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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

The principal is a leader, an educational leader for the teachers, keeping current on the teaching trends. The principal is a leader for the students, providing them with a positive role model. The principal is a leader for the custodians and support staff, assuring that all are treated fairly. The principal is a counselor, listening, caring and helping all. The principal is a researcher, constantly digging for more information about the many aspects in education. The principal is a business manager, dealing with financial responsibilities of the school.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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The Department of Educational Administration  
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Masters of Arts in Education

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by  
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The principal is a leader, an educational leader for the teachers, keeping current on the teaching trends. The principal is a leader for the students, providing them with a positive role model. The principal is a leader for the custodians and support staff, assuring that all are treated fairly. The principal is a counselor, listening, caring and helping all. The principal is a researcher, constantly digging for more information about the many aspects in education. The principal is a business manager, dealing with financial responsibilities of the school.

The various roles of the principal are like the individual squares in a patchwork quilt. When each square is separate, it's alone and of little value, like scrap material. When the individual squares are sewn together, however, they take on new purpose and seem to fit perfectly into place.

As a current teacher and future administrator, I have a personal feeling about the role of a principal as a leader. I believe the principal needs to lead teachers by constantly trying to encourage improvement in their teaching styles, to encourage career advancement and to encourage communication with

parents and others. For example, teachers sometimes need a push to try a new effective teaching method. It is imperative that the principal do the pushing. This obviously doesn't happen if the principal is unaware of the current teaching trends.

When discussing the role of the principal as a leader with my students, a different view emerges. Their idea of the principal's role as a leader means being good when the principal evaluates me, or just being good whenever he is around. They actually didn't see him leading them educationally. They called him my boss, instead.

The custodians told me that the principal is an effective leader when he makes smart decisions and everything runs smoothly.

Because so many people view the role of the principal through their own eyes, the principal's role is complex and at times unpopular. In this paper, I will examine various roles of the principal through my own eyes.

### Major Roles of the Principal

#### The Principal As A Team Leader

Principals must have a vision of what they foresee happening with education in the future. This

vision should include a wide scope of goals and then be focussed on the district. A principal leads the faculty and staff in a desired direction.

One way of doing this, according to Schwartz (1983), is for leaders to follow the A.S.K. formula: "Ask and it shall be given unto you. Seek and ye shall find. Knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (p. 159). The A.S.K. formula works for principals that are achievers. Too many principals seem to forget the valuable resources in their surroundings. The "A" section of the formula, is extremely important for a principal. All too often I have heard complaints that teachers never feel that their opinion is wanted or needed.

An important patch to be sewn in the administration quilt, is communication between teachers. I feel this is a strong aspect in my teaching, and hope it will carry over into my principalship. Will I be able to communicate my thoughts, feelings and ideas to my staff?

#### Communicating With Teachers

A principal once said that if you already have your mind made up on an issue, don't ask teachers for input. Instead, state your position and ask for a

discussion. An effective principal however, will realize what issues need input and when he is finished will thank them. In short, a principal uses his manners and is polite.

It is also polite to let the teachers know what a meeting is going to be about. They should be sent a note or agenda, discussing the issues at hand. That way the principal will not catch anyone off guard and the teachers will have the opportunity to think about the meeting and to be ready with questions and concerns. It is just like teaching. A good teacher will allow the students to read the material before questioning them about it; a good principal should do the same. I hope to employ all the great teaching techniques I have learned when I am a principal.

In our psychology class, we learned that a top-dog theory exists, especially in adolescents. Here the adolescents, when going from junior high to high school, have a feeling that they are no longer important or top-dog. They feel that they are simply a tiny fish in a big pond. They feel that their thoughts and feelings don't matter. Teachers tend to feel the same way. They feel that the principal is the top-dog and they are the little fish. I hope to



remember that I was once a little fish in that pond and will remember to communicate open and effectively.

When communicating with a teacher, the principal develops a relationship which allows common frames of reference and modes for tackling problems, thus enabling genuine communication. This relationship can nourish both the teacher and the principal.

