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In preparation of a new role: A reflection in essay form

Catherine D. Leipold
University of Northern Iowa

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In preparation of a new role: A reflection in essay form

Abstract

The role of educational administrators, be they employed as building principals, assistant principals, or as administrative assistants at the district level, has changed over the last few decades and will continue to change as our society's interest in and criticism of the educational process continues. The staff of the Department of Educational Administration and Counseling at the University of Northern Iowa is very much aware of the changes affecting our nation's schools and as such is preparing current graduates to meet the challenges they will be assuming as new principals.

**In Preparation of a New Role:
A Reflection in Essay Form**

**A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education**

**by
Catherine D. Leipold**

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Robert H. Decker

6-30-95
Date Approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Dave Else

7-7-95
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

7.10.95
Date Received

Head, Department of Educational
Administration and Counseling

The role of educational administrators, be they employed as building principals, assistant principals, or as administrative assistants at the district level, has changed over the last few decades and will continue to change as our society's interest in and criticism of the educational process continues. The staff of the Department of Educational Administration and Counseling at the University of Northern Iowa is very much aware of the changes affecting our nation's schools and as such is preparing current graduates to meet the challenges they will be assuming as new principals.

The majority of my graduate level academic career has been spent analyzing, evaluating, and reevaluating my thoughts, ideas and understanding of the phenomenon we call education with specific emphasis on the role administrators play in the education process. The often perplexing systems which impact the process of educating our youth and procedures to utilize these systems have been revealed in my course work at the University of Northern Iowa. The lessons I have learned, knowledge and insights developed during the last few years will be valuable throughout my career whatever path I choose to follow. This document is an attempt to catalog my perspective of the process of education, delineate the role of the secondary principal in the American educational process and realize the vast amounts of information I have gained through my course work which are not part of every person's knowledge base.

The Governing of American Schools

Never before in recent history have the public schools been subjected to such savage criticism for failing to meet the nation's educational needs - yet never before have governments been so aggressively dedicated to studying the schools' problems and finding the resources for solving them. (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p-1)

Few American institutions receive more criticism for their management than the public school system. This is primarily due to a lack of understanding about the way public schools are governed, or rather regulated. Although it seems natural to most people that their school is governed locally by the school board and superintendent, all schools are in fact under state and federal regulation and are directly and/or indirectly affected by the court system and by society as a whole. The degree of control at each level has changed over the years and will continue to change as concerns for new technology and world progress shape our view of the education process. Following is an attempt to explain the relationships among the local, state and federal government, the court system, and society which form the foundation of our current view of the American education system.

Federal Role

Historically, education has been viewed as a function of state government. Almost all state Constitutions have provisions for education. The federal government, however, has always had a hand in public education. Beginning with land grants, and continuing until the last session of Congress, certain provisions for public schools have been enacted by the federal government. These provisions are in the form of specific laws relating to education, as well as federal court jurisdiction pertaining to civil rights, and the establishment of State Federal Offices and Regional Resource Centers designed specifically to comply with federal mandates and directives. In 1983, a committee appointed by the Secretary of Education, conducted a study comparing scores of American students with those of foreign countries. The results of this study, disclosed in a publication called "A Nation at Risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education), catapulted education to the top of public and political interest.

State Role

The governance of schools at the state level consists of three main areas of control: the state legislature; a state board of education; and a chief state school official. The state legislature is the ultimate policy maker over education, particularly for public elementary and secondary schools. Legislators have power to “create, organize, and reorganize school districts; employ and dismiss personnel; prescribe curriculum; establish and enforce accreditation standards; and govern all management and operation functions” (Alexander & Alexander, 1992, p. 52).

Actual execution of educational government at the state level is performed by the governor, the chief state school official, the state board of education, a department of educational professionals, and several other agencies with specific educational functions as designated by the legislature. The governor's role in education is very important. The manner in which he/she addresses educational concerns and presents budget information can influence legislative decisions and express the governor's control over education. The governor is responsible for appointing lay persons to the state board of education.

The chief state school officer is usually selected by the state board of education or appointed by the governor. This official is usually responsible for general supervision over the schools of the state.

Education is also influenced at the state level by judgments rendered through the state court system. Although “the courts stand as a last resort in educational government as they do in general government.” (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, & Usdan, 1990, p. 185).

Local Role

Governance at the local level consists of a local board of education, a superintendent of schools, and principal(s). Responsibility for the actual operation of most of our schools has been delegated to the local school boards of education.

