

1992

A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

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Recommended Citation

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to articulate the fundamental values and beliefs which will guide me as I prepare to enter the field of administration. I would like to begin with a general statement on why I am a professional educator, a mission statement if you will. The paper will then examine specific behaviors which I hope to exhibit during my practice as an administrator. Before analyzing my personal motives for entering school administration, I must first ask myself what exactly is the role of education in our society. It seems those of us in the adult world have our own agendas for education. Faculty and staff see school as a good source of employment or as a place to advance career goals. People on Main Street or the industrial sector want schools to be an engine for economic development. Patrons often see athletic teams and other visible activities as sources of community spirit. Quite often, citizens view schools as a gigantic leach, siphoning off their hard earned dollars through ever rising taxes. Pragmatic politicians take both the successes and failures of schools and turn them into vote garnering opportunities.

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

Mark T. Core

July 1992

This Research Paper by: Mark T. Core

Entitled: A Preferred Vision for Administering Secondary
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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The purpose of this paper is to articulate the fundamental values and beliefs which will guide me as I prepare to enter the field of administration. I would like to begin with a general statement on why I am a professional educator, a mission statement if you will. The paper will then examine specific behaviors which I hope to exhibit during my practice as an administrator.

Before analyzing my personal motives for entering school administration, I must first ask myself what exactly is the role of education in our society. It seems those of us in the adult world have our own agendas for education. Faculty and staff see school as a good source of employment or as a place to advance career goals. People on Main Street or the industrial sector want schools to be an engine for economic development. Patrons often see athletic teams and other visible activities as sources of community spirit. Quite often, citizens view schools as a gigantic leach, siphoning off their hard earned dollars through ever rising taxes. Pragmatic politicians take both the successes and failures of schools and turn them into vote garnering opportunities.

While adults have both selfish and noble intentions regarding education, one simple fact remains; schools are the only social institution which exists entirely for the

advancement and benefit of children. This sobering reality leads me towards my professional mission statement.

Mission Statement

The purpose of my administrative practice will be to insure that every student, everyday will have the opportunity to succeed to his/her level of ability.

Professional Practice

This section will deal in great length with the daily actions which are necessary for the fulfillment of my goal. The irony is that while my mission statement's message dealt entirely with students, the majority of my professional practice will relate to adults, particularly teachers. The reason for the apparent incongruence is that teachers are those who have daily contact with students. It is in their hands that we place much of the responsibility for our children's intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development. I like to think of the organization of schools as resembling a pyramid. Students are at the pinnacle, supported and maintained by teachers, who are in turn are upheld by the administration (Goodlad, 1983).

One of my professional beliefs is that a principal should assume a leadership position in the school, within the framework of cite-based management. In the past,

principals were seen as the traditional middle-manager (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, Usdan, 1990). That is, somebody to carry out the policies set at the central office. I want my role to be that of a pro-active leader who is working in concert with a community of professional educators. Our educational team of administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals will work together to identify needs and implement solutions to help put into practice the mission statement (Erlandson, 1991).

The rationale for creating a decentralized, participatory environment is that teachers are the professionals who are in closest contact with the students. Therefore, it is vital that they be included in managerial decisions. I think it is appropriate for teachers to be involved in textbook selection, curriculum development, hiring and evaluation, student discipline, and the setting of budgetary priorities. Participatory management works for a number of reasons. First, teachers will be more committed to progress and change when they have a degree of ownership in the decision-making process. This will improve staff morale and will likely result in increased innovation on the part of educators. Finally, it stands to reason that the quality of decisions will be enhanced by having input from a greater number of

professionals (Webb and Guthrie, 1991).

While participation is vital, there are certain principles upon which a leader cannot compromise. What I will seek to do is articulate my core values regarding what it takes to have an effective, child-centered high school. I am in agreement with Earnest Boyer (1984) that the central aim of an excellent school should be an emphasis on effective use of the English language. All thinking and reasoning takes place in the context of language. There are virtually no occupations that do not rely on the use of language. The task of language development will not rest entirely with the English Department. All classes will be expected to stress applied language arts within their discipline. Students in all classes should be expected to read, write, speak, and listen. My school will not graduate students who are functionally illiterate.

