

1994

A reflection on the roles of the secondary school principal: A reflective essay

Steven J. Shanks
University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©1994 Steven J. Shanks

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shanks, Steven J., "A reflection on the roles of the secondary school principal: A reflective essay" (1994). *Graduate Research Papers*. 3298.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/3298>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

A reflection on the roles of the secondary school principal: A reflective essay

Abstract

I believe that educating children is the most important task that a nation undertakes. This puts the leader of individual school buildings, the principal, at the heart of not only the educational system, but of the nation itself. In no other position of employment can one person do more to help or hurt the mental and emotional growth of young people. The attitudes and successes of our youth, who will determine the attitudes and successes of our nation, are held in the hands of our educational system. The success of the system inevitably lies in the grip of its leaders; making the frontline principal a catalyst for achievement or an agent towards failure. That is why, as future principals, we must reflect on the role and characteristics of an effective principal.

A REFLECTION ON THE ROLES OF THE
SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Steven J. Shanks

April 1994

This Research Paper by: Steven J. Shanks

Entitled: A REFLECTION ON THE ROLES OF THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

PRINCIPAL: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Education.

Dale R. Jackson

4/22/94
Date Approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Patricia R. Krynski

4/25/94
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Robert H. Decker

4-25-94
Date Approved

Head, Department of Educational
Administration and Counseling

I believe that educating children is the most important task that a nation undertakes. This puts the leader of individual school buildings, the principal, at the heart of not only the educational system, but of the nation itself. In no other position of employment can one person do more to help or hurt the mental and emotional growth of young people. The attitudes and successes of our youth, who will determine the attitudes and successes of our nation, are held in the hands of our educational system. The success of the system inevitably lies in the grip of its leaders; making the frontline principal a catalyst for achievement or an agent towards failure. That is why, as future principals, we must reflect on the role and characteristics of an effective principal.

All leaders need a foundational philosophy that guides them through their professional lives. The foundation of my educational philosophy begins with the question "Why are we here?" (here being in education). Nine years ago, John Goodlad concluded that the purpose of our educational system is to develop students in four broad areas: academic skills, vocational skills, social and civic preparedness, and personal responsibility and expression (Goodlad, 1984).

According to the public, the answer to the question "Why are we here?" is more straightforward. Improving job opportunities, having a better life and obtaining financial security were the first three priorities of adults who had children in school in 1989 (Gorton and Schneider, 1991). Regardless of the angle that we take, the mutual theme is the student. We are here simply for the welfare of the students. Once that philosophical foundation is constructed, we can take the

appropriate direction in forming strategies that will make our schools successful.

Since our vision is focused on the student, we need to make sure that we understand who the students are, where they come from and what obstacles they must overcome before they can be successful. This task is much easier said than done considering today's daunting demographics concerning school-age children. For instance, crime arrests for juveniles have quadrupled since 1965, teen suicide has more than tripled since 1960, divorce rates have quadrupled, average SAT scores have dropped almost 80 points (Bennett, 1993), and the number of students identified as at-risk is increasing annually (Hodgkinson, 1991).

Some, like former secretary of education William Bennett, suggest that a general moral decline over the past 30 years is the cause for this sample of frightening statistics (Bennett, 1993). Others, like the National Commission on Excellence in Education, put much of the blame on the educational system, going as far as to say that our mediocre educational performance "threatens our very future as a nation and a people" (cited in DuFour and Eaker, 1992, p. 1).

While it is important that we understand the factors that have brought us the incredible challenges of the 1990's, it is more important for us as future administrators to know how to make our schools healthy, vibrant places where students can learn. After two years of learning about the principalship and reflecting on how I fit into the educational picture, I have identified five leadership characteristics that are essential to effective school management in the 1990's and

beyond. In this paper, I will discuss the principal as visionary, instructional leader, manager, communicator, and committed professional. I will reflect on each of these important characteristics, combining my personal values and educational knowledge with the professional instruction that our class has participated in over the past three years. This work will become my personal coat-of-arms that will serve as the foundation for successful leadership as I take this first step toward the frontline of our future.

