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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

As a future administrator, I realize that I must be both a reflective practitioner and visionary. As a teacher, I was trained to be reflective; as a future administrator, I am being trained to be visionary and reflective. 1 As a teacher, especially at the beginning of my career, I reflected only on if the lessons I had prepared were effective or if there were problems on which I could work. As time went by, I began to reflect upon my students themselves--how they learned, how they thought, and how I could help them to become better students. After some time, I realized that I had come to care about all aspects of school, not just what happened in my classroom.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR  
ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:  
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  
Sheryl L. Ellsworth

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As a future administrator, I realize that I must be both a reflective practitioner and visionary. As a teacher, I was trained to be reflective; as a future administrator, I am being trained to be visionary and reflective.

As a teacher, especially at the beginning of my career, I reflected only on if the lessons I had prepared were effective or if there were problems on which I could work. As time went by, I began to reflect upon my students themselves--how they learned, how they thought, and how I could help them to become better students. After some time, I realized that I had come to care about all aspects of school, not just what happened in my classroom.

I began volunteering to work with activity clubs, to go to dances, and to also work in the main office on policy matters. School became more to me than simply a place where I taught five classes; it was where I saw my students doing much more than the homework I had assigned them.

As soon as I became cognizant that I no longer viewed myself as only a classroom teacher, I began to want to become an administrator.

When I was content with simply teaching, and not being involved in other school activities, I saw administrators as being managers. They managed the school. They made class schedules, held meetings, dealt with discipline problems, and supervised at athletic events. I really did not see them as

people, nor did I believe that they had very much to do with curriculum, or what teachers actually did during the school day. To me, they were merely the people “in the main office”, whom I called on when I needed help.

The first few courses that I took were about learning styles, and how to conduct research. Those courses helped me to understand more about how to teach, but I still did not believe that administrators were a great deal more than managers.

As I progressed in my studies, I began taking courses that dealt with school/community relations, school law, and curriculum and evaluation. During this time, I also began working closer with administrators than I had previously done. It was all these things combined that began to show me a clearer picture of the administration field, my own school, and what I wanted to become as an administrator. I began to look at the students. They were now so much more to me than just faces in a hallway or in a classroom. I listened to them describe their problems at home and at school. They would talk to me about their hopes and dreams, and what their fears were of the future. I began to see that it was so tough for them and I wondered if our schools were doing enough to prepare them for the future. I began to “see” a school that had to change and I began to develop my vision of what administrators like myself should do.

In my course work in educational administration, I have had to read much of the literature to develop an understanding

of today's schools. I know what I saw in my school, but I needed to know if we were the norm, or not.

What I have discovered in my readings and in my own experiences is truly appalling. It appears to me that we are not preparing our students for the future--at least not a very good one.

Therefore, I wish to explore four areas of concern in this reflective essay: at-risk children, curriculum integration, diversity, and leadership styles.

#### At-Risk Children

As I looked at the students in my classroom and in the hallways, it quickly becomes apparent that here in Iowa we do not have a homogeneous population. Rather, we have many children from culturally diverse backgrounds. Of course, we do still have the usual European descendants, but we are adding Asian, Middle-Eastern, Hispanic, and a growing number of African-American children. Snyder (1992) reported that in the time period 1984-1991, the White enrollment rose 5%, while Hispanic enrollment rose by 45%, African-American by 17%, and other minorities (Asian/Pacific Islanders, and American Islanders) rose by 28%. Our schools have historically geared for the "traditional" American school child--one who is white, speaks standard English, has two parents in the home, and is middle class. I do not believe that educators nor school communities are cognizant that there has been such a population

change. They have been slow to realize that the schools they attended as children will not meet the needs of today's children. Our challenge will be to make those changes, and make our schools effective for the children of today.

With the changing demographics in student enrollment, one must see that many students' culture is also different than the majority's culture. Do we as educator's know enough about their individual cultures? I doubt it. Campbell and Wong (1992) related how an unthinking educator shamed one of his young Asian students by simply not understanding the student's background. The teacher repeatedly asked his student to call out his test scores. Due to the student's poor English skills, he did not have very high scores, nor did he say his scores in proper English. Not only was the student ashamed of his work, he was ashamed of his speaking ability. I am sure that this is not an isolated incident, but rather a scene played out far too frequently in American classrooms. Educators must possess cultural awareness.

