A Preferred Vision for Administering Secondary Schools: a Reflective Essay

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A Preferred Vision for Administering Secondary Schools: a Reflective Essay

Abstract
Administration of a public secondary school is a tremendous challenge as we move into the 21st Century. I have just finished my sixth year as a high school associate principal/activities director, and I have learned a great deal and enjoyed every minute of my job. My course work and my job experiences have reaffirmed my belief that the building leader is the key in determining the effectiveness of a school.
A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Administration of a public secondary school is a tremendous challenge as we move into the 21st Century. I have just finished my sixth year as a high school associate principal/activities director, and I have learned a great deal and enjoyed every minute of my job. My course work and my job experiences have reaffirmed my belief that the building leader is the key in determining the effectiveness of a school.

Leading a building is not without its stresses and problems, however. Villanueva (1997) reports that school administrators face the pressures of long hours, relatively low salaries when compared with what people who have similar skills are paid in the business world, political instability, and countless expectations. A partial list of those expectations includes; being a manager of both time and money, creating policies and procedures, facilitating meetings, supervising students during the day and at evening events, being a disciplinarian, leading staff development, supervising and evaluating teachers, being a public relations expert, counseling students and staff, working on curriculum, and being the district's representative at local and state meetings.

Ripley (1997) stated that school principals are constantly confronted with these, and many other tensions, and are called upon to make decisions that are in the best interests of students, staff, and parents. How do we strike a balance? Often that is difficult to determine. There is no map to follow. The search is as
much intuitive as it is intellectual, as much affective as it is cognitive. We must learn to live with the intense ambiguity that comes with school leadership.

Providing for the Needs of Students

The diversity of public schools provides many of these tensions and challenges, but it also provides the richness and excitement that makes the job fulfilling. Administrators need to provide programming for a wide variety of students - special education students and regular education students alike. My goal as a building leader will be to provide for the social, emotional, behavioral, and intellectual needs of all students. I am going to work as hard as I can to ensure that each student, no matter what his or her skills, talents, or aspirations are, leaves high school with the ability to become a functional, productive citizen.

I know that a 100% success rate is impossible, but it is imperative to reach as many students as possible. High school drop-outs used to be able to support themselves and their families, but that is no longer true because high-paying, unskilled jobs are not available. A minimum of a high school diploma is a must, and we need to try to motivate students to go on for further training.

It will be my job to figure out how to motivate the staff, parents, and the community to meet the social, emotional, behavioral, and intellectual needs of all students. This is a complex issue which never was discussed much in school until recently. The family was responsible for a child's social and emotional...
development, and the school’s responsibility was primarily a student’s intellectual development. In today’s society, more and more students are coming to us lacking in social, emotional, and behavioral skills, and we have to work to provide those skills before a student can become academically successful.

The Iowa Department of Education (1997) says education should not and cannot be only for those who, without direct assistance, are able to be academically successful and socially acceptable to peers and adults. If we are to meet the high standards of education reform, we need to evaluate and change our beliefs about students who are behaviorally challenging. We need to invest in the development of systematic and proactive curricula, instruction, and services, as well as staff who are committed to ensuring the social, emotional, and behavioral preparedness of all students and young children.

Advisor Program

One of the things I plan to do to try to accomplish my goals is to develop an advisor program. The advisor will stay with a small group of students throughout his or her four years in high school. The purpose of this program is to personalize the school, and to let each student know that he or she has at least one adult advocate in the building. The advisor will also be responsible for helping students create individualized plans for their high school education based on their
interests and abilities. The advisors will have a variety of other responsibilities as well.

Student Assistance Teams

I am also going to make use of grade level student assistance teams. These teams will meet regularly to discuss student progress and concerns. Mackin (1996) states that people make an institution. The quality of relationships and the openness of adults to reach out, stimulate and connect with students are what make a school a human, dynamic, and exciting place. He goes on to say that students learn to think best, to use their minds well in an environment where they feel trusted, respected, and encouraged. The principal is the key force in affecting school culture. He or she establishes the tone, ambiance, and overall commitment to excellence in the building. The real task in restructuring high schools for the 21st Century is not organizational but attitudinal.