A second foundation of my belief is that schools should have an environment which is caring and nurturing to the needs of young people. In my estimation, the greatest need of teenagers is to feel that they are part of a group that is important to them. This need can be met in a variety of ways. Most obvious is with an activities program which emphasizes voluntary

participation of students in the widest variety of programs. However, this idea of helping students feel that they belong can also extend to the classroom. Cooperative learning groups are an avenue worth exploring. "The idea of having students function as a group to produce some result has been carefully studied and it works" (Gough, 1987).

In addition, a goal of mine would be to create situations in which teachers and students could develop closer working relationships. It is imperative that teachers have more time with fewer students. Obviously, the budget is going to dictate many decisions, it will be a priority of mine to have smaller class sizes. Teachers who are overwhelmed with students cannot provide the type of nurturing instruction that students need (Arnold, 1982).

Finally, it would be a goal to help prepare students to function in the information age, rather than the agrarian or industrial societies of the not so distant past. It is obvious that technology and information (the two of course, cannot really be separated) have created a world in which millions of people have access to the knowledge that shapes the world. This power shift away from the elite to the masses has an immense implication

for schools. Rather than merely offering a computer applications class and saying "Look, we're preparing kids for the future," schools must change the way we look at knowledge. My school will move away from strict departmentalization to a more interdisciplinary approach. Students will be encouraged to use new technology to explore real world problems with information that is now at their fingertips (Cleveland, 1985).

Technology is changing so rapidly, that it is impossible to envision the types of demands that will be made on students twenty or thirty years from now. Because of this, administrators cannot view the acquisition of a system of computers or the latest media innovation as a panacea. Instead, emerging technology should be seen as merely a tool to more substantive educational principles that will allow our students to cope with the rapidly changing world. The first principle is that instruction should be highly individualized. It is high time that the assembly line approach to teaching be abandoned. Closely related to individualization is adaptive instruction. Technology should enhance the ability of teachers to reach students with special needs, whether this be special education or gifted education. Finally, instructional technology should enhance student interaction with

teachers and fellow students (Nickerson, 1988). Bossert (1988) illustrates this concept by describing a "field trip" students could take to a museum via personal computer, phone line, modem, and appropriate software.

A major role of a principal is to help create an environment in which people are motivated to work to their highest level. The people who I must first motivate are my teachers. I have been influenced by the work of Frederick Herzberg (1975). My role as a building principal in the area of staff motivation is twofold. First, I must remove as many negative hygiene factors as I possibly can. Unfortunately, many of the causes of poor staff morale are a result of master contract language (salary, job security, district policies). Because of this, I would have little or no influence in changing these dissatisfiers. Because of this, I would direct most of my efforts towards changing conditions that are within my control. I would talk to my teachers both individually and in groups to determine their frustrations.

One of my first actions would be to make the teacher's lounge both a comfortable and functional area. I want the staff, to feel that they can both relax and be productive. The walls will be painted brightly, floors clean, and the lighting will be adequate for reading. I

want the staff to take pride in their room. On the same note, staff should never have to go to the restroom in the same place students do.

Here is a listing of other positive changes that can be made at the building level to help eliminate poor morale.

1. Reserved parking for administrators will be eliminated unless it can be arranged for all staff members.
2. A private telephone line will be available for staff to use for schools business. While it may be too costly to provide a phone in each classroom, there is no reason why staff cannot be allowed a private line for school related business.
3. Administrative interruptions of classes will be kept to an absolute minimum.
4. Messages will be delivered promptly and accurately.
5. Teachers will be informed at the early possible time regarding changes in the schedule due to special events.

This list is not intended to be a conclusive, scientific strategy for improving teacher morale. However, it has been my experience that teachers become angry, frustrated, and burnt out when they are not treated in a professional

manner. While the items listed above might seem trivial to an outsider, most classroom educators consider them to be important. The working conditions of the school are a key determinant of staff morale (Gorton, 1991).

A much more important role for the principal is using satisfaction motivators to foster good morale. A great concept is what Herzberg (1975) calls achievement/recognition. I want to use every way possible to promote and publicize the successes that my staff attains. I would actively use the local media, speeches to service clubs, and private conversations to "brag" about my staff. A great deal could be done within the building to recognize achievement. I could initiate a teacher of the month award, write letters of commendation, use the daily announcements to publicize successes, and make announcements of achievement at faculty gatherings.

Another motivator which I feel holds great promise is responsibility. Teachers are bright people who are full of ideas. I want to encourage my staff to develop ways to improve and then give them the responsibility to carry out their own plan. People are motivated when they have ownership of their ideas and actions.

