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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

As I read these lines from *A Tale of Two Cities*, a novel about the French Revolution, I am struck with the fact that they could have been written about the state of American education today. When the "Nation at Risk" report came out in the early 80's, it spoke of the ills of American education, and offered an abundance of "cures" in the way of strong suggestions. The report itself aroused consternation for the most part in the eyes of the American public, a public largely in favor of the sweeping reforms that were offered by this document. However, most of these "cures" were suggested by a committee that did not base these suggestions on any empirical data, nor was the committee composed of those closely associated with public education.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Susan Newman Cleveland

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DARY SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper require-
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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way- in short, it was like the world we live in.

-Charles Dickens

As I read these lines from A Tale of Two Cities, a novel about the French Revolution, I am struck with the fact that they could have been written about the state of American education today. When the "Nation at Risk" report came out in the early 80's, it spoke of the ills of American education, and offered an abundance of "cures" in the way of strong suggestions. The report itself aroused consternation for the most part in the eyes of the American public, a public largely in favor of the sweeping reforms that were offered by this document. However, most of these "cures" were suggested by a committee that did not base these suggestions on any empirical data, nor was the committee composed of those closely associated with public education.

Clearly, what was needed then, were recommendations that were based on research, that were practical, and that could be implemented with the idea that they would make a difference in American public education. Out of this need, then, grew the body of literature stemming from the research on effective schools. As these studies emerged, a single, key component arose as perhaps the most crucial element of an effective school, that of the principal as not only the instructional leader of the school, but also as the visionary leader who sets the school climate and carries out the mission of the school on a daily basis. Chester Finn, in his article "Better Principals, Not Just Teachers" (1986) argues that if we really want to strengthen American schools, the most efficient way is not to fixate on the teachers but rather focus on improving the principals, as their numbers are far smaller and more manageable. Finn goes on to say that a great school almost always "boasts a crackerjack principal" and that his leadership is often the crucial element in the school's chemistry. Therefore, in this reflective paper, I would like to address these questions: What are the characteristics of an effective administrator? What will be my personal goals as an administrator? What criteria will I use to judge my actions as an administrator? What is the

role of the administrator in school and community relations?

The most important quality that a principal can possess is that of vision. Vision has been described as a way that things ought to be. Father Hesburgh of Notre Dame (1987) has said that "the very essence of leadership is that you have a vision. A vision that you articulate clearly and forcefully on every occasion. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet." A vision is also what you should and can be. Sergiovanni (1984) believes Warren Bennis' idea that a vision is "the capacity to create and communicate a view of a desired state of affairs that induces commitment among those in the organization." Through the sharing of this vision, you hope to empower others by bringing them into the decision-making process. Dr. Else (1991) has said that a vision is not just a dream, it's a dream tempered with a "profound understanding of what is possible." This vision that an administrator has will be a beacon towards which the school will always be directed. Covey (1989) has told his readers the story of Victor Frankl, a psychiatrist and Jew who survived the Nazi death camps. He made it through the camps, as others did, because he saw himself having something significant left to do in life. He had a profound vision of the future.

What makes for an effective vision? An administrator must aim for the best as it must be inspiring. No one wants to follow a dream that is less than inspirational. It must be clear and challenging. People must feel that the undertaking is important and nearly impossible. The vision must make sense and be flexible enough to stand the test of time. Leaders at all levels in the school must model behavior that is consistent with this vision at all times. It must be lived in details, not in broad strokes, and it must be a picture of "sustaining excellence."

Along with being a visionary leader, a principal must also be a strategic planner. Strategic planning has been defined as "a department-wide process that anticipates the future, and culminates in statements of intention that match strengths with opportunities." Strategic planning will enable administrators and staff to make better decisions and gives us a process to deal with on-going change. Strategic planning allows the good administrator to be proactive, not just reactive. With proper strategic planning for the future, it will help minimize the external forces that may impact the school district and its schools.

A school administrator must be able to listen well and to communicate equally well. The number one reason

given for dismissal of principals by school boards is the inability to communicate with others. Coupled with this, an effective administrator should be open-minded and solicit ideas from the staff. Intolerance of others' ideas will be perceived to be a lack of caring and sensitivity toward the staff and students.

Organizational skills are extremely important for an administrator to possess. According to Albrecht (1990), knowing what needs to be done is the most important role of an administrator. How to get the job done most efficiently and in the most organized way is a large part of this. We have all worked for the really nice administrator who just cannot seem to find that report we gave him/her or who forgot to come into the classroom to see the "nifty" presentation by a group of students. To run the ship smoothly, to carry on toward the beacon, organization is a must.

An effective administrator must maintain a sense of humor and a sense that schools should be places of joy where teachers want to teach and students want to learn. The ability to laugh at ourselves and at situations contributes to a positive school climate and sets the tone for the school. The "doom and gloom" administrator casts a pall over the entire staff and student body.

The ability to be fair and consistent with all those whom an administrator comes into contact with is crucial to building credibility and a rapport with others. Recently, our technology class had the opportunity to visit the high school at Wellsburg and a placard hanging in the high school's office said but one word, "Consistency." Mike Milligan, principal at Wellsburg High School, obviously feels as I do that that is one of the most important elements in dealing with others. So many times I have heard as a classroom teacher the complaint from students (often justified) that another student was allowed to do something by an administrator or another teacher, and yet this student was not allowed to. Inconsistency in dealing with discipline, school board policy and the like undermines the effectiveness of that particular administrator in question. It also creates a poor image of the school in the community.

