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A Preferred Vision for Administering Secondary Schools: a Reflective Essay

Robert S. Weaton
University of Northern Iowa

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A Preferred Vision for Administering Secondary Schools: a Reflective Essay

Abstract

Beginning the process of transformation from classroom teacher, to that of administrator, educational leaders are drawn to the reality that schools have undergone tremendous change, and with it a new set of challenges in an effort to meet the needs of students in the 21st century. The key to effective schooling does not solely rely on whether or not a school changes, but rather on how that change takes place, and to what extent students, staff, and community develop ownership of the process. As a beginning practitioner pursuing the goal of becoming an administrator in the secondary school, the focus is on two areas. First, twentythree years as a classroom teacher and coach at the secondary level have served to enhance a core value and belief system from which to operate. Being fortunate to have worked in three different school systems throughout a professional career, and through those experiences having begun to develop the second area of focus, that of a definitive positive leadership style, enabling the creation of an environment of professionalism, enthusiasm, and accountability for the students, staff, and community served.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING
SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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By

Robert S. Weaton

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Date Approved

Robert H. Decker
Advisor/Director of
Research Paper

April 22, 1999
Date Approved

Dale R. Jackson
Second Reader of
Research Paper

4.22.99
Date Received

Michael D. Waggoner
Head, Department of Educational
Leadership, Counseling, and
Postsecondary Education

Beginning the process of transformation from classroom teacher, to that of administrator, educational leaders are drawn to the reality that schools have undergone tremendous change, and with it a new set of challenges in an effort to meet the needs of students in the 21st century. The key to effective schooling does not solely rely on whether or not a school changes, but rather on how that change takes place, and to what extent students, staff, and community develop ownership of the process. As a beginning practitioner pursuing the goal of becoming an administrator in the secondary school, the focus is on two areas. First, twenty-three years as a classroom teacher and coach at the secondary level have served to enhance a core value and belief system from which to operate. Being fortunate to have worked in three different school systems throughout a professional career, and through those experiences having begun to develop the second area of focus, that of a definitive positive leadership style, enabling the creation of an environment of professionalism, enthusiasm, and accountability for the students, staff, and community served.

As administrators strive for an educational system that will speak toward the needs of our young people entering the new millennium, this reflective paper will address four areas which are important components to effective schools. First, how discipline plays an integral part and relates to school climate and the educational day. Second, to look at a changing vision for the American high school, which must meet the needs of a changing society. Third, the paradigm shift from extracurricular to co-curricular educational opportunities for our student body. And finally, perceptions of leadership style which will facilitate an environment conducive to being an effective school.

Discipline as it Relates to School Climate

You can discipline a child, or you can teach a child discipline. Therein lies the change that must take place in American schools. For years, high schools across this country have held to the old-fashioned, outdated suspension policy when it comes to disciplining problem students; however, do we really get at the root of the problem? A new discipline approach, based in part on the Iowa Behavior Initiative (Stanton, 1998, C3), leads the way toward a revitalized way of thinking which begins to establish the concept that calls for being consistent and firm, but less punitive with students in the initial stages of dealing with those having problems. Dr. Arlis Swartzendruber, Superintendent, in addressing the state of the Waterloo Community School District, emphasized that “our vision is to utilize knowledge about the essentials in every young person’s life, then apply that knowledge to help every student be an involved, well-behaved learner” (Stanton, 1998,C3). Schools of the 21st century need to better utilize resources available to them within the community, such as social services, to help in the education process. Educational leaders cannot continue to turn a student loose on a three day suspension, and expect behavior patterns to automatically change upon their return.

In the creation of standards of discipline within an individual high school, the two main goals of school discipline should be: (1) ensure the safety of students and staff, and (2) create an environment conducive to learning. An administrative team might look at three areas which could give a “fresh” approach to positive discipline, consequently enhancing academic achievement. First, and foremost, schools must become creative with a discipline policy. Discipline begins by getting to know the student, and the potential problems that students bring with them to school. Without that knowledge we, as administrators, can only discipline the

child, rather than address the problem (Krajewski, 1998). At the same time, we need to convince our faculty to invest the time in getting to know our students in the classroom. According to author Kunjufu, (1986), there are three kinds of adults in our classrooms today. First, instructors is the label used to denote those who specialize in content. Instructors do not teach children, they teach their subjects. Second, teachers are those who understand their subject matter, but also learning styles of their students. Third, the coach are those that have the ability to combine subject matter and learning styles with identity and self-esteem (Kunjufu, 1986). Education needs “coaches” teaching children. Schools must align themselves to the philosophy that faculty be student driven, not content driven. A simple change in teaching can ultimately lead to the reduction of dropout rates, attendance problems, and discipline concerns. Establishing this type of environment within the school, aids the effort of teaching our children to be disciplined.