Vision

George Bush is not the only executive who has been removed from leadership because of a lack of vision. Many principals are ineffective or have lost their jobs because they didn't project vision for the future of their schools. A principal is the chief executive of an organization that serves the public. Effective organizations, research has shown, have a shared sense of purpose or vision. Naisbitt and Aburdene (1985) found that the first ingredient of successful companies is a "powerful vision, a whole sense of where a company is going and how to get there."

As school administrators, developing a sense of vision is where we must begin the education of our students. An effective principal must have a personal vision that guides his or her professional life. We will take our personal vision into our first administrative position and then guide our assigned building or school district in developing a shared vision of an excellent school. In creating that shared vision, we, as professionals, must rely on our knowledge of educational

research and success patterns in order to provide leadership in this process. Once our personal and school visions are created, then it is important to be receptive to change. Peter Senge (1990) believes that building a shared vision is something continuous, not a thing that you build once and never refine.

According to visionary Joel Barker (1990), vision in organizations must be developed by leaders. "Good leaders listen to others and bring ideas into a coherent vision," Barker states in his video "Discovering the Future". He also believes that vision must be shared and supported by a "vision community", as well as detailed, comprehensive, positive and inspiring. Everyone wants schools to be successful and has their own ideas on how to make it happen. Knowing that, we must work to bring people together to create Barker's "vision community". It will be our job as principals to bring cohesion to the values and beliefs of the school community so that a focused vision will guide everything that we do.

Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1992) see several benefits for the schools that build and implement a shared vision for their district. The first benefit is that this process of building a shared vision creates a rallying cry in the community. "There is a heightened awareness of that goal on the part of the various publics that constitute a district. When people have a vision, they are motivated to make it a reality" (p. 23).

Secondly, a shared vision gives individuals a clear sense of purpose and direction. People will better understand their roles and diverse activities will be focused toward the same goals. Consequently, according to DuFour and Eaker, clear

guidelines for individual conduct and decisions will begin to emerge.

Finally, developing a shared vision will help a school district set an agenda for action. Once the vision is created, the stakeholders can throw out any guidelines or instructional practices that don't fit the new description of their ideal school.

DuFour and Eaker write that "If a school has no idea where it is going, the clarity and focus on what needs to be done is impossible to obtain" (p. 24).

Developing a sense of vision, for individuals and groups, needs to be the foundation for excellence. That makes the process of developing personal and professional vision essential for the effective leader. Barker (1990), in his video "The Power of Vision", states that "Vision without action is a dream, action without vision is just passing the time. Vision combined with action can change the world". Vision is our starting point as well as our measuring tool. We need to live our vision every hour of every day if we are to be true educational leaders.

My personal vision for the ideal school is this: The school will have a focused school mission, a safe and healthy environment, high and clear expectations for all students and all staff, a principal who takes seriously the role of instructional leader, parents who are positively involved in the education of their children, and an atmosphere where students and staff have the opportunity and confidence to take positive risks that will take everyone to a higher level of achievement.

While creating a focused vision is a foundational element of leadership, there are other factors critical to the success of a school. At the top of the list is a leader's

proficiency at fulfilling the role of instructional leader.

The Principal as Instructional Leader

I think that it is appropriate, given this topic, to again ask the question "Why are we here?" A principal's level of commitment to being an instructional leader is the factor that separates a management oriented principal who can keep the school environment orderly and the effective principal who can take the next step and be the "principal teacher" of the building. If we are here to educate students, should not the chief school executive be the leader of student instruction?