The purpose of the local school board is as a check and balance of the school district ensuring federal and state mandates are being upheld at the local level. They are responsible for the building of schools, hiring of certified teachers, expulsion of students, adjustments of curriculum, and salary negotiations.

The superintendent is an advisor to the school board. He/she is hired by the local board of education to fill this advisory position. Although the position has no mandated power, the power to influence the board, other administrative staff and public opinion help to make this position one of great influence.

Principals are administrative assistants working directly with teachers and students. Their responsibilities include instructional leadership and managerial control. The principal, as the executive officer of the school, is expected to ensure both issues are joined, he/she often relies on other staff members to assist with these duties. It is the principal who sets the climate of the school by his/her relationship to staff and students.

The governance of the American school is in no way a "clean-cut" affair. State and federal government, as well as the courts and citizens through participation in political active committees all affect the way our young are educated. It is neither a layer cake nor, as suggested by Campbell et al. (1990), a marbled cake which represents our way of governing schools. The governance of the American school system is rather like a jellied fruit salad. There are many different influences which affect the over-all flavor of the educational system and holding it all together is the underlying belief in the power of each influence.

The Role of Secondary Administrators

Administrators at all levels of education find themselves in a very precarious occupation. This is largely due to the fact that their position requires them to wear several different, sometimes seemingly conflicting, 'hats' often at one time. Although most people realize the secondary principal is responsible to the staff and

students they serve, many forget that the principal must also work for and with parents, interested business people, other principals within the district, and the central office staff, including the superintendent. The secondary administrator finds that his role is not only that of manager and instructional leader which require strong organizational skills, but also disciplinarian, human relations facilitator, evaluator and conflict mediator requiring strong interpersonal skills as well. Fortunately, as stated by Gorton and Thierbach-Schneider (1991, p. 85), "While it is unlikely that administrators would be required to enact all six of these roles simultaneously, they should attempt to become competent in each role so that they can perform it effectively when and if the situation requires." A thorough understanding of each role is necessary to accomplish the task of becoming a competent administrator.

Manager

The management and organizational skills required to be a successful secondary administrator can not be over emphasized. With increased expectations placed on the public school system by the government and the general public, principals find themselves responsible for more than ever before. Gorton and Thierbach-Schneider (1991, p. 86) state that many people feel the principal's "main role is to develop or implement policies and procedures resulting in the efficient operation of the school." What he does not state are all the other roles principals are expected to fulfill. Today's principal not only finds himself answering to the central office, but there are managerial expectations placed on them from teachers, parents and students which must be addressed. These expectations differ among the groups with regard to how the school is run and indicate a need for continued assessment and involvement. This is not to say that the principal must do all the organizing required for operating the school, but must be viewed as an organized person who is aware of and involved in all aspects of school life.

“By successfully performing their roles as managers, administrators can help others to accomplish tasks and goals; in the process they can generate a more positive attitude toward their contribution to their school.” (Gorton & Thierbach-Schneider, 1991, p. 86). This positive attitude is critical in light of the changing attitudes of the population with regard to public education in America. Parents and teachers want and need to be utilized wherever possible.

There are courses designed to help individuals determine their own organizational style, adjust it as necessary to work in the given situation, and evaluate organizational effectiveness. Additionally, the importance of a qualified and personable assistant can not be overstated.

The school budget and plant represent important vehicles for conserving resources and improving educational opportunities for students. Whether the full potential of these means is realized depends in large part on school administrators. They undoubtedly face problems and need to work within certain financial and physical constraints. However, in the final analysis, administrators’ success in providing the best possible budget and physical facilities for the school depend for the most part on their knowledge, resourcefulness, and persistence. (Gorton & Thierbach-Schneider, 1991, p. 181).

Instructional Leader

There are many opportunities for administrators to demonstrate their instructional leadership. One of the most effective avenues is the evaluation process. Through utilization of clinical supervision, administrators can point out positive practices and encourage staff members to become better educators. This process is explained in more detail in the section on evaluation. Additionally, by encouraging staff to participate in courses relating to their subject matter, administrators demonstrate the importance of keeping current. In-service activities

which increase teacher knowledge, introduce teaching techniques, discipline assistance, etc. are also important avenues administrators can utilize to show their leadership. Many teachers in my building have expressed a desire to learn more during our in-service sessions. Finally, administrators who encourage participation in professional organizations, conferences, lectures, etc. then encourage attendees to share the information presented build trust and support within and among the teaching staff.