### Teacher/Principal Relationships

Greenberg (1969) discussed the feelings some teachers have about their principals. He also stated that teachers feel principals never give the teachers credit for what they know. Greenberg (1969) also stated that some teachers:

. . . believe there is no freedom of speech, some feel that they do all the work for nothing. Principals need to be careful of this feeling. Teachers can feel a great deal of resentment toward their principal when they feel ignored. (p. 119)

As a teacher I have felt these same feelings. There have been times that I have wanted to implement more technology into the elementary curriculum, only to be shot down for one reason or another. As a principal, I will not only listen to my staff but I

will write down notes while they are expressing their ideas, research the idea and give feedback to them within a certain time period.

Teachers are mentors for the leaders of tomorrow. They hold in their hands the future. They make constant decisions that will enhance or promote children. They are responsible for instilling values either consciously or unconsciously. They utilize their own past experiences, their education and knowledge to teach what they feel is important. Yet, they are still treated with disrespect. They must deal with disrespect from the students, but they shouldn't have to deal with it from their superiors. For example, I know of a principal that sits in front of the main entrance of the school to catch a certain teacher being late. Why not discuss this problem with the teacher privately and let them know you are aware of the problem instead of having the other teachers think they are being watched? I believe it is up to the principal to earn the respect of the teachers but in order to earn respect I will have to give respect.

Another example of this problem is in the way the principal enters the teacher's room when he/she feels there is a problem, but never discusses the issue with

the teacher situation until it is time for a formal evaluation. I hope to have a good enough rapport with my teachers that I will be able to sit with them, tell them what I expect from them and offer them any suggestions on how to improve without the threat of a formal evaluation.

Author Bill Honig (1985) defended the fact that teachers are professionals:

Each day in the classroom, they make creative decisions about how to package the lesson, how to allocate time, how to structure activities, what facts to communicate, what skills to coach, and what discussions and trains of thought to set rolling. (p. 162)

In discussing the relationship between teachers and principals, Bloom (1992) asks some intriguing questions about such relationships:

Why do we demand so much of our teachers and administrators, yet refuse to honor their efforts with monetary and/or social rewards? Why are teachers feeling so put upon by society and parents so betrayed by teachers? Why are administrators perpetuating bureaucracy they know

is counter productive and resisting change at the expense of their staff and students? (p. 128)

These questions need to be kept in mind when struggling to gain perspective on my goals as a principal. It may be difficult to give a monetary reward to a staff member, but there are other ways to acknowledge them. One way is in a news bulletin. The principal could announce an accomplishment with a picture or a short interview from the staff member. This could also happen in the town's newspaper. It could also be broadcasted on the local cable access channel.

Educators have something special in them that makes them keep going. It's like that poor rubber balloon man that people try to knock down. He keeps standing upright, no matter how hard he's hit or how many times they hit him. That's the way principals need to be. For example, there will be times that principals will not agree with what the state says has to be done, and they will have to tell their staff about the situation or there may be a time that a teacher is not following an improvement plan and the principal knows the fatal outcome. There will also be times that the principal may have to lose a great

educator simply because of financial reasons. All of these things could make me want to quit, but deep in my heart, I will have to remember to do what I believe is right and good.

As a principal I hope to be thought of as a team player. Will I be?

### A Team Player

A team player listens to others, discusses various issues and tries to be helpful. A principal though, can easily get caught in the middle. A principal, along with other leaders, must make decisions that affect others. I will do what I believe will be the best for all involved. In doing this I will also have to be careful how my actions affect others. This will be done considering many factors: "But they do it within a framework of what is legal, authorized, politically and religiously neutral, socially acceptable, amiable and polite" (Yatvin, 1992, p. 50). Wow! What a chore! Is it possible to do all that and still be a team player? With all those ethics involved, won't somebody feel as though you are on your own team?

An atmosphere must exist so that there is open communication between the principal and the staff.

Business and other organizations are also becoming aware of this and the educational system should follow too.