Teacher behavior and parental support are major factors effecting school achievement. What a principal does each day greatly influences teacher behavior and the degree of parental support. According to a recent study, a principal's leadership does impact academic achievement in elementary and secondary schools, either negatively or positively. Principals in high achieving schools involved the staff in decision making and protected them from internal and external distractions (Heck and Marcoulides, 1993). Leading is not about power, it is about creating an environment where people can reach their potential. By creating that kind of environment for teachers, we go far in creating the same for the students.

An effective principal must be committed to being the instructional leader of the building. Without a serious commitment, managerial tasks will swallow up a principal's time and leave the school without its head educator. Instructional leadership includes numerous aspects, including curriculum and staff development, shared decision making, staff evaluation and supervision, and

creating an atmosphere of high expectations.

Curriculum and Staff Development

After a shared vision of what the community sees as the ideal school is developed, focused curriculum and staff development that is in line with the vision can take place. The principal needs to be very knowledgeable of the current curriculum and have an understanding of items that are not in alignment with the goals and values of the community. Then the leader need to bring the district's stakeholders together and build consensus on how to best realign the curriculum so that each group involved has some ownership in what is taught in the classroom.

After establishing committees for curriculum improvement, Gorton and Schneider (1991) suggest that the principal work directly with the committees to assure that the proper processes are followed and also encourage and evaluate proposals for improving curriculum. Principals should monitor the changes to make sure that the teachers are not trying to do too much. School curricula is usually overloaded, and it would be to our great advantage to put some focus on eliminating that curricula that isn't significant. We would do this by developing by which we could eliminate material that isn't focused directly on the shared vision of the school.

Since the purpose of curriculum is to increase student achievement, it is necessary to have a testing strategy that is in congruence with the curriculum. Educators need to carefully outline our expectations for skill and behavior

achievement and then test specifically to those expectations. The principal must be the spark in seeing that this occurs.

The formation of a focused curriculum should be followed by an effective staff development program that is also tied to the shared vision of the school. The staff and community, according to Tewel (1993), should be involved in the creation of a program that focuses on providing workshops and technical assistance to promote skills needed to accomplish school goals. Tewel suggests that schools should implement a peer coaching and supervisory system whose purpose is to increase staff performance.

The curriculum is the backbone of our schools; therefore, the school principal must be committed to spending quality time giving direction and ownership in establishing a program that is focused as well as flexible. Subsequently, instructional leadership is the backbone of a successful principalship.

Shared Decision Making

When the National Commission on Excellence in Education published the report *A Nation At Risk* in 1983, warning the nation that our system of education was "being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity..." (cited in DuFour and Eaker, 1992, p. 1), our elected officials and business leaders responded by driving state lawmakers to issue improvement mandates and standardization orders. Despite the intensity of top-down reform, this movement did not achieve the excellence that it was mandating.

The current restructuring movement in education has shifted the task of

decision making from the bureaucracy to the people in the trenches: the teachers, parents, and community members. This paradigm of shared leadership is an important characteristic of instructional leadership in today's open school systems.

In 1987, ninety-eight of the best middle schools in the United States shared the strategies that made them successful. Participatory decision making was, according to these schools, the most important factor in maintaining an effective school (George and Anderson, 1989). The authors found the following:

Establishing a faculty-administrator collaborative unit in the school is essential. Policies regarding the design of teams, advisory programs, curriculum, schedules, and building organization are too vital to be left to unilateral administrative decision making. School districts must find ways to identify individuals who not only have the sense of mission but understand that faculty involvement is the only way to make significant, long-term progress toward realizing that vision. (p. 68)

Staff Evaluation and Supervision

Another important sub-role of the instructional leader is that of evaluator and supervisor of staff performance. All prospective principals know that they will have to evaluate staff when they get their first job. Do all principals know how critical evaluation and supervision is in the instructional process? It is critical enough that a principal can lose all credibility if the "instructional leader" cannot identify or communicate effective teaching methods or professional behavior to the staff.