Cultural awareness can be developed in conjunction with the staff and student body. Celebrating the "culture of the month" is not enough; neither is making display cases showing a few achievements. These are nice, but are only a start on what we really need to do. Staff-student projects would be an excellent way to bring together many different ideas. They could collaborate on writing poems, producing, writing, and acting in



plays or musicals, and other similar endeavors. As the students and staff members worked together, they would not only be learning about each other's culture, but hopefully learning to appreciate each other. As an administrator, I would encourage such projects. I would also help with securing any needed outside funds to help pay for added expenses, such as writing for grants, and fund raising events. Also, these projects could be presented to the staff at faculty meetings so that other staff members would be aware of the exciting things happening at the school.

Beside demographic changes, family structures have also changed. Gone is the 1950s family: Dad worked, Mom was a housewife, and the children came home to milk and cookies each day. Snyder (1992) found that 23% of all school children live in a single parent home, and that of all African-American children, 57% live in single parent homes. These children frequently go home to find no one waiting for them, and are on their own for a few minutes to several hours. They often have no one to call upon in an emergency.

Barney (1990) reported that many children are from blended or step families. She urges educators to moralize the stepfamily concept to communicate with all the students' care givers, to help them cope with their family situation. I believe that many schools have not adapted to changing family

structures, and we must change our views on what constitutes a family.

I believe that it is necessary to train educators to communicate with all the adult care givers in a student's family, including giving information to non-custodial parents, as well as to those with whom the student lives. We must also realize that when we educators talk about "family", we need to include the terms stepfather/stepmother, and stepbrother/sister. Schools must also have updated student demographic information that provides the home and work addresses and numbers of all the adult care givers.

Another area in need of change is children's services. The change in demographics and family structure will require that these organizations change also. Kirst (1991) wrote that many children come to school hungry, diseased, unhealthy, are abused, do not come from a traditional family structure, or do not speak standard English. Abbott (1994) stated that the majority of abused children are elementary age, with just over 400,000 cases reported each year. This figure is expected to rise in the future. What can we do as educators? Kirst (1991) suggested that we develop a coordination between all private and public organizations to better serve our children. I must concur. As an administrator, I would like to see that there are home-school workers in each school to better provide information for help to students, and then give the student's information to the

human service organizations. This will create a liaison among the schools, students, and organizations. Also, I would like to see programs like partners in education develop between the schools and the human service agencies. These partnerships could be an excellent source of community service for the students and staff, as well as give these organizations the much-needed help in fund raising, and extra volunteer help. For example, students could help stock shelves in the food banks, have periodic canned food drives, help transport the elderly to stores or run errands, or help gather used clothing for the needy. The possibilities are endless. Not only would help be given to those that really do need it, the residents would see that their young people do indeed care about them, and about their community.

As a future administrator, I believe that it is necessary to do more than just give our students textbooks. We must do our part in helping to care for them, make them feel safe, and to feed them. I would like to see breakfast programs that are similar to the free and reduced lunch program. This is important for students of all ages, and should be available to all grades. Obviously, such a task is huge, and could not be accomplished by only me. I believe that a small committee, consisting of staff members, parents, students, and community members could develop such a program, thus giving the entire

school community a “stake” in the responsibility of feeding at-risk children.

A safe and orderly environment is necessary to allow students to feel safe. Zero tolerance for violence, in my opinion, must be the rule for every school in the nation. As a building principal, I would strictly enforce the district’s policies regarding violence. If these policies do not adequately address the problem, I would work with the staff, students, and parents to develop interventions that would. These interventions would include guidelines that ensure fairness, due process, and alternatives for students who seem unable to conform to a regular school setting.

An example of an intervention policy was developed by the Waterloo School District. The Education Discipline Center was developed for high school students who are unable to adapt to a regular high school. It provides students with strict discipline, a single classroom where the teachers come to them, and no open lunch. The students are sent to the center as a last resort only; they are referred there by their administrators at the regular high school. Usually, they are students who have been violent or frequently truant. These students must “earn” their way back to their regular high school through regular attendance, being self-disciplined, and working successfully with their teachers. I believe this to be an excellent method of providing students with an education while still clearly communicating to them that

their previous behavior was inappropriate, and will not be tolerated. For the other high school students, it does two things. First, it removes violent students from the environment. Second, it sends a clear message that inappropriate behavior will not be tolerated.

