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## A vision of a successful elementary principal: A reflective essay

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## A vision of a successful elementary principal: A reflective essay

### Abstract

What is the role of the principal in an elementary school? As I began taking classes for my degree of Master of Arts in Education, I asked myself this question many times. In this paper, I will describe some of my beliefs about the role of an elementary principal. My desire to become an educator began in high school. While I had enjoyable experiences during elementary and junior high, I was motivated by several of my high school teachers to become a teacher. They provided the role models which helped me to understand that a teacher can have a great impact on the life of a student. Through their mentoring and various opportunities to work with younger children, I began to realize that my future lie in education.

A VISION OF A SUCCESSFUL ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL:  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Administration  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

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by  
Brian G. Miller  
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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for  
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What is the role of the principal in an elementary school? As I began taking classes for my degree of Master of Arts in Education, I asked myself this question many times. In this paper, I will describe some of my beliefs about the role of an elementary principal.

My desire to become an educator began in high school. While I had enjoyable experiences during elementary and junior high, I was motivated by several of my high school teachers to become a teacher. They provided the role models which helped me to understand that a teacher can have a great impact on the life of a student. Through their mentoring and various opportunities to work with younger children, I began to realize that my future lie in education.

Another factor which helped in my decision to become a teacher was my parents. I was raised on a dairy farm. While my parents were very busy working on the farm, they always took time to attend school events. They believed that a good education was important, and they instilled that belief in their children. While living on the farm, I learned a lot about hard work and dedication. I believe that I learned even more about what it takes to be a good citizen, neighbor, and friend. This knowledge helped me to realize that I wanted to be able to help others. I believe that as educators, we have the power to mold and shape the lives of children. I wanted to be the one doing the molding and shaping.

As I began to take college education classes, I had the desire to work with middle school and high school students. Throughout my various field experiences, I began to realize that I enjoyed working more

with younger students. After switching from a math major to an elementary education major, I found much more enjoyment in the teaching experiences.

After graduation, I started teaching a third grade classroom in Greene, Iowa. I found the experiences to be wonderful. There was a lot of satisfaction in seeing the children learn and be successful. While I liked what I was doing, I began to realize that I wanted to do more. As a classroom teacher, I was working directly with twenty students a year. I had the opportunity to greatly affect the lives of these twenty students. My concern was for the other students in the building. I wanted to find a way of helping all of the students. After working with three different principals and seeing three different styles, I decided that I wanted to become a principal. I had seen the impact that a dedicated, caring principal can have on the students.

My motivation grew as I began to take administrative classes. With each class, I developed more confidence and desire to move into the administrative world. I have committed myself to the goal of helping to lead a faculty which is willing and able to help each student reach their maximum potential.

Throughout this paper, I will outline some of the important qualities needed to be an effective elementary principal. These qualities will include leadership, administrator of technology, and school and community partnerships. While these are not the only qualities needed to be an effective principal, I feel they are the most important.

## Leadership

I believe that the most important aspect of being a successful administrator is quality leadership skills. I will look at several components of being an effective leader. These areas include: philosophy and vision, shared decision-making, role model, communicator, facilitator, and instructional leader.

### Philosophy and Vision

It is important that the principal have a sound philosophy of education. My philosophy is that the purpose of education is to do what is best for students. If I always keep the best interest of the students in mind, I believe that my decisions will be justified. My philosophy is central to all of my beliefs about education. It is and must be something that I totally believe in and am committed to.

Another important aspect of leadership, is to have a vision and help the school district establish a vision. The vision should be the indicator of what you want your students to be able to do. In order for a vision to be successful, it "must be incorporated into the district's goals, strategies, policies, processes, cultural practices, management behavior, and accountability systems" (Tewel, 1996, p.16). The vision of the district should be consistent with the actions of the district. If it is something you truly believe in, it must be important enough to use it throughout the entire district. By using the vision as the driving force, we enable students and staff to find greater intellectual and social coherence in what they learn (Marshall, 1994).

As a school district, it is important to have a shared-vision. This vision should be decided by the students, staff, and community. A vision is not shared if principals are blinded by their own vision and feel they must manipulate the teachers and the school culture to conform to it (Fullan, 1992). This seems to be the case in too many situations. Many principals are not willing to allow input from others in deciding the vision of the school. Fullan believes that principals would be better off developing collaborative work cultures in order to help staff develop a shared-vision. In schools where teachers share a common view of their school's vision, improvement seems to occur more easily (Sagor, 1992).