The role of the principal in this restructuring process is to recognize that change is difficult and that it inevitably results in a certain amount of resistance, however, the principal must remain true to his or her vision of what is best for students. The principal must foster a climate that provides opportunities for faculty members to talk, reflect, express their opinions and concerns, and grow professionally. Dietrich and Bailey (1996) report that in schools with a positive climate, the principals are active participants in the daily operations of the school.
They are visible and enthusiastic, and they communicate a sense of caring for both students and staff. Enthusiasm, caring, and teamwork permeates the entire building and results in a positive feeling throughout.

**Discipline**

The behavioral expectations (discipline code) that are established in the school are another very important issue. If staff members are actively working to meet the social and emotional needs of students, misbehavior should be minimized. Green (1997) says that without caring relationships, teachers must rely on discipline and classroom management techniques.

There is, however, still a need to establish clear behavioral guidelines within the building. It is best to be proactive about teaching behavioral expectations and to outline consequences for violating those expectations. Many times students will do what is expected of them if we simply tell them clearly what it is we expect. If students and parents are involved in the process of creating behavioral guidelines, there is a greater likelihood that they will be adhered to. It is also very important to create expectations for student common areas such as the cafeteria, rest rooms, the gym, the auditorium, etc. because it is in these areas where many problems typically occur.

According to Heller (1996) well-disciplined schools do not happen by accident. They realize that appropriate school discipline must be a part of every
program, curriculum, and practice. The entire school organization must be
designed to support and encourage student responsibility and to address those
issues and behaviors that are not conducive to instructional and academic success.
Effective discipline procedures emphasize attempts to remediate the causes of
misbehavior rather than simply responding punitively to the symptoms. In
schools where the climate is positive, the emphasis is on catching students doing
things right rather than catching them doing things wrong.

I intend to utilize my counselors and parents to a great extent in
correcting discipline problems. Teachers, in conjunction with parents, will be
encouraged to try to solve their own discipline problems because it is always more
effective to work them out at the level at which they occurred. However, if that
does not prove effective, stronger measures will have to be utilized. I will use
behavioral and attendance contracts, modify schedules, and make
accommodations whenever possible in an attempt to get a student back on track.

I do intend, however, to use some form of progressive discipline, if
necessary, when misbehavior is repetitive. Students need to learn that there is a
bottom line, and that they will be held accountable for their actions. Heller
(1996) has a good description for how I view my role as disciplinarian, as a
facilitator of teacher-initiated discipline who uses a repertoire of intervention
strategies. The challenge in dealing with student behavior is to balance what is
best for the students against what is best for the institution. As I mentioned
earlier, consistency should generally be the rule, however treating students fairly
does not always mean treating them the same. Heller says student management is
a tight rope that an administrator walks without the comfort of a safety net.

In addition to being proactive and teaching behavior expectations, there
are other programs and practices that can be utilized to help create a safe and
orderly learning environment. Anger management skills can be taught as can
conflict resolution skills. Peer mediation is another effective program. The
discipline code should be reviewed periodically by students, parents, staff, and
interested community members in an effort to create ownership in the building’s
behavioral guidelines. Teachers should be assigned to supervisory responsibilities
to discourage misbehavior, and it needs to be emphasized that their role is to
“work the crowd” while supervising. In other words, the staff needs to move
among the students with the goal of building positive relationships. The noon
hour is a great time to let students know you are interested in what they are doing.
It is counterproductive to stand against the wall with your arms folded and glare at
them. Doing so is viewed as a challenge by the “tough” students and certainly is
not compatible with the goal of creating an open, student-centered school.

Another key to maintaining good discipline in the building is to provide
for the academic needs of students who are struggling because those are the
students who are likely to misbehave to compensate for their deficiencies. A full-time, in-house tutor would be ideal. Assignments can be modified, computerized instruction can be used, and jobs for school credit can be found for students who are at-risk. These things often provide them with a feeling of productivity, and helps them "put up with" the rest of the day. These efforts at accommodation are far better than removing students from school. In today's schools it is necessary for principals to change from, as Heller puts it, the traditional "fierce, stern, school marm" persona, to one that is more of a counselor and confidant for students.