Lastly, I feel that an administrator must be truly caring and have the best interest of students at heart. We must not lose sight of the fact that the reason that we are in this profession is that we have a genuine desire to make a difference in a student's life. Sometimes we forget just what an impact, either positive or negative, that we have on young people's lives. We can all remember

those teachers who encouraged us and made learning a joy. I am also certain that we can remember our high school principal, either in a positive or negative light. Enthusiasm for and dedication to our charges will be remembered by them all their lives.

What will my personal goals as an administrator be? First, I will have high expectations for the school, staff, and students. It has been said that good schools are morally averse to low expectations, and that should apply to administrators as well. High expectations are a part of what I envision an effective school to be. Effective school research clearly shows that an effective administrator defines this vision or mission of the school everyday in every way and communicates the goals that are the pathway to the vision.

Second, I will want to be knowledgeable in curriculum and instruction and be able to coordinate the curriculum, interacting with the staff about curricular matters on a regular basis. I will be a highly visible administrator, in the halls as well as in the classrooms. Frequent monitoring of the staff through formal and informal classroom visits will give me the opportunity to provide feedback to the staff in the area of instructional methods. Remediation of at-risk teachers is a high-priority item I feel.

I also want to set the tone for the school climate. Schools must be safe, secure, and orderly environments for students and teachers alike in order to carry out the mission of the school. Part of this safe and orderly environment is a clearly defined and consistently enforced discipline plan. I will place great emphasis on daily attendance of students and will want to stress that the rules of conduct pertain to all school functions. Protecting the instructional time is a priority of mine because students need to be in class learning, not constantly being interrupted in the classroom. Recognizing student achievement is so important in making students feel that their accomplishments count and are being noticed. I want positive feelings to permeate the school. Good relations with the staff will boost teacher morale, thus affecting the climate. According to Goodlad's (1983) study of schooling, the differences between schools appear to be more related to school climate than to instructional methods used by teachers. An effective administrator will help set that climate.

An area of deep concern that I have as a future administrator is that of appreciating and providing for the cultural diversity that is found in American schools, even in Iowa. Operating under the myth of America as the great

melting pot, we try to fit these minority or foreign-born students into a white only, English only mold without respect for the contributions that their culture and ethnicity can add to our "way of doing things." What troubles me gravely is the over 50 percent dropout rate for Hispanics in this country. Where and when have we quit dreaming the dream for them? I view this in the much larger framework of not doing the best job that we can in making our students prepared for the world of today. We have a responsibility to educate students for citizenship in a world community. The first step in this is the acceptance of the many different cultures in our society, some of which were here before the white English speakers arrived, rather than trying to bring about cultural homogeneity. Second, we must do a better job in the areas of geography, world history, and languages starting in the early grades. These things are crucial survival skills in today's world.

The last important aspect of being an effective administrator that I want to reflect upon is the role of the principal in school and community relations. It has been said that the mission statement of the school must be "a covenant among and between building residents" that compels the running of the school daily. I would like to take that idea further. The mission statement, the vision, if you

will, must also be a covenant between the community and the school. They have entrusted us with their most precious belongings, their children, and we must do the best possible job of informing the community of our continued effort toward that vision. The community must sense ownership in that mission of the school, and we must try to involve the community in order to instill within it that sense. The lines of communication must be two-way for parents to perceive the school in a positive light. Students and parents alike must buy into that shared vision. Again, the principal is crucial to positive school-community relations.

The service organization Rotary, International has a set of criteria for its members to use in order to judge their actions to determine if they are consistent with their values. I believe that principals also ought to have a set of questions that they should ask themselves to determine if their actions are in keeping with their beliefs. These include:

- 1) Is this consistent with board/school policy?
- 2) Have I heard all the sides to the story before I act?
- 3) Am I letting any non-relevant facts cloud the issue?
- 4) Is this what is best for the students?

- 5) Am I being consistent in this action?
- 6) Is this fair to all concerned?
- 7) If the tables were turned, would I want to be treated this way?
- 8) Have I violated this person's due process or confidentiality?
- 9) Is this a proactive or reactive stance on this issue?
- 10) Is this action part of the mission of this school?

By asking myself these important questions, it will give me time to reflect on my values as an administrator. In a recent video shown to us in the seminar class, it was said that values are the way you measure the "rightness" of your direction, a direction toward the shared vision of the school. This rightness of direction based on these reflective questions is a part of the significant vision which must always precede significant success, in my opinion. The role of vision is the most forceful motivator for change we have.

On the wall near my desk hangs a sign that reads:

A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of clothes I wore. But the world

may be a different place because I was important in the life of a child.

For me, this really says it all. Most principals spend their time fixing and coordinating and taking care of "dogs on the playground" and should spend more of their time influencing others. The principal must be a leader who knows the "rightness of direction", the captain of the ship that never loses sight of the beacon far ahead. The waters may be choppy, the crew at times disgruntled, but he knows the route, the path toward that shared vision on the horizon. I want to be that leader, for I choose to believe that it really is the age of wisdom, the epoch of belief, the season of Light, and the spring of hope. I will not blow an uncertain trumpet in sharing my vision with others.

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