#### Shared Decision-making

I feel that it is important to use shared decision-making in a school. Teachers are professionals and should be treated as such. If teachers have more input into the decisions that are made, they will be more willing to accept them. The teachers will also be more willing to implement the decisions and try to make them successful since they have ownership in them. I believe it is important to use your resources effectively. By allowing input from the teachers, I am tapping into their vast knowledge and expertise. If I am going to allow shared decision-making in my school, I must be willing to accept the suggestions from the teachers. They will become discouraged and not give input if I always do things my way and disregard their suggestions and advice. As principal, I will be accountable for all decisions made in our school. If something goes wrong, I must be willing to accept the responsibility for it. When



things go right, I must be willing to give credit to the people who helped to make it successful.

### Role Model

Another important characteristic of an effective leader is the ability to lead by example. I feel that I shouldn't ask teachers to do anything that I wouldn't be willing to do myself. If the teachers have to supervise in the lunchroom and at recess, I feel that I should take turns supervising the lunchroom and recesses also. Since most teachers are willing to put in extra time at school, I feel that I should be there too. I want to be there in the morning when most teachers are coming in and stay as late as most teachers stay at night. By doing this, I will be available to help teachers with questions or concerns before and after school. The teachers will also see that I am not afraid to put in the time necessary to do an effective job. Hopefully this will make them more willing to put in extra time.

I agree with the statement, "Effective human communications are more than ninety percent nonverbal" (Boyle, 1996, pp.3-4). A principal needs to be an effective role model for the staff, students, and community. One way to show support and caring is by being visible in the school. It is important to get out of the office every hour of every day (Boyle). This is the only way of knowing what is going on in the school. It shows that you are interested and concerned about what is happening in the building. By exhibiting this interest, you will help to motivate others to care about the students' education as well.

### Communicator

Another quality I will need as a leader is to be an effective communicator. This includes being a good listener. Sometimes a teacher might need someone to just listen to them. I feel that I need to be there for them when this happens. If they want help and suggestions, I will be willing to help. I must realize though that sometimes they just want someone to listen to their problems or successes. It will be important to listen and know when they want or need feedback. I must be able to effectively communicate to people what I want them to know in a clear and concise manner. I feel that the most effective way of communicating is face-to-face. While sometimes memos will be necessary, I will try to communicate in person whenever it is possible. Boyle (1996) believes face-to-face communication are ten times more valuable than those which are written. This provides the opportunity for two way communication. If they have questions or comments, I am there for them to talk to. When a memo is passed out, it does not provide for this two way communication.

### Facilitator

Duden (1993) sees the role of principal changing from one of instructional leader to a facilitator of the change process. The instructional leaders in a building are the teachers. I believe I need to be a goal setter. I need to help my staff set goals for student achievement. It is important to have goals to strive for. If we do not set high goals for our students, they will not be challenged enough to reach their full potential.

In addition to helping the staff to set the goals, I must be able to help provide them with the materials and knowledge needed to help the students reach the goals. This doesn't mean that I must know everything, but I must be able to find people who can provide the needed training. If I help the staff to set goals but never give them any help in reaching the goals, they will become discouraged and quit trying. In this manner, I can help enable them to become the instructional leaders that they want to be. It is also important that I set goals for myself. I have to know what I want to achieve and how I plan to achieve it. Using our goals as our guides, we can help our students to set goals and strive for success

#### Instructional Leader

I believe an important role of the leader of instructional leaders is to help teachers through observations and evaluations. The purpose of observation feedback should be for teacher improvement and not evaluation (Pajak, 1993). One way to conduct observations is to do what Peters and Waterman (1982) call "management by wandering around" (p.67). Using this approach, the principal will be able to stay informed and know what is occurring in teachers' classrooms ( Reitzug & Burrello, 1995). Observations should take place on a weekly basis. While each one might only be for five or ten minutes, it will give a good overall picture of the teacher's classroom performance.

The evaluation process should include a pre-observation conference. This will help the principal to get an idea of what will be taking place in the classroom during the formal observation. It will also

allow the teacher to share some concerns which can be monitored during the observation. During this discussion, there should be a mutual agreement as to what behaviors will be focused on. At the time of the observation, only these behaviors should be recorded unless there is something observed which needs immediate attention.

After the observation, a post-observation conference should be held. This will allow the principal and teacher to discuss the observed behaviors and how they can be improved. This conference should not be a culmination of the evaluation process nor should it be considered any more important than any other part (Pajak, 1993).

At the conclusion of the conference, a Personal Improvement Commitment(PIC) should be developed by the teacher. The PIC should concentrate on areas which the teacher wants to improve in. It should be written so that the responsibility for achieving it rests with the teacher and not the principal. By using the PICs, the teachers will have more ownership in their personal improvement. The areas that they will be working on will be ones which they choose.

