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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

Thomas P. Smyth
University of Northern Iowa

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

Abstract

As we approach the twenty-first century, I believe our schools are more alienated from the realities of our world. Japan and other countries are becoming increasingly competitive economically, and soon these countries will surpass the United States by the turn of the century. Thus, instead of a "nation of leaders", we will be known as a "nation of followers." To make things bleaker, teenage crime, pregnancy, and dropout rates are rising; in addition, more and more children are coming from divorced families, and the "traditional" family that characterized the first half of this century has changed (Boyd, 1983). These types of external factors are having a major impact on our schools and community. If educators are to meet the challenges of society and the world today, they cannot maintain the status quo of teaching children the same way our grandparents did at the turn of the 20th century. There has to be a great upheaval in school transformation and/or school reform.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY

SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Thomas P. Smyth

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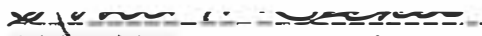
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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Robert H. Decker

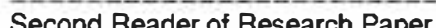
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David Else


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Michael D. Waggoner

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Head, Department of Educational Administration and Counseling

As we approach the twenty-first century, I believe our schools are more alienated from the realities of our world. Japan and other countries are becoming increasingly competitive economically, and soon these countries will surpass the United States by the turn of the century. Thus, instead of a “nation of leaders”, we will be known as a “nation of followers.”

To make things bleaker, teenage crime, pregnancy, and drop-out rates are rising; in addition, more and more children are coming from divorced families, and the “traditional” family that characterized the first half of this century has changed (Boyd, 1983). These types of external factors are having a major impact on our schools and community. If educators are to meet the challenges of society and the world today, they cannot maintain the status quo of teaching children the same way our grandparents did at the turn of the 20th century. There has to be a great upheaval in school transformation and/or school reform.

When I started my masters’ degree three years ago, I brought with me the old idea of what a principal was suppose to be: a top down manager that viewed teachers as workers on an assembly line, and children as nothing more than parts to be formed into some mechanical mechanism.

I am happy to say my whole philosophy has changed from a highly dictatorial and task oriented individual to a philosophy that believes decision making should be done by the ones closest to the customers or students--the teachers.

Teacher empowerment, site-based management, and shared decision making are all key elements in school transformation, but it is the principal who facilitates, encourages, and coaches these transitional changes. As a potential principal, I see a great many changes starting to occur in our educational system. Many leaders of yesterday are stepping down, and so they must be replaced by highly knowledgeable, energetic, and visionary people. Principals should be viewed as highly trained managers sharing power with teachers and parents in order to help the customers (students) become productive citizens.

As a result of these rapid changes that are occurring in our educational system, this reflective paper will address eight different aspects of what I think a principal's role should be. Leadership, school climate, technology, parental involvement, evaluations, school changes, curriculum and vision are only a small part of what makes an excellent principal. Other areas could be covered in school administration, but as a potential

principal I feel these topics are what I like to call the “nuts and bolts” of principalship. They are the areas that will take our schools into the 21st century.

Leadership

As leaders in government, industries, and businesses play various roles in running their organizations, so do principals. According to Sergiovanni (1987), an effective principal must play six major leadership roles: a statesman, an educator, a supervisor an organizer, an administrative leader, and a team builder.

The principal, as a statesman, is primarily concerned with the school’s overall mission, philosophy, values, and beliefs. The principal must work hard to communicate the school’s missions to outside forces, seeking support and obtaining resources (Kaiser, 1995). The principal and his/her staff are the key forces to establishing positive public relations. Because of open enrollment, students and their parents now have choices where they attend school, and the principal, in the statesman role, should promote his/her school capitalizing on its merits. If the principal does not see the value in positive public relations, many resources could be lost, both in students and in money.

