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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

Throughout my graduate studies my mind has continually been stretched. If I finished my Master's degree and never became an elementary principal, I would not regret the time and money spent on my education. The opportunity to reflect upon who I am as a person and as a professional educator has been invaluable. Through my studies I have identified several different roles I believe to be essential to effective leadership. In this essay I will discuss the elementary principal as communicator and leader.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Master of Arts in Education

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by  
Cynthia F. Rabbitt  
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"The mind stretched by a new idea never goes back to its original state." - Oliver Wendell Holmes

Throughout my graduate studies my mind has continually been stretched. If I finished my Master's degree and never became an elementary principal, I would not regret the time and money spent on my education. The opportunity to reflect upon who I am as a person and as a professional educator has been invaluable. Through my studies I have identified several different roles I believe to be essential to effective leadership. In this essay I will discuss the elementary principal as communicator and leader.

#### Role of Communicator

I believe effective communication is critical to the success of a principal. This statement in and of itself holds little value unless expounded upon. What is effective communication? Why is it important? How is it accomplished?

Communication involves both sending and receiving messages. Messages that are written, spoken, and non-verbal. It is my opinion effective communication entails more than that. For example, written messages must be clear, concise, and appropriate for the intended audience(s). Effective communication also

involves sending verbal and non-verbal messages by listening and speaking with empathy, sensitivity, and thoughtfulness.

As an elementary principal, I believe it is my responsibility to be aware of the ever-changing perceptions and beliefs within the internal and external publics. "Effective communication requires feedback. It is the sender's responsibility to see that the receiver has gotten the message" (Lundy, 1990, p. 49). When messages are sent to different publics we need to build-in a form of measurement to determine whether the message has indeed been received as well as the perceptions surrounding that message. When we receive feedback regardless of the form, we need to occasionally "read between the lines" in order to see things the way they really are. We must also take into consideration from whom or where is the message being sent? What are the circumstances? Do I have all the information I need? If not, we ask questions and gather more data. Then we can proceed to make the best decision for various situations, or we simply file the information for future reference. There may also be cases where we aren't receiving any feedback.

We need to examine the reasons for such instances. Am I providing the necessary avenues for others to communicate with me? Am I approachable? Do others have the tools or experiences for such communication or are they used to "one-way" communication? Lundy stated, "Everything a manager does is based on communication" (p. 49). I fail to find a single instance during my day as an educator where this statement is not true. We are constantly making decisions based on a variety of communications. Hughes and Ubben (1989) provided a quick checklist to be considered by administrators regarding messages being sent:

1. If the message was received, was it read?
2. If it was read, was it understood?
3. If it was understood, was it understood in the right spirit?
4. If it was understood in the right spirit, will it be acted upon in a positive way?
5. How do you know? The effort must be regularly evaluated. (p. 356)

Why is communication important? I believe communication is important for three reasons: to inform, to gather information, and to make decisions. "By failing to interact with the school system the individual school will stabilize and become static and unresponsive to the changing needs of the

community" (Hughes & Ubben, 1989, p. 364). As a principal, I will be working with individuals from within a school (internal public) and outside the school (external public).

### Communicating With Teachers

Communicating with teachers and support staff on a regular basis is essential to a school running efficiently and effectively. When considering communications with teachers, students, or community it is important to keep in mind the following quote:

Of the various proficiencies that distinguish outstanding elementary principals, one of the most important is the ability to communicate effectively. "The image such principals project-verbally, nonverbally and in written communication-forms the dominant perception of the school on the part of students, staff, parents, and the community (NAESP, 1991, p. 7).

Communication with staff includes a lot of sincere praise. Principals need to praise teachers often. Blase and Kirby (1992) found that teachers, whose principals praised them often, found themselves praising students and each other more often. By using praise as one of the forms of communication, school

climate is affected positively. It has been my experience after eleven years in education, praise directly increases teachers' and students' self-esteem which seems to enhance loyalty, pride, and the general climate of a school environment.

Principals also need to communicate organizational information to teachers and support staff. Organizational information is the "nuts and bolts" that keep a school running smoothly. For example, class schedules, bus and lunch schedules, policies, procedures, recess information, duty schedules, etc. There are many ways to achieve this: informal communication, handbooks, E-mail, phone trees, weekly bulletins, message board, and staff meetings to name a few. I will keep in mind, there will be times when it is appropriate to solicit input regarding organizational information. I would choose these times carefully and solicit input through a variety of avenues. For instance, whole staff meetings, committee meetings, advisory council meetings, and meetings with a few selected participants (depending on the issue).

