A vision of a successful secondary principal: reflective essay

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A vision of a successful secondary principal: reflective essay

Abstract
During the past 11 years as classroom teacher and successful athletic coach, I have had the opportunity to observe firsthand and develop strong beliefs toward the position of the secondary principal. The past two years have solidified my beliefs about responsibilities of the secondary school and its aim for effectiveness. The major areas of emphasis in this essay are indicated by the position that effective leadership from the principal’s position includes effective staff development, teacher evaluations, school and community relationships and technology in the schools.
A VISION OF A SUCCESSFUL SECONDARY PRINCIPAL

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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by

Gregory A. Criswell

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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During the past 11 years as classroom teacher and successful athletic coach, I have had the opportunity to observe firsthand and develop strong beliefs toward the position of the secondary principal. The past two years have solidified my beliefs about responsibilities of the secondary school and its aim for effectiveness. The major areas of emphasis in this essay are indicated by the position that effective leadership from the principal’s position includes effective staff development, teacher evaluations, school and community relationships and technology in the schools.

LEADERSHIP

An effective principal must be multi-dimensional in order to achieve the duties and responsibilities of the position. There are times when a principal will have to be firm and make difficult decisions that may not be favorable to others. It is important that the principal be as proactive as possible as opposed to reactive. A proactive principal is empathetic toward others as well as a risk-taker. Principals should always be willing to accept any challenges they may confront, and if they fail, look for different alternatives to try and reach their goals. Most importantly, they appropriately reward and praise their staff and give them the credit. They also are fair and consistent in their handling of matters. Reactive principals are considered self-serving, and sometimes look for the easy way out. They may also take all of the credit and place blame on others. Reactive leaders
are often not respected by their staff and never last long in their position as leaders.

There are often times when the principal needs to change roles from one moment to the next. These roles may shift from a building caretaker, a lunchroom monitor, a curriculum and instruction expert, a personnel manager, a computer expert, and a politician at any given time.

The principal must be someone who inspires trust, displays high levels of self-confidence and optimism, and models high standards of integrity and personal performance. Principals need to be sensitive and decisive, with strong interpersonal and communication skills. They also should be capable of building for consensus and commitment among individuals and groups both within and outside the educational community. Equally as important, an effective principal should have the ability to delegate authority appropriately while maintaining accountability.

It also is extremely important that the principal be personable and friendly toward both the students and staff. This will help eliminate the development of large problems concerning low morale and negative attitudes. The friendliness will stimulate or motivate individuals, both students and staff, to seek the principal's support when they are confronted with difficult problems in their lives. I also
believe the principal should have a strong conviction for doing “things right” for the kids within the community where he/she is employed.

**Ethics**

According to Calabrese (1988), the emphasis for the development of an effective principal includes ethics, moral courage, and the willingness to do what is right. Pascarella and Frohman (1989) describe 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. The effectiveness of an administrator diminishes when decisions are made that seem unethical. Ethics, influenced by conscience, affects job performance according to 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 according to 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 according to Calabrese (1988). The effective principal must be an ethical principal.
Recruitment & Selection

Today's principals also will play a much larger role in the process of hiring faculty with the emergence of site-based management practices. It is imperative that he/she has the ability to select high quality personnel who will fit into the philosophy of the school. Castallo, Fletcher, Rossetti, and Sekoski (1992) identify several items to consider in this highly important administrative function: (a) the examination of the individual employee's personnel record, (b) the school's employee orientation program, (c) the employee evaluation system, and (d) the entire staff development plan of the district. The entire selection process according to Castallo, et al., (1992), should identify those people who meet the qualifications and standards set by the school district. This process must also identify those people who ensure that appropriate individuals are in positions that allow the organization to operate with maximum success.

Legal

Another area that I believe is important for an effective principal is to be aware of practices concerning the legal ramifications of being the primary educational leader in a high school. An effective principal deals with legal responsibilities in terms of employees, students, student learning, student and personnel records, the transportation system of the district, instructional programs, extra-curricular activities, and the building and facilities.
Change

Effective principals can effectively influence change to occur if they create a shared-base environment in their school. They must begin this by having a vision of what direction they want the school to head in the future. However, it is critical that principals develop an environment to empower the faculty to take ownership in the vision. The principal needs to have a full understanding of what the values are of the staff and the community; only then can he/she begin to develop strategies to incorporate change. 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 according to Belasco (1990). Change is a medium adaptation. It may be beneficial or harmful; it may be short-lived or permanent; it may be rapid or gradual; and may be planned or unexpected. But change, like conflict, is inevitable according to Kowalski & Reitzug (1993). Society has changed demographically, and technologically and so must schools. To meet these challenges, we will need leaders who are change agents. Leaders who understand, embrace, and direct change will lead our effective schools.

