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
I believe schools reflect the society in which they exist, schools likewise have attempted to adjust to the changing needs of society. We presently live in a constantly changing society. Changes in demographics and the family structure have forced school systems to look at delicate issues such as consolidation of school districts and open enrollment. Students' needs have changed as a result of an increase in divorce, single-parent homes, and two family incomes thus forcing schools to adapt their curriculum and scheduling.

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A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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

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I believe schools reflect the society in which they exist, schools likewise have attempted to adjust to the changing needs of society. We presently live in a constantly changing society. Changes in demographics and the family structure have forced school systems to look at delicate issues such as consolidation of school districts and open enrollment. Students' needs have changed as a result of an increase in divorce, single-parent homes, and two family incomes thus forcing schools to adapt their curriculum and scheduling.

A great deal of hope for the future will be needed, especially the kind of hope that embraces an ever-expanding concept of community. Along with hope, however, we must also have commitment to higher standards and to increase our effort to realize our hope (Goodlad, 1985).

It is a very exciting time to be involved in education. As long as there are schools, they will require leadership. In our schools, that leadership comes from the principal. An effective principal plays a major role in the successful transformation of the school.

My philosophy of leadership and the principalship have changed as a result of coursework and the practicum in educational administration at the University of Northern Iowa.
These positive experiences have given me a new and broader perspective of education and the principalship in particular.

My own philosophy of administration has changed drastically from the beginning of the program to the near completion of the courses. Initially, I perceived administration as being a top down decision-making position. As I have become enlightened to the new philosophy of teacher empowerment, site-based management, and shared decision making, I envision educational administration much differently. It is important for principals to let go more and share the decision making responsibilities for such tasks as scheduling, planning for staff development programs, and budgeting. I have discovered that being a principal is much like being captain of a ship.

I envision the principal as the captain with his or her hand on the rudder of the ship. The faculty take the position of manning the oars. The oars can move swiftly forward and make the ship run efficiently or the oars can sit idle and out of the water. The oars may even be rowed backwards. I also see the community as the wind blowing the ship steadily forward or drastically off course. The valuable cargo of the ship are the students who will be carried into adulthood with hopefully the smoothest and most fulfilling voyage possible.
The purpose of this paper is to examine and highlight the numerous characteristics, skills, and attributes that an effective leader of leaders would possess. A school administrator must be a person who is capable of bearing a heavy burden of leadership, a risk-taker, a true executive (Finn, 1986).

Leadership

"When in doubt, lead!" This philosophy can certainly be applied to an effective school administrator. In what direction an administrator, specifically a school principal, leads is the key issue. The role of the principal encompasses much more than management. The central role of the principal has been viewed, variously, as building manager, administrator, change agent, politician, and instructional leader.

There are four competencies of leaders: (a) management of meaning, (b) management of attention, (c) management of trust, and (d) self-management (Bennis and Nanus, 1985). To be competent as an educational leader, an administrator must first be able to manage the meaning of schooling, which means that the leader has a clear understanding of the purpose for schools and can manage the symbols of the organization toward fulfilling that purpose.

The community, the legislature, local and state agencies, and businesses are part of different organizations that interact
with school districts. This system is called an open system. Open systems are loosely coupled organizations (Personal Communication, Doud, Introduction to Educational Administration, Fall 1991). I believe it is vital for a principal to understand these different organizations and how they interact with schools.

Management of attention is the ability to get teachers to focus and expand their energies toward fulfilling the purpose of school. This can be accomplished by having the principal make sure that the entire staff and community know exactly what the school mission entails. I believe it is the principal's responsibility to lead the staff in developing school wide goals and communicating them to the entire community. The staff, students, and community can all feel a sense of purpose from the school's mission.

Management of trust means that leaders behave in such a way that others believe in them and their style of leadership does not become an issue. There are five key characteristics of "successful executives" that can lead to management of trust: (a) face-to-face leadership, (b) initiative, (c) oral communication skills, (d) ability to analyze problems, and (e) good judgment (Personal Communication, Decker, Administration of Secondary Schools, Spring 1992).
face leadership involves getting teachers to take ownership of solutions. The principal might ask questions that cause teachers to reflect on their decisions and actions. Building planning committees could be organized to develop some ownership within the schools. Instilling initiative is getting teachers to take risks.

According to Bennis and Nanus (1985) the management of one's self is simply knowing who one is; and knowing one's strengths and weaknesses. I believe an effective administrator needs to play to his/her strengths and shore up his/her weaknesses.