When organizational information is not provided, the perceptions of staff members can range anywhere

from very negative, "The principal appears to be neglecting his/her duties," to very positive "Isn't it nice I am trusted to take care of these details." I would prefer to error on the end of providing too much information in order to keep programs running smoothly as well as covering any legal issues that could arise from neglecting to communicate organizational information. In order to avoid insulting the intelligence of employees, I would choose the information carefully and share it in such a way that would reflect my respect for them as professionals.

#### Communicating With Parents

I believe communication with parents is an area an elementary principal must have as a priority. Effective communication can occur in many different forms. Some communication overlaps with public relations. This is important to keep in mind as we see more students participating in open enrollment.

Target areas for communication should include school events, pupil progress and/or concerns, and curriculum information. A school newsletter seems to be one very successful tool for reporting school events, curriculum information, and general pupil

progress. The purpose for informing parents about school events will maintain or increase attendance. When parents and other family members attend school events a positive message about the value of education is being sent to the students.

I believe reporting pupil progress for the school as a whole should be done with great care. School personnel must take into consideration what type of information will be communicated, the purpose for such communication, and use careful judgement regarding this area. When reporting general pupil progress for the school as a whole, it is important to provide information necessary for simple interpretation or simply provide the interpretation without a lot of information that may contain educational jargon. The newsletter could also include a column from the principal, guidance counselor, school nurse, teachers, and students. In developing the newsletter, I would attempt to provide a balance of information provided to the external public. Information about students, school events, parenting, and community information. Periodically, I would ask for feedback as to what parents felt was most useful as well as what they might like to know more about. I would also ask

teachers to submit articles and/or student work so all grade levels are represented.

Most communities also have a newspaper for other kinds of communications such as meetings, events, and sharing good news. In addition to written communications, personal contacts such as phone calls, letters, and personal conversation at school or community events can also be useful tools in communicating with parents. Many communities also have access to an educational cable channel that could be used in many creative ways to enhance communication with the public. Another area of great importance, is communicating individual pupil progress with parents. This is an area I will oversee for the school and the classroom teachers. I firmly believe the more information parents have regarding the education and progress of their children, the better the educational experience will be for that child. Powerful messages are sent to children when parents are involved in their education. Reporting progress means reporting current level of performance, goal setting, and steps we (school and family) will take to reach that/those goals. So often pupil progress

is mistaken for reporting negative information. We must also report the good stuff!

### Communicating With the Community

In addition to communications with staff and parents, elementary principals need to communicate with the external public. With the majority of taxpayers having no children in school, this is becoming more and more important. Principals must be visible at community functions, other school activities, and make him/herself available to community groups to promote education in the community. As the commonly referred to African tale states, "It takes a whole village to educate a child". Community members have important things to say about education. I believe one of the ultimate signs of respect is listening to what someone else has to say. DePree (1989) stated, "Good communication means respect for individuals" (p.89). However, listening alone is not enough. Listening to others must be a sincere act. If not, others will catch on after a very short while and the credibility of an individual is seriously threatened. Covey (1989) supported this statement "Knowing I need to listen and knowing how to listen is not enough. Unless I want to listen, unless I

have the desire, it won't be a habit in my life" (p. 49). For many citizens, informal communication at community events is the only avenue with which they feel comfortable. All of these communication opportunities will help to strengthen the commitment, loyalty, and general support of the schools in any given community.

Regarding the quality of communication, I believe that all written forms of communication should adhere to the highest standards for the English language. I believe principals ought to conduct themselves as professionals with high standards at all times when communicating with the various publics. In addition, a principal must use care to choose words carefully. Precise, concise, and to the point are three rules of thumb I follow when communicating with the external public. By doing so, the standards and expectations are either maintained or in the process of being raised. I believe this is of utmost importance if we are to maintain a competitive edge, nationally and internationally.

#### Communicating with Students

As students' needs continue to change and cultural diversity becomes more prevalent in our

schools, students need to be informed about school expectations as well as specific feedback regarding their progress. Expectations must be clear and appropriate. High expectations for both appropriate behavior and achievement must be clearly communicated and consistently reinforced. I believe in you! I believe you can learn! You have skills and talents that are worthwhile! You will treat each other with respect and dignity! You may not bring firearms to school! It is my opinion, all of these are important pieces of information for children to have in order to insure success within the school. After all, the purpose for schools is to provide a setting where students can achieve in all areas: physical, cognitive, affective, and social. It is our job as educators to set the stage. It is my job as elementary principal to see that the stage is set and that it is consistent with what is best for children and lived out by those involved in the school setting.

As I communicate with all of the key players I will need to involve various groups and individuals at different times. As Covey (1989) stated "Individuals affected by decisions need to be involved in making those decisions to insure a commitment.