As an effective administrator, I will make changes in the system dealing with the school climate. The changes will make day to day instruction easier for teachers. I will begin by providing teachers with an agenda for faculty meetings when possible. It will move the meeting along more efficiently, give everyone the
purpose of the meeting, and allow staff the opportunity to prepare. I also feel that there is a greater need for staff communication. Many times the staff is left in the dark on decisions coming from the administration until the last moment. It is important that the faculty be informed on decisions that directly affect them and the students of the school. Communicating timely, accurately, and completely affects staff morale and will provide positive parent support according to Parish & Prager (1992).

**Instructional Leader**

As a practicing principal, I will also be an effective instructional leader. This is essential so that all students can receive the effective instruction necessary. I must ensure that curriculum and instruction are developmentally appropriate by providing my staff with needed space and supplies in order to accomplish this goal.

Smith & Andrew (1989) indicate that principals who are effective instructional leaders: (a) have clear, informed visions of what they want their schools to become - visions that focus on students and their needs; (b) translate these visions into goals for their schools and expectations for their teachers, students, and administrators; (c) continuously monitor progress; and (d) intervene in a supportive or corrective manner when this seems necessary.
Staff Development

I will need to help teachers develop more effective teaching practices. I will need to keep abreast of current developments in instructional research, reflect on what these developments imply for my school, and provide leadership and support for the implementation of instructional practices that effectively provide for diverse student needs NAESP (1991). Well-planned staff development can help ensure that teachers develop to their fullest potential. Fullan (1990) describes staff development as “any process intended to improve skills, attitudes, understandings, or performance in present or future roles (p. 3).” As teachers improve their skills and attitudes, the needs of the students will be successfully met. McGreal (1982) indicates that school districts must provide all members of the school with appropriate training and guided practices in the skills and knowledge necessary to implement and maintain the system. If the school desires effective teaching and instructional practices, the staff development program must provide that opportunity for the individuals of the district along with the evaluation program.

The three most important reasons for a strong staff development program are identified by Swenson (1981). First, declining enrollment in K-12 schools stabilizes the school staff. This is interpreted to mean that teaching staffs are remaining in a school district longer than in the past. Therefore, there are fewer
openings for the new, young teachers who will bring to the school new teaching methods, strategies, and techniques. With the older teaching staffs, the staff development programs must address the implementation of new teaching methods, strategies, and techniques. For effective schools to remain at the forefront in providing students with the best, it is important the older staff members be trained or “re-tooled” to meet those-ever changing processes. Second, new expectations as to what schools are required to do and teach have changed with the changing societal conditions. Thus, the school must meet those changes with a prepared staff. By this, Swanson means the existing staff must be prepared to deal with new needs and demands not only for themselves, but also for their students. Third, in order for the change process concept to take place, the people within a school must change before schools can change. Change cannot take place outside the school setting until teachers make appropriate changes within the schools. Rebore (1991) adds to this list the emphasis for teachers to become acquainted with the advances in instructional materials, equipment and technology. Rebore (1991) suggests that “staff development programs must be different than normal instructional programs of a school because of the involvement of the adult learner (p. 62).”

In defining staff development, Seyfarth (1991) calls it “the provision of activities designed to advance knowledge and understanding of teachers in ways
that lead to positive and productive changes in their thinking and classroom behavior (p. 183)." With the adult learner in mind, Seyfarth (1991) identifies reasons why staff development programs are ineffective. First, there is the lack of coordination of staff development activities with other programs aimed at improving instruction. The staff development activities do not provide any practical application to the adult learner and if they do, it is only because of chance. Primarily, there is no established plan or goal for the staff development program. Second, there is no training. There is no reinforcement when new teachers use new teaching strategies. Teachers are taught how to do something but no follow-up is provided. Third, the change is focusing on individuals, but no provision is in place for the organization to change.

