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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

The principal is the executive officer of the school building and is responsible for the management of the school building and is also responsible for providing instructional leadership. Through effective management and effective instructional leadership the principal becomes a key individual in providing an environment where teachers can effectively teach and students can effectively learn.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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by

Gary S. Long

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The principal is the executive officer of the school building and is responsible for the management of the school building and is also responsible for providing instructional leadership. Through effective management and effective instructional leadership the principal becomes a key individual in providing an environment where teachers can effectively teach and students can effectively learn.

The principal can find many ways to perform managerial functions and provide instructional leadership. Being a manager and a leader in a school means a principal must do many, many, things and must deal with many situations. Doing the many things required and dealing with the many situations can have both positive and negative aspects. It is important for the principal to maintain an even keel and not be subject to emotional swings. A principal must try not to take things personally. Wilbur M. Luce (1994), principal of Waco High School in Waco, Texas, said:

This probably was the hardest principle I learned. People say leaders need to develop a 'thick skin,' and I've learned they're right. Once I grew that thick skin, my life became more tranquil. I have learned to accept personal attacks, realizing that they come with the job and there is nothing I can do to stop them. (p. 25)

The situations that are presented to the principal will involve dealing with people from many groups, including students, teachers, parents, non-teaching

staff, members of the school's immediate community, or members of a community relatively removed from the school.

No two principals are alike. We all bring our own knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences to any job. It is the purpose of this paper to show the type of secondary school principal I would be as a result of the knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences I have acquired as a student, as a teacher and as a human being.

I consider myself to be a practical man. I believe it is important to cut through and even eliminate "red tape" so that things can get done. I would be a practical principal making practical decisions based upon my professional beliefs about education. I intend to articulate some of these beliefs in the remainder of this paper.

First of all, as a principal, I would make a difference in the lives of students. "Principals Can Make a Difference" (Joekel, Wendel & Hoke, 1994) was the title of an article which described Project Success. This project was an effort by three members of the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Nebraska, to learn more about the impact that successful school administrators made in the lives of their students. As a principal, I have a very important job. I make a difference in the lives of the students in my school. This is a serious responsibility.

More than one successful principal has said to keep kids first in every decision you make as a principal. Luce (1994) said, “If you always consider what is best for the kids first, I’ve found you’ll be making the right decision in the long run—even if it doesn’t seem best at the time” (pp. 23-24). Another principal stated that “serving as an advocate for children is one of my major goals . . . the students are number one. I try to maintain that as a personal philosophy” (Joekel, Wendel & Hoke, 1994, p. 34). I have found that putting the student first is the only way to operate in education. I would continue to do this as a principal. “The child is the reason for our existence” (Joekel, Wendel & Hoke, 1994, p. 34).

In my school I want every kid to feel each day that someone has made a positive personal contact with them. I think this is important because the students in our secondary schools are in various stages of adolescence. Brennan (1982) is of the opinion that loneliness is an important social problem, affecting 65 percent of adolescents. Brennan reports that loneliness is among the most frequently mentioned problems of youth seeking help via a crisis center hotline. I would want to take steps in my school to help the adolescent students not feel lonely. There is evidence that loneliness is predictive of later adjustment problems.

Children who are socially isolated or rejected by their peers appear to be at risk for academic failure, juvenile delinquency (Kuperschmidt, 1983), school dropout (Ullmann, 1957) and mental health problems (Cowen, Pederson, Babigan, Izzo & Tros, 1973; Page, 1991).

As a principal I feel a practical approach to helping with adolescent loneliness would involve my learning the names of all the students in my building. Calling a student by his or her name indicates an interest in the student that can help in the development of a personal relationship involving education. Just as a classroom teacher should know the names of all of the students in their classes, so do I want to know the names of all of the students in my building. I worked under a respected principal for many years and knowing all of the students in a school that ranged over the years from 600 to 1,000 students was something that added to his respect.

As a principal, I would schedule time weekly that allowed for walk-throughs. These informal visits to classrooms allow for personal contact with the students and the teachers in the building. It shows the principal's interest in the basic work that is being done in the classrooms, and allows the principal to get a feel for the "pulse" of the building. I agree with the successful principal that said,

Much of the behavior we find annoying comes from kids who merely need attention. I make an effort to let them know I notice them every day. I know all their names . . . I visit their classrooms every day, look over their shoulders and see what they are doing (Joekel, Wendel & Hoke, 1994, p. 35).