Academic Needs

Student Motivation

So far I have been discussing the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students, and I have not directly mentioned their academic needs. Ultimately school is about mastering the skills and acquiring the knowledge necessary to accomplish one's goals. The key to academic achievement is motivation.

According to Strong, Silver, and Robinson (1995) students are motivated if four elements are present in their education; success, curiosity, originality, and satisfying relationships.

Strong et al. (1995) found that students want and need work that enables them to demonstrate and improve their sense of themselves as competent and
successful human beings. They went on to say that before we can use success to motivate our students, however, we must meet three conditions:

1. We must clearly define the criteria for success and provide clear, immediate, constructive feedback.

2. We must show students that the skills they need to be successful are achievable by modeling those skills.

3. We must help them see success as a valuable part of their personalities.

Too often we assume that students understand what success means and what it looks like. We need to very clearly and very thoroughly show them what we expect.

Strong et al. (1995) believe that people are naturally curious about a variety of things, and that it is our job as teachers to ensure that our curriculum arouses intense curiosity. They believe this is possible if the curriculum features two defining characteristics: the information about a topic is fragmentary or contradictory, and the topic relates to students’ personal lives. They believe the lack of information compels us to understand the curriculum better.

Strong et al. (1995) also advocate allowing and encouraging students to express their originality as a great way to motivate them. Some ways to do this are by having students connect creative projects to their personal ideas and concerns, exhibiting their work to an audience (anywhere from one to many
people), giving students more choice, and utilizing some of the newer instructional thought regarding learning styles and multiple intelligences.

The final way to motivate students according to Strong et al. (1995) is to provide them with work that will enhance their relationship with people they care about. They feel it is important to utilize a lot of cooperative learning to encourage a connectedness with others in the group.

Innovations and Initiatives

4 x 4 Block

There are a number of innovations and initiatives in education today that can help students to become more engaged in their work and thereby help them to become more successful. I would like to briefly analyze two of these because I intend to use them in my school. They are block scheduling and the school-to-work initiative.

The building I currently work in - Washington High School in Vinton, Iowa - is utilizing the 4x4 block. It is also referred to as the full block, and the results have been very positive after this first year of implementation. For example, as reported at the June, 1997, Vinton-Shellsburg School Board meeting, the number of students who are on the honor roll has increased dramatically, the number of failing grades has reduced just as dramatically, attendance has increased, and the number of discipline referrals has decreased. All of our
empirical data as well as our anecdotal evidence indicates that the vast majority of staff and students are very happy with our change to the block format.

We surveyed the staff and students at the end of both semesters this year. A sample of the results indicates that 65% of the students felt they were more successful this year, and 70% said they enjoyed school more this year than in previous years. The faculty results reflect that 82% said they were better able to meet the individual needs of students, and they feel they've been able to engage students in higher levels of thinking.

Under the 4x4 block, classes meet every day for approximately 90 minutes, and each student has 4 classes every day (unless they have senior release). What used to be taught in a semester now takes nine weeks, and the classes that used to last all year now meet for only one semester. According to the WHS Block Scheduling Proposal (1995) advantages of the block schedule for students include:

- more intensified learning, more depth
- more individual attention from teachers
- more time for lab work, use of technological and library resources etc.
- remedial and acceleration opportunities individualize and personalize study
- more courses can be taken and more credits earned during high school

Advantages of the block schedule for teachers include;
• the opportunity for individualized instruction
• more authentic learning and teaching situations
• the elimination of study hall duty
• the paper load decreases because each teacher has fewer students per term
• lessons have continuity instead of being fragmented
• relationships with students improve

Erion (1995) states that the late W. Edwards Demming noted “it is more often the system or the structures of an organization than the inadequacies of the people who work within it that causes problems.” I believe that the block schedule is a better structure for a school than the traditional schedule.

In addition to the partial list of advantages I have mentioned, there are other ways the block schedule can make a significant difference in the learning environment of a school. Canaday and Rettig (1995) have stated that traditional schedules create conditions that increase disruptive behavior. Discipline referrals most often occur when large numbers of students are in transition in the common areas, and since these transitions occur less frequently with block scheduling there are generally fewer discipline referrals. More students also understand the importance of regular attendance when what previously was covered in two days is now taught in one.
If implemented correctly, block scheduling most likely will result in higher grade point averages, more students attaining the honor roll, fewer students receiving failing grades, reduced disciplinary referrals, and improved student-teacher and student-student relationships. These are all characteristics of an effective school. The critical factor in implementing any innovation correctly is to create support for it. There have to be sound reasons for changing the existing system, and these reasons have to be accepted by a majority of the students, staff, and community.

