

1994

A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

We are faced with decisions all our lives, and many of the decisions we make will affect what directions our lives will take. The results of our decisions also affect the lives of people with whom we are associated. Understanding the impact that our decisions have on ourselves and others, impels us to use all of our creative and intellectual abilities to arrive at the best determinations for all involved.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Education Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partical Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Cathy A. Bobier
May, 1994

This Research Paper by : Cathy A. Bobier

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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We are faced with decisions all our lives, and many of the decisions we make will affect what directions our lives will take. The results of our decisions also affect the lives of people with whom we are associated. Understanding the impact that our decisions have on ourselves and others, impels us to use all of our creative and intellectual abilities to arrive at the best determinations for all involved.

Indeed a classroom instructor makes educational decisions everyday. However, as an administrator, decisions begin to impact a wider audience of people. Gorton and Schneider (1991) reported that administrators engage in decision making perhaps more often than in any other process. The decisions an administrator makes affects students, staff, morale of a building, the perceptions that parents and the public have of the school and of education, and relationships with fellow administrators. "Administrators, as leaders, are expected to be visionary, with the capacity to inspire, to create positive working environments, and to enable employees to reach full potential as productive members of the organization" (Valentine, 1993, p. 78).

During the last three years, I have received an education that has not only given me a base of information but also has given me effective strategies to make informed decisions. My ability as a decision maker in the field of education was put to the test recently. I hope the procedure I followed will serve me well in making competent decisions when I become an administrator. I was approached with the possibility of becoming an assistant administrator at my present teaching location. The possibility of becoming an administrator made me take a look at

how I felt the job as an administrator should be carried out. I was forced, while making the decision, to reflect on what I had learned from courses, textbooks, articles, and experiences during the past three years. I contemplated what I learned from my professors and fellow classmates. I had to examine my vision as a future administrator and how it fit into the frame work of my school building and district.

The following pages are a reflection of the decision-making process I followed. I was told this was an excellent opportunity to get my feet in the door. I would have an excellent mentor in the system to guide me. I would not have to start out without any support. My principal felt I would be an excellent choice for the job and believed in my ability as an administrator. Even with all the positive comments, I knew I had to sit down and take a hard look at what I felt the job would entail. Would I be able to be an effective administrator, able to meet the expectations of the position under the district's job description?

Past Experiences

I have taught for nine years. I stayed home for four years while my children were small. During this time I spent some time substituting in grades K-12 to keep current in the field of education. I have been teaching in my current school district for four years. This is the building at which I would serve as an assistant administrator along with teaching three classes.

The principal I am currently serving under has been in the system for approximately thirty years. He began teaching in the system and later accepted the responsibility as the principal. He will be retiring this year.

The staff is largely composed of veteran teachers. I am one of the newer teachers. The staff is involved in most decisions made in the building and often initiate any changes. Although we are called a middle school, we still maintain the traditional junior high structure. This past year the schedule was changed slightly. There had not been any noticeable change in over fifteen years. Some programs had not been updated for over twenty years. I served on the committee which researched and finalized the schedule change. There was some opposition by teachers and administrators in other buildings due to the sharing of teachers. We were told we were the reason for the scheduling problems which occurred at the beginning of the year. Change and conflict go hand in hand. Those considering a career in school administration should be forewarned that it is not a profession for the light-hearted (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993). Scheduling will need to be addressed by the new administrator.

I feel it is important for an administrator to be seen in the hall ways and in the classrooms. His/her educational involvement with students and teachers can not diminish more and more each year without both teachers and students becoming aware of the situation. Gorton and Schneider (1991) found that generally students indicated that they expect school administrators to be highly visible. "School administrators (specifically principals) who remain in their offices, were characterized as unfriendly, lazy, and uninterested" (p. 95). Instructional leadership will need to be emphasized by the new administrator.