In the business industry, when an item "warrants the president's attention, you can stroll over to his office and bring it up directly" (Shaffer, 1993, p.118). Here the organization actively seeks feedback and encourages questioning. Just think how productive the schools would be if teachers, staff and community members were actually encouraged to make suggestions and give feedback!

Another important patch in the administrative quilt is reflection. This could be considered one of the more personal and yet one of the more important patches to be sewn.

#### The Importance Of Reflection

As a principal, I will set aside a portion of my busy day to read professional articles and other types of literature. There is always so many wonderful things happening in the educational world, and I feel that too many times we simply state that it's never been done that way before, or complain that it's just a passing fad and forget about it. I want to be able to discuss new teaching trends informally

with my staff. I don't want them to feel insecure about wishing to improve or express themselves about items such as this.

An article that discussed the importance of shared reflection stated that, "Successful schools are distinguishable from unsuccessful ones by the frequency and extent to which teachers discuss practice, collaboratively design materials, inform and critique one another" (Raywid, 1993, p. 162). Incorporating a team approach through reflection or sharing, allows teachers to have a sense of belonging and ownership. A time set aside to write and discuss educational issues could also allow the principal to have input on the important issues in education. As a principal, I would enjoy taking part in reflection time. When teachers believe that the principal is sincere in wanting a collaborative effort, they will feel more at ease and will want to improve, grow and challenge themselves.

Many schools have a sustained silent reading time, why not have a sustained silent reflecting or writing time? As a principal, I will incorporate this into our school day. I believe students need time to reflect, along with adults. I want the students to

see their role models writing. This would include the custodians, cooks and secretaries, too. It is imperative that the entire school realize the importance in the need to reflect and demonstrate how to enjoy and grow from it.

Teaching is a very lonely job, in a sense. Most of the time the teacher doesn't speak to adults for more than a few minutes a day, and that's just not enough. "If schools are to remain 'unstuck,' then teachers must have time for sustained collaborative reflection on school practice, conditions and events" (Raywid, 1993, p. 32). They need time to reflect, share and relax. One way to do this is to have a specific day of the week that teachers can sit, drink coffee and write in their journals. Then if they so desire, they can talk to a colleague about what they have written, or just switch journals with someone. If they don't want to share, it's their decision. We encourage our students to do this; why not our staff? We could also have a meeting place, the local cafe, for example, where the staff could meet for breakfast. It is important that it be away from the school, to let the staff feel more at ease. This opens the line



for communication with the staff without the threat or pressure of being at school.

The administrative quilt is beginning to be complete as the patches of communicating with teachers and the patches of reflection are sewn along with the patches of communicating with community members.

### Communicating With The Community

Involving the community. One goal the principal must achieve is involving parents and other community members in education. This is important because the community has strong beliefs and feelings about education. At times, the community may feel they are not being asked to participate enough. As Graham (1992) points out, "Educators and business people have great difficulty genuinely communicating with each other. Their frames of reference and their modes of tackling problems are very different" (p. 138).

The school needs to be the center of the community. However, a principal should consider how to infiltrate the communities resources. For example, in an after school program, why not have the retired community members supervise the children? "Most American households don't have school age children. Aging, mobile, often childless people have

increasingly distant connections to local schools" (Carlson & Goldman, 1991, p. 182). The schools are becoming more and more isolated. Resources, such as the elderly are there; they just need to be motivated to become useful. For example, the school could furnish the building to hold square dancing or line dancing. Another idea would be to have a "gold card" for the seniors that wish to attend extracurricular events at a discount. The elderly could also be guest speakers or readers. Finally, the school could hold a computer class especially for the elderly. They could become spokespersons for the school within the community. They are a great opportunity waiting to happen and their presence and potential should be acknowledged.

When dollars are tight, difficult program decisions sometimes have to be made. The community should have an opportunity to examine and prioritize which ones.

Making program decisions. In dealing with the cutting of programs, what ones are first to usually be cut? Most of the time it's the activities that could involve the community such as music and art programs. The less popular sports programs are also quick to be

reduced or cut. Such actions continue to cut the ties with the community (Carlson & Goldman, 1991).

