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A preferred vision for administering school business management: A reflective essay

Abstract

"School business management is a broad, complex and dynamic area of educational administration. The contemporary school business administrator must be knowledgeable about a wide variety of areas." (Association of School Business Officials International [ASBO INT'L], 1986, p. 7) This same book listed seven high importance task clusters; financial planning and budgeting, fiscal accounting and financial reporting, cash management, fiscal audits and reports, general management, payroll management, and purchasing. The average importance list contained 20 additional items.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SCHOOL BUSINESS

MANAGEMENT:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Joseph B. Daley

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"School business management is a broad, complex and dynamic area of educational administration. The contemporary school business administrator must be knowledgeable about a wide variety of areas." (Association of School Business Officials International [ASBO INT'L], 1986, p. 7) This same book listed seven high importance task clusters; financial planning and budgeting, fiscal accounting and financial reporting, cash management, fiscal audits and reports, general management, payroll management, and purchasing. The average importance list contained 20 additional items.

School business management has grown because of the decline in the rural population, diversity of funding and accountability and because of increasing annual expenditures. The decline in the rural population has contributed to larger schools both in the cities and by the merger of smaller rural districts. Larger districts have more complex educational programs and transportation needs which usually requires the special skills of a school business administrator to assist the

superintendent and school board in meeting their main mission, providing quality education at a reasonable cost.

Before I entered my masters program, I was experienced in many aspects of school business management. I had 12 years of experience employed at area education agencies and schools. The courses in my program have provided me with valuable information regarding historical information, current perspective, and models developed by others from problem solving to employment procedures. I have seen myself in numerous examples that have come up in these courses. With a tighter state budget and correspondingly tighter local budgets, there will be many financial challenges to face in the next few years. I feel much more prepared and confident about my abilities following the completion of my program.

The first graduate course that I enrolled in was school and community relations. I use to think that the public really did not care what went on at our schools or at board meetings. It is remarkable how few parents or anyone else who thinks

they are concerned about education, have attended a school board meeting. Special interest groups and internal and external power groups had been very quiet. I believe this was an example "of an amorphous power structure which occurs commonly in rural settings and means that the power is latent" (Kindred, Bagin, and Gallagher, 1990, p. 28). But the climate in my school district changed. Suddenly a small group of taxpayers started to criticize the school board and the superintendent. The local paper made front page news out of any negative item. This group of supposedly concerned citizens started a holy crusade. It was anything but holy. Finally the superintendent resigned and three incumbent board members decided not to run for another term. Three new school board members were elected. The verbal attacks on administrators continued. The special education director resigned when he was hired for a similar position out of state. The new school board stated, through the new superintendent and board attorney that they could not work with me. So I resigned (with

three months severance pay.)

Kindred et al. (1990) stated their definition of educational public relations:

Educational public relations is a planned and systematic management function to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive two-way communications process involving both internal and external publics, with a goal of stimulating a better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the organization. Educational public relations programs assist in interpreting public attitudes, identify and help shape policies and procedures in the public interest, and carry on involvement and information activities which earn public understanding and support. (p. 15)

Community input and feedback is necessary to measure the amount of or lack of agreement on any board action. But the difficulty here is the task of measurement. How does the

school board determine the community feelings? The board and the superintendent should have utilized the "key communicator program which calls for identifying those people in a community who sit on top of a hypothetical pyramid of communications" (Kindred et al. 1990, p. 33) and solicited input. An action plan should have been created based on the information collected. Ignoring the situation, did not make it go away.

Kindred et al. (1990) identifies the five elements of communication as: "source or sender of information, the message form used by the source (encoder), a channel that carries the message, the decoder who perceives and interprets the common language, and a receiver who reacts to the message after conceptualizing it" (p. 84). A study on these components reveals the many pitfalls to clear and concise communication. Another concept (fraction of selection) "states that a decoder is more apt to decode a message that calls for the least amount of effort" (Kindred et al., 1990, p. 86). So keep the message as

simple as possible.

Regarding the operation of school board meetings, I feel there is one cardinal "Don't" rule. Kindred et al. (1990) stated:

Don't permit citizens to speak out at just any point in a meeting. A specific time should be set aside for them to address the board. If this is not adhered to, a school board will have no control over its own meetings. (p. 176)

That is exactly what occurred during the months of meetings where the school board and the superintendent were verbally attacked, lack of control.

Make sure that this procedure is a board policy. It would be most helpful to have in place before the board needs it.

Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, Usdan (1990) stated: Boards fulfill their control obligations locally in two general ways. One, they are the official link with the public. Boards are to reflect the public will in what they do. Two, boards have crucial internal management responsibilities, such as the selection of top

administrative leadership, allocation of fiscal resources, and examination of the system's products. (p. 205)

School boards cannot delegate some powers. They must use their powers carefully and completely. They must mediate the public will.

Superintendents must provide the leadership and management skills in the district. It is not always apparent but not every superintendent is a good leader and a good manager. Some will be stronger leaders and some stronger managers. The true leader possesses a vision and senses and transforms the needs of followers. This individual needs to employ strong managers in other key positions. The true manager has delegated some responsibilities and kept others. This individual lacks creativity and vision but operates procedures well. The complete leader is high in both leadership and management qualities. I believe it is important to identify which type of leader you are working for and is leading your school district. Even if you have initially determined that your

superintendent has strong management skills, it is necessary to re-evaluate these skill levels each year to protect yourself.