Second, as teaching professionals work toward varying strategies in the classroom to allow for different learning styles within the student population, an understanding that certain students do not function within the “traditional” school environment and school model must also be addressed. Therefore, alternative programming is critical in meeting the needs of a diverse student body. Alternative classrooms and schools should prepare students for the ultimate goal of returning to a regular classroom, and to assume adult roles in all communities (Wilcox, 1998). To establish a discipline policy void of this concept would be nothing more than a stop-gap measure intended to solve only short term problems of the school, not help the very students schools are charged with educating.

The final area discussed is in establishing positive discipline within the school to address the concept of social responsibility and accountability. If we

expect a student body to accept responsibility and become accountable, administrators and faculty members must model and teach that same behavior. If united, a school can develop a model of consistency, dealing with the day to day problems that arise. With punishment alone, ownership is relinquished; once the punishment has been served, students are free and clear. Creative discipline moves past this first step to incorporate additional points of accountability, built into six fundamental principles: (1) positivity is a better teacher than negativity; (2) choice empowers; (3) self-evaluation is essential for improvement; (4) self correction is the most successful approach to changing behavior; (5) social responsibility must be taken, rather than given, this involves intrinsic motivation; (6) authority can be used without punishment (Marshall, 1998, p. 31).

To many administrators and faculty, discipline means only punishment. Educators must redirect discipline to include the teaching component. Discipline can be a positive way of socializing students to learn self motivation, ownership in their lives, and accountability for their actions as they strive to be successful in a complex society.

Changing Vision for the American High School

As a beginning practicing administrator of a secondary high school, the Carnegie Institutes 1996 report, "Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution" is an important analysis toward the transformation of the American high school, entering the 21st century. What is important about this report, is that it embodies a vision developed by those on the firing line: the high school principal and teacher. It draws authenticity from the fact that it rises from the inside, with those who are accountable for the education process on a day-to-day basis; not with those who descend on our high schools from the outside (Carnegie, 1996,

p. 5). It therefore constitutes serious consideration when looking at a specific high school institution, and through collaboration with students, faculty, and community members, will serve as a guiding vision for effective change.

As the beginning practitioner, the focus will be on various components of the report, and allow it to guide the thinking process of serving as an agent of change. The key components of the report needing consideration are: First, the core of the high school curriculum should offer the substance and practicality to prepare our students for the new millennium, as well as meeting the individual needs of students and community. Second, understand that the responsibility for implementing instructional strategies to meet our students needs, rests with teachers who need to develop and utilize a variety of strategies to motivate the learner. Administrators must continue to set high standards for acceptable teaching practices by providing positive support, resources, and ongoing professional development time, facilitating effective teaching strategies. Third, it is imperative to continue to create a climate conducive to teaching and learning. Fourth, technology has revolutionized education dramatically within the last decade. Regarding it any other way than critical to the enhancement of the educational process is counterproductive. Planning should continue to be a high priority to employ technology throughout the school and to integrate it into all aspects of the educational program. However, unless placed as a high priority in the education of staff toward technology literacy, the school will lag behind in its technological effectiveness. Fifth, there is a need to evaluate whether or not a restructuring of time and space will allow for a more flexible education. The ways of doing business in the past, must give way to innovative and more efficient ways of educating children. Educators must move away from the theory that seat time equates

learning, and that education takes place only in the classroom. Sixth, accountability demands that a high school have standards, benchmarks, objectives, and a way to assess if students are meeting such criteria. The purpose of accountability is to ensure that teaching, strategies, and learning are serving the needs of the student population. Administration has fallen far short of holding a faculty accountable for good teaching. Standards must be set, and adhered to if the goal is to pass those same expectations on to students (Carnegie, 1996, p. 6-9).