School to Work Program

We need to start providing students with a clearer focus of what opportunities await them when they complete their education. This can be accomplished by implementing a school-to-work program at the high school level. A well-organized guidance program which is supplemented with authentic on-the-job experiences are important characteristics of a successful school-to-work initiative. These work experiences can and should range from a short-term job shadowing program to semester-long apprenticeships. Providing “real world” experiences is just what many students need to be motivated to excel in school.

As Cuetara (1995) envisions it, implementation of a school-to-work program could occur in the following manner. All students should be required to take a technology class as a freshman because mastery of a variety of technologies
is critical if students are going to acquire meaningful work when they finish with their education. As sophomores they should be required to take an exploratory class that exposes them to the major career pathways, and then as juniors and seniors they should concentrate on their chosen career pathway making on-the-job experiences a part of their education. If an effective school-to-work program is in place in high school, students may, upon graduation, continue on to associates or baccalaureate degrees, enter an apprentice program, or enter the world of work well-prepared for employment.

Administrative Leadership

Relationships

If a school is going to be effective, the people who are going to make that happen are the teachers. The principal’s relationship with the faculty has to be on solid ground or the students in the building are going to suffer. A principal has to be in the hallways and classrooms if he or she is going to be effective - management by walking around is really a sound practice to engage in. It is, however, extremely difficult because there are many, many things that can keep you chained to your office. It is critical to be visible in the school or the teachers will see their leader as being detached from the educational process. The principal cannot be effective if he or she is not “in the trenches” aware of what is going on at the grassroots level in the building.
Staff Development

Staff development is a critical component in creating an effective school. Unfortunately, professional growth opportunities in most schools are limited and ineffective. French (1997) says that professional growth is critical because what teachers know and can do makes the crucial difference in what children learn. Professional development programs cannot succeed if teachers are passive recipients of information as opposed to being actively involved in training programs. The best thing a principal can do to provide meaningful staff development is to allow teachers to spend the time necessary outside the regular school day to learn some new skills or techniques. There are also opportunities for learning at the area education agencies or at local, state, or national conferences and meetings. It also works well to have ongoing workshops presented by the faculty for the faculty.

French (1997) goes on to state that preservice preparation can no longer last a whole career, nor can teachers' professional growth be squeezed in after school. This is because of the scope of the demand placed upon teachers today. They teach, develop lesson plans and curriculum, integrate technology into their instruction, adapt their instruction to meet the needs of students with special needs, are often involved in co-curricular activities, and help students cope with
increasingly turbulent lives. Effective staff development requires a larger block of time than what is usually allowed for it.

Staff Meetings

It is critical for a principal to have something meaningful to present when he or she has a staff meeting. People do not want to have their time wasted. Clerical items and many types of informational items can be disseminated through memos and newsletters. A faculty meeting has to produce some substantive results because pointless meetings create ill-will among the staff.

Pawlas (1994) points out other things that a principal can do to help reduce teacher stress:

- listen to them
- plan ahead - let them know what is coming up
- stay off the intercom
- assign mentors to first-year teachers
- highlight student progress to highlight teacher success
- catch them doing something good
- communicate with and encourage parental involvement

Teachers will respond positively if we publicly support them, minimize class interruptions, use specific rather than general praise, let them know we care about their physical and mental health, and help them improve.
Supervision and Evaluation

Supervision and evaluation of instruction is necessary to help teachers improve. In most districts the method of evaluating teachers is mandated by the master contract, but some innovative districts are allowing some variation such as peer coaching. Whatever the method used, this must be a positive growth experience for teachers. One principal told me that when he discusses evaluation with his staff he assures them that he doesn't “hire 'em to fire 'em” (John Long personal communication, June 2, 1997). His goal, and my goal as well, is to facilitate professional growth.

