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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

Abstract

As I reflect and think about how I have grown since beginning coursework in administration, I am amazed at how much more aware I have become of the educational system, my beliefs, and values. When I began my coursework two years ago, I had just finished my first year of teaching. I did not have a lot of background in education or experience to draw upon. My thoughts about administrators were that they were very busy people, but I had not really taken the time to think about all of the responsibilities and obligations that accompanied the position. I have learned many things over these past two years. I feel that as I have prepared for a principalship, I have grown as a person, a leader, and a teacher.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Presented to

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by

Tracy L. Morrison

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As I reflect and think about how I have grown since beginning coursework in administration, I am amazed at how much more aware I have become of the educational system, my beliefs, and values. When I began my coursework two years ago, I had just finished my first year of teaching. I did not have a lot of background in education or experience to draw upon. My thoughts about administrators were that they were very busy people, but I had not really taken the time to think about all of the responsibilities and obligations that accompanied the position. I have learned many things over these past two years. I feel that as I have prepared for a principalship, I have grown as a person, a leader, and a teacher.

I have always wanted to be involved with education. In fifth grade, I would go home and "teach" to my classroom of students. During high school, I knew that education was the profession I wanted to pursue. My interest in working with children made the decision easy. I am currently very much enjoying teaching and plan to continue teaching for a few years. Yet, the challenges of administration are alluring to me, and I look forward to the opportunity some day of pursuing an elementary principalship.

Administrators play an extremely important role in shaping the entire process of education and learning in the schools of today and schools of the future. Educational leaders must possess a vision of what they hope to become and what they hope the school they are responsible for will become. I am sharing my vision in the following pages.

My goal of becoming an effective strategic leader in administration will not be easy to attain as I recognize the incredible challenges which face education. As Guthrie and Reed (1991) stated, "Strategic leadership refers to the continual need to appraise conditions both external and internal to an organization, assess the organization's mission relative to environmental changes, and consistently evaluate existing organizational procedures" (p. 3). Schools are open systems in which the environment affects the operations within schools causing them to be in a continuous state of transformation.

Organization is an important key to being a successful administrator in my eyes. I feel that organization in one's personal and professional life, only helps one to achieve success. An effective leader must manage his or her time wisely which is very challenging in the administrative position. Administrators must plan ahead

whenever possible to organize themselves and their staff. According to Guthrie and Reed, "A leader is an individual who accepts the authoritative expectations of others to responsibly guide the activities and enhance the performance of an organization" (p. 10). The administrative position is challenging yet very rewarding for those who take on the enormous responsibilities it carries with it.

According to Hughes and Ubben (1989), "Research reveals six abilities that are important to successful school administrators: the ability to plan and organize work, to work with and lead others, to analyze problems and make decisions, to communicate orally and in writing, to perceive the needs and concerns of others, and to perform under pressure" (p. 7). As I look over these six abilities, I feel that even though we can all improve, I am more ready to face these challenges each and every day. Through my coursework, practicum, and by watching and learning from others as I work in a school every day, I am preparing myself for each of these tasks.

As an educator, I firmly believe that all children can learn when given an appropriate amount of time and when a variety of teaching methods are presented. Children experience life with a joyful lightness of being and an extremely high energy level (Seefeldt, 6). This is quite

evident as I work with children every day. I often times marvel at their boundless energy and enthusiasm. According to Katz (1987), "Young children learn most effectively when engaged in interaction rather than receptive or passive activities. They should be interacting with adults, materials, and their surroundings in ways which help them make sense of their own experience and environment" (p. 5).

Elementary schools especially need to provide a developmentally appropriate curriculum approach based on knowledge of the typical development of children and sensitivity to individual differences. As stated by Elkind (1989), "The learner is viewed as having developing mental abilities. The important task for educators is matching curricula to these emerging abilities" (p. 114).