Holding the school community accountable to both a vision and mission in education is a large task. However, the transformation of schools to become vibrant centers of student learning begins with small steps. As the school community begins to accomplish established goals, all will begin to feel a sense of pride. That pride will in turn foster more participation with renewed confidence as schools continue the process of reform and improved student achievement (Voors, 1998, p. 6).

Paradigm Shift: Extracurricular to Co-curricular

Of the many concerns that face educators heading into the new millennium, the one that is of extreme interest as a future administrator, and is tied to the overall school environment, is the drop in participation in school activities among students across this country. For that reason, the choice is to focus on this issue as a separate entity. As an educator, and coach for the past twenty-three years, the belief that this issue needs to be addressed in more than a passing thought among those administrative officials who are key players in the decision making process. Too many administrators view extra-curricular activities as a necessary evil, separate to the educational day. Instead, there needs to be a major paradigm shift from the concept that activities outside the classroom are “extra”, and should be

treated as such; to that of activities outside the classroom being co-curricular in nature, and serve to complement the education process of the total child.

To illustrate the need to look at the total picture, rather than fragmented parts alone, a local survey of students at Waterloo West High School focused on athletic participation and possible reasons why students were not involved (Stanton, 1998, B1). The impetus of the article leads one to believe that student's do not participate because they are not recruited to do so. The athletic department goes on to state that recruitment is a high priority, and that coaches within the district need to do a much better job in this area. At no time in the article does the student leaders advisory committee, who were responsible for the survey, pursue other common denominators to the problem of student participation, as well as survey coaches within the district to research what type of collaborative effort is made in the area of getting students involved. As a result, at least in this particular district, the essence of the problem gets muddled, and the district is no closer at getting to the root of the problem, than it was before the survey was conducted. This is nothing more than "pass the buck" problem solving, and neither enhances the school environment, nor brings us any closer to involving students in outstanding co-curricular programs.

The previous example is used to point out the dangers of becoming nearsighted in attempting to improve the school activities program of an individual district. As the administrative leader of the high school, it is imperative that belief and commitment be conveyed so that the total educational programs of the school includes co-curricular activities; as vital as the core areas of academic study. It is therefore, education's mission, as we enter the 21st century, to infuse a total curriculum; removing the concept that education takes place only between four walls, a chalkboard, and thirty students sitting in a well organized set of rows.

The NASSP/Carnegie commission on the restructuring of the American High School, in Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution (1996), devotes a segment of their report on the premise that co-curriculars are essential to changing high schools for the 21st century. High Schools provide for social and personal needs of students, as well as academic growth. Benefiting from such co-curricular programs will reinforce the goal of teaching students to be responsible and well rounded human beings, providing them with opportunities that develop character, critical thinking, sociability, and specific life-long skills (Carnegie, 1996, p.4). A 1992 Department of Education study confirms what many educators have believed all along about the importance of co-curriculars in the climate of a high school. The study shows that participants in co-curricular activities have better attendance, better academic achievement, and develop higher goals than those of non-participants. In addition to these benefits, statistics also show a link between participating students in co-curriculars and less use of drugs and alcohol, as well as decreased drop-out rates (Carnegie, 1996, p.5). However, administrators who believe in the benefits of such programming must become innovative in their thinking. Within the same research of the Carnegie report, the most alarming of data indicates that students of low socioeconomic status were less likely to participate in activities than were high socioeconomic status students (Carnegie, 1996, p. 5). Because of the importance of co-curriculars as a means of helping at-risk students, all those within the educational community must look at innovative ways to get all students involved. They can tie in the concept of volunteerism with an English curriculum, where freshmen students are required to spend hours outside the classroom volunteering their time. Graduation credit is given for participation in the music and arts programs. There is a strong need to continue the

trend of moving our extra-curricular programing to co-curricular status, thus giving true value to all phases of student interests.

When dealing with increasing participation among students in a high school setting, a second variable needs to be addressed and considered: that of upgrading the competence level of our coaches and sponsors. When the state of Utah, for example, considered upgrading their athletic programs, the need to better train those coaches and sponsors of athletics was identified. By training all school para-professionals and noncertified coaches the real winners become the students themselves. They receive better coaching, leading to better safety, a higher level of sport philosophy and psychology, leading to more positive coach/athlete relationships (Beveridge, 1996, p. 51).