Disciplinarian

One of the most unwelcomed 'hats' worn by administrators is that of disciplinarian. It is the one part of the job that many secondary principals would prefer not to perform. Student discipline is viewed as a negative function by most administrators. Dealing with student misbehavior need not be seen in such negative light however as it affords the administrator to have a direct, hopefully positive impact on the student(s) involved. It can also become an opportunity to build positive rapport among faculty as administrators are expected to "support teachers on issues and problems of student discipline" (Gorton & Thierbach-Schneider, 1991, p. 95).

I spent much of my time during practicum administering discipline to students at West High School in Waterloo, Iowa who had committed minor rule violations. Dealing with discipline of students as an administrator was not as difficult as I expected. This is probably due to the fact that for each type of student violation, there exists a specific consequence to follow, part of the legal due process. My major tasks were handling discipline referrals for students who did not report to their assigned detentions, and students who parked illegally on school grounds. I found that after the first few weeks, the students were very accepting of my "new" authority. Their responses toward me were very similar to those I heard toward Mrs. Fillio prior to my taking over the tardy and parking referrals.

Although I was not personally responsible for the disciplining of students who broke other school rules, I was given the opportunity to sit in on conferences ranging from attendance problems, first truancy, theft, and fighting.

Facilitator of Human Relations

“Studies show that people who acquire their information about schools from board members and employees tend to support the schools more than people who get their information from other sources.” (Kindred, Bagin & Gallagher, 1990, p. 5). This observation reflects the need for secondary administrators to be active participants in the school’s human relations program. Human relations, or school and community relations (as presented at the University of Northern Iowa), is one area often looked upon as not very important by administrators. However, “with the competition for public funds on the local, state, and national levels, it’s imperative that educational leaders be effective spokespersons for education.” (Kindred et al., 1990, p. 2). Everyone in the education arena must acknowledge their role in the human relations process and strive to build the best school possible.

I believe this task is best accomplished by realizing the different publics which affect the school, then striving to understand and address their needs and concerns as openly and honestly as possible. These publics can be divided into two specific categories, internal and external. Internal publics include teachers, support staff, students and other administrators. Kindred et al. (1990) offer three reasons for building a good internal program of communication: “(1) a good external 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.” While the authority for much information dissemination comes from the board of education, the attitudes of the building administrator affect the way teachers, support staff, and students feel about the school system.

Schools that communicate with their external publics in some organized way enhance their chances of getting better public support, minimizing criticism, learning the values and priorities of a community, and receiving many functional ideas that will help them educate students better. (Kindred et al., 1990, p. 133).

Thus it is imperative at the building level to encourage participation by all external groups in the education process. I would not only encourage participation in current athletic and academic booster groups, but also specialists from area businesses and community organizations to become involved in such activities as job shadowing, mentoring, tutoring, and curriculum planning.

Evaluator

Evaluation of the teaching staff is just one part of a principal's responsibilities. It should be an enjoyable and rewarding task since it affords principals the opportunity to see teachers doing what they do best, teaching students. The evaluation process, when administered properly, can also provide a direct avenue for building trust and support from staff members. There are, however, several things which get in the way of this very important duty. These problems can be separated into three areas, teachers' reaction to the evaluation process, demands on principal's time, and principal's perception of their role in the evaluation process. Principals can minimize these obstacles by utilizing clinical supervision for teacher evaluation and, where appropriate, master teachers to assist in the identification and remediation process. The principal's role in teacher evaluation should be supervisory with an emphasis on helping teachers to become their very best.

Teacher evaluation has been used as a means to determine whether tenure would be offered to a new teacher or if an experienced teacher would be terminated. It is not surprising then that many teachers should view evaluation in a negative

light, as something to be tolerated but not embraced. These teachers have not been sold on the benefits of the evaluation process. According to Acheson and Gall (1992, p. 7), "most teachers do not like to be supervised. They react defensively to supervision, and they do not find it helpful." Additionally, some staff members feel their building administrator is not proficient enough in their particular area of education to be an effective evaluator of teacher performance.

Building administrators, especially in their first year, find themselves with many time consuming responsibilities. They realize immediately the need for incredible organizational skills to allow them to deal with potential problems rather than constantly putting out fires. This realization does not, however, change the fact that in most cases, building administrators do not control their day to day activities. When it comes to teacher evaluation, the expectation is that it will be fit into the schedule without question. With sometimes up to one third of the staff being evaluated in one year, the task of giving each teacher a thorough evaluation seems almost unattainable.

