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On becoming an effective middle level administrator: A reflective essay

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On becoming an effective middle level administrator: A reflective essay

Abstract

Middle school students are a breed apart. They have special characteristics and needs and require specialized care. Educators who choose to teach these unique creatures should be trained to professionally address their academic, physical, social, and emotional needs. Likewise, principals who aspire to lead middle school students and professionals through the labyrinth of the educational system should be especially attuned to the elements of effective leadership to meet those diverse needs.

ON BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE MIDDLE LEVEL ADMINISTRATOR:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts in Education

by

Christi A. Lines

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**This Research Paper by: Christi A. Lines
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ADMINISTRATOR: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Middle school students are a breed apart. They have special characteristics and needs and require specialized care. Educators who choose to teach these unique creatures should be trained to professionally address their academic, physical, social, and emotional needs. Likewise, principals who aspire to lead middle school students and professionals through the labyrinth of the educational system should be especially attuned to the elements of effective leadership to meet those diverse needs.

Personal Philosophy

Administrators have tremendous impact on the educational process and climate in a building. As I contemplate the daunting task of becoming a middle school principal, I am constantly drawn to the maxim, They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

I hope, as an administrator, to share my passion for excellence in education. Of course, I am not so naive as to think that passion for learning and love of children will sustain me in this challenge. I realize that solid theory and practice are essential for success. As a principal I must portray a positive attitude and strength in educational

leadership. It will be important that I model inquiry, while providing stability and consistency.

As an educational leader I will need to respond to the environment, including parents, the community, teachers' unions, and special interest groups. It will be necessary for me to identify interrelationships and processes, and join the diverse elements to attain a common consensus that benefits all children. In order to manage the rapid pace of change and the growing influence of outside forces in education today, a principal must model the importance of being a lifelong learner. I feel I will need to focus on teamwork and team learning, and help those teams develop the ability to self-regulate for the best possible results.

Communication, collaboration and conflict resolution skills will become increasingly vital for educational leaders, professional educators, and the young adolescents with whom they work. One of the greatest challenges facing me as a middle school principal will be to provide "roots and wings" to both young adolescents and the professionals who guide and teach them. I feel it is essential that as a team we provide every student with academic competence,

strategic and creative thinking skills, and a global view of the world.

Of course, teachers and students are individuals with needs, ambitions, and expectations of their own. An educational leader cannot simply dictate changes, however important and well-intentioned they are, and expect that the actions will be implemented. As a new principal I will need to learn and understand the personal, social, and environmental interactions which occur. Work patterns and cultural norms will already have been established when I enter the system and must be respected. My goal will be to decide what area is a priority and in what area the most impact can be made, and then to start action and make small changes without upsetting the norms.

Situational leadership provides a balance of structure and freedom to make professional judgements based on what is best for kids. Because backgrounds, experiences, and foundations vary, I feel dialogue must be the foundation of leadership. The only way to benefit from the diversity of ideas available is to explore them before exercising judgement. As a principal I will need to learn to rein in my natural impulsiveness and to proceed judiciously.

Just as I hope to prepare the middle level students entrusted to my school to meet the challenges of their future, so must I prepare to be an educational leader focused on that future. In an era of educational transformation, I will need to lead by design and example from a position of knowledge and maintain authority within a climate of educational excellence, respect, and dignity.

Personal Professional Vision

Hallinger (1992) asserted that school staffs must thoughtfully examine current practices and make informed choices about directions for development of new practices. In my vision for education, I would empower teachers to make those decisions, utilize the expertise of many people, and guide and praise them. I hope to be a visionary and a risk-taker, leading through example.

My belief in the value, worth and dignity of all human beings and my love of people can only enhance my leadership qualities. I value working in teams, seeing the big picture, empowering others, creating ownership, and continually striving to improve the school. I envision the principal as a member of a team, highlighting the need for a confident principal,

a principal who functions as an enabler and a visionary leader. I believe that together as members of an educational community we must constantly look for better ways to accomplish our task of preparing students for the future and provide them with a global perspective. I further believe that this preparation begins with the expectation that students can learn, will learn, and must learn.

Whitaker and Valentine (1993) highlighted three essential differences between effective principals and those who are not effective. The first essential difference is that effective principals view themselves as more responsible for all aspects of their school. They are the ultimate problem solvers, whether the problem was an internal or external problem. They believe it is their responsibility to do whatever is necessary to make their school the best, and focus on solutions and ideas that will lead to school improvement.

The second essential difference was that teachers and principals share the same perspectives of how much input teachers have in decision making within their schools. Effective principals have accurate perceptions of how teachers view their relationships

and the level of involvement, in this case, teachers viewed their leaders as effective communicators. Effective principals are more sensitive and perceptive to teachers' feelings and needs, and thus are better aware of how teachers view them.