At the beginning of this school year, the staff used our entire inservice days to begin a new discipline program in our building. All school preparation had to be done on time outside the inservice. The process involved using the principal as a resource for behavior change. I believe it is important for a staff to receive support from an administrator or what starts out as dramatic change can dwindle to a trickle. Teachers will be frustrated. Behavior modification and disciplining will need to be addressed by the new administrator.

Our building is an old high school. It is not assessable to handicapped persons. The custodial staff in our building consists of one person who also does all repair work. There is a plan for the building of a new middle school. A bond issue recently missed passing by four votes. The new administrator will need to address the time needed for informational meetings and planning for a new building.

Evaluation will need to be addressed by the new administrator. Some teachers in our building have not been formally evaluated in over ten years. I believe evaluations often serve two purposes: (a) to measure quality and (b) to provide direction for growth and change. I feel that without evaluations it is difficult to strengthen the instructional level of a staff.

Our technological advancement had been at a standstill for years. But, within the last year a technology committee has been formed. They are working on a plan for our district. With the formation of the committee and a new superintendent there has been a marked advancement in the area of technology in our school district, but it has

along way to go and a new administrator will have to be instrumental in the development of a workable plan.

The school district is very flexible in allowing time for curriculum inservices and visitations to workshops or seminars. The administration encourages the staff to keep abreast of the latest curriculum developments, school strategies, and technological advancements. During the last two years the entire staff has met one day a month for staff development dealing with quality schools and school curriculum. We also have a curriculum cadre that meets regularly to develop curriculum. Our building staff recently met, along with community members, to develop strategic plans and goals for our building which are in line with the vision for our district.

An Effective School

Every school, in every district, has both positive and negative aspects. Even the most promising school systems have room for positive changes because of a constantly changing society. Within the last two years our system has made advancements toward becoming an effective school. Purkey and Smith (1985) described effective schools as institutions where: (a) teachers and administrators work toward common goals, (b) collaborative planning allowing collegial relationships between teachers and principals is ongoing, (c) common goals are accepted by those who work in the school, (d) people are capable of identifying and solving problems, (e) a linkage to the community exists, (f) democratic decisions are made by consensus, and (g) a greater degree of responsibility is placed on the professional staff.

Our school system is a school in which a person who believes in progressive, effective schools would want to be employed. An administrator would be able to start on the ground floor, working through the process of creating an effective school. This was a positive factor I considered when deciding to pursue the idea as an assistant administrator in this school district. The school district is led by a superintendent who stays current on educational philosophies and trends.

Effective Principal

An effective school needs to have an effective principal. Would I be an effective principal? What does it take to be an effective principal? An effective principal adjusts to the needs of the school district where s(he) is employed. Schools have different needs which is why it is important to be familiar with a school system, its faculty, and its community. Resources need to be identified on how they can best be utilized. I am going to address the characteristics I feel a principal needs to have to help her/him increase the effectiveness on the lives of our students attending our middle school.

Vision.

I believe an important characteristic of an effective administrator is her/his vision. A vision, what the future can be, is obtained by setting goals and striving to meet them. Clarity of vision provides purpose. A leader lacking this clarity will have difficulty leading others. A staff with with no real goal except those created individually often seem to be adrift. The ability to move forward to a common goal is not present. I

feel both people in a school and the school can reach their full potential through commitment to a common vision. It is a well-defined vision that provides stability and guidance in the same sense as does one's personality, philosophy, or core values (Carrow-Moffett, 1993).

To be an effective principal, I would need to have a clear vision. The vision would need to be shared with others while encouraging the sharing of their visions. The enmeshment of everyone's vision is what becomes a shared vision we would use to guide us. My vision for this school is based on a quote by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "You cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future" (Howes, 1993, p. 62). That is our job as educators. We should build responsible students who can adequately function in society and who are willing to contribute to society. We need a school where instruction is diversified so all can be engaged in learning. A school in which all participants respect each other and are committed to common goals.

