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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

This is an exciting time to be in education. The world has changed. Technology and the development of a global economy have played a part in this transformation. Reorganizing schools is of foremost importance to educators today. Schools have been affected significantly by these changes, and they will continue to evolve as we enter the 21st century. The education community is seeking to fundamentally change the way we work with our most important resources - teachers, administrators, students, parents, and the community. For educators, the most challenging aspect of this new age is to successfully educate every student for a meaningful future in this complex new world.

**A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING
SECONDARY SCHOOLS:**

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts in Education

by

Darla Jean Williams

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A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

This is an exciting time to be in education. The world has changed.

Technology and the development of a global economy have played a part in this transformation. Reorganizing schools is of foremost importance to educators today. Schools have been affected significantly by these changes, and they will continue to evolve as we enter the 21st century. The education community is seeking to fundamentally change the way we work with our most important resources - teachers, administrators, students, parents, and the community. For educators, the most challenging aspect of this new age is to successfully educate every student for a meaningful future in this complex new world.

The topic for my first research paper in this program was “Restructuring for Quality Schools Through Site Based Management.” Then I knew little about “change.” Now, three years later, my teaching experiences as well as the classes in this program, have introduced and oriented me to the meaning of “change” and “restructuring.” There are many definitions for the term “restructuring.” “Restructuring means rethinking what we have been doing, determining what works, and changing what doesn’t. It means looking at something from new angles and then making the changes necessary to bring all elements in line with the new vision” (Brandt, 1991, p. 27). This new perspective arises from the exercise of sharing power. Educators have learned from the business world that the best

decisions are made by those closest to the product. Education focuses on the student and what the student knows and can do; therefore, the teacher, in knowing the student, is best prepared to make decisions about curriculum and instruction.

It seems that defining “restructuring” or “change” is ongoing. Shared decision making, site-based management, team building, collaboration, and community involvement - all appear to be essential aspects of the process. “Whatever the issue, the principal is the pivotal player in facilitating change or maintaining the status quo” (Evans, 1995, p. 4).

As Tom Payzant (1994) stated in his article, “Changing Roles and Responsibilities in a Restructuring School District,” “Restructuring emphasizes that change must begin at the bottom of the educational bureaucracy, where teaching and learning take place in the classroom through exchanges between teachers and students”(p. 11). According to Payzant, school restructuring activities have brought about pronounced changes in the work and relationships of many teachers, administrators, and other school employees. He emphasized that an administrator in a restructuring school must be less a director and more a facilitator. “Facilitating involves listening to a wide variety of people and engaging them in ongoing deliberations about teaching and learning and other important matters that affect the life of the school” (p.12). In other words, excellent communication skills are a necessity. Leadership is a critical ingredient.

Restructuring schools involves leaders who make a difference based on their influence rather than through the authority of their position. What makes a positive difference in the lives of children determines the criteria for success.

Team building and trust building are significant responsibilities. It is true that some educators subscribe to the notion that students and staff members must be structured into specific patterns for them to succeed. This view is a narrow one that limits individuals and thwarts their success in school and beyond.

Personal Characteristics and Values

Having experience in both elementary and secondary classrooms, I have found that part of me vehemently resists change. On the other hand, because I do search for new answers and better solutions, I have greater understanding of the fact that once the process of shared decision making is initiated, it is unlikely that a school ever will be the same again. You can't go back to the "good old days." Everyone involved in any "change" process has a responsibility to commit to changes taking place that will result in enhanced educational opportunities for all the schools' students.

My personal values and beliefs with regard to "principals and administration," were formed in part as I went through school. Of course, the motivation and enthusiasm of certain teachers stand out; the English teacher whose dedication and love of literature extended in the classroom to a philosophy of life and living; the math instructor whose classroom environment was so structured -

her presence commanded respect; and finally, the principal of East High School in Sioux City. Mr. Eugene Farrell was his name. He was my classroom teacher, and later I taught physical education at East High School, where he served as principal.