The third essential difference was that effective principals identify key teachers and informally involve them in decision making. Although they utilize a broad level of staff involvement, they know who the key informal leaders are and seek their input on critical decisions.

By focusing on these essential differences and trying to emulate the characteristics of an effective principal, I feel confident that I can harness my passion for educational excellence at the middle level to become an effective leader.

Key Characteristics

A considerable body of research on effective teaching has been compiled in recent years. Similarly, research on the characteristics of effective school administrators is emerging. Krug (1993) has identified what he sees as five essential categories that serve to describe an array of behaviors in which a principal engages: defining a

mission, managing curriculum and instruction, supervising teaching, monitoring student progress, and promoting an effective instructional climate. He maintained that "what distinguishes effective schools and their leaders is an awareness of purpose and an active commitment to achieving their educational mission" (p. 241).

Leithwood and Steinbach (1993) agreed that for school leaders to be most productive, they need to think expertly about their own school contexts and the consequences for the practices that they choose. They added that leaders need to "encourage innovative teaching, help with specific problems, and facilitate communication across classrooms" (p. 312).

It's obvious that principals can no longer just report performance on an annual basis. As an educational leader I will need to evaluate learning outcomes regularly and use the results to improve the instructional program. Students learn best when the atmosphere of the school is one that values learning and supports achievements. It will be my responsibility to ensure that the mission and instructional climate stress these values.

Team Approach

Today's education system is being constantly bombarded with demands of transformation. As business and community leaders, parents and teachers clamor for a greater stake in the decision making, the role of the educational leader is changing. The National Association of Secondary School Principals recognized this emerging role when it reported in a 1992 Bulletin that one of the principal's future demands will be to have effective consensus building skills. A principal must not only build a competent team of professionals who are committed to their mission, but must know how to support each of the teachers for maximum results and must work effectively with parents and the rest of the community. With models of school-based management evolving, the principal's role becomes one of expert team-builder and facilitator.

Foriska (1994) supported the theory that the key to an effective principalship is getting things done through teamwork. As I learn to manage curriculum and instruction effectively, I must strive to provide the commitment and strenuous training and support system needed to assist each teacher to successfully move from theory to behaviors, skills and attitudes. It

will be my goal to encourage teamwork and group empowerment to ensure that expectations of quality and excellence are maintained at a high level. I'm sure my efforts to improve student achievement will be more successful if they are directed at helping teachers help students learn.

Foriska (1994) maintained that an educational leader must "encourage teachers to take some risks in both identifying and implementing new instructional procedures to help students learn" (p. 32). I agree wholeheartedly with his stipulation that an organization that satisfies needs, where each person is valued, nurtured and given the opportunity to develop, is the most effective. As an educational leader I must remember that the best knowledge should be the driving influence behind all decisions and actions, and change must be accepted as a normal part of living within a dynamic organization.

As Snyder and Anderson (1988) asserted, "To manage productive schools requires that principals imagine a better schooling future and foster group empowerment to resolve the next most pressing challenges" (p. 23). My vision for a better future

must be knowledge-based, change-oriented, and team-driven.

Supervision of Teaching

In addition to managing curriculum and instruction, I will also have the opportunity supervise the teaching process. To influence real change in classroom behaviors, I feel that supervisors need to understand the complexity of the instructional process and have strong interpersonal skills. No checklist or model can sustain a system of supervision and evaluation effectively without a competent supervisor implementing the procedure. Supervision and evaluation should not be intermittent strategies, engaged to pacify Board expectations or to compile necessary documentation for teacher dismissal. Rather it should be a vehicle to encourage professional growth and competence in a non-threatening, collegial atmosphere.

I believe that education is dynamic, not static, and teaching is a lifelong learning process. Teacher effectiveness can be learned, yet teachers should nurture their individual styles. According to Krug (1993) effective leaders need to be aware of the special needs of each instructional area, because the

school leader blends individual teaching styles and content areas into an integrated learning experience for students. Similarly, teachers must be aware of effects of their own behaviors and styles on learners and should possess the skills to adjust their strategies and behaviors to meet student needs. I think supervisors should strive to increase this knowledge and ensure that it is acted upon in the classroom. Elements of many of the supervision models should be combined to create a system which meets the unique needs of a school. For me, some of those elements would need to include opportunities for direct supervisory assistance, peer coaching, and self-analysis.

I believe that improved instruction will result from a collaborative effort if exploration and growth is encouraged and metacognition and reflection are modeled. Supervisors should also engage in self-reflection and analysis of the evaluation procedure.