This past month we have started setting common goals for our staff, parents, and students. As a new administrator I would need to continue the task. Our goals have been defined and now need to be communicated to those not directly involved in the process. School personnel, students, parents, and community members, all people affected by our goals need to be informed. Poor communication is one of the things which prevents school faculties from developing strong core sets of beliefs that provide meaning and direction (Kowalski & Reitzug).

Students would be exposed to goals during classes, at assemblies, and in the hall ways. Parents would be informed by newsletters sent home, at school functions, and by participating on school committees. The community would become aware of the goals by presentations given at meetings, cable or radio broadcast and in newspaper articles.

Staff members would hold monthly committee meetings discussing building goals and how to reach the learner outcomes. Each committee would make periodic reports to the faculty. Once concession is made on the assessment of the goals the faculty would proceed with implementation. It may take 3-5 years before everyone becomes aware and is a part of the vision, but it can be done. I believe having a vision creates a conscience which gives us direction, keeps our goals in sight, and reaffirms that what we are doing has a purpose important to those around us.

It is important while creating a shared vision and goals to allow parental input. During our recent goal setting meeting for the middle school three parents attended. I noticed during our meeting that teachers dominated most of the discussion with parents offering little input. Lysaught (1984) has noted that problems of language and meaning, and their transmission are among administrators most important, persistent, and ubiquitous organizational difficulties. More frequently than not, failures in communication lie at the heart of problems in organizations, goal-setting, productivity, and evaluation. One of the parents questioned what was meant by the acronym BI as the term was often being used in the teacher's dialogue. Professionals

in the field of education often surround themselves with terminology many people do not understand. The term Behavioral Impaired was explained to the parents and we proceeded from there.

Effective schools understand and realize the need for understandable and open communication for all individuals. It is our job to make parents feel comfortable by explaining the process and what we are trying to accomplish. Parents need to feel they are an important and needed part of the process. It is important to get them actively involved in school using a volunteer program or participating on a school committee. Allowing parents to have ownership in the school will make parent involvement more meaningful.

Instructional Leadership.

An effective principal needs to be an instructional leader. All principals are instructional leaders since all principals inevitably influence what students have an opportunity to do in the classroom (Donmeyer & Wagstaff, 1990). I believe those principals who place priority on instructional leadership become leaders who create an effective school. An instructional leader visits classrooms, questions staff members about what is being done in the classroom, passes on information to staff members, and uses evaluations to make positive improvements in instruction. Paper work may have to wait. Sergiovanni (1991) in discussing the form of symbolic leadership noted, "Very often it is the little things that count. Simple routines and humble actions....can communicate very important messages and high ideas" (p. 107).

Effective instruction in a classroom will be deemed important by faculty when instruction is emphasized by the administrator. Where would I begin to allow teachers and students to see I believe in strong instructional leadership? I would begin by visiting classrooms. Short classroom visitations would allow me to show interest and involvement in the classroom. Lesson plans can be checked for points of interest and to stay abreast of what is occurring in the classroom. Notes of praise and interest can be written to teachers. Verbal praise is also very important. I would cover classes when teachers are called out allowing me to stay abreast of what is happening in the classroom. Articles on classroom instruction, which I read, would be passed on to the appropriate teachers.

An instructional leader also uses evaluation as a tool to improve instruction in the classroom. Manning (1988) noted that student learning is enhanced in schools where evaluation is stressed. At the present time, when teacher assessment takes place, there seems to be little continuity in the evaluation practice. There is a wide variation in frequency, formality, perceived importance, techniques used, and the use of the results. Airasian (1993) stated that teachers report receiving little benefit from their assessment process. If I were the instructional leader I would work to change current assessment practices.

I believe there are basically two types of teacher assessment. Evaluations can be either summative or formative. Summative evaluations are used to grade, place, or promote. Formative evaluations are used to investigate the learning process taking place

and to help in improving instruction. For the most part, educators have concentrated on summative evaluation of teachers.