As the instructional leader, I desire to be a strong advocate for teaching and learning in my building. There

are many formal and informal ways to move towards this goal. The greatest informal method is merely showing an interest in what goes on in the classroom. "Effective principals...often spend about half their time in the school's halls and classrooms...they are high visibility leaders" (Gorton, 1991). Teachers and students will know that I care what is happening in the instructional arena. Obviously, principals are very busy people with a myriad of responsibilities. It will be necessary for me to set aside blocks of time in my weekly schedule to get out of the office and into the hallways and classrooms.

I believe there are two vital areas which must be considered part of instructional leadership. First is staff development. This is a planned set of programs designed to address a specific learning objective for teachers (Rogus, 1991).

Unfortunately, it has been my observation that staff development is something principals have developed unilaterally, without input from teachers. Teachers sit and wonder why they are at these meetings while they could be working productively in their rooms. Meanwhile, administrators become frustrated at the seemingly unprofessional attitude of the staff. This traditional approach to staff development is destructive to the goal

of fostering a positive attitude towards improved classroom performance.

My basic philosophy of staff development is that it should be designed to improve instruction and benefit kids. Staff development that is randomly selected and haphazardly presented will do little or nothing to improve the quality of classroom instruction (Gorton, 1991).

The first thing I would do is set up a team of teachers who, along with myself, would be responsible for assessing, planning, implementing, and evaluation a comprehensive staff development program. This "collegial, collaborative, and community" (Rogus, 1991) atmosphere is more likely to produce positive results for both teachers as students.

The following are some specific steps which can be undertaken to improve a staff development program.

1. Participation in specific programs should be voluntary. A simple system would be to say that each teacher must attend five meetings a year. The teacher could then decide which meetings most closely suit his or her areas for growth.
2. The objectives of each program should be clearly stated well in advance.
3. The concepts presented should be clearly applicable

to classroom needs.

4. Staff development instructors should not only be experts but should be able to easily relate to teachers.
5. The duration of the program should be long enough for teachers to not only be exposed to, but also practice and apply the concepts being taught (Stasz, 1985).

The second major thrust in the area of instructional leadership would be the development of a truly formative system of evaluation. Far too many people view supervision and evaluation of instruction as only a summative function. That is, a way to determine a teacher's present and future status in the district. This unfortunately limits the role the principal can play in improving the instructional performance of the faculty.

Cangelosi (1991) points out that the summative function that most principals engage in interferes with the greatest aspect of formative evaluation, constant and descriptive feedback. To be effective, principals need to separate the two.

The first priority when initiating a formative style of evaluation is to establish trust between the staff and administration. Great effort must be made to convince the faculty that classroom visits and feedback are not

attempts to "get" teachers. To accomplish this, teachers must be involved in the process (Gorton, 1991). A team could be created to identify evaluation criteria, in-service of staff, procedures for classroom visits, opportunities for peer and self-evaluation, and follow-up activities.

I am sold on the idea of the Professional Improvement Commitment (PIC). I would involve every teacher in the PIC process on an annual basis. I believe in the PIC for two reasons. First, it is obvious that everybody, regardless of current level of competency, has room to improve. The PIC institutionalizes the idea that the staff will always look for ways to make itself better. The second strength of the PIC is that it puts responsibility for its success or failure squarely on the shoulders of the faculty member. This ownership will be a motivating factor for the teacher to see to it that the goals in the PIC are accomplished (Decker, 1991).

Unfortunately, a major portion of any principal's job is student discipline. While this is often an unpleasant experience it is vital to maintain an environment in which every student can learn. I believe the most important thing in discipline is prevention of misbehavior. I will take a proactive approach to this challenge. The most

important key to effective discipline is having an instructional program which is well planned, effectively executed and into account the needs of students (Glasser, 1969). Our traditional approach to discipline is that administrators impose and enforce rules. Unfortunately, these rules are often unreasonable and arbitrarily enforced. All rules should be closely associated with the attainment of educational goals and should be enforced in a fair, consistent manner.

Regardless of any preventive measures, some students will go beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior. I believe that certain principles will ensure success in this area. First, students need to understand that the consequences for their misbehavior are a result of conscious choices that they made. These negative reinforcers should be reasonable, workable, and take into consideration the circumstances of the infraction. Finally, I want to follow up on all discipline to determine if some other type of action is needed. Often, discipline problems are a result of emotional or academic problems which require further assistance (Graff, 1991).

