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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

Reflection is the process of careful thinking or thoughts about practices and ideas resulting in clarification of future actions. I realized the importance of being a reflective thinker in the fall of 1991. I watched a video by Barker (1990) addressing the power of vision, and it was at that moment that I totally bought into, and began to clearly develop my vision as an educational administrator through the reflective process. Most people reflect on one level or another. One would think that reflection would make life easier and answer all important questions. It is actually to the contrary. The more you reflect, the more you question. Reflection may not make life easier, but it does improve the quality of one's life by bringing clearer meaning to your daily actions. It is through these mental gymnastics that I have moved from the boss philosophy to the leader philosophy represented in this very wise and true quote by Glasser (1992): A boss drives. A leader leads.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

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and Counseling

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Shari R. Steward

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Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Reflection is the process of careful thinking or thoughts about practices and ideas resulting in clarification of future actions. I realized the importance of being a reflective thinker in the fall of 1991. I watched a video by Barker (1990) addressing the power of vision, and it was at that moment that I totally bought into, and began to clearly develop my vision as an educational administrator through the reflective process.

Most people reflect on one level or another. One would think that reflection would make life easier and answer all important questions. It is actually to the contrary. The more you reflect, the more you question. Reflection may not make life easier, but it does improve the quality of one's life by bringing clearer meaning to your daily actions.

It is through these mental gymnastics that I have moved from the boss philosophy to the leader philosophy represented in this very wise and true quote by Glasser (1992):

A boss drives. A leader leads.

A boss relies on authority. A leader relies on cooperation.

A boss says, "I." A leader says "We."

A boss creates fear. A leader creates confidence.

A boss knows how. A leader shows how.

A boss creates resentment. A leader breeds enthusiasm.

A boss fixes blame. A leader fixes mistakes.

A boss makes work drudgery. A leader makes work interesting. (Preface)

National Association of Elementary School Principals (1991) identifies proficiencies for principals under three categories: Leadership Behavior, Supervisory Proficiencies, and Administrative/Management Proficiencies. The following paper will examine my philosophical change, growth, and solidification in the above categories.

## Leadership Proficiencies

### Leadership Behaviors

Creating a school vision helps administrators facilitate decisions, teachers to direct a lesson, students to prepare for class, and parents to support in the home. A vision brings all stakeholders together through commitment to a common goal (Robbins, 1995). Building a shared vision is a process. We must shift the paradigm from I, me, mine, to we, us, our (Greene, 1994).

It has been my experience that we seem to often work backwards in the process of planning. We plan a trip with no destination. A vision must be in place in order to make effective and efficient decisions. Once a vision has been established, the mission, goals, school plans, and instruction will then fall into place.

An effective leader must relate, develop, analyze, support, create, assess, bond, and initiate change

encompassing all areas within education. The decision making process within a school can be very complicated. Livingston (1992) incorporates Quaker notions of matters of preference and matters of conscience. If the decision at hand is a matter of preference, the staff member is asked to step aside and allow the decision to be made. If it is a matter of conscience, then the decision needs to be delayed or abandoned. This helps to eliminate time spent on minutia, to reduce anger and frustration by zeroing in, and addressing the problem.

Effective administrators must also recognize individual needs of parents, staff and students. This is one area where experience and the maturation process have helped me grow professionally. National Association of Elementary School Principals (1990) says that a school with a favorable climate will have a caring atmosphere that permeates the building. You cannot care about people until you can accept and appreciate their similarities and differences.



Principals must also foster the leadership skills of others. Hoerr (1996) says that collegiality does take more time and make people accountable but that the benefits far outweigh the demands. Hoerr adds that power that is shared, is power that is multiplied. If teachers are expected to invest time and energy, their efforts must influence decisions. The principal must accept that some decisions may reflect opinions that differ from their own.

Principals must initiate and facilitate constructive change. Greene (1994) notes that the changes needed to move from adequate to quality are numerous and substantial. Even after suggestions, ideas, strategies and training, change must come from a conscience choice within each individual.