I also believe that in-service training for staff members to provide them with information on how to be successful with at-risk students is necessary, as well as showing them the techniques that actually work. Latham (1992) reported that the following methods were successful when dealing with at-risk students: maintain composure; be brief; don't waste time; and, smile. Decreasing negative interactions, such as scolding or frowning, will help to reinforce appropriate behavior. I believe that following these suggestions will make all staff members--including administrators--more successful with at-risk students.

Another problem facing at-risk students is the lack of supervision after school. Many are latchkey children who must be alone for an hour or more. One possible solution is a program in Oakland, California, called "Kid's House". Diegmuller (1994) reported that this program provides junior high students after school with care givers, a home, nutritional snacks, tutoring, and care. The program's cost is \$10,000 per home for up to six children. I realize that cost is always a factor, but I also believe that we as citizens are responsible for our children. The cost to society for not caring for them is high--

paying for teenage pregnancies, juvenile delinquency and crime, and having a large group of under-educated citizens. As an administrator, I would prefer paying for the former costs.

Educating the public as to the need of such programs is important. Information about them could be included in school handbooks, school newsletters and newspapers, discussed in the area newspapers, or discussed at school open houses. Public awareness will hopefully lead to public support, which is vital to beginning and maintaining the programs.

#### Curriculum Integration

Next, I began looking at methods to change our curriculum. When I began to look at the courses offered at my school, they seem to be great. There are several foreign languages offered, advanced-placement English and social studies classes, several levels of mathematics, different science classes, as well as other electives. It is perhaps an excellent curriculum for a student population of 1970. The same courses appear each year, but occasionally change names. Most schools have had the same curriculum with little or no changes for a decade or more.

What I believe is necessary is to integrate higher order thinking skills in every course. The courses we teach must apply to what our students need in order to survive in the world. More importantly, we must teach our children to be life-long learners. All the education in the world is useless if our students

are unable to work or feed themselves after graduation. We must begin to better prepare them for the future.

How do we do this? It is a huge task, with many problems and questions. Vertical integration is one method of doing that. This allows a common theme or unit to be taught in several grade levels, including throughout an entire school system. Marina (1994) described a project developed by high school students and middle school teachers. Using their imagination, they developed a rocket building project that used the talents of elementary, middle school, and senior high students, university faculty, and members of the school community. Middle school students in the math classes figured out the rocket's path, high school science students built the rocket, and elementary school social studies students learned about the history of rocketry and space exploration. The project culminated with the actual firing of the rocket. I believe that this was an excellent way of showing students that what they do in the classroom is applicable to their lives outside it.

Another possibility in curriculum change is reported by NEA Today (1994). Twelve junior high schools were selected by the Clark Foundation to receive funding for curriculum improvement. These schools adopted projects that incorporated higher order thinking skills, increased parental involvement, and developed in-service training for the staff regarding horizontal and vertical curriculum integration. After

four years, it has increased staff confidence, and begun to raise student performance. Also, curriculum that has been developed by the staff gives the staff a greater sense of ownership than simply handing them dusty curriculum outlines, and telling them to use it.

Another problem that I have seen for years is how ninth grade students are when they arrive at the high school. The transition is very difficult for many, as middle schools are structured differently than the traditional high schools. I believe that we can make curriculum changes to ease the transition for students, as well as changing the high school.

Jett, Pulling, and Ross (1994) discussed the problems facing 13 and 14 year old students. They are emotionally and physically different than other high school students. They look younger, and generally act more immature than the others, and they are easily picked out from the crowd.

Besides not looking or acting like the others, they are coming into a setting that is different than a middle school. Jett et al. (1994) reported that middle schools have teams of teachers designed so that the teachers work with the same group of students all year, that homeroom teachers provide mentoring to the students, that there is interdisciplinary instructional and curriculum organization, and student advisory groups. It is an incredible shock to new freshman to be handed a seven-period schedule that has five or six subjects, a



homeroom teacher that simply hands out information, and classes that are taught by departmental faculty, rather than by an organized team. It is truly unfair to just expect these students to adapt, without helping them do so.