In the case of a teacher who is ineffective, the principal needs to be willing and able to remediate and dismiss them if necessary. The major areas to look for when considering a teacher's termination would be danger to the students, incompetence, or insubordination.

While placing students in danger is a situation which could call for immediate termination, cases of incompetence will require a lot of time and documentation. The incompetent teacher needs to be given help

through remediation and assistance. When dealing with an incompetent teacher, a principal's personal predisposition and training will often cause them to handle the teacher like a problem pupil by trying to build their self-esteem instead of being honest with them (Waintroob, 1995). This thought process has created a system which uses the word "satisfactory" to mean "unsatisfactory" in the summative evaluation (Waintroob). While this system is appropriate with students, it is not with teachers. Teachers need to know when they are being ineffective.

It is the job of the principal to help the teacher with the remediation process. During this process, specific documentation should be kept recording what has been tried and whether it has worked or not. If remediation is not successful, then it is best to attempt to counsel the teacher out of education. In the event that the teacher does not feel the need to leave education, the termination process should be implemented.

Another possible method of improving teacher performance is to establish peer groups. With teachers working together to help each other improve, much of the responsibility lies with the teachers themselves. They could videotape each other and then discuss the performance while watching the videotape. Teachers might be more willing to accept constructive criticism from their peers as opposed to the principal. This will also allow the teachers time to work together and share ideas. By

sharing ideas, each teacher can expand their own knowledge of teaching methods which could help them to be more effective.

### **Administrator of Technology**

I believe the area of technology is one of the most important and rapidly expanding areas of school administration. While the principal will not usually be the person using most of the technology, it is important that he/she be a leader in the technology movement. Since it is not possible for most schools to keep up with the rapid development of technology, schools must stay as current as possible and make effective use of the equipment they do have.

The typical excuses for the slow pace of technology integration in the schools are well known. Among the most common excuses are insufficient money, teacher resistance, and little administrative support (Cuban, 1994). Another problem is that most Americans don't want any big changes in their elementary schools (Bracey, 1996). Since the money for technology changes must come from the community, it is difficult to make changes without their support. The principal must play a major role in helping to build this support for the implementation of a new technology curriculum.

Throughout the history of schools, new innovations which were believed to transform education have had little impact on education. Examples of this failure have been telephones, televisions, and computers (Luehrmann, 1990). While these inventions could have had a great impact on the education process, schools have been very slow to

learn how to use them effectively. Even though there are millions of computers in schools, 95 to 98 % of the class time is still spent with the teacher talking and the students listening (Luehrmann).

One of the most debatable issues is what role technology should play in the schools. I believe the purpose of technology should not be to totally replace the teacher, instead it should be used by the teacher as a resource to help provide additional information and support to the students.

Computers can be beneficial to students as a form of motivation. Many students will work harder when given the opportunity to work at a computer as opposed to a traditional form of school work (Alvestad & Wigfield, 1993). In an age of entertainment, it is sometimes necessary to capture the attention of the students before teaching them. By using the capabilities offered by technology, it is easier to get and keep the students' attention.

In order to effectively integrate technology into the schools, it must be placed into the hands of the teachers. When technology was first placed in the schools, it was used for administration of the building. Teachers and teaching came second and had to deal with whatever technology was left over after administrative uses (Murphy, 1993). When teachers are provided direct access to technology resources, they are more willing and able to find ways of incorporating it into their instruction. If the technology is not in a place which is easily accessible to them, it will not be used (Lamson & Barnett, 1994).

Another factor involved in whether or not technology is being used correctly deals with methods of teacher training. Studies have shown that most teachers have an interest in learning more about using computers in their classrooms, but they are unhappy with the limited training they have received (Scrogan, 1989). The most important aspect of the training is that it needs to be continuous. Schools are famous for using a shotgun method of inservicing teachers. The teachers are given a few hours of training and are expected to implement it into their classrooms. Many times there is no follow-up training. Most of the teachers who extensively use computers in their classrooms are self-taught (Beichner, 1993). For teachers who are not technology minded, this makes it an impossible situation for them. If schools expect teachers to learn how to use the technology on their own, very little progress will ever be made.

I view technology as another area where the principal can serve as an effective role model. By using a computer, the principal can show the staff that computer usage is important. The opportunities for a principal to demonstrate computer proficiency are endless. Even more important than personally using technology, is encouraging teachers to try new methods of implementing technology in their instruction. When teachers feel that they have the support and encouragement of the principal, they are more willing to take risks and try new methods.