When a principal is at a school where those programs are discontinued, he/she needs to be creative in involving the community. The principal needs to start with the staff. It is of utmost importance that the principal sets the tone for the building. The staff needs to be cohesive. There should be a sense of community in the building. A feeling of "We're all in this together, so let's support one another" (Shaffer, 1993, p. 113).

Recently, our school district sent out an assessment questionnaire to the parents in the community. Next, we asked the community to view a video tape that discussed the future of our schools. Various teachers volunteered to hold discussions of where our district was headed and what we, together, could do about it. There may not have been a concrete answer to this, but great dialogues occurred. Teachers don't always feel comfortable talking "shop" with parents and community members. This arrangement allowed the conversations to flow without too much difficulty. Parents genuinely want to understand the many issues in dealing with change and education. The

principal needs to create a path so that such opportunities may occur. The principal should also create a sense of mutual ownership in the education system (Schurr, 1993).

Schurr (1993) also suggests other ideas in order for the community to feel more welcome at the school. First, the school district could open a lounge for the school community to use. For instance, the lounge could serve as a place to display brochures and pamphlets of social services and agencies. There could also be a lending library of materials on educational issues and parenting aids. The key is to have the room accessible for the community. It shouldn't be a place to gossip and criticize others. Finally, if possible, the center could have used clothing and toys that could be given away or traded.

In order to be able to communicate effectively with the community, I will need to be aware of the economical conditions that exists. It is imperative that I understand where my students and their families are coming from. If I don't know this, I may not utilize the most effective programs and eliminate the unnecessary ones. The community members may be uneducated in many instances, and therefore the school

could be seen as an unfriendly reminder of their failures. Also, the "children often come to school ill-prepared for learning" (Maehr & Parker, 1993, p. 234). This may also cause some parents to see the school as a reminder to their failure and thus their children may feel the same.

School is a place that reminds these children of their inferior status, not a place that gives them opportunities to feel increasingly efficacious and eager to work hard, to learn, and to persist in developing the higher order skills that serve to break the cycle of poverty. (Maehr & Parker, 1993, p. 234)

The principal will need to face this challenge head on. First, the principal needs to have activities that show these particular community members they are valued. Such activities would depend on the situation. However, one could be something as simple as provide a movie they could watch, an activity they could succeed at or a special cook-off in which the entire school could participate. If the community represents people of various ethnic backgrounds, such activities could promote and enrich this diversity.

After identifying with the various ethnic backgrounds of the members of the community, the quilt still needs to have one of the most important patches. This important patch is remembering to put students first.

### Putting Students First

As a principal I will constantly face issues that may not have a straight forward, clear cut answer. It will be my goal to always remember to put the students first. This can become a difficult task when the teacher is ineffective. One example of this involved a teacher who believed she deserved permanent disability leave and was denied it:

There was an enormous amount of disapproval from parents who would have children in her classroom. The principal knew the students in her classroom would have to be independent learners. But those were the children of the parents who kept calling demanding their children not be in her classroom. What should a principal do? With the teachers' union pressuring you and the superintendent pressuring you, something must be done, but done carefully. (Yatvin, 1992, p. 51)

In such situations, I firmly believe that the principal needs to go to the source, discuss the situation and set up an improvement plan. Each situation must be dealt with individually; no two situations are the same. As a principal I must be ready to stand up for what I believe is right.

"School leadership is a complex process that involves developing strategies to facilitate learning, creating an environment that fosters motivation to learn, and shaping the way students come to view learning" (Parker, 1993, p. 230).

In this particular instance, the teacher left her position after the first semester and received compensation. At times, a principal's hands are tied just when they are asked to write. However, the students must be put first, even if it means not being considered a team player. In this example, the principal was a team player, however. She was looking out for her students and staff and doing what she believed in. "Sometimes hard decisions have to be made which people do not like, but what should be considered is that they have to be made for the good of the education of youth" (Wendel, Hoke, & Joekel, 1993, pp. 52-53).