Principals must be able to articulate values and make decisions based on those values. Robbins (1995) states that this is done in two different ways: symbolically and expressively. Symbolically, the principal focuses their

individual attention on what is most important. The principal fosters the expressive side by initiating dialogue about important issues which helps staff members to solidify their values.

A leader must encourage higher-level thinking skills in staff and students. Brooks and Brooks (1993) state that promotion of higher-level thinking skills opens windows to staff and students reasoning which helps administrators make school experiences meaningful.

A very valuable strategy that is very effective in promoting higher-level thinking is to turn the question back to the asker. If a teacher or student asks, "Is this project good enough?" my answer is almost always "What do you think?" It is amazing how often the asker finds the same strengths and weakness' in a project that I would find. The growth then comes from their own evaluation, not mine. This is so much

more meaningful. It fosters self-improvement rather than improvement from criticism, coercion, and fear.

### Communication Skills

Goldring and Rallis (1993) explain how boundaries between school and community have been blurred and that we must proactively manage our environment through communication. They add that we must explain and publicize our mission and programs while simultaneously nourishing external support. The idea of communication and involvement with the community is one in which I have had to force growth. I had no idea of the impact the public has on a school. Everything you say and do as a representative of your school is crucial, these are the only things in which you are in control. It is important that you do them well. Effectively and efficiently communicating proactively can help influence all of the forces that you do not have control over.

Covey (1991) says that collective bargaining has eroded the trust between teacher and administrators, the community, and the performance of the educational system. In order to rebuild trust, stakeholders' opinions must be valued and acted upon.

It is clear that all communication cannot be proactive. The most important aspect to reactive communication is in the art of practicing active listening skills. Whether or not you agree with the communicator is not as important as hearing what he/she has to say. When people feel that they have been heard, they walk away with a positive feeling regardless of the decisions that are made.

### Supervisory Proficiencies

#### Curriculum

Supervising curriculum is a balancing act between stakeholder values and state requirements. Quality indicators for curriculum stated by the National Association of Elementary

School Principals (1990) are that the curriculum reflects the mission, is clearly defined, is developed cooperatively, is all encompassing, and promotes cooperation among teachers. The curriculum, like other administrative decisions, is established based on the mission of the school.

The amount of available information is now doubling every seven years. This makes curriculum development increasingly more difficult. The curriculum must allow for accountability as well as flexibility. Glasser's control theory (1992) says that students' need for power must be met in order to achieve quality work. Students and teachers need to have power over what is learned and taught. The idea of teaching students process of learning becomes much more important than the content itself. Students need not know all the elements on the periodic table, but rather where they can find that information and why it is useful to them.

In the days of political correctness and the blending of cultures, providing a multicultural and gender-fare curriculum is quite challenging. A leadership style which promotes acceptance and trust is a good place to start. A principal must do the best he/she can to stay current on the materials used in the classroom and promote open and honest communication about people's similarities and differences. Technology is making the world seem smaller and is a tool which can improve the above curriculum.

Technology is becoming a huge part of our present day curriculum. Technology cannot become yet another separate curriculum which sets on the shelf in a binder. Technology is a means to an end which promotes success in all curricular areas. Do we have a "pencil" curriculum? The pencil is a tool used across the board and so is technology.

I call technology "the equalizer". Technology does not see race, sex, or academic ability. It can challenge the

talented and assist the challenged. The days are gone where an administrator can sit idly by and allow this tool not to be used. The administrator must lead by example and promote the incorporation of technology into all administrative and academic functions of the school. The principal must also funnel time, money, and personnel to infuse technology into daily life at the school.

### Instruction

The supervision of instruction must again support the vision and beliefs of the school. The combination of the quality school philosophy and teaching strategies aligned with the expeditionary learning model best support my beliefs of what is best for students and teachers. Supervision is then high expectations, low stress (Glasser, 1992) promoted by the administrator following quality schools and expeditionary learning.

I believe the best way to supervise instruction is to practice the philosophy of "management by walking around." The only way to truly understand the instruction in your building is by observing the lessons on a regular basis. The instructional style of a teacher can only be understood when examined over time.