With the educational reform and accountability movement, there is increased attention on teacher performance and evaluation (Buttram & Wilson, 1987). Progressive districts are trying to improve teacher assessments. Districts expect administrators to advise teachers on how to improve their performance. To implement an assessment policy that improves instruction, an administrator needs to set a tone that good instruction is important in the school. Both summative and formative evaluations need to be used. Instructional growth has a chance to occur more quickly with beneficial assessments. Ornstein (1993) found that teachers appreciated evaluation processes that helped them improve their teaching as long as: (a) the evaluations were professionally planned and administered; (b) teachers were permitted to learn from their mistakes; and (c) more than one model of effectiveness was acceptable and teachers were free to adopt the styles that fit their personalities and teaching philosophies. A devoted instructional leader will not allow a key factor of instructional improvement, such as assessment, to go unused. "To place evaluation high on the agenda in terms of time and resources is critical for the promotion of student learning" (Manning, 1988, p. 16).

I witnessed a situation I feel could have been helped by the use of good evaluation methods. A teacher was working hard on preparation for her classes and wanted the best for her students, but she was having discipline problems in her classroom. She asked for advise on

different teaching and disciplining methods, therefore, showing her openness for help. The administrator heard and saw the problem, but did nothing about it. As an administrator, who is to be an instructional leader, he ignored his duty to the teacher and the students in her classes. This teacher would benefit from a good formative evaluation and growth plan.

As an instructional leader I would have to address this problem. I would begin with a formative evaluation in which a pre-conference would be held. We would discuss what is taking place in the classroom, what I should be looking for, and in what areas she feels she would like help. After the classroom evaluation we would have a post-conference meeting discussing what had been observed. We would set up a plan to work on the improvements such as observing a veteran teacher in the classroom and discussing what was observed. If she would be comfortable I would allow a teacher in her subject area to observe her in the classroom. Eventually this collaboration would lead into a mentor program between the two teachers. The problem will not be solved overnight. It would probably take the entire year, maybe longer. But I really feel this teacher has the capability of doing an excellent job. She has desire, but at the present she and her students are only feeling frustrated.

In addition to teacher evaluation, I feel administrative evaluation should also take place. When a person becomes an administrator, it does not mean there is no longer room for growth. Some states, such as Texas, are requiring administrators to prepare professional growth

plans (Wilmore & Erlandson, 1993). Some viewed this just as another needless demand. They were required to complete a plan covering 36-months with short-range, mid-range, and long-range goals. I feel an administrator without a growth plan is a stagnate leader without much vision. I am a strong believer in professional growth for teachers because of the changing education system, but I have seldom noticed a principal actively pursue job growth. In observing school superintendents, it was found that (a) the most effective practitioners complete more graduate work and hold more advanced certification than their peers, and (b) the most effective superintendents are more likely to be involved in professional activities such as conferences and workshops (Burnham, 1989). I believe this applies to principals as well.

A professional growth plan can be a headache, or it can be a positive self-growth experience. It is a long-term method for administrators to stop, take a look inward, study, and plan for professional growth and the future. It is an important part of a reflective administrator.

An effective principal will emphasize teaching and learning. A direct way a principal influences instruction is by the hiring of the teachers who deliver it. Previous experiences of teachers being hired without much investigation by the principal have proved disastrous for both students and the administrator. A list of requirements needs to be arrived at by the administrator and teachers need to be involved in the hiring process. The background of each applicant needs to be fully investigated. A person should not be hired relying strictly on the

recommendation of one person. All candidates need to be interviewed in person along with phone interviews. Questions important to ask in the hiring process include: (a) What is your philosophy of education? (b) How would you set up a program? (c) What are your weaknesses? (d) What is the principal's role? and (e) What would you do if....? (Martin, 1993).

It would be a good requirement to request the person to teach a short lesson in a classroom. The teaching style of the applicant will be able to be observed. This would provide more information about the candidate allowing a more thorough decision to be made. A teacher needs to be philosophically attuned to the vision of the school to be effective. We need to find out what their past actions have been and what did they do in certain situations. Making good hiring decisions has a large impact on the effectiveness of the school system

Willingness to empower.