The topic of teacher evaluation is covered in only one or two courses of the program for administrative training. Many administrators are therefore not adequately trained to be effective evaluators. As such, they may be somewhat apprehensive when it comes to staff evaluation. Conversely, because of the lack of attention the topic receives at some universities, some administrators may have a false sense of security, thinking evaluation is a relatively unimportant task they must endure. They evaluate staff on bases other than those used to describe sound teaching technique.

I believe these problems of teacher evaluation can be minimized and overcome by utilizing the supervisory technique described in the evaluation course at the University of Northern Iowa. This technique, known as Clinical Supervision, is a process of teacher evaluation which relies on both the teacher and

the supervisor to improve instruction (Achenson & Gall, 1992). It consists of three basic phases: planning, observation and feedback. These phases are repeated throughout the year to ensure that the teacher is made aware of his growth potential and encouraged to achieve higher goals for himself. Through out each phase, emphasis is placed on improving teacher performance and not on criticizing teaching skills.

Once the decision has been made to utilize the Clinical Supervision (Achenson & Gall, 1992) or other such models of evaluation, several things must be accomplished prior to enactment. First, the supervisor(s) and/or evaluator(s) must receive proper and regular training in the areas related to evaluation (listening skills, interpersonal skills, teaching functions, feedback techniques, etc.). This is to ensure that the person(s) will maintain sharp skills and knowledge base.

Second, the use of peer evaluators to assist the administrator must be examined. Master teachers, those who consistently demonstrate good teaching techniques, can be a vital link in teacher improvement. These experienced leaders provide easily accessed role models for new or inexperienced teachers. They can also provide support and direction for staff members in need of rehabilitation.

Next, the administrator must acknowledge the staffs' needs with regard to evaluation. Furthermore, the administrator must listen to and address the staffs' concerns. Communication is the key here. Teachers must feel comfortable with both the person and process of evaluation or they will not be honest with their comments. Together the staff and administrator must determine the purpose and procedures to be used for teacher evaluation.

Finally, time for assessment of the program should be allocated at regular intervals to identify the program's strengths and weaknesses and improve the process. Those people who were evaluated should be surveyed to determine their perceptions of the programs purposes and how it may be improved.

If used appropriately, with proper training and concern for improving teaching techniques, staff evaluation can be an effective way to build positive support for administrative techniques. People who are treated with respect and asked to participate in their own advancement will look upon their supervisors more positively. Administrators can and should look to evaluation as a powerful tool to be used to build staff cohesiveness (Chirnside, 1984; Conley, 1987).

A Final Reflection

As stated earlier, the majority of my graduate level academic career has been spent analyzing, evaluating, and reevaluating my thoughts, ideas and understanding of the phenomenon we call education with specific emphasis on the role administrators play in the education process. Through my course work, experience as a high school teacher and coach, and reflections of society's changing view of public schools, I have developed a personal philosophy of education, the role administrators should play in the education process and several goals I would strive for as an administrator.

Philosophy

Building a sound relationship between the staff and the principal is the key to ensuring quality education for students. To build a sound relationship between the teachers and principal, the principal must first know where he/she and the teachers are in relation to the needs of the school/students they serve. The teachers do not necessarily need to have the same point of view as the principal, but as the person ultimately responsible for everything that happens in the building, the principal must know his/her staffs' concerns. A trusting, caring, cohesive environment helps ensure the staffs' true beliefs and feelings. I would attempt to build such an environment by utilizing the characteristics of Theory Z (Gorton & Thierbach-Schneider, 1991) as my beliefs are more in line with this philosophy.

The notion that all people are lazy and want to be told (ordered) what to do as described in Theory X (Gorton & Thierbach-Schneider, 1991) would not be conducive to building a sound relationship with all faculty members. There are certainly some staff members, and some administrators, who do function under the philosophy described as Theory X. However, this seems to be an example of the “fatal flaw” described as relying on top down mandates (Administrator telling staff what they should do).

I tend to agree with the Theory Z (Gorton & Thierbach-Schneider, 1991) administrative characteristics and hope to personify them when I become a principal. I believe people treated with trust and respect will be more efficient on the job and more trusting, respecting, individuals. To gain trust and respect, I would remember to share appropriate (not all) information with staff members, praise them in public, and always criticize them in private. When criticism is necessary, I plan to do so with care and sensitivity to the person as an individual so as not to destroy the person's confidence or self-worth.