How can we change? As a high school administrator, I would work with the staff to develop programs helping freshman. Homeroom teachers should become more like advisors, helping students to “learn the ropes”, with guidance counselors assisting them. This should last all through the school year, not just for a few weeks at the beginning. Study halls could be changed so that staff members from all departments help supervise and provide tutoring for the students. In this way, teachers could be “teamed”, so that they are working with the same group of students all year. This arrangement would also be recognized by the freshmen, and be something that they could relate to. They would also be receiving much-needed attention from the teachers in the form of help with homework, or simply having someone to talk to.

Jett et al. (1994) also proposed the development of a committee consisting of middle school and high school teachers that allow for communication between the two groups. I would really like to see this happen, as far too often the two groups do not understand what is happening at the different levels. It would also provide a much-needed collegiality, and allow the

groups to develop curriculum that smooths the transition for incoming freshmen.

As a future administrator, I believe that curriculum should be a changing and growing part of our schools. We must constantly question what we are doing, and how it affects our students.

### Diversity

I can seldom pick up an educational journal without seeing the word "diversity" jump out at me. What does it mean? I believe that it depends upon to whom one is speaking. Diversity, at least for this reflective essay, will refer to groups of students whose cultural background is different than the majority of the students in the school system that they attend. I believe that one can strive towards having an excellent curriculum, but if it is being taught to children with limited English skills, the proverbial boat is being missed.

Many students come to school who are unable to speak or understand English properly. Nor do they always have a good grasp of the school culture in America. Snyder (1992) reported that from 1984-1991, the growth in the number of Hispanic children aged 5-13 exceeded the growth of both the White and African-American populations. As a native of Waterloo and an employee in the Waterloo School District, I can easily believe this. There is a large influx into the area by Hispanics who are coming to work at large businesses, such as Iowa Beef

Processors (IBP). Many of these worker's children are elementary and middle school age, and do not speak English. How do we educate them? First, we must help them to become part of the school so that they are able to feel safe and cared for. Next, we must develop programs that teach them English, and help them in their other course work. English as Second Language Programs are a good start, but we must do more. Teachers must be able to speak to them in their native language. Can one imagine the frustration that the child must feel in not being able to make himself/herself understood in either Spanish or English? As a future administrator, I would encourage staff development in acquiring the target language, and work with the staff to develop a method where the foreign language teachers are able to give cultural information to the staff, as well as working with the staff to communicate with the students.

Parental involvement is also necessary for the students to be successful. One possible way to have more involvement is to develop a liaison between the school district and the employers who have a large minority population. This liaison could provide information to the children's parents in their native language concerning school events, district policies, and state laws regarding compulsory attendance. I believe that such a liaison would lessen many fears and problems that students and their families face when coming to a new area. It would also give the

families a more secure feeling about the school district, as well as the community.

Another group of children that must be helped are the Asian children. Many arrive here hungry, scared, and unable to speak English. They are not accustomed to the school culture here, and neither are their families. Again, I believe that staff development is necessary to help these students become successful in school. In-service training would provide staff members information about the students' culture, language, and background. While I am not saying that every staff member should become proficient in all the languages that children from diverse backgrounds speak, it would be good to have some members at least be able to speak some key phrases, as well as know who to contact if they should have any questions.

Students are a valuable resource. Minority students could be invited to faculty meetings or department meetings to discuss their culture, family, or language. In my own experiences, I have found that most staff members enjoy listening to students, and would like to learn more about the students' cultures. Students can teach us a great deal, if we only give them a chance to show us what they can do.

Another method of showing the good side to diversity is to attempt to hire more minority staff members. While I realize that this may be difficult due to a small pool from which to hire, there are some programs being developed that will help to

correct the problem. An article in the Waterloo Courier (Stanton, 1995), reported on an innovative program by the Waterloo School District, in conjunction with Wartburg College, that promotes minorities in teaching. The program sends minority candidates through college to boost the ranks of such teachers in the district. Upon graduation, they must apply to the Waterloo School District. If there are no openings, they may apply to area districts. As a future administrator, I believe that this is an excellent program, and I would attempt to hire participating educators from it. As a native of Waterloo, I am proud that the school district is trying to give support to its citizens.