His love for students, his instructional leadership qualities, his emphasis on the academic curriculum as well as the co-curricular activities, and his skill in recognizing and seeking out all the average kids that needed “recognition.” are qualities that I remember. Everyone that stepped into this office “learned something.” He was “wise” and a visionary. Needless to say, the role model that he demonstrated and the personal qualities that he possessed form in part my perspective on the “principalship.”

As the demands on education and the schools of our country increase, the principal, as the leader of what may be the largest enterprise in many communities, will have to change even more to cope with the changes of today. One has to ask - how can one person continue to meet the needs not only of education but of society as well?

Aretha Pigford (1996), a professor of educational administration at the University of South Carolina, has written an article entitled, “Leadership: A Journey That Begins Within.” Focusing on “authentic leadership,” she described authentic leaders as “people who have well-defined belief systems, people who know the values that guide them, and people whose actions are consistently

congruent with the values they expose” (p. 116). I am in agreement with some of her conclusions about leadership:

1. Leadership is a sacred trust, not a bestowed right - It is based on actual trust.
2. Leadership is about hearing all the voices, making decisions only after careful consideration of the perspectives of all.
3. Leadership is about creating a “surplus of vision.” Authentic leaders nurture other leaders recognizing that leadership shared is leadership multiplied. They create a “surplus of vision” by enthusiastically empowering those around them.
4. Leadership is about being comfortable. Authentic leaders have a strong commitment to bringing about changes - they “do something” (p. 117).

Principals must have many attributes. I am a strong believer in instructional improvement. I believe student achievement can be enhanced through improved teaching. I believe that administrators and teachers must be facilitators and that planning, guidance, and communication are keys in this process. I believe in promoting teacher ownership, and student and parent involvement. My personal philosophy is centered around a commitment to the school being student centered, with proper guidance and structure. At the secondary level particularly, the guidance aspect is so important. One challenge is to turn negative problems of

students into positives; a second is to get teachers to be sensitive to adolescents' problems. Understanding ourselves and others, and, knowing what negative behaviors mean and how to handle them in the school setting while focusing more and more on how we communicate, may have profound consequences in and out of education.

Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes

James Stronge (1993), in his article "Defining the Principalship: Instructional Leader or Middle Manager," suggested three general dimensions of a principal's behavior: (1) defining the school's mission, (2) managing the instructional program, and (3) promoting a positive learning environment. He believed that these dimensions would result in an effective framework. James Stronge reflects on this definition of "The Principal's Mission."

Successful principals must keep their mission foremost in their mind at all times. This mission is to educate human beings. The principal must not only articulate, but model the characteristics of integrity, trust, caring, listening, attention, and global vision. The principal must also hold high expectations and take a positive approach to life. Add a sense of humor and a low boiling point (p. 3).

I believe that a very important step in defining the schools mission as well as managing the instructional program would be the implementation of Site-Based Management. Robert Crowson and William Boyd (1993) stated that the current wave of school reform has gone through two phases. The first phase was guided by the belief that "excellence could be imposed from the top. Merit pay, career ladders, and mentoring programs, all were a part of this belief implemented to

improve teaching. There existed the belief that teaching and learning were unaffected by such efforts” (p. 148).

The second phase of school reform has involved “restructuring.” This is where Site-based Management comes into focus. Crowson and Boyd found that “although restructuring implies fundamental school reform, changes in curriculum and instruction, organization and administration of schools, partnerships and networks, many individuals viewed restructuring as shared governance. In other words, Site-Base Management is the reform or restructure” (p. 149).

Our building has been involved with Site-Based Management for the past three years. As our staff moved toward a site-based decision making model, the important aspect of restructuring surfaced--that of “teacher empowerment.”

Moses and Whitaker (1990) point out:

With empowerment, the role of the teacher requires a redefinition from the custodial job of dispensing information to the more sophisticated one of facilitating growth. This empowerment will also mean increased involvement of teachers in the day-to-day operation of the school (p. 32).