I want my beliefs and actions to be consistent with the philosophy of the school. This would reassure the faculty that when decisions are made my reactions will be the same way under similar circumstances. I would emphasize long-term solutions to problems whenever possible to avoid the 'quick-fix' and 'putting out the fire' approach to problem solving. I do not think I could function for very long trying to solve problems "by the seat of my pants".

Finding long term solutions to potential problems tends to require money to be spent before results are seen, sometimes several years. It would be necessary to have staff support for the solution to ensure the money and time spent were not wasted. Staff support for solutions to problems would be easily found by allowing staff members to participate in the definition of and possible solutions for some of the problems the school is facing. Utilization of the staff in this process allows

more creative decision making, more effective implementation and broad dissemination of information and values. It also builds ownership of both the problem and the solution.

My philosophy is best described by Theory Z (Gorton & Thierbach-Schneider, 1991) for it describes treating people with respect, as human beings, and not as living flesh who want to get out of doing anything. It is with this attitude, that the people I will be working for (students, staff, and community) deserve respect, that I hope to begin my career as a secondary administrator.

Goals

One of my primary concerns about becoming a secondary principal is how to build a trusting and supportive relationship with the staff, students and the community. Additionally, I need to build my strengths as a "leader of leaders". The traits, characteristics and behaviors I view as important to become an effective administrator, one who is building trust and support, can be divided into three areas. These areas focus on personal characteristics, social skills, and leadership qualities. (Gorton & Thierbach-Schneider, 1991).

The personal characteristics include honesty, energy, motivation, sensitivity, a range of interests and stress tolerance. Being honest does not mean disclosing everything known about a situation. In many cases, this practice would be illegal or unethical. One should be sensitive to the people and situations encountered. If someone should ask for information they should not know, it is best to respond by explaining that you really can not talk about the subject, without causing any loss of face to the person asking the question.

Stress tolerance and energy seem to be two related characteristics of good administrators. Both indicate a need to keep body and mind in good condition. The easiest way to deal with stress and to maintain energy is through a quality exercise program. Many communities have reasonable membership rates at the

local YMCA. Such a membership would not only help with stress tolerance, but could increase community support through the informal meetings with parents, business leaders teachers and students such membership would provide.

Social skills are also necessary to elicit trust and support as an administrator. These skills include written and oral communication, organization, and problem analysis. The advantage of these skills is that they can all, to some degree, be learned and therefore weakness in any area can be overcome. Classes are offered to help improve communication and organizational skills. Problem analysis can be increased by remembering not to rely on hearsay, but rather to investigate potential problems yourself.

The importance of having very good writing and speaking skills can not be overstated. These qualities are the most important social skills because communication is the key to sound leadership. If your meaning is not obvious to those receiving the message, time and energy can be wasted and you will be perceived as being unclear and perhaps untrustworthy. As such, Iles (1987, p. 2) suggests it is best to follow two rules when preparing presentations: “(1) know your subject, and (2) know your audience.”

In many instances, the administrator is thought of as a “leader of leaders”. Leadership can be defined as “the ability to recognize when a group needs direction” (Decker, 1993). These strong qualities of leadership include good judgment, decisiveness, educational values and initiative. A strong leader is one who knows what should be delegated, and to whom to delegate. Brown (1988, p. 21) states that the foundation of delegating is the “ability to define jobs and creatively match those jobs to your staff.”

To realize that a group needs direction, there must be a vision, based on educational values which are consistent with the needs of the district. “Visionary leadership is what is now called for by our young people and by our society.”

(Cunard, 1990, p. 34). The administrator must share the district vision or the district must share the administrator's vision for cohesiveness. The vision should be based on what is best for the students being served by the school. With this vision in mind, and hopefully written, it becomes easier for the administrator to determine when direction is needed. Increasing the amount and use of technology, for example, has become a vision for the administration, staff and parents at West High School. As Finkel (1990) notes, "when an administrator wants technology to be part of the education program, it happens." I believe this is true for any shared vision.

Decision making skills and logical reasoning ability are also leadership qualities. Administrators must be aware of their emotions, the priorities of the school verses personal priorities and the amount and type of information they have when making judgment (Gorton & Thierbach-Schneider, 1991). It is best to keep emotions at bay and have as much information as possible, from all sources, before making decisions. Once a decision is made, the administrator's position must be explained honestly and as openly as possible to everyone involved to help build and maintain a trusting relationship.

When beginning my administrative challenges, I will ask the questions, "What are the strengths of the school?, What areas could be improved?, How can we best serve the students?" to construct my vision. From there, I would build on my personal, social and leadership skills realizing it is a continuous process.

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