All of this has to become part of stitching the patches together on the quilt I call the principalship. Along with dealing with the community, the principal has many other responsibilities to fulfill.

### Responsibilities Of A Principal

One of my responsibilities is to manage my time effectively. How will I do that with all the stress that ties into this job?

#### Manage Time Effectively

Managing time effectively will be a challenge for me. I am afraid I will devote too much of my time to one thing and not enough to another. But, I obviously can't be everywhere and do everything at one time. Will I be a principal that devotes her whole life to her job, sacrificing everything else? Dr. Decker talks about having a significant other to help you through the tough times. I have no significant other at the moment. Will I stress my family out along with myself? Right now I go to my roommate, who is a teacher. Will she be such a good listener when I am on the other side of the fence? How will she think of me?



Robert Fulghum (1988) described the need to be found. At times, principals may feel the need to hide. Life as an administrator may get too overwhelming, causing the person to want to hide from others much like the hide and seek game of children. In his book, Fulghum described children who were playing hide and seek and one child was not being found. The child waited and waited and the other children were about to give up. Fulghum went over to the window and shouted to the boy to get found. I believe principals need to get found at times. It might be tempting to bury oneself in an office and not get found.

Such a feeling could come out when goals are not being met and agendas are not being accomplished.

### Goal Setting

As a principal, Beckley (1993) stated that, principals need to put first things first:

Putting first things first is not a management technique, it's a philosophy--a philosophy for those who are not afraid of change and who believe they have responsibility to support ideas that will make a difference in education, as in

any other endeavor. Because school administrators face tremendous workloads and great time constraints, they must make sure not to waste their time: The tasks they choose should benefit the most people--especially students. (p. 26)

As a principal I will attempt the following goals as stated by Lewis (1986):

I will hold quarterly meetings with my staff to discuss reports on achievement progress and any awards received, the attendance rates, and any other information that is pertinent at the time. I will also hold two different types of meetings. One to bring all the staff together before school starts to discuss the first day of school. The other meeting would be at the end of the year. This meeting would not just be about check-out time. This meeting would be a time to congratulate the staff on the results of working as a team and accomplishing the goals that were accomplished. This meeting would be uplifting, to show the enthusiasm for the upcoming year. (pp. 58-59)

After the stitches of goal setting are sewn, the needle will be threaded once again to stitch through the scheduling patch on my quilt.

### Scheduling

Another role of the principal, is scheduling. As an elementary principal, my task may not be as difficult as a high school principal. I believe that a team of teachers should be formed to gain their input on when to schedule special classes. If we work together, the teachers will have a sense of ownership and may feel more equipped to accomplish their own goals. "Planning as a team will enhance the education and foster growth in the student" (Lewis, 1986, p.175).

I recently designed a schedule for the upper elementary grades. In doing so, I made sure to remember that my goal was to enhance education and make the most out of each and every minute of the school day. This involves more than just the core subjects that are taught. It also involves the scheduling of special classes and recess duties.

I also had to consider who would teach what. In the department I had to think about who did an excellent job teaching what and who probably shouldn't

teach another subject. Because I had taught with them for a few years, I had developed my own opinion. However, if I was a new principal, I would ask them what subjects they felt most comfortable teaching and then explain that we as a team, would try to accommodate them as best we could.

After the patch of scheduling is securely sewn, I would next set goals in regards to maintaining discipline in school.

#### Maintaining Discipline

An important aspect of discipline is establishing and maintaining a respect of students.

Establishing students' respect. When a person thinks of a disciplinarian in a school, he probably thinks of the principal. The principal is perceived as the big bad wolf and the students are the three little pigs. I am tired of teachers not teaching students responsibility and respect. They also need to try to solve some of their discipline problems on their own. In my opinion, it's too easy to simply send a child to the office and have the principal solve the problem. Of course there are extremes to the situation, but many times the problem could be solved by the teacher. One reason this happens is

because the principal is considered a higher authority and the children fear being sent to the office. There is also that old threat of having your parents get a call from the principal. It appears to be a fear factor. As a teacher, I feel that if I have to send a child to the office, then it is a personal reflection on my classroom management. It shows that I let myself get into a power struggle with the student. Sending the child to the principal's office also puts the principal in an awkward situation, because he/she is forced to discipline a child for an unknown reason.