I would encourage teachers to have verbal flow charts made of their classrooms. These charts are diagrams that visually show each contact that is made verbally with a student. An arrow usually indicates each interaction. Such charts can be very helpful in indicating what contact is being made with all students and that none are being left out.



Such a chart would be an important tool for me to use in formal observations of classroom teachers. The primary purpose is to see that students have a positive personal contact.

Whether called Mastery Learning, Management by Objective or Outcomes Based Education, I am an advocate of learning with a final goal or objective in mind. I want all students to achieve the desired goal.

According to Mijuskovic (1986), one step in eliminating adolescent loneliness would be to eliminate the fierce competitive individualism prevalent in the schools and community, both in academic and athletic pursuits, which often lead to a feeling of failure and rejection. Competitive grading and emphasis on such factors as physical attractiveness and athletic ability all significantly contribute to a sense of loneliness in all who “fail.”

While I understand that Mijuskovic (1986) sees problems with a system that guarantees that most will fail, I am not optimistic that the competitive system can be changed. Therefore, parents, teachers and helping professionals must affirm the worth of those adolescents that are not always “the best.” In my school I want to let the students know that the effort and not the winning is what is important so that self-esteem is not diminished.

I also want students and staff to share my philosophy that all students can learn. In my classnotes from October, 1991, Dr. Robert Decker of the University of Northern Iowa provided eleven “Teachingisms.” One teachingism is that “all

boys and girls can learn; schools exist to educate all boys and girls” (R. H. Decker, personal communication, October, 1991).

We need to have high expectations. One principal stated what I believe. “I have high expectations for myself and those responsible for teaching kids. I do not ask of others what I’m not willing to do myself” (Joekel, Wendel & Hoke, 1994, p. 35). Another echoes this philosophy by saying:

I faced the challenge of convincing staff and parents that the school was better than its perceived image, and that students would excel through high expectations and encouragement. I worked with the staff to identify goals and priorities, and conveyed high expectations for myself and others (Joekel, Wendel & Hoke, 1994, p. 35).

As I indicated earlier, I think loneliness is an important condition in adolescence because it is linked to identity development, peer group relations and self-esteem. These three areas have a direct impact on how a student performs at school. As a principal I want my teachers to provide activities in the classrooms which help students with identity development, peer group relations and self-esteem in addition to the standard curriculum.

A study by Page (1991) indicated that a large number of teachers do not feel effective in helping students deal with adolescent loneliness. Page surveyed over 200 teachers.

One-half of the teachers (50.5%) believed that they were effective in helping their students to avoid loneliness or isolation. The remainder (49.5%) did not perceive themselves as being effective, felt that they were neither effective or ineffective, or did not feel comfortable in responding to the item. This finding, in combination with the finding that one-third of the sample members desire further training or information about childhood loneliness, strongly suggests the need for inservice programming dealing with this aspect of children's mental health. It also suggests that colleges and universities which train preservice teachers should offer information and training in dealing with loneliness (Page, 1991, p. 70).

So, inservice training programs must be developed for teachers and must be utilized in order for students to receive the personal contact and have the self-esteem that I want them to have in my school.

From a practical perspective, I want inservice programs for my teachers to be worthwhile. Too many times teachers feel that the inservice that they receive is of little value and is a waste of their time. The inservice should be provided with a definite goal that relates to the mission of the school.

“The development of an effective teaching staff has little to do with luck,” according to Duke (1982, p. 4). He states later, “It results from at least three activities in which principals can play crucial roles—recruitment, inservice education, and staff motivation” (p. 4).

As a principal it is my responsibility to implement an effective inservice staff development program. This requires that I understand my staff and the complexities of my school.

Rebore (1991) identified six separate but sequential steps in creating a successful staff development program:

(a) establish school district goals and objectives for a staff development program, (b) assess the needs of the employees to determine if there is a discrepancy between competencies of the staff and the requirements of the organization, (c) establish staff development goals and objectives from the topics selected, (d) design a program that will meet the staff development requirement, (e) implement the plan in a way that effective adult learning may occur, and (f) evaluate the program to ascertain if it is meeting its objectives. (p. 179)

Luce (1994) offers some brief, but good advice as it relates to the people a principal may hire and/or work with. "Hire good people, give them direction, support them, then get out of their way" (p. 25). The point is that as a principal I cannot be an expert in everything and I should not try to do everything myself. Good people will do the job they are hired to do. If possible, as a principal, I should let them do it without interference and without unnecessarily complicating my job.