In terms of what my supervisory style will be as a principal, I like what Joan Buttram and Bruce Wilson found in districts with effective evaluation and supervision programs. They observed that progressive schools: (a) link evaluation systems to research on effective teacher practices; (b) provide improved training for evaluators; (c) hold administrators more accountable for conducting evaluations; (d) use evaluation-identified teacher deficiencies to focus staff development; and (e) make teachers active partners in the evaluation process (cited in DuFour and Eaker, 1992).

The last point is especially important for leaders in this era. Gorton and Schneider (1991) suggest that when administrators make teachers partners in developing and implementing an evaluation process, it makes it more likely that the teachers will accept and act on constructive criticism. We cannot go into the principalship with the idea that evaluation and supervision is a tool of power over the school staff. Shared leadership works and we have to look at evaluation as a team process aimed at improving the lives of our students.

Creating an Atmosphere of High Expectations

Many schools are ineffective because achievement expectations are too low. An educational leader will work towards raising expectations for not only students, but for teachers, parents, administrators, business leaders and community members. We need to give students the tools of achievement so that they feel comfortable working at a higher level.

The atmosphere of the school depends a great deal on the attitude and

priorities of the principal. From reducing classroom distractions and creating a pleasant physical environment to practicing shared leadership, the building principal is expected to pay attention to all the details that contribute to the overall atmosphere of the school. Creating a positive atmosphere increases a school's chances of fulfilling high expectations.

Building principals need to challenge teachers and students to reach for lofty goals. Principals also need to build teacher confidence so that all teachers believe in their ability to teach all students and to accept their responsibility to do so. A place where we can begin is within ourselves; the principal needs to be confident and committed when it comes to high expectations. A committed administrator will have a positive effect on the staff and students of a school.

If an administrator can demonstrate ability to create high expectations, evaluate and supervise a diverse staff, share their decision making power and communicate curriculum and monitor staff development, they have moved a long way down the road to creating an effective school. All these instructional leadership skills are central to school excellence. However, before a principal can be the instructional leader, hundreds of managerial details, both small and large, must be dealt with efficiently.

The Principal as Manager

The role of principal is somewhat like that of a golf groundskeeper. Before a golfer can play excellent golf, the course has to be well manicured. With the school administrator, the planning, budgeting, scheduling, and coordinating must be

effectively *managed* before excellent teaching and real learning can occur.

A first-year principal's leadership style will likely be somewhat top heavy towards the managing role as we become familiar with the culture and mechanics of the school building. This is probably a good strategy if you believe in the idea that all day to day processes must be running smoothly before significant change or progress can happen. Principals do get fired because there is a perception that things are out of control. The effective principal is careful not to forsake management for idealism. Both are important and the task of the school leader is to effectively balance organizational matters with the idealistic vision that guides them.

Gorton and Schneider (1991) agree on the importance of the management role. They write:

...rather than resisting their roles as managers, school administrators should accept and implement the role in such a way that the school is efficiently managed, yet they are in a position to be available for other role options.

By successfully performing their role as managers, administrators can help others to accomplish tasks and goals. (p. 86)

Most of managing is simply having the commitment to put whatever time it takes to be organized. Whenever possible, and not just when it is comfortable for the administrator personally, he or she must include teachers in the management process. Conley and Bacharach (1990) call it "participatory school-site management" (p.539). Educational leaders must understand that "they are

managing professionals and that organizational success depends on cooperation and exchange of information with these professionals" (p. 540). Teachers should be in the room when decisions about discipline, promotion, opening day activities, and assignment of students and teachers are made. Good management leads to good morale and good morale leads to good teaching. According to Conley and Bacharach, the success of shared decision making depends on how "administrators view teachers" (p. 540).

DuFour and Eaker (1992) believe that schools that are well managed have the feeling of "being run" as opposed to "running". Effectively handling discipline, fostering collaboration and experimentation, being visible, eliminating intrusions into the classroom, giving students ownership and celebrating success are all key concepts that are part of the manager's responsibility, according to DuFour and Eaker.