As a principal I would encourage teachers to focus on our school discipline plan. I would attend the training and refresher courses and encourage them to attend it also. I believe the entire staff needs to be educated in the same discipline program in order for it to be consistent and therefore effective. If there was a certain teacher that had a problem, I would visit with that teacher one on one and work on a plan to improve the discipline problem. If that made the teacher feel uncomfortable then I would ask assistance from another staff member.

The principal also needs to build rapport with students.

Develop rapport with students. Glasser (1969) suggested that, "A school cannot function without an effective administration that develops reasonable rules and enforces them" ( p. 193). This reflects the importance of having fair, consistent discipline. Glasser went on to state that, "giving students freedom without structure can be disastrous" (p. 132).

"Effective leadership--more precisely, effective support of teaching and communication of a coherent mission for the school--leads to improved student achievement" (Parker, 1993, p.232). There are several ways a principal can be respected by students.

According to Sandri (1992):

A principal should learn the names of every student. This makes them feel like they belong. Second, the principal needs to visit the classrooms frequently. This is not to evaluate the teacher, but to see the children, to get to know them. Third, make birthdays special. Students enjoy being recognized. Fourth, be visible everywhere. Don't stay in the office all day. Fifth, greet them in the morning and afternoon. The principal could even board the buses and talk to the students and the drivers.

Next, have lunch with the children. This allows informal conversation to take place. The principal could also send congratulatory notes to the students. Children enjoy receiving personal notes as a reward. Finally and most importantly, smile! Being a principal is a serious job, but smiling at people, especially children, pays off with many smiles in return.

When a schools gives structure and sets expectations, goals can be met, and learning can take place. Only then can the rapport between principal and student be established. (pp. 44-45)

These are excellent ideas that all principals should take into consideration. It is imperative that the staff, students and community respect me, it's one of the final patches to be sewn on my quilt.

#### Conclusions

A principal gets advice from friends, relatives, teachers and other principals. Some advice is beneficial and some advice should probably fall on deaf ears. Robert Fulghum (1988) wrote about the Storyteller's Creed and I believe it is the best advice for me as a teacher and as a future principal.

I read this every morning before I teach and will continue to read it when I become a principal:

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge.

That myth is more potent than history.

That dreams are more powerful than fact.

That hope always triumphs over experience.

That laughter is the only cure for grief.

And I believe that love is stronger than death. (p. 8)

There are so many facets to this role, so much soul searching that needs to be done. As a teacher, I make critical decisions that will effect all my kids. To think of all the decisions I will make as a principal and who it will effect is profound. This paper has forced me to examine more than I thought I would.

"The American school is a troubled institution, with both more difficult challenges and more constraints on the horizon" (Carlson & Goldman, 1991, p. 182). My role as a principal is going to be different than the principals in the past. There are more problems, such as poverty, abuse, neglect, among others that will challenge me in my administrative role. One of these challenges that will effect me and



the educational system is the need for "parenting" students. Because there are single parent families and families that have latch key children, there is going to continue to be the need to have additional before and after school programs.

In the future I will remember the following: "the most important thing to success at a job or career is liking what you do" (Wendel, et al., 1993, p. 53). I hope to be an effective principal. I hope to be the type of principal that is "all over the building, finding the good things that are happening for kids" (Sagor, 1992, p. 15).

A principalship is a complex, changing role that effects many people in many ways. Hopefully these effects will provide a time for growth, reflection and collaboration. In time I hope to have a complete quilt to open many new doors in my educational career. I hope to encourage others to grow like I have and continue to do.

What a wonderful job to have: children around you all day with positive outlooks, adults around you that are concerned for others, and a supportive staff and community that want to foster growth in everyone. I hope to never lose my perspective on this wonderful job called education.

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