I do not want to be seen as a reactive leader. The reactive leader deals with each crisis as it occurs. Seldom are definite patterns or goals established by the reactive leader. Each situation is dealt with as it happens. I know that in reality there will be times when situations occur within the school that cannot be foreseen. These situations will result in the principal having to be reactive and their effectiveness as a leader will be measured by how they react and how successful they are in coping with the unexpected problem or crisis. Luce (1994) states:

A principal must understand that the blob runs in all directions. I think this is one of the cardinal principles of principaling. No matter what you do nor how hard you have tried, things over which you have no control will go crazy all at the same time. That's why I compare managing a school to gathering a big glob of goo in your arms. You work and work, and eventually you get it all gathered up, with nothing running over.

Then, when you are feeling good, you spring a leak. (p. 25)

As an effective principal, I am capable of plugging the "leak" when it occurs. I would have to recognize that the principal that is constantly plugging leaks and putting out fires is probably dealing with a school in chaos. In my opinion, a principal at times has to be reactive, however, the principal that is constantly reactive is not an effective principal.

The effective principal is proactive in many areas such as crisis management, conflict resolution and public relations. I will be a principal that is not afraid to take risks and advocate change. A NASSP study notes that the risk-taking principal actively identifies and solves problems—often urging groups and individuals actually to try new approaches rather than just talk about them (Pellicer, 1990). I feel very strongly that education has to change. We cannot stay with the same old traditional methods of education in a society that is undergoing constant change.

A risk taking principal lends an air of excitement and energy helping to relieve the institutional boredom that saps the vitality of students and teachers over time (Pellicer, 1990). I think that one of my strengths as an educator has always been that I enjoy implementing new and innovative ideas and programs. Excellence in nearly any pursuit involves some risk. By making themselves vulnerable, risk taking principals encourage others to take the same risks. Risk taking principals work hard to remove the barriers that separate people in the school from one another. These principals create opportunities for their staff members to reaffirm their commitment to serving children, discuss their problems and work toward common solutions (Pellicer, 1990).

My teaching career has been spent in the Catholic school system. It is a school system that generally is considered to be successful. I have two reflections to make about the Catholic school system that have implications for me as a principal.

My first reflection is that the Catholic school system, like the Catholic Church, operates from a male-dominated hierarchy that uses a top-down approach. For many years the American public school system has operated this way as well. As an aspiring principal, I know that this is not the way of the future. The role of the principal has changed with education reform, shared decision-making and site based management. It is very likely that I will find myself working with local school councils made up of members including parents, community members, teachers and students. It is very likely that my colleagues will include as many females as males. It is even possible that as a principal I will not have any more power (such as a veto) than anyone else in the building. I am comfortable with these developments in education. I realize that anything significant that is accomplished requires a team approach. As the building principal, most of the time I will be viewed as the team leader. As an agent of change, I know that I must get other members of my team to buy-in to my changes. This means they need significant involvement in designing and implementing change. One successful principal offers good advice, "I try to initiate and manage change by involving others and serving as a cheerleader. I can't remember a time in thirteen years when I did not encourage experimentation" (Joekel, Wendel & Hoke, 1994, p. 35). My role then is perhaps different than that of the principals of the public and private schools of the past. I will be a principal that is much more a catalyst and facilitator rather than a

dictator. Feirsen (1994) says that principals have, “never been more important than they are in today’s climate of school change. True, we’re not returning anytime soon to the days of principal as autocrat, but the job remains significant and complex” (p. 48). This does not mean that I feel that the bottom-up approach is always best. Yes, for example, teachers must have time, resources and opportunities to collaborate and make decisions and the bottom-up approach encourages a sense of “ownership” among teachers, but the top-down approach communicates a commitment from the principal that everyone is moving toward the same significant, shared goal (Ornstein, 1993).