Once local businesses and industries see the school striving to create an education for the local children, they are more likely going to invest their monies to promote more educational programs (Kaiser, 1995). For example, a principal may want to approach local banks and ask them if they wish to donate “X” amount of dollars for every student who is on the honor roll. With the current financial situation looking as bleak as it has, principals are going to have to help their staff find innovative ways to supplement the budget. By taking this initiative, the principal is establishing him/herself as a leader in both the community and in the school. The school is a mirror reflecting the communities’ values and beliefs. The principal, as a statesman leader, is responsible for improving the reflection the school has upon the community.

As an “educator” the principal is primarily concerned with the development and articulation of educational programs. These programs include teaching style methods, classroom climate, subject-matter content, and evaluations of students, teachers, and programs (Sergiovanni, 1991). Also, the principal helps to guide and encourage healthy student-teacher achievement, thus improving the school as a whole. Overall, this role focuses on the

achievement of the school's educational objectives.

In the supervisory role, the principal works with teachers individually or in groups, and together they organize the schools' goals and plans for implementation (Alvy & Robbins, 1995). Staff development and clinical supervision are part of this role, along with working closely with teachers through a team effort, making the improvements necessary to have a successful educational program.

The principal, in an "organizer" role, ensures that the school's purposes, objectives, and work requirements are what determine the school organizational structure patterns (Sergiovanni, 1991). Too many times schools become comfortable, orderly, unnoticed, and unimaginative organizations, but a principal, I believe, must make sure that the organization of a school revolves around the objectives and goals of the community. The principal needs to provide a supportive school structure and climate to enhance student learning.

A fifth role a principal must perform is that of an "administrative leader." This type of leader is less glamorous but is just as important as the other leadership roles. The principal must organize the work, make up various schedules,

order supplies, and provide adequate information to school personnel (Sergiovanni, 1991) I believe that if a principal has poor organizational skills, it will create frustration, anxiety, and dissatisfaction among the staff, which ultimately affects the students. To alleviate that from happening, the principal needs to organize a support system that will allow teachers to devote time and energy to teaching and learning instead of focusing on mundane duties that take them from their ultimate goal of educating students.

The last leadership role a principal must play is one of “team leader.” The goal for a school is create a team environment where parents, teachers, administrators, and the community work cooperatively in making educational decisions (Alvy & Robbins, 1995). The principal as this leader helps to build the cooperative team where support and trust are prevalent among the teachers and between teachers, administrators, and the community.

Climate

A top priority for any principal is to create a warm and positive climate for learning. Student discipline, teachers’

perception, size of school, and the principal effectiveness all affect the underlying culture and climate of a school district (Sweeney, 1992).

In a school where teachers view discipline as a significant problem, there is seldom a winning climate, and if students view discipline in a negative way, then the school climate is generally depressing.

Because teachers' perceptions of school climate vary from school to school, it is important for a principal to be careful not to make generalities. Research has found that as the size of the school increases, the less positive the climate becomes (Bennis, 1984). Larger buildings and more students create a bigger challenge for achieving a healthy climate. However, a principal's effectiveness definitely influences the school climate, regardless of its size. He or she is directly responsible for creating a positive or negative climate.

As a leader in creating a positive school climate, a principal must identify what the "feel" of the school is like (Sweeny, 1992). For example, if teachers believe that respect for the individual is important, then treating students and colleagues with respect becomes a shared value. This shared value

positively influences how the teaching staff treats students, other staff members, and parents. A principal can improve the “feel” of the school climate by providing positive feedback. Rewards for accomplishments and creating a stimulating environment, which could include sprucing up the physical maintenance of the school, promoting enthusiasm, encouraging growth and creativity and having fun, all help to build a quality school.

If a principal sets high expectations and models a positive approach to meeting these expectations, the staff, students, and community will emulate this approach, thus creating a positive, self-fulfilling climate necessary for learning.

Technology

Schools are information tools, governed by rules of information technology, and the prime law of information technology is the distribution of intelligence and power rather than the concentration of it (Gilder, 1993). This means that schools are information centers and through technology, teachers can distribute a wealth of knowledge to students.

Our society has entered into the information age, and

technology is at the center. Computers, CD-Roms, video disc players, and other forms of technology will help students learn and become more productive citizens. Principals who understand the difference between the educational technology view of the computer and the computer-as-tool view are in a good position to foster computer educational programs (Luehrmann, 1990).