Teacher Evaluation

I also need to have the ability to successfully assess how well students are learning and teachers are teaching. "The purpose of evaluation must be the improvement of instruction (Chirnside, 1984, p. 42)." Nolan and Francis (1992) shared that, through goal setting and team input, principals need to encourage teachers to be active participants in the evaluation process.

With an emphasis on accountability, according to Manning (1988), "the effective leader has the summative evaluation procedures to summarize what was observed and what was not observed (p. 4)." "The effective leader can help
promote growth or improvement of instructional practices when formative evaluation procedures are used (p. 5)."

Formative evaluation procedures should be non-threatening to the recipient, and the evaluation should identify ideas to help the recipient adopt performance strategies that will result in growth and increased effectiveness according to Manning (1988).

Sergiovanni (1991) addresses five stages of formative evaluation: pre-observation conference; observation of the teaching act; analysis and strategies from the study of the observation while in the classroom; post-observation conference that occurs after the observation and used as a feedback session to the teacher; and the post observation conference analysis used by the evaluator to determine how well the person being evaluated has accepted the improvement plan decided upon by both the teacher and the evaluator.

Troisi (1983) provides criteria for effective teaching and student achievement that an evaluator may desire to address when observing the teaching act through formative evaluation procedure. The first criterion is planning and preparation. Classroom management, the second criterion, is defined by clear rules that are consistently followed. The teacher provides a high rate of positive feedback, promotes student time on task that is relatively high, provides remediation of learning deficiencies, provides for role models to students, uses
direct instruction in both large and small groups, and creates a supportive learning atmosphere for each student.

The third evaluation criterion includes elements of monitoring student performance, recognizing student accomplishments, providing individualized feedback, and returning assignments in a timely manner.

During the evaluation cycle, formative evaluation deals with the teaching act. However, the conclusion of the cycle deals with the summative evaluation will include other supporting data that would affect the teacher’s accountability and be the basis for any status decisions according to Manning (1988). This supporting data may include informal documentation pertaining to extra duties, personal interactions, appropriate attire, follow through of board policies, submission reports in a timely manner, and preview of the previous evaluation and the improvement from that report. Thus, according to Manning “the accountability aspect of summative evaluations will ensure that all teachers meet minimum standards of competency for the district and will provide assistance for those not meeting minimum standards (p. 14).”

The instrument used for teacher assistance is commonly known as a Professional Improvement Commitment. Information gathered during the formative evaluation process is included with the other information when evaluating or making comparisons toward the minimum competencies of the
district and when describing the teacher’s accountability to effective instructional practices in the summative evaluation process.

School & Community Relations

The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children’s families identified by Epstien (1995). There is a distinct difference between students and children. When educators look beyond the young people in their classes as “students” and view them as “children,” the partnership between the school, the families, and the larger community blossoms. By establishing these resources, every angle of the child’s life will be positively impacted because all parties share a vested interest, wanting to help children learn and succeed.

I feel that we need to establish our school building as a community center. I feel that administrators should play a role in helping develop a plan that would allow the community to utilize the facilities after school hours. However, it should be made clear that the supervision during those hours be the responsibility of others in the community.

Gorton (1991) indicates that parents constitute an important group that holds expectations for the role of the school administrator. The expectations parents have for the building principal fall into two categories: (a) working with parents’ groups and community members, (b) knowing and helping individual
parents report to parents on progress of children, indicated by Gorton (1991). These expectations make it imperative for building principals to actively seek partnerships and alliances with the homes and greater community.

Crowson (1992) indicates that from the onset of public schooling, educators recognize that the public-service nature of their craft requires the pursuit of support from a surrounding community. The search for parental and community support for schools has become proactive of late; however, schools continue to shut out the parents.

While gaining parental involvement might be one of the most vital roles of an administrator, it can also be one of the most difficult challenges. Schools must be a positive ground for the nurturing of parents. Parents must not be judged, but valued and encouraged to participate in their child’s educational life. The school must have a welcome mat out for parents if we are to make an impact in a child’s life.