It is important that schools be ready to do their part in seeing that children succeed. As an instructional leader, I believe that it is part of my job to make sure that the framework for quality learning is in place. This framework begins with the principal's awareness of the school's mission and the ability to activate a plan that will accomplish the mission. As Winborne (1991) sums up, "A mission statement serves as more than an expression of purpose. It establishes a climate for academic success that reaches beyond the school into the

community" (p. 209). I will see to it that everyone on my staff understands and is willing to take the necessary measures to accomplish the mission of our school. Staff, community, and parents need to develop ownership in the mission statement by being a part of its formulation.

Schools are cultures for growing minds. Through the kinds of programs offered and the quality of teaching provided, schools help in the creation of young minds. As an instructional leader, deciding what to include and exclude from the curriculum is an extremely critical issue. Eisner (1991) stated, "Minds are forms of cultural achievement, and the kinds of minds that children come to own depend, in large measure, on the kinds of experiences they are afforded during their lifetimes" (p. 11). I see the area of curriculum and instruction as one of the most important issues facing administrators.

At the elementary level, the students are taught the "basics " of all other learning. If children do not understand the basics, then it will be difficult for any other advanced learning to take place. This issue of grasping and truly understanding the basics of learning is extremely important to me. Successful instruction in a school is the high level of expectation that should be held by all staff members. As Winborne

(1991) stated, "Teachers must believe their students can achieve and therefore must work toward that end" (p. 210). In an administrative position, my job will be to ensure that each teacher does everything that he or she can to help his or her students to find success in school.

An important issue and a concern of mine is the number of students found in today's elementary classrooms. Too many classrooms are crowded with too many students and desks to be truly effective. It is nearly impossible for a teacher to singlehandedly meet the needs of thirty plus children every day. The demands and needs of elementary-aged children are many. Smaller class sizes would undoubtedly improve the amount of time a teacher could give to each of his or her students every day. This is an issue I will work hard to improve as the school administrator.

Schools need to be held accountable for their successes and when students are not achieving success, then it is the school's responsibility to determine what can be done to remedy the situation. It will be my responsibility to be certain a competent staff with the necessary instructional materials are in place. Education is not just about making a living; it is also about making a life ("Excerpt from Bush," 1991).

As an administrator I want to be a visible figure to the students

and teachers in and out of the elementary classroom. I realize that an administrator has a lot of commitments, but the importance of getting out into the school to visit with students and faculty about their concerns and successes has to be about the most important commitment than an administrator should have.

Parents and community members play an important role in education. The more support that parents and the community can provide to children and schools, then the better the educational system will become. It is critical that all people feel that they have a part in today's schools. By inviting parents into our schools, asking for their ideas on issues, and placing them on committees we will be able to work together as one large family; all working together for the one final goal of educating children and helping children to become all that they can possibly be.

Another way to involve parents and community members in the school setting is to establish a volunteer program. As a practicum project, I discovered the many benefits for the teachers, students, and volunteers. Everyone seemed to gain from the program.

School districts need to be engaging in the process of strategic planning. According to Dr. Mary Garcia (1991):

Strategic planning is a creative management process that can be used to eliminate discrepancies between what is and what must be. The purpose is to make decisions about the future before the future forces decisions or renders decisions irrelevant (p. 2).

I feel the key to the strategic planning process is being out ahead of the trends and not just being a follower. It is important to be a leader when implementing new ideas.

Site-based management and shared leadership have a place in schools of the 21st century. Restructured schools are characterized by new roles and responsibilities for the people involved. According to Murphy (1991), "Teachers need to develop understanding and skills in collegial decision making in order to perform successfully in schools where they are empowered to participate in the governance of the organization and in which their roles and functions are enhanced" (p. 54).

Administrators are the key people in the restructuring process. According to Winborne (1991), the components of successful schools include, "Most importantly, strong administrative leadership must be in place. This is followed by a sense of mission, a clear instructional

focus, high expectations of students and staff, a safe climate, and parent and community involvement" (p. 209). As emphasized by Winborne, the importance to strong school-site leadership cannot be matched.