A principal can help teachers to use technology by supporting their use and allowing time to learn more about technology and its benefits in the classroom. Another way the principal can show his/her support for technology is by encouraging the district to keep abreast of the advancements and allocate funds for the purchase of the new technologies.

Parental Involvement

Research has shown that students who are academically successful tend to receive consistent support from their parents and other adults in the home. Research further supports that people who spend more time in schools feel more positive about those schools (Loucks, 1992). Principals should make parental involvement one of their top priorities. Of all the professional organizations, school is one that everyone feels some familiarity

with since most have experienced it. One's own experience with education has left many parents with ideas on how schools should be run; many of these ideas are based on the parents' own school experience, however positive or negative that experience.

Therefore, any ice breaker that a principal can do to make parents feel welcome in their child's school helps to promote positive public relations. All too often the communication between parents and the school is usually in a negative form (i.e. discipline and/or failing grade).

Instead of communicating only when there is something wrong at school, principals must be proactive when communicating with parents regarding all school issues from a new program to an individual child's progress report. It is found that parents support the school as long as the school is communicating with them and has kept them aware of important issues (Alvy & Robbins, 1995).

As a potential principal I have learned how important it is for school personnel to be able to call parents by their names when they see them at school functions and out in the community. Doing very simple but important amenities such as shaking hands, smiling, and giving a welcome to parents help them feel more

comfortable in a place that may not be comfortable for them.

Along with promoting parental relations, the school also needs to foster community involvement as the overall public plays an important part in expressing opinions about the local school district. Anytime the school can utilize community members in the education of its children, a relationship begins to develop, and people on both sides benefit; the students, of course, benefit through the educational aspect, but even more importantly, they witness success occurring within the local population. The community members benefit by feeling needed and important, which gives them a good feeling about their school. Principals that are successful in promoting parental/community involvement will not only see an increase in student achievement, but also the community will see the school as a positive influence and a place that creates a learning environment for all members (Alvy & Robbins, 1995).

Evaluations

Performance based teacher evaluations are an important component of most school districts because they provide individual teachers with the opportunity to improve their

instructional techniques (Kaiser, 1995). Teacher evaluations are considered a continuous process showing various stake holders (i.e. parents, local businesses, community leaders.) throughout the community, the school districts accountability for the improvement of instruction. It is the principals that lead and facilitate this evaluation process, and they are to provide accountability to these various stake holders in the community (Drake & Roe, 1994).

According to Sergiovanni, (1991) teacher evaluations are very important because they provide a school district with three essential items. First, teacher evaluations provide a school district with a quality control mechanism. It is up to the principals to monitor the teaching and learning processes in their buildings and by going through this evaluation process they can maintain a kind of quality control. Second, teacher evaluations can ensure professional development. Principals who recognize and help teachers develop their teaching skills will improve the overall quality of their schools. What teacher evaluations provide is that of direction. Many times motivated teachers have no direction to go in as far as their teaching is concerned. It is up to the principal to help those teachers find their strengths and

weaknesses and point them in the right direction.

When it comes to the evaluation process itself, the principal must make it clear to the teachers that this process is to help them grow and become better at their profession. Teachers who are intimidated by their principal will not take risks in their classrooms and thus learning is stagnated (Alvy & Robbins,1995). A principal's first priority is to build trust with his/her faculty. This trust can be developed through open lines of communication between the principal and the teacher. When the teacher sees that the principal has a desire to learn and share ideas, it is easier for the teacher to reciprocate that trust.

Once trust has been established between the principal and the teacher, the stage is set for the evaluation process. The preobservation conference, the observation itself, the analyzing of information and the postobservation conference are all used to help the teacher recognize the direction he/she would like to grow in professionally and personally. The principal must make sure that the teacher knows exactly what is going on throughout the entire process. There should be no surprises throughout the evaluation, and open lines of communication must be maintained

by both the principal and the teacher. The whole idea of teacher evaluations is to catch the teachers doing something right.