As educators, I believe that we must work together to ensure that the concept of multiculturalism is a positive influence in schools. Cultural awareness can open everyone's eyes to new and different ideas, and be exciting experiences. As an administrator, I would encourage the staff and students to work together to develop programs where all can learn about other cultures, and participate together in activities that promote multiculturalism. Learning together is in itself a sharing of ideas and experiences, and will allow for personal growth whether the participant is a staff member, parent, or student.

## Leadership Styles

How will I lead? That is a question I have been asking myself since I first decided to become an administrator. In attempting to answer it, I have reflected on how my administrative team has lead the school. I have watched how each of them has dealt with students, both as individuals, and as a group. The same threads appear in each situation--the ability to listen, to analyze quickly, and to act with compassion toward students. This is similar to how I act each day with my students.

After reflecting upon my own administrator's leadership abilities, I began to research how other administrators act, and if I agreed with those actions.

In my opinion, leaders must be visionary and progressive. We must ensure that all children are taught as much as possible.

First, we must foster the ideals of democracy. Administrators must instill these ideals into staff and promote them to their students, parents, and school community. Slater (1994) believed that the administrator is engaged in symbolic democratic leadership. By allowing staff to help make decisions in their school, the concept of democracy comes into play. And with this sense of democracy comes a very real feeling of ownership of those decisions agreed upon.

Van Meter (1994) reported that school-based decision making (SBDM) has been legally mandated in Kentucky. Under guidelines established by reform legislation, all 1,370 public

schools must develop SBDM no later than July 1, 1996. Basic features from the Kentucky model, I believe, could be implemented in every school in America. Individual SBDM councils include teachers, parents, and an administrator to implement SBDM policies. These school policies are formulated by the council, and must be consistent with school board policies. Other council responsibilities include textbook and material selection, setting the school day and week, assigning students to classes, consulting with the principal to fill vacancies, as well as many other duties. Members are elected on a yearly basis, and are eligible for reelection. I believe that this type of SBDM should be adopted into Iowa schools, (or at least in the schools I will lead ), and also into other states. Teachers, parents, and school community members would both have a say and a stake in the running of their schools. What better way to show democracy in action? I truly believe that the more input one has in a decision, the more one will support those decisions.

Richardson and Lane (1994) reported that administrators must change from being push-button decision makers to making decisions that reflect inventiveness and ingenuity. They must also be willing to learn how to learn, to deal effectively with constant change and ambiguity, and to reflect. I must agree. Administrators must be able to size up a situation quickly, and then be able to deal effectively with the players in the situation.

I also like the concept of the administrative team. My school has such a team. There are three assistant principals, one shared assistant principal, and one principal. The administrative duties are shared, and they meet weekly to discuss problems, and to make decisions about the school. The team provides input and information on decisions that must be made, and after this, the principal makes the needed decision. Some decisions regarding student discipline problems are made by the individual principal, but are made according to district policy. Gorton and Schneider (1991) reported that such an arrangement allows for shared accountability. The team is able to work together in the management of the school, and to have collegiality with other principals.

#### Conclusion

As I have read over my reflective essay, I realize that I have touched upon problems that are hard to solve. I know that I sound as if I believe schools must be educator/parent/police all rolled into one. I know too, that this is very idealistic. But the problems that I have discussed: at-risk children, curriculum integration, and diversity are here in our schools, and must be dealt with effectively. Administrators are the leaders of their schools--these are the people that the staff, students, and school community look to when decisions must be made.

Administrators must create human organizations that are equal to the challenges in today's increasingly complex world



(Bolman & Deal, 1994). It is not enough to know that the problems exist--these problems must be acted upon. I personally would prefer to be proactive, but I realize that that is not always possible. What educators can do is see what other school districts are doing, and if those programs would work in their school. Administrators must stay informed of current trends in education, and hopefully, continue their own professional development. Professional development enhances their own knowledge, and provides them with collegiality with other administrators and educators.

Administrators wear many hats in today's schools. They must be managers and educational leaders, and still be aware that all students must be provided for and challenged. It is not an easy task--a challenging job seldom is. But, it is a job worth doing, and must be done by administrators who are capable, caring, and visionary. I hope to become this type of administrator someday, and I realize that it will be the challenge of my life time.

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