The principal who displays strong instructional leadership places high priority on curriculum and instructional issues. Curriculum development and staff development are keys to a school's success; it is next to impossible to use these keys without strong leadership (Rutherford, 1985). Sapone (1985) maintained that any school can increase efficiency and effectiveness if the principal is able to demonstrate curriculum and instructional leadership. It is important for a principal to understand that curriculum change takes place because there is a social context going on that affects schools.

A productive and effective administrator must realize what organizational impediments might stand in the way of
leadership. Four obstacles seriously constrain principals from exercising strong instructional leadership: (a) lack of knowledge of curriculum and instruction, (b) professional norms, (c) district office expectations, and (d) role diversity (Hallinger and Murphy 1987).

The principal who displays strong instructional leadership is dedicated to the goals of the school and the school district and is able to rally and mobilize resources to accomplish the goals of the district and the school. The principal cannot accomplish the goals of the school without empowering others. Sergiovanni (1987) described active leadership as enabling others, or empowering others, to be leaders. It is vital for success that the faculty obtain ownership in decision-making. Shared decision-making has been linked with job satisfaction and commitment, and it can be very beneficial (Sergiovanni, 1984). Barth (1988) suggested a school can fulfill no higher purpose than to teach all its members that they can make what they believe in happen, and to encourage them to contribute to and benefit from the leadership of others. Effective principals must make sure their schools have a clear cut direction and plan for what kids are to learn. Administrators should be sure to communicate this to the community and get parents involved in this plan.
Empowerment of teachers is a topic that has constantly come up in my coursework at the University of Northern Iowa. Before teachers can be empowered they must understand and be involved in development of the school's mission and belief statements. By understanding and living the school's shared beliefs the faculty is empowered so they clearly understand the parameters that they are to be working within. A "community of leaders" (Barth, 1988) can be developed if principals are willing to relinquish their old pattern of top down management style. Management of attention can be implemented by principals to strengthen the course of empowerment. A successful principal finds a way to have his/her faculty take ownership for new ideas and strategies.

I believe another important leadership role of the principal is to act as an instructional resource. The principal needs to be actively engaged in the improvement of classroom circumstances that enhance learning. Through ongoing dialogue with the staff, the principal encourages the use of a variety of instructional materials and teaching strategies. In order to accomplish this, the principal must stay abreast of new developments in materials and strategies for improving instruction.

The effective principal is actively involved in all aspects of
the instructional program, sets expectations for continuous improvement and collegiality, models the kinds of behaviors desired, and consistently gives priority to instructional concerns.

According to Gauthier (1980), "every school must believe that all children can learn and that all teachers and administrators can help them" (p. 16). Principals must attend to differences in staff members' attitudes about students' abilities to learn, as well as feelings of both teachers and students that what they do makes a difference (Sergiovanni, 1984). It is the job of an effective principal to stretch his/her faculty by asking the faculty the right questions. That is, questions that probe and go to the heart of the teaching-learning process.

Whole-brain thinking is what effective administration is all about (Hooper, 1992). A school principal must be efficient at management and leadership. Management (left-brain thinking) works well when efficiency is important and leadership (right-brain thinking) works well when people and effectiveness are important. The right side of the brain of an administrator must come up with the intuitive imagining of a possible desired outcome, a vision. The left side of the administrator's brain must connect the vision into an action plan.
Vision

Blumberg and Greenfield (1986) related vision to a sense of moral imagination which gives an individual the ability to see that the world need not remain as it presently is. They went on to say that creating a vision is allowing people to strive for something better. I feel vision is something an effective principal should work toward.

I believe principals who attempt to maintain the status quo have no vision. They are not risk-takers and I feel risk-takers are what education presently needs. Administrators with a vision are dreamers with a sense of purpose. Instructional leaders have a clear vision of what the school is trying to accomplish. The ability to visualize the steps from an idea to realization is a very vital task for a principal.

Patterson, Purkey, and Parker (1986) listed five steps educational leaders can take to achieve their visions: (a) valuing, leaders see the vision; (b) reflection, leaders "own" the vision; (c) articulation, leaders make their private vision a public one; (d) planning, leaders develop strategies; and (e) action, leaders mobilize people. Administrators must believe that schools are a good place for children and in order to make a difference they need to invest themselves and take risks to improve schooling.
Andrews and Smith (1989) stated that it's important for a principal to be seen as a good communicator at his/her different levels, one-on-one, as a small group facilitator, and to create a sense of vision for the school.

School principals need to create meaning that is full of hope and optimism for people. Principals should communicate a sense of professionalism to their staff members. They should send the message that it is okay to try new things with students even if they do not work. I believe principals can do this by exposing staff members to new strategies and methodologies of teaching. It is imperative to move a faculty away from the status quo. It is important to stretch a faculty whenever possible. It is imperative that principals and teachers share a vision so it can be effectively implemented and students and parents can be influenced by the vision.