Carl Glickman, a professor of Education at the University of Georgia, believes that the goal of education is to help students to engage productively in a democratic society. “Site-Based Management decisions should revolve around effective learning practices in the education of students. Everything else falls out from this” (Glickman, 1993).

I am in agreement with the beliefs of Glickman. Glickman concerns himself with the issue of education--providing an opportunity for the pursuit of life, liberty,

and happiness and demonstrating through school practices that justice and equality exist. In answer to the question, “How can we improve a dialogue about teaching and learning in our schools that enables us to have common goals, take collective action, and study the effect on student learning?”, he encourages the development of three dimensions of a school:

Shared Governance Process -

Involving teachers as equals in making major decisions in education.

Focus of Change -

Improving education programs that benefit all students

Action Research -

Schools will implement action research, assessment, and collection of data which will determine effective changes in learning on students (p. 2).

Having been a member of a building Site-Council for three years, I have observed the positive results from these three dimensions. Our staff “floundered” for two years.. Then we were fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in Peter Holly’s “Process of School Improvement Planning” training. This year our building’s organization renewal does reflect:

Clear school improvement goals

A clear/accepted process for decision making

Use of data and feedback

Focused action toward goals

Broad participation in reaching goals (Holly, 1996)

This School Improvement Planning Process has helped our staff to:

Create a shared agenda.

Get focused.

Stick with the changes over time.

Ground our change efforts in data

Plan to succeed in terms of enhanced student learning (Holly, 1996).

I particularly liked his philosophy: “Effective change is a combination of the best of the old and the best of the new. Less is more; if we really do less better, then we’ll achieve more” (Holly). By taking our staff through this process of school improvement, we have involved “all” of the staff. We feel that we have unified and integrated our change efforts into one deliberate, concerted plan. Our building is pleased with our progress even if there are many areas that we still are uncertain about. This process is a “necessary and beneficial one”.

The educational leader for the 21st Century must be skilled at working with the complexities of motivating teachers. There are certain essential elements for positive teacher morale and motivation.

Bill Blokker (1992) outlines and explains these elements:

- I. Care
 - A. Time - Teachers must know you care.
 - B. Listen, both verbally and non-verbal.
 - C. Reward - Recognition and praise
- II. Dignity - Teachers must feel they are important.
 - A. Give value - Success
 - B. Understand intentions - Do not assume.
 - C. Trust - Be consistent over time.
- III. Potency - Teacher must feel power.
 - A. Goal setting - Be specific and set goals realistically high.
 - B. Monitor - Be accountable. Give feedback, and care.
 - C. Circle of Skills - Balance cognitive and affective.
 - D. Involve in decisions - Power
 - E. Define success as improvement. Perfection is not possible.
 - F. Ask for feedback - Modeling - Get off your pedestal.

(Blokker, p. 503).

According to Richard Niece (1993), an effective instructional leader is people oriented, interacting regularly with a variety of school population. “Principals pay considerable attention to developing school goals that are consistent with district aims, help teachers acquire needed instructional resources,

and directly supervise how instructional strategies are transformed into learning activities through observation and follow-up feed back” (p.16-17). The research indicated that principals who foster the use of test data in making changes in the instructional program and who encourage effective classroom monitoring of student progress can also identify important in-service needs.

In our district, principals alone are not solely responsible for the quality of the instructional program in their schools. Our district works within the concept of head teachers and supervisors. Instructional leadership should be a shared responsibility. It is my feeling that the positions of “head teachers’ are under-utilized sources of instructional leadership. These positions can be expanded to include key instructional tasks such as classroom observation, feedback, peer appraisal and coaching. Action research that allows education to be more reflective and thoughtful in the classroom can be an additional strategy for improving a school’s environment.

“Collaboration enhances the ability of a school to respond to problems and opportunities and increases effectiveness, efficiency, and productivity” (Shedd and Bacharach, 1991). There are many ways in which teachers, and administrators can be involved in collaborative efforts. Whether the collaboration is direct involvement in decision making or participation as an influence, leadership plays an important role in its success. A principal can give high visibility to the collaborative process by valuing and recognizing the contributions of each staff member. It is

also necessary to provide support systems for participatory decision making.

