to know and do as a result of their education in order to be successful in the next century. Through the efforts of shared decision making we would like to see a developmentally appropriate, student-centered curriculum that focuses on higher-order thinking skills and on developing life-long learners.
The role the principal plays in shared decision making is crucial to the success of the school, since that person works directly with the majority of the people in the district. An effective principal is a person who can handle himself or herself in a variety of situations. According to Gorton & Schneider (1991) there are six major roles for administrators: (a) manager, (b) instructional leader, (c) disciplinarian, (d) human relations facilitator, (e) evaluator, and (f) conflict mediator (p. 85).

A person is an effective manager when he or she can keep the building organized and running smoothly. As a manager one will be in charge of the employees, budget, scheduling, and daily operations of the building. The majority of the people in the school community believe this to be the most important role of the administrator.

A person cannot become an effective principal unless he or she is an instructional leader. An instructional leader looks at coordinating curriculum and improving instruction. The instructional leader helps guide the district to the shared vision. This person also continuously looks at the academic program to find ways to improve it.

The effective principal is also a disciplinarian. This person maintains discipline in the building and is a support for the teachers when discipline problems
arise. The administrator should create a climate to minimize discipline problems. Creating a positive climate is one of the most critical jobs of an administrator.

The effective principal is a facilitator of human relations. The administrator’s human relations skills must be used when dealing with teachers, students, parents, community members and supervisors. The administrator needs to be a good listener, as well as a good communicator. The administrator needs to work collaboratively with all groups, while being open-minded and having the ability to look at the total picture. The little things that an administrator can do for others, such as a smile or friendly greeting, can help him or her in becoming successful.

The effective principal is an evaluator. He or she needs to evaluate the instructional program, teachers, support staff, and student progress. The administrator also needs to evaluate the condition of the facilities. Being an evaluator is not always an easy job. It is essential that the administrator realize that evaluation is a tool for improvement not for finding fault.

The effective principal is also a conflict mediator. In this capacity he or she uses human relations skills to resolve problems that arise by listening and helping others to work through the
situations that come forth. An administrator must always keep his or her eyes and ears open to try to terminate conflict or to be prepared when something does happen.

All of these roles are important in becoming an effective principal. If you take the critical traits suggested by the National Association of Secondary School Principals--problem analysis, judgment, organizational ability, decisiveness, leadership, sensitivity, range of interests, personal motivation, stress tolerance, educational values, oral communication skills, and written communication skills--and combine them with the roles of an administrator listed above, you will have an effective principal.

One of these areas cannot be deemed as more important than another, because one needs to allow for the differences in situations, schools, and communities. The most meaningful thing that an effective principal can do is to create a positive climate for learning and involve everyone in creating that climate.

Conclusion

Our world has changed since I was a child. The style in which I was educated no longer is the best method for all students. Therefore, change must take place. We must begin implementing quality in our schools. In creating a quality school we need to devise
a plan in which the vision, mission and goals of the district are established and in which a plan is put into affect and continuously evaluated. We need to promote a positive climate where students take more responsibility for their learning. A curriculum needs to be developed in which the process is as important as the product. In a quality school change occurs from the bottom up rather than the top down. If everyone works collaboratively together, we can build quality schools to insure a better future for our children.
References