### Performance

The supervision of performance is an area in administration that I feel needs a great deal of improvement. The idea of the principal as the expert, forcing his/her evaluations on teachers is as ineffective as teachers forcing judgments on students. The growth and improvement of teachers comes from within. It is up to the principal to guide the teacher through his/her own self-evaluation so meaningful changes can be identified and suggested. Robbins and Alvey (1995) suggest that teacher analysis of his/her own work best



reveals understanding of the classroom and desires to grow as a professional.

In order to insure that staff members achieve their potential the principal must develop relationships based on trust so that staff are willing to take risks in order to move closer and closer to the school's mission. This can be accomplished by having all stakeholders involved in the construction of the mission statement. It is then up to the principal to show continuous support of the mission statement by encouraging risks and innovations.

The principal must also maintain high expectations for self as well as all students and staff. This can be done by having specific school goals and then having staff write personal goals. Students also need to set goals both as a class and individually.

## Evaluation

As a professional body we must seek to use authentic evaluation of staff similar to evaluation of our students. Professional portfolios and reflective journals are ways that I plan on making the assessment process more meaningful to teachers. The challenge then is in the blending of the required evaluation instruments and the authentic, self-evaluation process. This blending will come when districts, unions, principals and teachers become one in their beliefs about what promotes positive, professional growth for teachers.

The principal must continuously speak about the evaluation process as a procedure designed to help staff and students not a vehicle to "get" teachers. The principal must also encourage input about teacher performance from the stakeholders of the school. This can be done through the survey process and meetings with the learning community members.

Trusting relationships help promote the success of any evaluation. This can be achieved by being visible in all classrooms on a regular basis. The principal needs to be seen so often that he/she can walk into any room and the education process continues without missing a beat. Regular classroom visits need to be followed up with specific feedback to both students and teacher.

### Administrative/Management Proficiencies

#### Organizational Management

The organizational management of a school covers a broad spectrum of responsibilities. Once a clear vision is established, the principal must lead the staff through a comprehensive school planning process. Robbins and Alvey (1995) say that this can be done easily by asking three questions: What are we doing well? What do we need to improve? and What are we going to focus on next? Education can always improve every facet of the process. Comprehensive

planning enables the staff to focus on the most pressing issues and then evaluate the success of their efforts. Planning can take what seems to be an overwhelming job and divide it into more manageable, achievable pieces.

Once a comprehensive plan is in place, the delegation of responsibilities becomes simple, the need to establish action teams to focus on the major areas identified within the plan needs to take place. Glasser (1992) believes that the quality of solutions and work increases when teachers work together. His acronym is TEAM, Together Everyone Achieves More. This can only happen when you truly trust and believe in the staff and give them the ownership in the decision making process. You must also be willing to accept recommendations that may be different than your own.

Administrators must also lead the parade which supports the use of research to make program decisions. Carnine (1995) says that you must first decide if using research is feasible.

You do this by deciding if your problem at hand requires replacement or refinement. Replacement issues are often broad in scope and effect the entire learning community so research is an important piece in the change process. Refinement issues can usually be handled at the level of the problem.

The influx of technology helps us as administrators in organizational management by effectively and efficiently completing day to day tasks. You must give support staff the latitude to change what needs to be changed in the daily operations of a school, and who better to do this than the people responsible for the tasks.

### Fiscal Management

"We must put our money where our mouth is." In other words, your budget decisions need to be based on the vision of the school. These decisions need to be made with staff input and ownership. The staff will take more responsibility in the

spending of resources when they are the ones who help create the allocations. Site based decision making is allowing stakeholders in schools to have more power over the direction of their funding. Even though this requires much more work, the benefit will be moving closer and closer to the vision of the school.

### Conclusion

Finding the appropriate balance of all these responsibilities seems to be the art of administration. Greene (1994) says when teachers and students share in decision making, respect and trust each other, and have healthy communication, morale, productivity and job satisfaction increase. That is all we should want as administrators! Moving relationships from "power over" to "power within" will make me a catalyst in the creation of a quality school.

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