Collaboration is a powerful tool for creating environments where faculty, staff, parents, and community members can work cooperatively to promote appropriate learning opportunities.

Personal Professional Vision

In order to focus on a vision - laying out plans for changes in education - I had to read. I chose to refer to the report of the National Association of Secondary School Principals with recommendations based on their experiences. The very title of the report: "Breaking Ranks" (1996) conveys a recognition that old ways that no longer work must yield to change. The changes should be guided by a sense of purpose. The following goals appear as the purposes of high schools:

- A. High school is a learning community and each school must commit itself to expecting demonstrated academic achievement for every student in accord with national standards.
- B. High school must function as a transitional experience, getting each student ready for the next stage of life - each person needs to earn a living.
- C. High school must be a gateway to multiple options.
- D. High school must prepare each student to be a life-long learner.

- E. High school must provide an underpinning for good citizenship and for full participation in the life of a democracy.
- F. High school must play a role in the personal development of young people as social beings who have needs beyond those that are strictly academic.
- G. High school must lay a foundation for students to be able to participate comfortably in an increasingly technological society.
- H. High school must be an institution that advocates in behalf of young people (NASSP, March, p. 57).

Even more important are this committee's recommendations. In the area of curriculum, one important recommendation centers on offering essential knowledge, integrating it, and making connections to real life. The core of the high school curriculum must strive to meet individual needs without compromising larger goals. I feel strongly that a district must identify a set of essential academic learning in which students must demonstrate achievement in order to graduate. I observe that in our middle schools, the district simply "passes" a student that has really failed in core curriculum areas. A district must have a commitment to support academic achievement standards. Promotion of co-curricular activities as integral to an education is also important in that such activities provide opportunities for all students and extend academic learning.

In the area of instructional strategies, students should be engaged in their own learning. Although the responsibility for implementing instructional strategies ultimately rests in the hands of well prepared teachers, a principal must model acceptable teaching practices and provide support, resources, and ongoing professional development that facilitates effective teacher strategies.

Included in the NASSP report was the importance of a school environment that was conducive to teaching and learning. It is important that the principal and everyone else responsible for the high school work to create a climate favorable to education inside and outside the building.

Technology is revolutionizing education; school leaders must work with others to develop and implement a long-term strategic plan for use of technology in the school.. Schools will make technology integral to curriculum, instruction and assessment, accommodating different learning styles and helping teachers to individualize the learning process.

This report recommended restructuring space and time for a more flexible education. This would involve the creation of flexible scheduling that would allow for more varied uses of time in order to meet the requirement of the core curriculum. This academic program would extend beyond the high school campus to areas outside the four walls of the building.

The high school must assess the academic progress of students in a variety of ways so that a clear and valid picture emerges of what they know and are able

to do. Accountability demands that a high school have a set of objectives and assess and report the extent to which they are met.

Learning on the part of educators is essential to their professional role. A school district should help educators to create a learning community in which substantial professional development linked primarily to content knowledge and to instructional strategies play an important part in their work.

Our school district has a distinctive “boss-manager leader” in its Superintendent. We also have a Chamber of Commerce controlled school board. Their political and bureaucratic “arms” are continually reaching out and “eroding” what is best for kids. I find myself questioning decisions in so many areas. In the article, “Organizational Change and Change Leadership” (Krysinski and Reed, 1994), this statement made an impression on me:

When those who have power to manipulate changes act as if they have only to explain, and when their explanations are not at once accepted, shrug off opposition as ignorance or prejudice, they express a profound contempt for the meaning of lives others than their own (Marris, 1995, p.161).