Principals must understand that at times there will be staff members who do not share the principal's beliefs. Buell (1992) suggested that dissent is needed, for it can sharpen the vision to hone it against dissonance, to a degree. Administrators must learn to "rework" the values of others.

Buell (1992) listed four areas that principals should adhere to when reworking people's values.

1. Know the importance of expressing ones values, and
practice this expression, both to develop educationally sound value positions and learn to handle argument and criticisms.

2. Hear the values of others, and participate in reasoned debate about values.

3. Identify the strategies that could be used to rework the values of others.

4. Practice the negotiating skills necessary to bring the commitment of others to their value-driven decisions.

(p. 90)

A vision, by its nature, is a target. In order to reach this target a principal must understand the system. He/she must understand how a system works and how people function in it. Without this baseline knowledge, good planning is impossible.

Educational leaders, above all, must be doers. Visions are useless without action and people. Visionary leaders must be strong, skillful communicators who work well with diverse people. Visionary leaders do not lead easy lives. A great deal of energy, time, and money are spent in perfecting skills needed to accomplish their vision. Opportunities must be seized and risks taken in order to see one's vision become reality. Building commitment to a vision is vital for effective leadership. The principal's vision must be actively built into the culture of the school. Every meeting, speech, consultation, and goal must be
encompassed into the vision. Reward systems need to be established to continually reinforce behaviors consistent with the vision and behaviors and actions that are inconsistent need to be redirected. Being a visionary leader is not easy. The vision leaders create for schools must focus on excellence. A vision is a preferred future, and taking risks and understanding that leadership is more important than power will help create a bright future.

Climate

I believe that people can only obtain happiness if they decide for themselves that happiness is what they want. Research provides evidence that when teachers understand, accept, and like themselves, they have a much greater capacity to understand, accept, and like their students (Purkey and Smith, 1983).

Similarly, it has been shown that administrators who have a positive sense of self-worth tend to act positively. They have a high regard for their employees as human beings and they try in various ways to build self-esteem in their staff (Beck and Hillman, 1987).

Schools, like people, have personalities. The development of a healthy school climate is a vital task in educational leadership. School climate is the perception that
people have about their schools. School learning climate refers to norms and attitudes of the staff and students that influence the learning in the school. It is the responsibility of the principal to work toward a positive climate where people respect, trust, and help one another. It's important that people exhibit strong sense of pride, ownership, and personal productivity that comes from the entire school staff working in harmony. This sense of family is created when principals initiate, organize, involve others in clarifying values and vision, define the work to be done, and demonstrate concern for people. Principals shape the learning climate directly and indirectly by maintaining high visibility in order to communicate priorities and model expectations (Hallinger and Murphy, 1987).

Strong instructional leaders who promote a positive climate are seen as “visionaries who are out and around” (Andrews and Smith, 1989, p. 36). An effective principal is one who is seen. He/she is in classrooms, in the hallways during passing time and in the lunchroom. Principals should be willing to give up their office and catch people doing something right. A highly visible administrator is one who is seen as being approachable and willing to establish trusting relationships. They make positive announcements over the public address system and they praise the staff and students for good work. It
is important for the principal to be enthusiastic about his/her work because enthusiasm is contagious and it can do great things to improve the teaching-learning climate within a building.

According to Guba, it is vital for teachers to understand the nomothetic expectations by having administrators clearly state anticipated school norms. It is also very important for principals to comprehend their staff's individual behavior, or idiographic needs (Personal Communication, Decker, Administration of Secondary Schools, Spring 1992).

It is very important for principals to work toward obtaining prestige and influence so they do not constantly have to invoke their status and authority. Principals must use rationality and reasoning to move from nomothetic expectations to organizational goals. I believe it is imperative to get a sense of belonging between the nomothetic and the ideographic needs of a faculty. Only when this is accomplished will faculty take ownership in their own organizational goals and obtain a feeling of commitment. Organizational procedures will seem much more inviting if the principal and his/her faculty can agree on goals and hold certain values in common. I believe that communication is the key to ushering in belonging, rationality, and commitment.

Communication comes in numerous channels. Oral and
written communication should always be clear and concise. Written communication should be appropriate for the different audiences. Selecting the proper channel of communication will always enhance the clarity of meaning.

Since schools are open systems it’s important to understand that the community influences the expectations and tone or “spirit” of the school. It is imperative that communities have pride in their schools. Administrators must make sure that their schools are clean, neat, safe, and always open to members of the community. The mission of the school must be understood and agreed upon by the community in order for a positive climate to flourish.