Certainly time must be devoted to this process of supervision and evaluation if it is to effectively influence the educational process. As an administrator I will need to devote time to foster positive interpersonal relationships, collect and

analyze data, engage in meaningful dialogue and feedback, and ensure teacher accountability. Only by valuing this process and addressing it adequately will I have the opportunity to be an effective change agent in the struggle to transform education to meet the needs of today's students.

We need to provide today's young adolescents with a vision for the future and for their success in that future. We must provide successful learning experiences to ensure the success of society. I agree with Armstrong's (1994) assertion that a middle school curriculum should accommodate multiple intelligences. He maintains that when children reach puberty their intelligences become even more intense, especially the bodily-kinesthetic and the personal intelligences. Anyone who has worked with middle school students can attest to the great diversity of physical and personal competence levels. As an educational leader I will be in a position to positively influence the curriculum to meet the unique needs of early adolescents.

The principal must focus on the evaluation of instruction and assume the role of motivator and catalyst for change. In that role I must be a source of ideas, strategies, techniques, resources, and

programs, and I must remember that support and encouragement have much more effect than criticism. As Rooney (1993) so aptly pointed out, "Teachers are, and should be, the instructional leaders in our schools. We must rely on the collective experience of the staff to bring our schools into the 21st century" (p. 44).

Transformation

As schools proceed into the 21st Century, the essential component in any process of transformation will be attitude. Raebeck (1994) asserted that improvement in terms of professionalism, purpose and productivity will be apparent in person-centered schools where the needs of everyone are being met. Productive staff members benefit students by encouraging improvement with thoughtfulness, care, and quality, fostering a school where virtually all students and staff are successful.

Sagor (1992) proposed that principals who are transformative leaders consistently exhibit the same characteristics, a clear, unified purpose; a common cultural perspective; and a constant push for improvement.

Leithwood and Steinbach (1993) added the view that total quality leadership combines "expert thinking with the capacities to act transformationally, when such actions are warranted" (p. 312). They asserted that expertise is associated with effective and efficient problem solving:

Experts develop a relatively clearer understanding of the problem before attempting to solve it, devote more time and effort to the initial formulation of ill-structured problems, and are more inclined to view the immediate problem in its relationship to the broader mission and problems of the organization. (p. 315)

In their view, despite differences in style and personality, all expert leaders share a transformational effect on professionals who work in their building. Further, they all share certain behaviors. Transformational leaders endeavor to visit each classroom every day, practice active listening, and view teaching as an experimental science. "The continuous asking of probing questions that go to the

heart of the teaching/learning process enables them to maintain pressure necessary to foster school improvement" (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1993, p. 322).

I hope that as a beginning principal I can provide teachers with a modicum of meaningful personal support that will create a willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty. This level of commitment will certainly make schooling more effective for students and more professionally rewarding for teachers. I am thoroughly convinced that when faculty feel empowered the educational system can truly be transformed to keep up with the pressures and challenges of today's world.

Staff Development

As I apply my knowledge of educational leadership to middle level education, I am reminded of the point illustrated by Mills and Pollak (1993) that staff development becomes the most important vehicle to foster implementation of a middle school philosophy and should focus on adolescent development, interdisciplinary teaming, and lesson planning. They stressed the need to "help teachers develop a sense of direction, practice collaborative skills, and enhance interpersonal communication to ensure the successful

implementation of a middle school" (p. 5). Effective administrators recognize the crucial role teachers play in the transformation from a junior high to a middle school and capitalize on that knowledge.

Wendel, Hoke, Joekel (1993) agreed that it is vital to put students first by hiring the best staff members and nurturing their development. They maintained that "staff members must have support opportunities to provide leadership, and administrators' belief they can do great things" (p. 26). If I want to be the most effective leader possible for the benefit of young adolescents, it will be vital for me to empower and inspire the professional who will interact with those young people on a regular basis.

In addition, the school community must not overlook the contributions of parents and community members. An effective principal sets high expectations and commitment from the staff, students, and self, and models it every day of the year.

Conclusion

Ultimately, knowing the characteristics of an effective principal is irrelevant unless I can put that knowledge to use. Likewise, the question, "What

will I be like as a middle level principal?" can only be answered in action. At this point in my development I can only hope that I will be able to put the knowledge I have about effective educational leadership into practice.

I have passion for education at the middle level and high expectations for students, faculty, parents, community, and, most importantly, myself. I will strive with all my heart to provide strong instructional leadership through a carefully developed curriculum related to the needs of students, to regularly monitor students and teachers, and to ensure an orderly, positive, and safe environment. My goal will always be to work in the best interest of kids, teachers, and the community, and I truly hope to grow to be the effective principal I know I can be.

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