My second reflection regarding my career in the Catholic school system as it relates to being a principal involves the fact that some of the success of the Catholic school system can be attributed to the fact that the school is supported by parents, and for the most part, students that want to be there. They have a loyalty to the school because it is their school by choice. It meets their particular needs whatever they may be. As a principal, I want to have a school building supported by parents and students that want to be there. A successful principal said, “I believe it is important to stress school as a ‘we’ and not an ‘I’ proposition. It is our school—students, parents, staff and community” (Joekel, Wendel & Hoke, 1994, p. 35). Creating this loyalty simply means that as much as possible the school must meet the needs that the parents and students perceive for themselves.



I realize, of course, that these needs must conform to certain state and federal laws.

The law has something to say about most of the areas principals have to deal with—from developing individual education plans in special education to disciplining students, dismissing tenured teachers and providing equal access to school facilities. I base most of my decisions on school law (Luce, 1994, p. 25).

It is only practical that as a principal I keep abreast of school law. Due process always must be kept at the forefront of any conflict that might arise involving the employees of my building or the students that attend my school. I think that I should do the best I can to educate my staff about basic principles of school law so that they can better understand my actions and decisions.

I want to do everything in my power to make the image of my school seem positive for anyone that is associated with it or comes into contact with it. This includes many things. I want the custodial and maintenance staff to enjoy their work and take pride in the building. This will result in a building that seems clean, pleasant and functional. Visitors approaching the school or entering the premises should see it this way. This same enjoyment for their work and pride in it needs to be developed within the office staff. Anyone that comes into the office or calls the office on the telephone should have the feeling that they were treated in a pleasant way.

I realize that as a principal I must be professional in all aspects of my life. This involves many, many things including the ability to either conduct or be a useful participant in effective professional meetings. Much of a principal's time, like it or not, is consumed by meetings. I believe in employing the keys to meeting leadership. These keys as outlined by Development Dimensions International (1987) are:

1. Maintain or enhance self-esteem.
2. Listen and respond with empathy.
3. Check for understanding.
4. Make procedural suggestions.

With these keys in mind more can be accomplished.

Being professional is a characteristic for effective leadership. In being professional, "I belong to lots of professional organizations, read a lot, attend conferences and network with others. I try to keep up on new trends by attending seminars, workshops and conferences," a successful principal said (Joekel, Wendel & Hoke, 1994, p. 35). Being professional includes knowing what you should and should not do in your school and in your community outside the school. It includes knowing what to say and what not to say and when. Being professional is something that is so broad it is difficult to put into words, but the true professional knows how to put it into practice.

I have maintained from the first course I took to be a principal, Introduction to Educational Administration, that the schools of the American

educational system are governed by the American people. Groups of people make the decisions which affect schools much more so than individuals. These various groups operating at the federal, state and local levels control schools through their actions and their interactions. A democracy is ruled by people and because the United States is a democracy its schools also are ruled by people. These statements about the governance of schools have significance for me as a principal.

School principals and the teachers are at the most grassroots level of school management. The principal is the executive officer of the school building. Principals are responsible for both managerial functions and instructional leadership. Teachers complete the governance picture as they manage the classrooms containing American students.

It should be emphasized that many people are involved in the governance of American schools. Because so many people are involved, controls over schools are complex. With the American form of government it is understandable that some control of schools comes from the federal level. Each state clearly has the most managerial power over the schools in the state. This power mainly rests with the state legislature. The American public's desires for schools should be reflected by the local school boards which run the local districts with superintendents.

It is my feeling that as a principal, my building should provide the education that the local people want provided. The local people should determine

the educational needs for the community. As a principal, it is my job to see that the needs identified by the local community are being taken care of in my school building. It is also my job to see that these needs fit under state and federal requirements. People govern schools and the principal as an individual carries the workload along with the teachers.

All schools should have a mission. This mission should be clearly defined in a mission statement established by the people of the school in conjunction with the needs identified by the local school community. As a principal, I need to clearly have a vision for my school. This vision should be in line with the established mission statement of the school. There must be a match between the principal's vision and the school's mission. If this match does not exist, I will find a different place to be a principal.

Successful principals say that the vision must be shared with others. One said, "I believe you must develop a vision, communicate it effectively to your staff, students and parents; and make sure that everything you do communicates it clearly to them" (Joekel, Wendel & Hoke, 1994, p. 34).

The vision that I have for the secondary school where I am principal will be formed by the beliefs which I have outlined in this paper. It will be a pleasant place where teachers can effectively teach and students can effectively learn the things that the local community believes are important.

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