Professional employees in school organizations often have great insight and usually excellent ideas of how a school could be improved. They also have the need for both personal and professional growth and development through interaction with other school professionals. One way to interact is to participate in management decisions at the building level that affect curriculum and instruction (Guthrie and Reed, 185). When a staff is well-trained, adaptive, and motivated, great things can be expected to happen. It seems almost inevitable.

I am a believer in the site-based management concept. I think that through an appropriate preparation process, this idea will be effective. To be successful in the next century, educational leaders must expand their focus beyond the traditional school buildings and consider the needs of the students in a larger context which would view the entire community as an educational setting ("Now What," 1991).

Communication is one of the most important skills an effective school leader can possess. It provides staff and students with clear goals

and expectation. Two-way communication also allows leaders to benefit from the knowledge and expertise of teachers, parents, and others on the school staff and members of the community. According to Parish and Prager, "The efforts that administrators invest in improving two-way communication will be rewarded with significant benefits: a greater sense of unity, a clearer sense of purpose, stronger employee and student morale, and increased parent and community support" (p. 39).

To promote staff communication, many ideas and strategies can be employed. A personnel handbook which includes school policies and procedures, schedules, and general information is very beneficial to staff members. Weekly or daily staff memos could be put in mailboxes to inform all staff members of special events, reminders of meetings and deadlines, and the staff could submit items to promote sharing of information and materials.

Grade-level meetings are important for staff members so that concerns, curriculum, and grade-level activities can be discussed voluntarily once a month. Faculty meetings are necessary to discuss the concerns among the entire staff. Other ideas might include

publishing a staff directory and distributing opinion surveys to staff members to help improve the school's activities and functioning.

Leadership team meetings, composed of one teacher representative from each grade level and resource room, could meet at least once a month. These meetings would be designed to discuss grade level concerns and to develop resolutions (Parish and Prager, 40).

I feel that the individual contacts made with each staff member every day through verbal contact is very important. These contacts should be informal at times, so that as a principal, I would be seen as also a friend and a caring person, and not just someone always wanting to talk "shop". Positive notes and messages in the staff's mailboxes are also appreciated to recognize a job well done such as an interesting lesson, class project, or bulletin board to name only a few.

It is also important to have a good rapport with the students. I feel that greeting the students in the morning or visiting with them in the lunchroom or at recess, gives the students an opportunity to get to feel comfortable around the principal. This would be beneficial in that when problems did arise, the students would hopefully feel more relaxed about approaching me or more willing to discuss the matter with me to find a suitable resolution.

Parents can be kept informed of school activities through newsletters, parent surveys, informal contacts, and conferences. The communication with the community and all of its various publics can be promoted through newsletters, newspaper articles and pictures, partnerships, and the use of community services and resources.

If communication is really happening in a school, it helps to promote a positive school atmosphere. A school that has a sense of excitement and joy in the air is an effective school in my eyes. It is a feeling that someone would get as soon as he or she walked through the door into the school. The children are active and involved. The teachers are responsive to student needs. The administration is visionary. According to Guthrie and Reed (1991), "In excellent schools, there exists a strong sense of purpose while at the same time a great deal of freedom is given to teachers as to how this purpose is achieved" (p. 84).

A goal of mine will be to help nurture and develop this positive feeling in the school where I am working. This is a concept that has been brought up numerous times in classes I have taken, and I strongly believe that it is a valid concept and one worth remembering and striving towards.

A school must have a sense of direction. A quote from Guthrie and Reed (1991) stated, "If you don't know where you are going, then it doesn't much matter what you do" (p. 83). This really made a lot of sense to me, and after reading it, I thought about its meaning. Even in one's own life, if there is no direction sought, then one will never attain his or her potential. It is only through the establishment of goals and dreams that one reaches success and achievement.

This holds true for schools also. When improvements are seen, it is usually because there is a plan of action. A sense of direction can be provided for a school in the form of a statement of beliefs, a set of goals, and specific objectives to be achieved. These should be interrelated. The principal is the one person in a school who can oversee the entire program because of his or her interest in the success in the entire school and all of its parts. The principal is in the best position to provide the necessary sense of direction. As research has shown, the most effective principals have a clear sense of purpose and priorities and are able to enlist the support of others toward those ends (Guthrie and Reed, 85).