The value of clearly and concisely written board policies should be stressed. Many people view board policy as a confining set of rules when in actuality these policies guide the school and staff and community during the educational process. These policies guarantee equal treatment for all. If policies were not in place during the school year, a day would not go by that did not bring with it another problem. Good policies provide the framework of procedure so everyone involved knows in advance how a situation will be dealt with. This provides security to some and saves time for others.

The public perception of the school business administrator position amazes me. When I meet people in a social setting and mention my occupation they always ask what I do. I am always struck with the thought that they expect a 10 million dollar enterprise to operate without a business manager. A school uses public tax money and collects various

student fees and the public just assumes this is all properly and legally accounted for without a business administrator. After I explain that I am involved with budgeting, purchasing, payroll, insurance, reporting, auditing and anything else that requires money, they suddenly become very interested and always have a few questions. I always take advantage of these opportunities to explain my duties and answer their questions. Many of them have never really thought about the size of a school budget or its financial impact on a community.

I have found budgeting to be an ongoing process throughout the school year. Between state budgeting forms, various line-item budget scenarios and year end reporting, the years seem to fly by. I found one book extremely helpful, The Administrator's Budget Handbook (1989). This book acts as a guide to the entire budgetary process, including model forms, reports and worksheets that may be used or adapted to the needs of individual schools. Ridler and Shockley (1989) state,

Budget procedures are not complicated. They are both

straightforward and logical and, like your household budget, they deal with the two sides of money flow: income and expenditures. In building the budget, it is just as important to know where the money is coming from as it is to know where it will be spent. (p. iv)

School business administrators need to stay current with changing management reform. Herman and Herman (1991) state,

Successful school-based management demands collaboration at all levels, especially between the principal and the school business official. Because school-based management typically involves budgeting and classified and certified personnel, the school business official, along with the building principal, is a key to the success of this decentralization process. (p. 34)

Because our school budgets are showing less growth each year, teachers should have a direct line for budget input. I feel teachers should be informed in the early stages of budget

building and what impact their building will feel, instead of surprising them at the start of the new year.

"Since the school business administrator is often directly responsible for personnel functions of classified and non-instructional personnel, a knowledge and understanding of these organizational characteristics is imperative" (ASBOI, 1986, p. 47). This is a very important area as the business administrator will be dealing with people: current employees and prospective employees and past employees. Castetter (1981) states "The personnel function, it should be noted, is divided into 11 areas: planning, bargaining, recruitment, selection, induction, appraisal, development, compensation, security, continuity, and information" (p. 6).

The personnel function is as complicated as the accounting function, but must be handled as efficiently and congenially as possible. High ethics must be maintained during the hiring process so every qualified applicant feels that he/she had a fair opportunity to present themselves and to be

selected.

The evolving perception of the modern personnel function is that it has become a key organizational activity that, when fully integrated with other key functions, will play a major role in developing and implementing strategic and operational plans and that will involve ingenuity and creativity to resolve critical uncertainties stemming from both within and outside of the organization (Castetter, 1981, p. 37).

Once the contract has been ratified by both parties, each has a responsibility to make the contract work. Disputes are certain to arise over the meaning of the language in the agreement. But if care is taken during the writing of each article in the agreement, disputes can be greatly reduced.

"Contract administration includes four elements: implementation, conflict resolution, enforcement, and evaluation. Few negotiators are blessed with wisdom to foresee every problem, every conflict, every clause with a

potential for misinterpretation" (Castetter, 1981, p. 176).

Teachers started to negotiate because of one, a concern with changes that affect them, two, to protect themselves from physical assault, three, they did not want neighborhood groups running the schools, four, they want boards to maintain uniformity and standardization, and five, they want adequate income without moonlighting. Many of these reasons are still valid today. Alexander and Alexander (1985) noted, "The right of public employees to engage in collective bargaining entails important legal aspects, such as the employees right to organize, the authority of the school board to bargain, the right to strike, and the authority of the school board to submit to compulsory arbitration" (p. 675). I feel it is fortunate for students, teachers, board members and administrators that Iowa does not allow teachers to strike.

Six things can happen when you negotiate; you can alienate teachers, alienate your board, alienate the community, alienate students, you can be perceived as the problem, and

settle the contract. Decker (1991) stated, "The board negotiating team has three very broad goals. First, it must not harm the educational process in the act of negotiating the agreement. Second, the board team is charged with successfully negotiating a satisfactory agreement, one that is acceptable to both parties. Third, the agreement must never lower morale or worsen teacher/administrator relations" (p. 8).

I have listed some of my guiding negotiation considerations. Control perceptions and emotions. The team should know in advance what is acceptable to the board. Be patient but meet as few times as possible. Bargaining is a gradual losing process, not a giving process. Timing is important. Don't make too good an offer too early. Learn how to say no.

Some other general values and beliefs that I have adopted are; one, always be honest with the press, the public and employees, two, fully list in every board action the full language of the motion and ask the board for clarification if it

is not clear, three, if the board wants to agree to something in closed session inform them that official action must occur in open session, four, double check all figures before they are released, five, realize that any hidden or embarrassing actions may remain hidden for a time but will always resurface, and six, be ethical and honest at all times and admit your mistakes.

I feel a school business administrator must also be a good listener and every time someone talks, it is an opportunity to learn something new.

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