I believe that developing home-school partnerships is critical. If a child is not encouraged, at home and the school, we are failing as educators. Because reform efforts include a heavy parental involvement component, public school principals are being called on to be more responsive to their parent clientele according to Goldring & Rallis (1993).
Another role practicing administrators must consider is their ability to deal with the complexities of fast rising integration of technology into the education world. As we enter the 21st century, it is quite apparent that we will be living in a very sophisticated technological world. We are in the age of the information superhighway with the Internet. We now can communicate with others all over the world. With the stroke of a key on a keyboard, we can access information on anything we choose. Students can now access information from the computer instead of going to the library and having to look up information out of a book. I personally think it is very exciting. As an administrator our roles will be to allow access to the technology and encourage our faculty to be competent in the area of utilizing current technology. This will not only enhance their ability to do their work better, such as grading, scheduling and communicating, but will teach our students how to acquire the necessary skills in order to become better educated so they can have a chance of succeeding in our ever-changing world.

See (1993) indicates that because the nature of technology changes swiftly, school leaders must evaluate their technology plans on a yearly basis. As technology continues to become more powerful and less costly, school technology plans must attach long-term goals when considering the budget cycle. He also
recognizes that technology is more than computers, and this is important when developing the school’s technology plan.

Cuban (1994) addresses that technology plans not connected to long-term staff development are destined to fail. Building principals must address the fact that some faculty are “computer anxious.” There remains a lingering suspicion of these clever machines and the fear of losing control over a world that has become too fluid and complex strikes teachers as well as students indicated by Murphy (1993).

Cuban (1994) emphasizes that educational leaders must work hard to make computers part of the professional equipment, same as books and chalk, for every teacher and ensure that every teacher receives the kind of education and training necessary to fully integrate the variety of technologies that are available today, and are to come tomorrow. They will prepare students for the future in where electronic technologies rule the work place, the marketplace, and the home.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude my reflective essay by covering some areas on my personal and professional beliefs that are necessary to be an effective leader. My goal of education is to create an environment where all children can learn if the setting is one where instruction, discipline, social activities and relationships are
coordinated to provide a secure school environment encouraging all children to exercise self-discipline and enhance their self-esteem.

My philosophy on leadership is that I must be a visionary leader who will demonstrate genuine concern, a high level of trust, and model high standards of integrity and personal performance. I am committed to the development of a personalized learning environment for all students. I will work collaboratively with members of the school and community in planning education that meets the future needs of students. Equally important, I will be a strong instructional and enthusiastic leader who possesses dynamic human relations skills necessary to lead a school into the 21st century.

My style of leadership is that of a proactive leader developing a leadership style of management. I will be a facilitator and a motivator, not a boss-style manager that conducts himself in a manipulating and intimidating way.

When building relationships, it is important that I build support and trust. In order to do that, I need to empower others such as staff, students and community members. By empowering them, they will develop ownership, take more pride, and work much harder to ensure success. By developing these characteristics mentioned, I can then build trust and open up an effective form of dialogue. Most importantly, I feel that I will inspire people by listening emphatically to their wants and needs, and model a high level of integrity.
Students should always be treated with respect and dignity. They should be encouraged to build their self-respect and self-discipline. It must also be understood that I will hold students accountable for their actions for the climate of the school. Regarding disciplinary matters, it's important to remember to show strength by showing respect toward students, but also to be stern and serious. Display genuine care for the students, but also display that you will not tolerate misbehaving.

When I finally retire someday, it would be my hope that if any of my staff members were asked what type of a leader I was, the staff member would reply in this manner: Mr. Criswell was a fair and honest man, who always held a high level of integrity. He met every physical challenge, but never invited one. He always displayed empathy, and genuinely showed concern for all students, faculty personnel and community members. Mr. “C” was pleasant to be around, but demanded that we demand of ourselves, to achieve excellence in education. He had the ability to use polite words while at the same time using sharp tones. He showed excellent leadership qualities. He always displayed total commitment, direction and vision for our school. Mr. “C” was always courageous and proactive, not timid or reactive. He felt as if the community he lived in was very important. He always shopped and bought from the merchants in the community and had an effective working relationship with the parents. Most importantly he
ran a safe and secure school, was an advocate for all students, and always shared credit with staff and students. We will truly miss him! My experiences over the last two years have been truly rewarding. Now it’s time to go out on my own and put my knowledge to practice.
References