Of all the critical factors involved in successful leadership, effective communication is the most important. If we do not take the time to listen to others, share our ideas with them, and build solid relationships based on honest communication everything else we do will be a waste of time. We need to encourage our staff to communicate their ideas for school improvement to us and to participate in making decisions about issues that affect them.

Site-based Management

David (1995) says that site-based management may be one of the most significant reforms of the decade. However, it is also an elusive thing to get a grip on. No two people agree on what it is, how to do it, or even why to do it, but the days of an administrator “issuing decrees from on high” are over. Some
administrators may still try to do business that way, but a faculty will not stand for it for long. In order for communication to be effective it has to be two-way.

Why have site-based decision making? The only reason that makes any sense is to allow for a more efficient, responsive organization which results in improved student learning. It allows teachers to have ownership in what is going on in a school, and ownership leads to a more engaged, motivated teacher. David (1995) goes on to state that the following are some characteristics of effective site teams;

- there is a well-thought out committee structure - the composition of the team is in congruence with the types of decisions to be made.
- there is enabling leadership - participation from all members is encouraged. School-wide ownership of the process is created, and the group’s goals are clear and concise
- the focus is on student learning - all decisions are linked to teaching and learning
- the “big picture” is kept in focus - direction, coordination, and communication are emphasized, not micro-management or individual agendas.

School and Community

Communication is important not only within a school building, but also in nurturing school and community relations. Schools do not operate in a vacuum.
We need the support of our parents, and it is important to communicate with them in both formal and informal ways.

The Education Commission of the States (1991) says that in formal communication with our public we need to consider the following:

- We are accountable. We have a responsibility to answer questions and concerns. We need to do so without a lot of educational jargon.
- We need to listen. As I have mentioned before several times, good communication goes both ways. We need to hear what people are saying and respond to their concerns without becoming defensive. It has to be understood that when children are concerned emotions run high, and it is not always easy to remain calm but we have to. If the principal and/or staff members are defensive and hostile it will damage the credibility of a school very quickly.

There are many opportunities to communicate informally with the community and parents as well. For example, newsletters, informational meetings, phone conversations, open house, and parent-teacher conferences are all effective ways to communicate informally. It is important for a principal, especially a high school principal, to be visible in the community. We need to develop an “emotional bank account” with our parents and make plenty of deposits because at some point in time we may have to make a withdrawal. If we
have had no positive interactions with parents, when it comes time to have to do
something negative involving their child it will be a very difficult situation
leading to a lot of conflict and ill will. The same is true for our relationship with
students, we need to create a strong “emotional bank account” with them.

**Standards and Assessments**

An issue that I believe will have a major impact on our job as a principal is
the issue of standards and assessment. The call for reform is being led by the
President of the United States, and his efforts as well as the efforts of many state
legislatures will put a great deal of pressure on us to create measurable standards
for attempting to gauge how much a student has learned by the time he or she
graduates from high school.

Creating different ways to assess student achievement is a big challenge.
Two of the major ways it is being attempted now are portfolio and performance
assessment. As stated by Ryan and Miyasaka (1995) education today is
undergoing a transition which includes changes in basic beliefs about what
students should learn and how to best teach them. The public is demanding that
we explain what we are doing and that we demonstrate that what we are doing
produces discernible results. As teachers we need to synthesize elements of the
old and the new into coherent and effective assessment strategies that improve
education for all students.
Measurement of standards is one thing, but the fundamental question is what standards are to be used? Who creates them? Are they local, state, or national standards, and does this mean that we need to create a uniform curriculum? These and many other questions will be discussed and debated with great passion in the near future.

Conclusions

I have just touched the surface of many issues, and I know that there are many other things that are extremely important to the success of a principal that I have not mentioned. Some of those other major responsibilities include staying abreast of school law, the whole issue of special education laws and I.E.P.'s, strategic planning, scheduling, technology, and many other things. As Sockett (1996) says, unfortunately, oftentimes what we do is not even a question of priorities, but coping with the constant drip of political and bureaucratic pressures in a context of crisis management. The challenge is both overwhelming and exciting at the same time. I feel that I have a very solid understanding of what it takes to be a successful principal, and I know that a good principal has a huge impact on students. So does a poor one. The challenges, opportunities, and responsibilities of leadership are too great to do anything less than your best.
References