A principal and a teacher can go through the entire process, but unless the principal takes an active role in following up the evaluation process with a staff development program, the whole process becomes worthless. The staff development program must be agreed on by both the teacher and the principal and a time line must be in place. By placing a time line on improvement, the teacher takes on the responsibility of assuring their own growth within the classroom. The principal on the other hand, is assured that growth is occurring within their school building.

Change

When I think of principalship and change, they remind me of a cartoon that I read in the newspaper. It showed a person standing in front of a shaded tree, and he was pondering the thought of change. The cartoon figure said to himself, "Change is scary and no good. Change leads to nowhere and can be disastrous for everyone." The cartoon figure continued, "Change is terrible, everything should stay the way it is, if everything stayed the way it is life would be good." This cartoon figure was so afraid of

change that he refused to even move from out from under that tree. A few frames later, the cartoon figure got up from where he had been sitting and said, "This is boring" and moved out from under that tree to where the sun was shining. Looking around at his changed surroundings, the figure then said, "Change is GREAT!".

As the cartoon stated, change can be scary and disastrous, but it also showed that change can be great and essential. When it comes to our schools, the principal, like the cartoon figure, is the one that needs to step out from under that tree and promote change. The principal is the risk taker and promoter of change. The principal is required to do things right, and as a leader, to do all the right things to bring about change (Ovard, 1990).

Because society is changing so rapidly, and schools are taking on more responsibility of the social ills, principals must learn to understand and cope with the increasing changes. Principals who will be successful in today's schools are the ones who fully understand the critical changes occurring and how to implement management strategies to cope with these changes (Bookbinder, 1992). Principals who do not cope with change will merely react to any change that occurs and thus relinquish any initiative they have.

Risk-taking, experimentation, and voicing conflicting opinions are essential for bringing about change. One of the most important challenges for a principal is to try and promote change within their school buildings.

Alvy and Robbins (1995) developed seven guidelines a principal must follow in order to make positive changes in their schools. These guidelines are as follows:

1. A principal must walk the talk. When a principal's words and actions are consistently aligned, credibility will usually follow.
2. The principal must lead by example; others will follow.
3. The principal should allow input from the staff over the change that will occur and how it will be implemented.
4. The principal should encourage consensus building by providing opportunities for individuals to share viewpoints.
5. The principal should always keep an open line of communication so staff members can express any fears they may have.
6. The principal should encourage disagreement. The information the principal gets through resistance will help him/her realize that people need to be less threatened from the change.

7. The principal must acknowledge people for their efforts in promoting the change.

A principal should keep in mind that change is an all-encompassing experience that evolves both the organization and its members. The only way to keep up with change is by building it into the system. An effective principal will be one who is successful in bringing about change and is willing to take the initiative instead of reacting to it.

Curriculum

One of the greatest challenges for a principal in today's society is creating the momentum for life long learning. Many people in the teaching profession have accepted the notion that how much of the curriculum gets covered is actual learning. Realistically, it is not the amount of curriculum covered that is learning, but how well the teacher teaches the curriculum (Alvy & Robbins, 1995).

The principal's daily contact with students, teachers and parents, put him/her in the best position to reflect on how the curriculum is affecting the total school and community. Because of this position, the principal can see the weaknesses in the

curriculum and then make plans for changes (English, 1986).

As a potential principal, I believe that when it comes to principalship and the curriculum, I must provide a forum or setting for teachers to discuss curriculum. If we accept the notion that “less is more” then it is the principal’s responsibility to facilitate a forum so teachers can interact across grade levels. Teachers need time to align and articulate the curriculum.

Because the knowledge base has grown over the last few years, I believe the curriculum should reflect only a few key learning objectives rather than touching on all chapters in a textbook. By facilitating a forum, the teachers can discuss the area of learning objectives they would like to see the students move towards. Teachers, by participating in the forum, will take on a sense of ownership of the curriculum.