When a college or prospective employer comes knocking, and wishes to see a student's transcript, why do they place such emphasis on the participation in co-curricular activities? What does this say about the student? Could it indicate an individual of diverse interests, experiences, and background? This is the essence of the total educational experience schools should be giving to our students. It teaches those qualities so strongly associated with success: energy level, drive, self-discipline and, how an individual uses available opportunities (Fitzsimmons, 1996, p. 19). Co-curricular commitments help our young people answer the fundamental question: Who am I, and how will I fit into the complexity of American society?

It is time to stop "selling" and/or "defending" the educational benefit of an activities program. Instead, educational leaders should only have to point to activities as the very best examples or school reform initiatives. Themes woven through school reform in our classrooms, have been evident in our co-curricular programming for decades. Concepts such as authentic learning, authentic

assessment, cooperative learning, inclusion, lesson planning, higher order thinking/problem solving, service requirements for graduation, curricular integration, transitioning, and the whole child or learner all take place at some time in our activities program (Gholson, 1996, p.21).

Student activities continue to provide unique, realistic, relevant, and fun opportunities for learning. Achievement in the academic, social, and emotional realms of the student's life has always been at the heart of the activity program. It is time to end the discussion of co-curricular program relevance and learning opportunities for students. Rather, we should ask for relevance and meaning in many segments of what we think are the academic components of the school. Most of the best practices related to learning and achievement have always been and continue to be found in the activities program (Gholson, 1996, p.22).

Educational Leadership

In a time when students, faculty, and communities are looking for viable solutions to real educational problems, certain districts become nearsighted toward the very commodity that should be treasured the most; it's people. As we enter a new millennium, educational leaders will be faced with the greatest of challenges. However, in meeting those challenges schools can not lose sight of the common thread that connects true educational leadership with positive educational change; it's people.

Educational leadership focuses on moving away from the stereotypical principal as the "manager" of a school, to one of "leadership", suggesting a true vision to take the organizational structure in a desirable direction. The manager views his/her role as one who finds out what consumers want from the school, and then delivers specific services accordingly. The educational leader is concerned with the issues of purpose and direction, struggling to identify the right thing to do

(Sergiovanni, 1992, p.76). Therefore, educational leadership must become more expansive. It must include a concern for the worth of objectives, its impact on the school and society, and leaders that are active instead of reactive. By moving from manager status to leader status, one begins to shape ideas instead of responding to them, adopting a personal and active attitude toward specific goals. "The net result of this influence is to change the way people think about what is desirable, possible, and necessary" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 76). One only need look at effective schools to identify outstanding qualitative aspects of educational leaders. Those individuals possess three distinct qualities of vision, intensity and creativity. A vision of what is possible, and what the school is doing is significant to educational performance. An intensity which translates into desire, commitment and enthusiasm, creating an atmosphere of excitement in the school community. Finally, a creative spirit, which produces fresh thought, a sincere commitment to new ideas, and a belief in creative change. Hence, principals of effective schools had the following characteristics in common: (1) did not intend to become principals; (2) a sincere faith in children; (3) works effectively with people; (4) aggressive, enthusiastic, and adaptable; (5) committed to education; and (6) able strategists and well organized (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 80-81).

In moving to the role of educational leader, the principal must also focus on the role as an instructional leader; a leadership style that initiates, and implements planned changes in a school's instructional program. It begins with a specific attitude committed to student productivity, which creates values, behaviors, and functions designed to foster student satisfaction and achievement. Instructional leadership is: (1) a shared responsibility; (2) situational (timing is everything); (3) planned (a critical component); (4) enhanced by a common purpose (there is general

agreement among segments of the population); (5) involved in risk taking (the more people involved, the better the outcome); and (6) characterized by being goal oriented (Pellicer, 1990, p. 57). Instructional leaders, therefore, know what they believe, and attempt to bring this belief system to the educational table. The instructional leader is quite aware of how important it is to start off right, making decisions in the best interests of a schools primary clients, students. The instructional leader does not ignore problems; they attack them and deal head on with them. And finally, the instructional leader pays attention to the little things, collaborating with those entrusted with creating a dynamic educational curriculum, reflecting the needs of a changing society (Pellicer, 1990, p. 58).