Literacy is an important issue. Schools are obviously a critical element in achieving a nation of literate individuals. As Hoffman

(1991) stated, "Students depend on schools for guidance in acquiring the literacy levels demanded for full participation in the technological, information generating world of the 21st century" (p. 60). Educators are responsible for ensuring that the students in their schools are literate. It is important that children can read, but also I believe children should be challenged to use their higher order thinking skills to solve various problems and situations that they encounter. Students must be taught how to apply their knowledge.

The issue of drug-free schools as is heard so many times today depicts the unfortunate situation in which educators have had and will continue to have to deal with in the future. It greatly disturbs me to think that drugs have invaded society so badly and that they, the drugs, have dared to enter into our schools. However, I realize that the drug problem exists and as an administrator, it will be my job at the elementary level to assure that students are taught from the earliest grades to say "no" to drugs. Also, I will bring in speakers to deliver drug-free messages and to recognize and have activities during National Drug Awareness Week.

Supervision and evaluation is an important area for an instructional leader. Formal and informal evaluations of teachers and

staff can be very beneficial in that all professionals can improve in one way or another. Even the very best teachers can develop a personal professional improvement plan with the assistance of the instructional leader. As the instructional leader, it is then critical to follow up and monitor progress, so that the staff realizes that you feel that it is important and not just something extra for them to do. According to Guthrie and Reed (1991), "For proper staff development and evaluation, the principal must take an initiating, rather than reacting role, and the comprehensive plan for staff evaluation must be based on a sound rationale" (p. 233).

In my opinion, effective instructional leaders are not only in the teachers' classrooms on formal evaluation days. Effective instructional leaders make routine informal visits just to keep informed about the learning and happenings of the school, and to let the teachers know that as an instructional leader, you care about them and their students.

One idea shared by an administrator in one of my classes was to try each day to visit five different classrooms for five minutes each. This principal apparently worked in a larger school district, but I really liked the idea. It would be quite difficult to follow through with this

plan every day since other conflicts, many of them unplanned, may interfere. However, setting up a schedule of visitation would help a principal keep organized and when time permitted, a short visit would be done. Teachers and students would become more comfortable with each visit, and as a principal, I would see the teaching and learning taking place.

As a prospective principal, it concerns me that I could lose touch with the classroom happenings. I love teaching and the world of education. It will be important to me to keep current about the teaching and learning that are taking place in the building I am in and to read journal articles to stay aware of other teaching practices and strategies. In my opinion, it is critical that an elementary administrator is knowledgeable about current trends and methods of instruction.

It is imperative that a principal understands due process and approaches the process with an abundance of knowledge about its steps. It is important for principals to keep continually informed of new developments in the laws and regulations. According to Guthrie and Reed (1991), "Although parents, children, staff, or community members may not always be right, they always have rights" (p. 29). Legal issues could be an administrator's worst nightmare if he or she

was not aware of the laws and/or rights of others. This is one area in which I feel that I need to become more informed about. I am aware of due process and its procedures, but I need to become more knowledgeable about the rules and regulations of the school system in general.

As I have taken each course in the educational administration program, I have become much more aware of the wide array of responsibilities that administrators have placed upon them. In the school I am currently teaching, I have been more observant of the events and processes that go on around me. I have tried to learn and grow from those experiences. Since learning so much about the principalship, I view situations differently in the school. I see things with a broader view and better understanding of why certain decisions are made.

Through my studies, I have gained a new perspective on schools and education. I feel that I can now see the "bigger picture". The challenges of an administrator will only increase as our society begins to rely more and more upon our schools. Children are the most valuable and precious natural resource in today's world. My goal is to become an effective elementary administrator in the future with my

main objective to help children reach their full potential and become responsible citizens who believe in themselves and in their future.

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