I believe a positive school climate is achieved when goals are part of a school’s mission statement. Schools must be seen as pleasant, but serious workplaces designed to help students achieve. A positive climate is one that helps foster student self-esteem and emotional well-being.

In order for a positive climate to flourish I believe a principal should model an enthusiastic approach. He/she should always follow through on administrative directives to guard against fragmentation of a faculty. Everyone in a building should be aware of the school’s mission and work toward obtaining that purpose.
School climate, therefore, is a major indicator of school life. Principals must grasp the concept that positive attitudes produce positive results. If the principal has set high expectations and models a positive approach to meet these expectations, the entire staff, students and community will fall in line toward achieving a productive and positive climate.

Change

Sarason (1971) summarized our experience in trying to change education as trying very hard but actually changing very little. This problem of change, or lack of it, stems from individual resistance to being changed. Schools are tough to change because professionals lack the required skills and are negatively disposed toward change. Administrators must understand that change can create havoc because it introduces disequilibrium, uncertainty, and makes day-to-day life chaotic and unpredictable.

Principals must understand that change takes time. Before suggesting or initiating change, one must understand why things are the way they are. When initiating change, people's beliefs, needs, and values should not be overlooked. I believe a principal must steer clear of top-down mandates. It is necessary that the staff take ownership in change because lasting change is only affected by creating support. Building
principals must work to unfreeze, move to new levels and refreeze so effective change may take place. The first stage to unfreeze would indicate that change is needed and information for making that change is necessary. Moving to new levels would call for innovation, and creativity. To refreeze would involve molding or becoming part of what is expected, that is, part of the nomothetic (Personal Communication, Decker, Administration of Secondary Schools, Spring 1992). By planting seeds and allowing them to grow a principal is acting as a true catalyst. The principal cannot simply be the "fixer", but he/she can be the catalyst for reflective practice. This whole process may take from three to five years.

Change in curriculum is inevitable and desirable. The curriculum should reflect the nature of change in our environment, that we are constantly reorganizing to meet the changes evident in a dynamic universe (Burns, 1989). The curriculum is a product of it's time, and our times are ever changing. Administrators must concentrate curriculum development toward the global community. By this I mean we live in a world that is constantly becoming smaller because of advancements in technology. Schools must take into consideration the global world because we live in an ever increasing global economy.
When initiating change in curriculum, I believe principals must start with the present curriculum. The key to effectively changing curriculum is to have a clear cut direction and plan for what kids are to learn. Changing curriculum needs to be a cooperative group activity involving teachers, administrators, and the community. Through supervision and evaluation a principal can get a feel for the academic climate of the school.

Nolan and Francis (1992), suggested that a change in the mindscape on supervision is grounded in certain principles and beliefs. They believe that the purpose of supervision is to provide a tool for teachers and supervisors which will increase their understanding of the learning process through collaborative inquiry with other professionals.

I believe that evaluation should never be a surprise and an administrator should try and catch the faculty doing something good. An effective formative evaluation process needs to be in place and used effectively. I also believe a professional improvement commitment plan is necessary in the summative evaluation in order to get a staff to stretch themselves and become the best possible teachers. Staff development can be a primary source for improving instruction. This vehicle can help motivate and change a staff if done correctly.
Staff development is an investment in one's staff that demonstrates real commitment and a sense of priority for improved instruction. For staff development to be effective, knowledge and skills must be demonstrated in an appropriate and meaningful way. Principals can lead the way in staff development by using supervision and evaluation skills such as the use of reflective questioning and self-improvement plans (SIP). Unfortunately, many staff development programs offer no follow-up. I see this as a major shortcoming of staff development programs. The principal needs to take the initiative to have follow-up procedures or the staff will view programs as quick-fix solutions with no validity.

Conclusion

Henry Adams stated, (Bartlett, 1937) "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence will stop" (p. 636). An important task for an administrator is to build a structure of relationships within schools so that all children may enter adulthood and become productive members of societies. Educational leaders need to create good schools so societies are full of productive people.

I believe the number one reason why people go into administration should be that they believe they can make a difference for kids. Because of the changing demographics of
our society, making a positive difference for kids will be a difficult one. According to Greene and Smith (1990), schools are being asked to guide the national culture, almost single-handedly, through a storm of change while confronted by the most diverse and challenging student population in American history.

I see principals as being lifelong learners. Principals need to take responsibility for their own growth. Principals must never lose sight of the importance of being a leader among leaders in our educational system. The focus needs to remain on excellence in our schools. Creating good schools is what an effective principal must strive for. Hopefully, someday, I will have my hand on the rudder of my own ship. A ship with the world's most valuable cargo, our children.
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