One must understand that organizational change projects can create such feelings as anxiety and uncertainty among the leaders and followers. I have heard others describe our district as one with “management by turmoil.” In education, there seems to be a sense of frustrated ideals. It is true that educational opportunity has improved substantially. However, Jonathan Kozol (1995) does remind us that millions of children in America do not share in the educational

advances that we believe should be the privilege of every child. Paul Regnier

(1994) has pointed out:

It is an illusion to think of teaching quality in terms of technique, nor is it enough to think that subject knowledge alone will yield quality. At the heart of teaching are moral or ethical relationships, because the teacher takes responsibility for the upbringing of the young (p. 23).

I know that when I am in the classroom that I must project those qualities of being honest and fair. I must encourage self-discipline and academic responsibility, and most important, model respect toward others. I have learned that in order to be happy, we need Love, Achievement, Fun, and Freedom. I also must continue to believe that a classroom teacher can make a difference. That part is hard sometimes!

Having participated in the “Quality Schools” intensive training, I recognize “lead management” as the necessary force that would help remove some barriers to “quality” that exist in our school system. William Glasser, writes extensively, describing the concepts of lead management in his books “The Quality School (1991) and The Quality School Teacher (1993).” Glasser explains that a lead manager must communicate a compelling vision of quality as well as inspire cooperation. His “lead management focus” involves finding out what is wrong and then studying the process to prevent defects. In addition, he calls for and recognizes group achievement and works with the attitude of “help me help you do your job.” The school’s focus must be to create a constancy of purpose for

I would always want to be a part of a school involved in change projects. Such a school would engage the curriculum - how students learn and how peer supervision improves instruction. This school would also be involved in shared decision making. Problems and solutions are the collective responsibility of the entire school community. A school that works has visionary leadership. Teachers would teach with an open door and the principal would manage by “walking around.”

In 1984, Peters and Waterman, in “In Search of Excellence,” expressed the belief that successful companies remain close to the customer. Students are our customers, and if we want to be successful, we must focus on their needs. A school must be secondary to the product. The product is exemplary teaching and student learning.

Transformed schools will support and value creativity. In such schools, new teaching methods will be encouraged and there will be opportunities for innovation. Diversity of teaching style is valued, and diversity of learning style is evident.

I must put foremost in my mind the belief that moral professionalism is not limited to wrestling with the day to day controversial dilemmas within the school and community. Rather, it is about such matters as: what caring for children means and how we practice that; recognizing that justice is about how we can be

children means and how we practice that; recognizing that justice is about how we can be fair to children; and understanding that being intellectually honest is often problematic for a teacher.

I was impressed with the comments written by Hugh Sockett (1996). He stated that teachers, as well as principals and superintendents are trapped by the outmoded bureaucratic systems in education. The task for leadership can thus, be described as transformational. I have observed that even when principals aspire to instructional leadership, they are hemmed in by the traditional and bureaucratic character of their ascribed roles, and they lead by administering an existing system and “power-brokering” within that system. They cope with the constant drip of political bureaucratic pressures in a context of crisis management.

Sockett concludes by sharing three primary features that he feels will redefine a principal’s professionalism.

A recognition of one’s self as a learner; fostering that spirit, attitude, and practice throughout a school so that it becomes a learning community (one that recognizes all can teach and all can learn) as well as a learning organization; and reasserting one’s own moral autonomy and control of one’s time to provide the space for serious, reflective thought and study (p. 29).

The twenty-first century will dawn with a continuing public concern about education. As an educator, I do know the immense importance of the services that schools deliver to society. We need to work together at ways to transform them, focusing above all else, on moral and intellectual quality in the school.

Dennis Littky, principal of Thayer High School in Winchester, N.H., and a recognized leader in restructuring, said:

The process of real change begins with the leadership of one or more people who have a deeply felt vision - call it a passionate vision of a great future for their school: people who can raise their eyes high enough above the daily smog to see that ordinary kids can do wonderful things if the conditions are right; people who believe that having a great day at school is a lot less exhausting than having a lousy day; people with a faith that hard work directed at worthwhile goals can produce amazing results (p. 24).

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