Once the learning objectives have been established and written, it is the principals responsibility to make sure that the objectives are measurable. In this age of accountability, I believe objectives that can not be measured are considered not to be objectives at all. The principal, as the leader in curriculum, should then monitor the learning processes throughout the school year. This monitoring can be accomplished through simple

observations and/or the reviewing of lesson plans.

It is equally important that the principal provides feedback to the teachers on his/her observations of the curriculum. If gaps in the curriculum begin to occur, it is the principal's responsibility to "fill" those gaps by involving the teachers in refining the curriculum, so it does not become something that gathers dust.

I believe that in our ever-progressing world, the curriculum will continue to evolve and change over time. It is up to the principal to take the lead in this area of curriculum to ensure that our children will learn to be productive citizens and contributors to society. As one teacher has put it, "We should be aiming to help children become caring adults, builders of communities, shares of learning, lovers of the printed world, and nurtures of nature" (Alvy & Robbins, 1995).

Vision

It is vision that seems to distinguish leaders from those who are simply good managers to those who can see the future and bring about change. Bennis (1984) has found the key ingredient among executives of highly successful organizations to

be one of “compelling vision.” I believe that in order to manage a successful school, the principal must have a clear vision of where the school is presently and where he/she would like it to be in the future.

In a rapidly changing environment, principals who try to maintain the status quo will quickly find their school behind. However, principals who are visionary planners will be able to ensure that their school effectively meets the needs of the future (Sybouts & Wendel, 1994). I believe that principals who are experts at managing change will be able to implement needed innovations in schools much more effectively than principals who are uninformed or lacking in knowledge.

Principals with clear vision will be able to harness the collective intelligence of their staff, as well as that of the opinions of leaders in the community (Jenkins, Hersey, & Keefe, 1992). By doing this, the principal will be in a better position to address the needs of their school in the future.

I believe the principal should send a clear message to their staff allowing them to take risks in their classrooms as well as trying new and innovative ways to improve their school.

According to William Rutherford’s (1985) review of earlier

research, effective principals have five essential characteristics.

1. The principal's vision focuses on the needs of the students.
2. The principal turns these visions into goals for his/her school and expectations for his/her teachers and students.
3. The principal establishes a school climate that contributes to these goals and expectations.
4. The principal continuously monitors the progress.
5. The principal intervenes in a supportive or correct manner when necessary.

I believe school principals should tie in their vision with everything they do during a school day. Every meeting, staffing, conference or informal conversation should reflect the school's vision. The school's organization must personally believe in the power of the vision as a force for creative, continuous improvement (Wheatley, 1992). The vision must induce commitment from the various stake holders and bring meaning to their lives.

It is important that the faculty be continuously exposed to new technologies and methodologies. Teachers who maintain the

status quo in the classroom will become boring and learning will become stagnated. Lines of communication must remain open so that the vision can be expressed freely between students, teachers, parents and other members of the community. The school itself should be characterized by collegiality, staff working together for the common good of all.

Principals, above all else, must make their visions real. Teachers, students, and parents need to take an active role in bringing their vision to life. It is up to the principal to help motivate these people to action. Time, energy and commitment on the part of principal is the only way to make the vision become real.

Conclusion

“The school principal, whether elementary or secondary, is the single most important person to a school’s success” (Sharp & Walter, 1994, p. 1). This is the very reason why I chose to go into school administration. Becoming a principal in a highly intense society challenges me to not only become a better person but also create an impact on the educational system.

In order for me to be an effective principal, I will need to be a visionary, which allows for growth and development

necessary for my school to meet the needs of the students in this changing world. As a leader, I must be responsible without always being in charge; empowering others helps to create school ownership within the community. Also, I must address the social needs of the teachers, students, and community making sure that no one is left behind.

With the diverse situations encountered daily by a principal, I will need to have a variety of action repertoires enabling me to respond effectively and efficiently. Some situations will require problem-solving skills while others may require diplomacy and open communication.

The principal is the key to a good school, and the quality of the educational programs depends on him/her (Barth, 1990). I hope to be that key which unlocks the door to a school that creates a nation of leaders instead of a nation of followers.

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