So it seems that the principal's role of instructional leader is dependent on their success as manager. Thompson (cited in DuFour and Eaker, 1992) brought this idea together when he stated, "A positive school climate is perhaps the single most important expression of educational leadership" (p. 64).

The Principal as Communicator

All of the characteristics of an effective principal that have mentioned thus far are interdependent functions. No other administrative skill entangles itself more into the aspects of the others than the skill of communication. Being able to communicate, both verbally and in written language, is an invaluable skill that is

becoming increasingly important in the age of shared decision making and open systems.

Communication Within the School

When considering how we should communicate, we must always keep the school culture and the existing paradigms that dominate that culture in mind. It is also important to understand our role in communication both as a manager and as an instructional leader. A manager thinks of himself as an initiator of communication and the leader stresses considerations of friendship, respect and trust that develop a solid foundation for long-term change and progress (class notes, Fall 1991). We need to combine the two in order to be effective.

How should a first-year principal begin communication with school personnel? The first order of business should be to meet individually with all teachers, custodians and central office staff and ask them about themselves, what they like about the school and what they would change about the school. This would be the beginning of understanding the school culture.

Then with a foundation of honesty, trust and respect, I would immediately show a commitment to shared decision making; getting the staff involved in self-assessments and a school needs assessment followed by a plan of action for higher achievement. Also, with communication skill comes the responsibility to confront conflict head-on and to listen to others with a commitment to put their ideas to use, not to toss them aside. We need to avoid communicating from the mountaintop, remembering that our school is filled with professionals that deserve

respect.

Most importantly, our communication must always reflect the shared vision of what we want the school to become. For instance, if a middle school vision is to make the backbone of learning the interdisciplinary unit, then the principal needs to communicate that vision within scheduling, staff meetings, staff development, in hallway conversations, and in complimenting student effort or achievement. Many teachers aren't aware of the school mission because it is not consistently communicated by the administration.

Communication With the Public

One of top priorities of the school principal should be increasing the involvement of parents in education. Secondary schools are facing an enormous struggle to increase parental involvement in the midst of societal changes occurring across the country. The changing demographics of American families in combination with the fact that parent involvement decreases as children get older (Schurr,1992) makes the educator's job extremely difficult. While getting parents involved is getting harder, the need for parents to become involved is becoming greater. The problems and pressures on today's secondary school age students are sometimes terrifying and many youths are going through bad times alone. The need for a two-way communication structure that emphasizes a school-parent partnership has never been greater. Therefore, principals should review current policy regarding parent involvement and work with the school staff in improving the communication process through evaluation and the creation of an effective

action plan.

Another form of administrative communication is with outside interest groups such as the media, city government, businesses and health organizations. With these groups in mind, Gorton and Schneider (1991) suggest that schools need to (a) sell the educational program to the community so that they will take pride in and support their schools; (b) interpret to the community the educational program so that people have an understanding of what the school is doing; and (c) encourage community interest and participation in the school program.

A healthy school utilizes the talent within the community in order to improve the education of the students. Also, schools need to make sure that they don't paint too rosy a picture of the school in order to gain public support. It is essential that schools be honest and communicate weaknesses as well as strengths if we are to gain the respect of the district.

Principals need to get out in the community and meet people, especially people or groups that hold power within the community. Kindred (1990) suggests that administrators develop sociological surveys that are distributed to the public. In this way, we can learn about the needs and expectations of the community. It will also help us understand the power structures as well as possible situations that may need to be avoided. A sociological survey is a good first step in external communication, one that will help give administrators a jump on getting the public more involved in school issues.

The Principal as Committed Professional

As I stated earlier, the principalship is one of the most important jobs in America. It is difficult to imagine a position that affects more people than that of the school principal. With this in mind, we must confront the monumental and essential commitment that the principal must undertake in order to do justice to the students, the community and the nation. This may sound overly dramatic, but when you reflect on the roles and ramifications of the principalship, it makes sense.