Recently, our district began intensive work on trying to adhere to site-based management. Site-based management offers an opportunity to erect new professional relationships between principals and teachers--relationships that may invigorate both groups (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993). Along with this style of management comes teacher empowerment. Empowerment creates a sense of self-worth and an elevation of the importance of professional knowledge and competence (Bennis, 1989). We are allowed to share in the majority of the decisions made in our building. The principal is very open to any and all recommendations given by the faculty. A principal who does not

believe in or feel comfortable with teacher empowerment will have a difficult time working in this building. Once people have been given the power to make decisions it is very difficult to take away. But empowerment is only effective when teachers and administrators work together, when parameters are set for involvement and decision making, and when each person is willing to respect the other (Manning, 1988). I, as a new administrator, would practice this management style. I would give the staff information and involve them in the decision making processes. Bennis and Nanus (1985) described a site-based manager concerned with empowerment when they wrote, "The new leader is one who commits people to action, who converts followers into leaders, and who may convert leaders into agents of change" (p. 3).

Change Agent.

An effective principal at this building would need to initiate some changes. Change is not something that is pursued solely for its own purposes. That is to say, it is not a product--it is a process (Belasco, 1990). Change is a medium for adaptation. It may be beneficial or harmful, it can be short-lived or permanent, it can be rapid or gradual, and it can be planned or unexpected. But change, like conflict, is inevitable (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993). Society has changed demographically, sociologically, and technologically and so must schools. To meet these challenges, leaders, who are change agents, will be needed. Leaders who understand, embrace, and direct change will lead our effective schools.

I believe to be an effective administrator in the system there are some

changes that need to be initiated dealing with the school climate. The changes would make day to day instruction easier for teachers. I would begin by providing teachers with an agenda for faculty meetings when possible. It would move the meeting along more efficiently, give everyone the purpose of the meeting, and allow staff the opportunity to prepare.

Instructional time would not be interrupted. At the present time classes are frequently interrupted by announcements over the address system including requests from the school's support staff and even parents. Policies, rules, and norms can directly influence classroom activities by providing adequate time in the day for teaching and learning and thereby relaying to students, teachers, and parents that academics are important (Donmeyer & Wagstaff, 1990). I, along with teachers, students, and parents would need to establish new policies, rules, and norms to protect instructional time and reinforce to students, teachers, and parents that academics are important.

There needs to be more communication with staff. Many times the staff has been left in the dark on decisions coming from the administration until the last moment. We often do not receive information which had been received days earlier, until the moment arrives. I believe it is important for the faculty to be informed so they can make wise decisions. Communicating timely, accurately, and completely affects staff morale and will provide positive parent support (Parish & Prager, 1992). Our building also needs to have more communication with parents. I would like to see a monthly newsletter

produced. Currently, high school information is published in the newspaper. Some middle school happenings are published, but not everyone gets the paper. I would investigate how this is handled in other schools and proceed from there.

I would also need to work on management of our new behavior policy. At the present time teachers handle all discipline problems. Few students are sent to the office. As a staff, we would need to review the new behavior policy we worked on during our inservice and I would need to review what my obligations are as the principal. Trust with my faculty would be built when I "walk the talk".

Ethical Leadership.

Pascarella and Frohman (1989) described new school leaders as individuals who passionately embrace certain values that create a vision and who are capable of building mutual trust by demonstrating high levels of selflessness. As an effective administrator I feel the need to base my decisions on high moral values. I have seen the effectiveness of an administrator diminish when decisions were made which seemed to be unethical. Because of our positions we are under close scrutiny of the public. They are entrusting their children's education with us. Ethics, influenced by conscience, will affect the skill of job performance (Green, 1987). Ethical leadership is synonymous with effective schools. "The very essence of leadership is a moral and ethical act in that it involves influencing others to pursue specific courses of action" (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 373). The ethical principal is concerned that people are treated fairly, teachers teach

effectively, the curriculum evolves to meet social needs, students are held accountable, and parents are incorporated into the school process (Calabrese, 1988). The effective principal must be an ethical principal.

