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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

Education in America is changing. This paper will explore the role an administrator plays in developing a shared vision, empowerment, school-community relations, staff development, the hiring process, and in dealing with social problems. "All principals are instructional leaders, since all principals inevitably influence what students have an opportunity to do in the classroom" (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 27).

Administrators should be the facilitators of teachers. It is important to be the kind of principal that teachers can trust to implement changes. A principal's purpose is to nurture and develop better teachers. A critical part of the job is to help all teachers to understand that they are there for the benefit of the kids.

A PREFERRED VISION OF ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
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Masters of Arts in Education

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Education in America is changing. This paper will explore the role an administrator plays in developing a shared vision, empowerment, school-community relations, staff development, the hiring process, and in dealing with social problems. "All principals are instructional leaders, since all principals inevitably influence what students have an opportunity to do in the classroom" (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 27). Administrators should be the facilitators of teachers. It is important to be the kind of principal that teachers can trust to implement changes. A principal's purpose is to nurture and develop better teachers. A critical part of the job is to help all teachers to understand that they are there for the benefit of the kids.

To maximize the effectiveness of a staff, the administrator must know how staff members feel and they need to feel they have input in the decision making process. One way to get input is to never be too busy to listen attentively and to give the idea presented thought before speaking. A good listener resists the urge to reject proposals until he/she is sure he/she fully understands it.

Shared Vision

"Most people have goals and objectives, but no sense of a real vision. No organization becomes great without goals, values, and missions that become shared. A 'vision statement' or the leader's strength is not enough. A genuine vision breeds excellence and learning because people want to pursue these goals. Shared visions create a commonality that gives a sense of purpose and coherence to all activities" (Senge, 1991, p. 7).

In an open system the leader shares with others all the choices he/she is willing to live with. The group then arrives at a consensus that reflects the input. A true open system could be renamed a support system because everyone is supporting one another. In this type of system everyone is successful because everyone is working toward a common goal.

Shared vision is indispensable for employers that want to provide focus and drive for employees. The overarching goal that the vision establishes leads to commitment as well as new ways of reasoning and performing. It encourages risk-taking and experimenting. It also strengthens a security to the long-term (Senge, 1991, p. 8).

School Empowerment

As an administrator one should always be a cheerleader and motivator. It's important to pump people up and to be positive in public. We can't control our circumstances but we can control how we respond to them. Glickman (1990) believes that empowered schools are better because of the way that teachers, students and administrators treat one another. This source indicates that some of the best and brightest teachers have left the public schools because of their frustration caused by a lack of influence in decision making. He powerfully illustrates the levels that thrive on empowerment by reminding the reader that not even the President of the United States has absolute veto power.

When a group of knowledgeable people are put together, it is believed that they act in the best interests of students. Giving teachers a voice in decision making motivates them to work seriously toward change. They will strive to keep a program from failure when the responsibility for its success lies with them. After all, no one wants to be viewed as a poor decision maker.

As an administrator, more input translates into more ideas with the feeling of ownership developing. Glickman reflects that democracy is not an efficient mechanism, and at times it produces horrendous decisions. Democracy is, however, the core belief that unites us as people. A major goal of education is to teach the skills necessary for democracy to survive.

School-Community Relations

At the heart of an effective and dynamic school district is a structured program of school-community relations. "An administrator may provide excellent leadership for the school's curriculum and he/she may be a financial wizard; but if that administrator cannot communicate with the school board, a concerned taxpayers' group, or the staff, days in the district will be few" (Kindred, 1990, p. 1).

External Public

The principal provides for the good of the organization when he/she is involved in public relations. We are doing a multitude of good things in schools and we should be "tooting our horns" a little more. Unfortunately, the media spends too much time and energy focusing on negative incidents. It is the

charge of a school administrator to act as a "press agent" for the school district. Community members want to know what is happening in schools and to feel they have a voice in the decision making process. The principal makes the final decision but only after weighing suggestions from parents, teachers, and community members. It is paramount to convey the perception that the school truly seeks and respects ideas that don't originate with educators. After all, how can anyone make an intelligent decision before they have considered all the facts or information?

Internal Public

An effective school is run in much the same manner a successful business is run. Emphasis must be placed on good customer service. At school administrators sometimes neglect to consider the students, their parents, as well as the faculty and staff as valued customers. School employees could benefit immensely from some customer service seminars similar in content to that the business community attends. Open enrollment and private schools offer "dissatisfied customers" other options.

Kindred (1990) found the following:

School districts see three reasons why a good

internal communication program is important: (1) a good external communication program cannot survive without it; (2) constructive ideas will be suggested by employees because someone is listening and informing them; and (3) human needs, such as recognition and a sense of belonging, will be met, thus making employees more productive (p. 100).