Without involvement, there is no commitment" (p.143). Therefore, in order for a school community to be successful, those responsible for the education of children must function as a team. In order to function as a team, there must be a common mission, beliefs, goals, and objectives. It would be wrong to charge one person with determining what is best for all. This type of communication will take time and may involve some conflict. Conflict is healthy when determining priorities. If our schools are to continue moving forward and respond to societal changes appropriately, then those involved must have a shared vision. This will provide a challenge for any building administrator. However, with patience, persistence, and a plan this can be achieved.

#### Role of Leader

To be a leader implies "to be at the helm of a ship" in a lonely sort of way. Being a leader also means appointing and allowing others to "steer the ship" at times. However, the ship must be sailing toward a chosen destination in order for the journey to be worthwhile. For without a plan and destination the captain simply allows "the ship to be tossed about by the waves". The ship might reach a destination

eventually. It might capsize. The captain must then ask, "At what cost have I allowed this to occur?" Should the captain go down with the ship? Should the captain reassess the situation and ask for input from the sailors? I believe, just as a captain must have a plan and a destination, a leader must be principle-centered. Without principles, the leader of a school sends conflicting messages about what is important and, at best, might perform at a mediocre level. The position of principal is of more importance to the future of our society and youth than to allow a mediocre level of performance.

Principle-centered leadership, includes both management and leadership as Covey (1989) quoted Drucker and Bennis, "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things. Management is efficiency climbing the ladder of success; leadership determines whether the ladder is leaning against the right wall" (p. 101). Also, in Covey, "Efficient management without effective leadership is, as one individual has phrased it, "like straightening deck chairs on the Titanic" (p. 102). So what are my principles? What do I value? What makes up my inner compass? I believe in leading a

balanced life. This includes a variety of values. I value family and friends, education and continued growth, taking time for reflection, a sense of humor, teamwork, respect, diversity, honesty, sincerity, perserverance, and recreation. I find I have very high standards in all of the above areas. I also believe actions speak louder than words. Given these elements I have chosen for my life to be a fulfilling, I will work to lead by example. For instance, managing my time in order to spend time with family and friends, recreation, and spiritual growth. I will continue to attend meetings and read professional materials for continued professional growth. I also believe in the "golden rule" learned in elementary school: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. To me, this means treating others with respect and dignity as well as being an active listener at all times. With these principles in place I make my personal and professional decisions.

As a leader facilitating shared decision making, I realize that not all people will share my values. Therein lies a opportunity to celebrate diversity, learn from others, as we work to obtain a common vision. I can provide a model by agreeing to disagree,

listening, and concensus building. This can be done through the sharing of beliefs, goals, and objectives. After a group has shared these, we can look for common threads and further develop our beliefs as well as our mission and use these to make decisions and build programs. Also, as communication begins taking place among a diverse group of people, there will be a common thread guiding our decisions: the children.

An elementary principal must be a leader in many different areas: curriculum and instruction, change, and a leader of leaders.

#### Leader of Curriculum and Instruction

Prior to curriculum and staff development, a principal must insure that the school has a clear mission, goals, and belief statements upon which to make decisions and build programs. Following the development of these three items, a proficient principal will work toward creating a productive caring atmosphere suggested in the NAESP (1991) Elementary and Middle Schools Proficiencies for Principals book written for principals. Without a positive climate where staff members feel safe to share existing programs, suggestions for change, concerns, and questions, effective leadership in curriculum and

instruction will be challenging. In order to lead staff toward current trends and issues in these areas, administrators need to keep abreast of the current research, programs, and movements in education through professional development opportunities such as conferences, meetings, reading, and seeking out experts in various fields. Some of these experts will, most likely, be on staff. In addition, I believe a principal must realize he/she cannot provide all the answers and information needed in curriculum development. These are wonderful opportunities to provide leadership opportunities for staff members in my opinion. As mentioned in the NAESP Elementary and Middle Schools Proficiencies for Principals (1991), "...proficient principals encourage faculty input and involvement in curriculum development" (p. 10).

In addition to providing the leadership in curriculum, instructional practices, group process, and shared decision making, an elementary must seek appropriate resources of time, money, personnel, and materials to support identified curriculum and effective instructional practices. It is important, also, to provide the emotional support system needed to successfully implement programs. During the

implementation stage, it is the principal's responsibility to set the stage for teachers to hold high expectations for all students, with the emphasis on student achievement. This will require frequent monitoring of student progress.

### Leader of Change

Throughout history, schools have remained open systems responding to the changing needs of society. As mentioned by Dr. Doud (personal communication, January 18, 1993), change is possibly the only constant in education. This clearly states the need for the principal to be leader of change.