“Teachers are prepared to teach disciplines, not students” (Lambert, 1998, p.74). The success of a school depends on whether the principal is able to move a faculty in a direction of being student centered, rather than curriculum driven. From this premise, education must consider a third component of leadership, that of leadership capacity. Defined, it is the incorporation and ability to infuse skillful participation in the work of leadership (Lambert, 1998, p. 12). The principal must take action to build leadership capacity, and in doing so, incorporate specific concepts into the process. Hiring personnel with the capacity to do leadership work is important. Find those teachers who view themselves as being responsible to the school community, as well as the classroom, and you will find a greater chance to impact a student body. Also important to leadership capacity is getting to know the people in the building. Authentic relationships are fostered by personal conversations, shared work and responsibilities. This builds trust and cooperation between administration and staff, important in the collaboration process. A third factor is to assess one’s staff and school capacity for leadership, by summarizing

the staff's highest needs, then setting a course of direction in meeting those needs. Additionally, a school must develop a positive culture of inquiry within the school. By organizing the school community, and establishing structures and groups that serve as the infrastructure for the self-renewing process of inquiry, positive school growth can occur. Finally, develop with the cooperation of the district, a system of shared decision making. Decentralization of both authority, responsibility, and resources through site-based management practices gives direct ownership to those educators within the building (Lambert, 1998, pg. 77-87). However, do not talk about site-based leadership if the district is not willing to allow it to take place. This serves no purpose and will alienate a staff, creating a sense of distrust between administration and faculty. The building principal often gets caught in the middle, a position which takes time to correct. Leadership capacity therefore becomes the practice of learning together, thereby constructing meaning to the education of children collectively and through the collaborative process (Lambert, 1998, p. 5).

“Seek first to understand ... Then to be understood” (Covey, 1989, p.53).

The final focus of educational leadership concerns the most important piece of the puzzle, individual leadership vision. While the emphasis has been to discuss the specifics within the field of education, there are certain personal qualities that cross all boundaries of effective leadership. Beginning with a personal mission statement:

Succeed at home first.
 Seek and merit divine help.
 Never compromise with honesty.
 Remember the people involved.
 Hear both sides before judging.
 Obtain counsel of others.
 Defend those who are absent.
 Be sincere yet decisive.
 Develop one new proficiency a year.

Plan tomorrow's work today.
 Hustle while you wait.
 Maintain a positive attitude.
 Keep a sense of humor.
 Be orderly in person and in work.
 Do not fear mistakes - fear only the absence of creative,
 constructive, and corrective responses to those mistakes.
 Facilitate the success of subordinates.
 Listen twice as much as you speak (Covey, 1989, p.106).

By developing a personal mission statement, the individual establishes a specific path to follow in actions of thought, word and deed. It allows a leader the opportunity to be proactive rather than reactive, knowing what knee jerk reaction solicits from peers, therefore eliminating distrust and a lack of confidence in leadership ability. Personal mission statements also help to define who you are and what it is that you stand for. The key to effective leadership in the 21st century will be in communicating that personal mission statement, into the schools vision of what effective schools should be, and finding those individuals with similar beliefs, to help bring education alive within the school.

Educational leadership is a series of professional strategies of doing what works, and doing what matters. Successful leaders, no matter what the field of endeavor, always return to a belief that the number one priority of positive leadership is in taking care of those within the organizational structure, and finding others to help them do it. Why does this continue to be such a mystery in many of the school districts around this country? In order to motivate people, you first have to provide for them, and then know them. By doing so, administrators will find that to lead effectively, it must be done in a way that enhances self-esteem (McGraw, 1999, p. 48). Look around and you will find districts who believe, and those who do not. Truth be told; either you get it, or you will fail (McGraw, 1999, pp. 33-55).

Through the reflective process, this paper has attempted to emphasize the priorities and focus in becoming an effective leader within education. Discipline, changing visions of the American high school entering the 21st century, the school as an entire curricular environment, and perceptions of effective leadership all work to shape the thinking and actions of this author as a future administrator. It is now the time when administrative theory from the classroom must coincide with practical application in the field setting. Becoming an effective leader means living and acting upon the core value system so vital in the manifestation of a schools established mission agenda. In doing so, students, faculty, and an entire school community grows as one; dedicated to providing the very best educational opportunities for the children of today, and the leaders of tomorrow.

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