Social Problems

"Our world is awash in violence. And no one is suffering more than our young people" (Molnar, 1992, p. 4). The social problems that schools deal with today are enormous. Adolescents experiment with various coping strategies, i.e., alcohol, drugs, sex, suicide, gangs, etc. Gangs give adolescents a sense of belonging, a surrogate family, a career path, an opportunity to actualize "adulthood", and an identity or role. A gang has a defined structure and "turf", a special language unto itself, a uniform dress, specific names for its members, and a purpose--illegal activity.

According to Moore, Garcia, Garcia, Cerda, & Valencia (1978) many gangs were started for nothing more than protection. Consider the early Hispanic gangs in the Los Angeles area. When immigrants from

Mexico came to this country due to political instabilities in their own country, they were unable to speak the English language. They tended to move into Hispanic barrios where they were often treated as unskilled laborers and paid almost nothing for a day's work. Due to ethnic misunderstandings, there was strife between the immigrants and the English speaking community. Due to the strife, groups were formed to protect themselves and their families. Ultimately, criminal activity began being conducted through these groups, and decent people were forced out of the groups. These now criminal groups began fighting with such groups or gangs from other neighborhoods, which started long-standing rivalries that still exist today.

On the basis of this information, one could derive that gangs began as a racist defense. It is also true that until recently most Hispanic gangs allowed only Hispanics, and on rare occasions, a black into their group. Black gangs have, until recently, limited their membership to blacks. The white gangs are usually all white and lean towards the "Aryan" type mentality. In recent years, however, we have seen these racial divisions fading away and we are seeing multi-ethnic gangs.

In recent years, we have seen the reason for gang existence shift toward the money-making aspect of crime. We find gang members selling drugs and competing for that market. We find them involved in car theft rings. It is no longer protection of their neighborhood or turf, but competition for the elusive buck. There appears to be a trend toward more organized, criminal activity.

"More than 80% of America's one million prisoners are high school dropouts" (Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 15). These sorts of problems must be addressed before learning can take place. Educators may attempt to teach, but until students' physiological needs are met they cannot learn (Hodgkinson, 1991). In 1953, Wally and Beaver Cleaver had Ward and June Cleaver to turn to for support. In 1994, the frightening and pathetic truth for many teens and pre-teens is that this role is now filled by their gang. It has been said that ignorance is bliss. That may be but when it comes to social problems, knowledge is the best defense. The problems don't go away if we ignore them. The informed administrator can prevent many problems by educating not only the staff they work with but the community as well.

Referral Networks

As our society changes so do the students we have in schools. As a result, it is essential that referral networks be developed within schools. The network should serve as a link among teachers and administrators to identify and connect students and parents with the appropriate resources to help meet their needs. Schools can make a significant impact on students and parents who are affected by social problems.

"America's children are 'endangered species' and schools alone cannot correct the problems in education" (Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 16). In addition to teaching the fundamentals, schools now have the added responsibility of directing youth to successfully confront social problems. Only by concentrating all of our resources toward a common goal can we efficiently help all of our youth achieve healthy and positive self-concepts. Administrators serve as key persons in getting the referral network established. It falls upon the administrators to see to it that all students are safe. Many times this may require disciplinary action which possibly includes assistance from an outside source.

Youth Empowerment

"Participants from diverse youth-serving organizations--churches, sports organizations, youth groups, schools, social clubs--say that a major problem they confront is attracting and sustaining the involvement of young people" (Heath, 1991, p. 624). Successful organizations have in common their diversity and their insistence that members feel that they belong to an intimate group. "These organizations also adopt an approach that is both firm and flexible; they empower rather than infantilize youths" (Heath, 1991, p. 625).

Only rarely are adolescents viewed as a source of insight into the reasons that some of their peers deliberately place their health and their futures at risk (Roth, 1991). "Enlisting teens to attack problems endemic to adolescence is an approach that is well-suited to youth service organizations" (Roth, 1991, p. 619).

Staff Development

It is very important that appropriate staff development workshops be sought by the administrator. In our school district, an appropriate in-service would be on gangs and how to deal with the related issues.

Another school district may need to be in-serviced on special education. The needs of the district should be assessed by the administration and addressed. Too often administrators choose in-service topics on their wishes rather than the district's needs. Educators must give up some popular beliefs, but in the process they gain the freedom to maximize their own and their students' potential (Lovitt, 1990).

Instructional Leader

A common opinion is that principals are not and never have been maximally effective instructional leaders (Fallon, 1979, p. 67). Many teachers' experiences and beliefs about supervision and evaluation are that the exercise happens as a required part of the job. They don't understand that supervision and evaluation is part of an improvement process for teachers. They think the principal is trying to "catch" teachers in their weaker areas. The perception of an announced classroom visit is that anyone can look good for fifty minutes if they know ahead of time that they are going to be evaluated.