Summary

I reflected on what I have learned during the last three years and the amount of information has been overwhelming. Pedler (1988) described self-development as a synthesis of previous ideas that involves a constant transfer from experience to reflection and back again. I guess that is what I have been experiencing. Each course, each clinical experience, and each day of work provides information that one should use in formulating, evaluating, and revising his/her professional career plan (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993).

I have addressed what I felt an administrator would need to facilitate to make this building educationally effective. Do I have what it takes to make an effective principal? Albino (1992) suggested there are four important characteristics women who succeed in academic administration possess: (a) strong sense of self, (b) capacity for hard work and long hours (making wise choices at what they work at), (c) interpersonal skills (not holding on to anger), and (d) the ability to strategize. I feel I have been adequately prepared for the job of an administrator.

I closely examined the job description presented to me. I would assume full administrative duties along with teaching three classes. Could I be an effective principal and teach three classes each requiring their own preparation? I deliberated on this question for two weeks. I

talked to fellow staff members to get their views. They saw the need for a full time administrator in our building. Changes, which would need to take place, would require a large amount of time. They also recognized the need for reduction of a full time administrator because of future plans to build a middle school adjoining the high school. Their recommendation was a full time administrator who would also assume the duties of the district's technological leader.

I researched literature on the topic of dual principal and teacher employment. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (1990) recommended dual principalships with the principal administering more than one school, or also serving as a teacher, are inherently incompatible with quality. A key factor in a quality school is the visible presence of a strong principal who is not only the school's chief executive officer but also its instructional leader. It is unrealistic to expect a principal to provide necessary human support and leadership when also assigned teaching responsibilities or called upon to administer more than one school. An effective instructional leader will possess the key characteristics of: (a) clear vision/goals, (b) high expectations, (c) the ability to communicate these goals and expectations to the faculty and students, (d) placing a priority on curriculum and instructional issues, (e) acting as an instructional resource, (f) demonstrating a visible presence, and (g) functioning as a resource provider (Fredericks & Brown, 1993). I do not think it is possible to be an effective instructional leader trying to achieve the above goals and teach three classes.

I met with the superintendent, my building principal, and the administrator who would serve as my mentor. I shared my concern with the time requirement to do both jobs effectively. After the discussion I decided not to pursue the job opportunity. The high school principal did ask me about the opinion of staff members on how to fill the position, thereby, providing the most positive benefits for the school district. I was impressed by his question. This was the first time anyone had asked for the opinion of the people most affected by the decision. I was able to share with the superintendent and principal the idea of an administrator/technology director. They are now pursuing this avenue.

Did I make the right decision? For three years I have been asked to reflect and that is what I did. Reflective practice centers on reflection about the action, which I did for two weeks; reflection during the action, which occurred during the discussion; and now reflection on my action. Would I change anything? I should have had some key points written down giving me more credibility in my decision, but at the present time in my life and based on the job description I feel I made the right decision. Other people may have made a different decision but this is right for me. I do not feel I would have been able to do the job I want to accomplish due to the job description. Valentine (1993) reported that 88% of the principals reported working an average of more than 50 hours in a typical week. I could not be an effective administrator and teach three classes effectively.

Kowalski and Reitzug (1993) described leaders for the transforming schools as practitioners who possess advance knowledge in the moral

dimensions of leadership as well as the technical applications of management. They will accept teachers as colleagues rather than treating them as subordinates. They will view administration as a process of “pulling” rather than “pushing” people. And they are individuals who truly believe that schools can make a critical difference in lives of individuals and the quality of society.

There have been significant changes that have occurred and will continue to occur in society. My challenge is to help create a school which is responsive to life in this and the next century. Look out, here comes a new wave of administrators!

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