There are several factors that contribute to effective leadership in this area. One such factor is the principal must be open to innovations and modifications (NAESP, 1991). Without this openness change would be slow to occur or nonexistent. I am not suggesting, however, that schools change simply for the purpose of change. Any changes must relate directly to a clearly articulated mission to which there is a high commitment throughout the school and community.

Another factor that must be considered is that of climate within a school and within a community.

As Schatz (1986) stated, "There is always a climate, the climate affects everybody and everything, and the leader always affects the climate" (p. 112).

A major part of climate is trust. NAESP (1991) suggested "...a proficient principal must inspire trust-to instill a willingness by all concerned to risk the investment of commitment and hard work" (p. 12). In my opinion, establishing trust does not occur quickly. Principals must start small and go slow being careful at all times to honor confidential conversations, treat others with dignity and respect, be sincere, sensitive, and thoughtful. Principals must also serve as cheerleaders at times. I believe, providing positive reinforcement goes a long way with staff and students. Along with positive reinforcement a little enthusiasm and excitement can be highly motivational for the teachers blazing the trails as well as the teachers who are the followers.

When working toward any changes, the elementary principal must work with the community to insure support and success. Working with community members, the principal helps to bond the community with the school through shared values and beliefs.

### Leader of Leaders

"Proficient principals encourage and develop the leadership of others" (NAESP, 1991, p. 6). As schools for the future move toward change, meet new challenges, are faced with more legal issues, and provide more services for students and community, I believe teachers must be directly involved in the leadership process to insure success. A principal's role is not to be everything to everybody or be the "answer-man". As Drucker (1966) implies throughout his book leaders ought to know thy time. There simply isn't enough time, not to mention trying to be the "answer-man" ignores the importance of modeling collegiality in decision-making. Fostering leadership in others is part of the principal's role, in my opinion. I believe any time ownership is felt by those most directly affected by decisions, success is much more likely to occur. This applies to curriculum development, learning new instructional strategies, as well as programs within a school. We must remember "Individuals, not organizations create excellence" (Hickman & Silva, 1984, p. 25).

Involving others in the leadership process carries with it some risk for the elementary principal. This

would point to the importance of being involved in shared decision-making. I don't believe in simply turning over the making of decisions to a variety of groups or individuals. The principal must use judgment and care when determining which tasks and decisions staff ought to be involved in. The principal must also be aware of the need to keep the process fair. Too many times, the same staff members are involved in the leadership roles. While each staff has its own set of dynamics, I believe all staff members should have an equal chance to grow in the leadership area. While some individuals may not appear to have the qualities that accompany strong leadership, they still deserve the chance to develop some of those qualities. "The only way to develop responsibility in people is to give them responsibility" (Blanchard et al., 1989, p. 73).

Another reason the principal needs to be fair when providing leadership opportunities for staff members deals with modeling high expectations. Just as teachers within a classroom will experience more success when high expectations are evident, the elementary principal will enjoy much of that same success when high expectations for all staff members

are evident. Blanchard and Johnson (1982) also stated, "Everyone is a potential winner...some people are disguised as losers, don't let their appearances fool you" (p. 71).

I will state here that I believe teachers already have an enormous workload which is why support must be provided when involving staff in shared decision-making and leadership opportunities. We cannot simply ask teachers to do more without providing support in the form of time, money, and materials.

As the elementary principal provides opportunities for leadership he/she must take time to reward and celebrate achievements related to this leadership. DePree (1992) said "Change and renewal and hope and confidence will result" (p. 107) as we involve others in the leadership process. I believe it is essential to give credit where credit is due. "The excellent companies have a deeply ingrained philosophy that says, in effect, respect the individual, make people winners, let them stand out, treat them like adults" (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p. 118).

The role of the elementary principal as an instructional leader as well as a manager is a frequently discussed issue. Dr. Doud has said many

times throughout my coursework that failure in the management role is much more likely to get a principal fired, than poor instructional leadership. While this seems terribly wrong, it is a fact. I believe the roles of manager and leader overlap in many different ways that would be too great to discuss in depth in this paper. I don't mean to suggest that one role is more important than the other. I do mean to suggest if the principal remembers his/her role is to serve the community and school in which he/she is employed, and do what is best for children many of the managerial issues will be addressed.

In conclusion, I believe the role of the elementary principal has many facets. Several have been mentioned throughout this paper, many have not. In order to successfully fulfill this role and the varied aspects of it, reflection will be of utmost importance. I feel this is one of my strengths. I take the role very seriously and realize it will be full of challenges and changes. It will be time consuming and demanding. It will be frustrating and difficult. But more than any of this, it will be rewarding. It will provide me the chance to impact the lives of many and to make a difference.

Harvey Mackay (1990) advised "Deliver more than you promise" (p.35). I'm ready to go the extra mile to become an effective and successful elementary principal.

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