"Secondary school principals are expected to provide instructional leadership, but the everyday demands of the principalship compromise their ability

to adequately fulfill that role" (Cunard, 1990, p. 30). Effective principals spend most of their time in the school. They are engaged in identifying and assessing instructional problems. A leader is never happy to just identify the problem but also aids in the solution. The principal that encourages and supports others actively and consistently looks for the opportunities to guide and coach people.

The principal who understands the most important and perhaps the most positive purpose of teacher evaluation is the improvement of instruction, is a true educational leader. This purpose must be conveyed to teachers. Many teachers feel suspicious and hostile toward the evaluator when the purpose or goal of evaluation has not been communicated and, therefore, will usually not teach his/her best lesson.

"Effective principals, together with their staffs, articulate a set of cultural norms that define what their school is about; they are constantly out and about their buildings, monitoring whether norms are being violated and reinforcing good teacher practices" (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 27).

Who Should Be Hired?

As the educational leader for the building, it is important that a principal have the ability to hire good teachers. A team is only as strong as its members. "One of the most direct ways a principal influences instruction is by hiring the teachers who deliver it" (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 23).

Minority Population

A principal needs to ask applicable, probing interview questions and know what teacher traits are critical for the kids in a particular building. Although race should not be used as a sole criterion, an ideal school would recruit the same ethnic make up in faculty and staff as is present in the student body.

Faculty diversity provides the opportunity to present lessons from multiple perspectives. Teachers should be role models for our youth, challenge stereotypes of minorities, and reinforce the democratic ideals of equality and equity. It is inequitable to expect our minority students to identify with a majority role model. An administrator can play a crucial role in the recruitment of diverse individuals.

Recruitment

It is true that there are limited numbers of people of color in education but that is not an excuse to give up the search for qualified minority individuals. Maintaining the status quo is no longer acceptable. School districts wishing to improve their cultural diversity will need to advertise positions in sources to inform targeted audiences of opportunities for employment.

"While schools of education should continue recruiting minorities for faculty positions and encouraging minorities about to enter college to consider a career in teaching or graduate studies in education, they should shift some of their attention to establishing relationships with metropolitan school districts to try to increase the academic performance of all students, thereby addressing the more fundamental problem--the lack of minorities in higher education" (Garcia, 1993, p. 427). The goal of all educators should be to increase the pool of minorities with bachelor's degrees. One way to keep teachers as well as students around once they have been successfully recruited is to implement a mentor program for teachers and students in school.

In conclusion, significant efforts must be made to increase the number of minority applicants and to ensure that minority faculty are valued for all of their academic contributions. The goal of intellectual diversity will then have been reached.

Level Appropriate

It seems a crime to put a high school teacher in the middle school environment. Middle school students have many special needs that need to be addressed. It would be preferable to hire instructors specifically trained at each level rather than let the middle level be a gray area in which both, elementary and secondary people can teach. After all, the middle level students' needs are unique and demanding. Placing someone in that situation who does not have the training or desire to work with this challenging age group of kids will only make the kids and teacher miserable.

Middle Level Teacher

The most important quality a teacher can possess is genuine caring for the students. The middle level needs teachers who seek excitement every day and most of all wants to work with exciting, challenging, 10 to 14-year-old students.

The middle level teacher must believe there is no higher calling than middle level teaching as a career. There is no other field of service where you could make a greater contribution, where you could have more of an impact on the lives of others. 'Middle school teaching is service with a capital S. It is demanding to be sure, but it gives satisfaction in abundance (O'Hanlon, 1991, p. 27).

Middle school teachers should willingly accept students for who and what they are. Teachers must work with students in terms of what they can do. "Young adolescents succeed at new and more difficult learning tasks and areas of study when they feel comfortable with their teachers" (O'Hanlon, 1991, p. 28).

Effective middle school teachers understand and can empathize with the challenges today's young people face in school and in their life outside school. Teachers with those capacities have great success in helping middle school students learn facts, skills, and concepts.

Education In America

Each person working in the American educational system is thought to have the same goal... doing what

is best for kids. When success is achieved the rewards are immense and help compensate for the many hours of time and effort spent. It is the duty of the building's educational leader to see to it that the entire staff understands that not everyone will reach the same high level of success, but an effort has been made to identify and assist them to the fullest extent possible. Genuine care and concern for students on the part of the school and community result in increased success in and for schools.

According to Hodgkinson (1991), America has the power to reduce the proportion of at-risk children but lacks the will to do it. America has the power and the will to decrease the number of at-risk children dramatically but lacks the ability to consider schools, parents, and social services working side by side. Presently, many times when we reach a hurdle we jump to blame one another. Schools and parents working jointly with community agencies to serve the special needs of all students is the key to helping students achieve their goals inside and out of school. The administrator who believes in a shared vision, school empowerment, school-community relations, and addressing

social problems through education is a change agent and therefore, an effective administrator.

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