After seven years as a teacher and coach, I feel like I know what type of commitment it takes to be effective. We have been exposed to several lists dealing with the characteristics of strong principals and effective leadership. Here is another list with questions whose answers will tell us if we can put our professional intelligence to work in a positive way:

1. Are we willing to put in work weeks of 60 plus hours?
2. Do we have a supportive family and social network?
3. Do we have the persistence to follow the steps of change?
4. Can we come back after major setbacks?
5. Do the students come first?

I don't believe that a person can straddle the fence on the issue of commitment. Either we are committed to doing our best for the students or we are not. There are many great principals in America today, all of them improving our hopes for a bright future. Those principals combine their knowledge of the

educational process with a serious personal commitment to do what is right for the students.

Conclusion

Dr. Doud (class notes, 1993) discussed the "new conceptualization" of educational leadership. In this paradigm, the student is seen as a worker, the teacher as a manager and the principal as a catalyst. I see now that this is a necessary ideological movement considering this age of shared decision making and ownership. A catalyst leads by providing subtle direction with honest information and then letting other professionals as well as community members work together to make things better.

Too often people see leadership as a tool for personal power when it is really personal responsibility to serve others. There is a sixth-century proverb that says, "A leader is best when people barely know he exists" (cited in White, 1985). The "new conceptualization" jells with this proverb because a catalyst increases the rate of positive change by bringing people together. In the end, it is the people who feel like they have done it, while it was the leader who provided them the opportunity for success.

In 1970, the United States Senate did something it isn't always known for; making great sense in a very non-political way. In that year, it passed resolution 359 dealing with school leadership. The resolution states, "If a school is a vibrant, innovative, child-centered place; if it has a reputation for excellence in teaching; if students are performing to the best of their ability; one can almost always point to

the principal's leadership as the key to success" (cited in DuFour and Eaker, 1992, p. 46).

The future of our youth is important enough for us to make the commitment. The rest is making a vision a reality with communication, management and leadership. Let us make the most of this *opportunity*.

References

- Barker, J. A. (1990). Discovering the future: The power of vision [videocassette]. St. Paul: Infinity Limited, Inc.
- Bennett, William J. (1993, May) America needs cultural renewal. The Des Moines Sunday Register. pp. 2C-3C.
- Conley, Sharon C., & Bacharach, Samuel B. (1990). From school-site management to participatory school-site management. Phi Delta Kappan, March, 539-544.
- DuFour, Richard, & Eaker, Robert. (1992). Creating the new american school. Bloomington, Indiana. National Educational Service.
- George, Paul S., & Anderson, Warren G. (1989). Establishing and maintaining quality middle school programs. National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin, LXII, 67-74.
- Goodlad, John W. (1984). A place called school: Prospects for the future. New York. McGraw-Hill.
- Gorton, Richard A., & Schneider, Gail T. (1991). School-based leadership: Challenges and opportunities. Dubuque, Iowa.
- Heck, Ronald H., & Marcoulides, George A. (1993). Principal leadership behaviors and school achievement. National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin, 77, 20-27.
- Hodgkinson, H. (1991). Reform versus reality. Phi Delta Kappan, 73, 9-16.

Kindred, L. W., Bagin, D., & Gallagher, D.R. (1990). The school and community relations (4th ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Naisbitt, John, & Aburdene, Patricia. (1985). Reinventing the corporation. New York: Warner Books.

Schurr, Sandra. (1992). Fine tuning your parent power. Schools in the Middle, Winter, 3-9.

Senge, Peter. (1990). The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization. New York: Doubleday Currency.

Tewel, Kenneth J. (1993). Moving toward whole school reform: What the principal can do. National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin, 77, 46-55.

White, Maury. (1985 October 7). A little bit about alot of things. The Des Moines Register. p. 1B.