School and community relations are a critically important job of any principal. My guiding philosophy in this area is that the school must make a commitment to

two-way communications. Too often, public relations efforts amount to the school telling the public what is going on. We need to make an extra effort to listen to both internal and external publics.

School and community relations begin with the internal public. It is necessary for the administration to build quality relationships with the staff and students. Katz (1955) states that the focus of an overall school-community program is the relationship between administrators and staff. It is the responsibility of principals to model human relations skills that foster good will and mutual respect.

If this relationship is firmly in place, staff need to be involved in the overall school-community effort. An effective idea is to involve all staff members in an in-service program on public relations. This could cover topics ranging from answering the phone in a cordial, helpful manner to effective ways to write press releases (National School Public Relations Association, 1955).

I also believe it is important to improve the relationship with the student body. Glasser (1969) states that the most fundamental need of any individual is to exert some type of power or influence over your environment. This obviously is true of students as well.

I would utilize student advisory groups, student opinion surveys, "town meeting" assemblies, and suggestion boxes to solicit input. In addition, trusted teachers could be utilized as ombudsmen between students and administrators (Kindred, Bagin, and Gallagher, 1990>

The principles used to deal with internal publics are equally effective with the general public. All citizens have an interest or stake in the school. It is important to get feedback from all constituencies. Advisory committees, opinion polls, and panel discussions can all facilitate the sharing of ideas.

While listening is important, it is also necessary to get the message out. I think publicity should center around our "product" the students. Every effort should be made to spotlight the accomplishment of our students. This should go beyond the traditional football games to include the fine arts, academics, and community service. I feel it is even appropriate to show off kids who do well in non-school activities. A student who is named employee of the month at a local fast food restaurant is surely worthy of some type of recognition (Nickerson, 1988).

Nickerson (1985) also makes the point that much can be learned from the private sector. He states that private schools often have much more successful publicity

campaigns because they are in a fight for survival. Schools that are successful in public relations share these characteristics: a great deal of parental involvement, high expectations for students, a community network for soliciting donations, and effective advertising.

Curriculum development could possibly be the most important job a principal will have. Teaching and learning is what a school is all about. My main philosophy on curriculum is that we need to look forward, not to the past. In most ways, schools of today are fundamentally the same as the ones my grandparents went to. Children of today will spend their productive years well into the next century. Clearly, grandpa's curriculum will not serve our children's needs.

Daggett (1990) has some visionary thoughts on what the curriculum should look like. His basic premise is to borrow an idea from special education. That is, every student should have an Individualized Educational Plan developed at the beginning of his/her high school year. This would take students where they were at and push them to the highest possible level. This would require schools to end strict departmentalization and other institutional requirements and to start teaching to the whole child.

Specific areas of instruction would include analysis and synthesis in language arts, keyboarding, problem solving and decision making, systems of technology, applied economics, career planning, applied math and science, and human relations.

In addition to being concerned with the content of the curriculum, it is necessary to look at instructional practices. Benham-Tye (1984) asserts that the problem is not what is being taught, but how we teach it. She advocates more heterogeneous grouping, more pretests to assess student needs, more cooperative learning, more essay tests, and less reliance on lectures as a method of transmitting knowledge.

Goodlad (1983) sums up my views on curriculum by emphasizing that classroom instruction must interface with the outside world. He commented that the educational system must rid itself of the "Pretense that human existence can be segmented, that part of it can be left outside the classroom door."

Conclusions

At the beginning of this paper, I articulated a mission statement which, in essence, said that the student should be the central focus of my administrative practice. To support that, I have stated my professional views with

regard to school-based management, school climate, information-age education, staff morale, instructional leadership, discipline, school-community relations, and curriculum. While each of these areas are of vital importance, I would like to conclude my paper with a brief observation on why I am a professional educator. Young people are the reason our profession exists. Our clients, while possessing many marvelous qualities are also experiencing many physical and psycho-social upheavals (LeFrancois, 1986). I am convinced that student-oriented teachers and administrators can help young adults through the trials of late adolescence. I hope that as my career advanced that I do not become cynical and self-interested, but rather keep my mission statement at the forefront of my thoughts and actions.

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