Another benefit technology will have in schools is to greatly enhance the special education programs. Technology will play an



important role in the lives of individuals who have disabilities (Parette, Hourcade, & VanBiervliet, 1993). For these students, the opportunity to use technology will allow them to be more successful than ever before possible. It will help them to keep up with students who do not have any disabilities. For students who are disabled, computers may be the answer to providing the skills needed to adapt to life on their own. This should be the goal with many of these students. It isn't appropriate to try and educate many disabled students as you would regular education students when they need to learn skills which will help them to survive.

Adult education is another area in which technology can benefit a community. Since most community members do not have access to the amount of technology that schools do, it needs to be a role of the school to provide this access to them. This can be done by offering adult education classes. Many community members are not in favor of technology in schools because they have never had the opportunity to use technology. By offering adult education classes, schools can help them to become technology literate. This will not only benefit the community, but it will also benefit the schools. Once people have had exposure to current technology and have seen how beneficial it can be, they will be more willing to support technology in the schools.

Schools can also provide open computer lab times to allow community members access to the schools technology. This will allow them to use the equipment which they have helped to purchase and will give them time to practice computer skills which could help them. It will

also help some adults to feel that the school is a welcome place for them to be. Once they become comfortable in the school, they will be more supportive. This support is crucial to the success of a school.

### **School and Community Partnerships**

Throughout the existence of public education, schools have declared their desire to include the public in the education of the children. While this sounds great in words, it has never been put to practice until recent years. Declining public confidence in schooling, perceptions of a crisis in school quality, and a lessening of faith in the professional expertise of schools have led to a reform movement which is sweeping the public school system (Crowson, 1992).

In order to help satisfy the community, many schools are using a public relations approach to community relations. In this sense, community relations is the effective communication of school goals, activities, and achievements to a receptive public (Crowson, 1992). While this might be effective in keeping the public informed, it is not true community relations. In order for a school to achieve good community relations, it must be sensitive to the needs and desires of the community. Community members should be included in the decision making process of the school. This partnership between school and community will help to provide a school setting which meets the needs of the school and the community.

The development of a partnership requires both partners to be aware of their own roles. They also must trust that the partnership will be

beneficial to both partners (Winlock, 1994). In the situation of a school and community partnership, the students should be the ones benefiting the most. If the students are not benefiting from the relationship, it must be restructured so that they are.

If a school and community partnership is to be effective, it must be based on open and honest communication between the school and community. This needs to be two-way communication. Too often, the communication is really one-way. Schools send home newsletters and notes, but very seldom is there meaningful dialogue between the school and home.

Parental involvement requires ongoing communication between the home and school (Winlock, 1994). This communication should not take place only at conferences or when problems arise. It should occur as often as possible and include positive and negative feedback when necessary. It is important to remember to use jargon free language when talking to parents and to also avoid using a we-know-best attitude (Willis, 1995). By keeping in constant contact with the home, schools can be better aware of the needs of the students and their families.

Epstein (1995) believes that "The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families" (p. 701). With the increase of single parent families, this statement is becoming more important every year. Many times, the school is the only constant source of stability in the life of a child. By helping that child's family,

schools can help to solve family problems instead of provide a temporary relief from them.

## **Conclusion**

As I conclude my graduate school experience, I wonder what life holds in store for me as a principal. Many times, I wonder why I began this journey and if it will be worth all the time and effort. As I view schools and society, I wonder if one can ever do a truly effective job of educating our youth. Students are coming to school with such a diversity of backgrounds and experiences that it is difficult to know how to teach them. Many are too worried about their home life to be able to concentrate on their education. Legislative cutbacks force schools to make do with less money. Schools are given the responsibility of being more and more of a parent as they deal with issues of morality and ethics. I'm not sure where the line must be drawn defining when schools have done what they can with what they have to offer.

With all of these difficulties listed, I am still certain that being an educator is the greatest job on earth. I do not know of any other occupation where one can do as much good for as many people. The rewards that an educator can receive as they see a child learn and succeed far exceed any difficulties which were encountered in the process. It is a joy and satisfaction that can only come by helping another human being.

As a principal, I look forward to the challenge of helping to shape our youth and prepare them for their adult lives. I believe that I can truly

make a difference in the lives of many children and ultimately help to make our world a better place to live. By working with staff, parents, and students, I can help provide an environment which encourages each child to reach their maximum potential. While I will meet many obstacles and face many frustrating moments, my ultimate goal of helping every child will always be the driving force which will help motivate me to continue on. I feel fortunate to have been given the ability to help others, and I will use this ability to help every student that I can.

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