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# A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

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## Abstract

I decided to pursue a Master's Degree in Educational Administration after being encouraged by my school principal. She saw in me several personal characteristics she believed necessary for an elementary principal: a willingness to undertake tasks requiring time and organization, the ability to work with others to implement ideas into actions and complete a task, and the possession of ample communication skills to relate to a diversity of publics. Since I had been very active in several community organizations and was willing to assume some leadership roles in the school setting, this seemed a natural route for me to take.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts in Education

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by

Sally A. Strottman

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I decided to pursue a Master's Degree in Educational Administration after being encouraged by my school principal. She saw in me several personal characteristics she believed necessary for an elementary principal: a willingness to undertake tasks requiring time and organization, the ability to work with others to implement ideas into actions and complete a task, and the possession of ample communication skills to relate to a diversity of publics. Since I had been very active in several community organizations and was willing to assume some leadership roles in the school setting, this seemed a natural route for me to take.

I began to prepare for educational administration with the belief that an effective administrator could envision what needed to be done, could encourage staff and community to undertake the "vision" and could reap the rewards with all concerned. I have to admit I didn't think of it as being complicated. In my past experiences with community work, I

led a group of volunteers working toward a common goal. The goal was clearly defined.

In the beginning I believed that administration was a top-down approach to achieving the vision. However, I have learned through my classes at the University of Northern Iowa, my own readings in journals, and recent experiences, that administration is a real collaborative effort. The administrator works with others, whether they be other administrators, staff, or parents to develop goals and make plans for achieving those goals. The vision, for which all strive, is dependent upon the staff's expertise, their commitment to teaching, and the nurturing of their assets and/or potential abilities. The administrator is the catalyst, the driving force towards vision attainment.

I believe successful administration needs to seriously consider the following areas as important: vision/staff

3

development, situational leadership, school cultural network, curriculum development, and human relation skills.

Building Shared Vision through Staff Development

The common goal is so important to the final outcome in the school setting. I believe the administrator should involve staff, parents, students, and the community in developing a clear statement of where the school should go based on the input from these people. Creating the vision, the focus and the agenda, the leader must have an understanding of how to build commitment to that shared vision, and the know-how to communicate it to staff, students, parents, and others (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1984). The leader acts as a catalyst, orchestrating all actions toward the goal. Principals in quality schools have established effective communication with all segments of the school and community (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1990). They focus communication on school goals and priorities. They

work with task groups in the school to utilize the vision in setting goals. Effective principals work in collaboration with others to identify the decision-making procedures that promote the school goals. Envisioning goals is the core and essence of the best leadership (Gardner, 1990; Bennis, 1989). The vision helps unify and focus energies within the school setting.

In order to focus energies I believe the administrator should be a staff developer (NAESP, 1990). I will involve the staff in shared decision making. Enabling and empowering teachers gives them the responsibilities for decisions that directly or indirectly concern them or touch their students' experiences. Through staff development, teachers acquire the appropriate information to wisely assist in decision making. With my support as principal and the support of colleagues, teachers build confidence in achieving school goals. Their

personal and professional assets are utilized toward a common focus--the vision of the school.

In teacher development, teachers are viewed as adult learners actively involved in bringing meaning to their work. Four guidelines which I want to remember were outlined in the article "The Principal's Role in Teacher Development" (Leithwood, 1990). The first guideline was to treat teachers as whole persons. An effective principal considers their professional, psychological, and career cycle developments. As a principal I will try to be sensitive to all three developmental dimensions. I will seek to identify the various stages of development in my staff at yearly conferences. This could be done in conjunction with goal setting and/or discussion in the three areas. This opportunity would allow us time to plan for interventions designed to promote growth. Daily interactions with staff members also provides opportunity to recognize faculty in a more informal manner.

The second guideline was to establish a school culture based on norms of technical collaboration and professional inquiry. It has been found that teacher development strategies seem most likely to be successful within a school culture in which teachers are encouraged to reflect on their own practices, share ideas about instruction, and try out new techniques in the classroom (Leithwood, 1990). I believe the principal should establish those norms in the interactions with staff members, students, and parents. I will try to capitalize on the assets of each teacher and involve them in peer teaching and mentoring opportunities. Especially during evaluation conferences, I see the opportunity to assist teachers with reflection upon teaching practices and interactions with others. It would be an opportune time to identify options for sharing their expertise. Whenever the occasion arises I would involve teachers in shared decision making, creating the need to plan and arrive at solutions with colleagues.

Carefully diagnosing the starting points for teacher development was the third guideline. I can use teacher evaluation procedures to accomplish this. The evaluation needs to be based on criteria or goals that teachers and principal feel are relevant to teacher development and the improvement of instruction. I believe it should be an incremental process that builds on teacher attitudes, knowledge, and skills. The evaluation should be a collaborative effort between teacher and principal.

And finally, the fourth guideline suggested recasting routine administrative activities into powerful teacher development strategies. McEvoy's (1987) article states that subtle, sometimes opportunistic, teacher development strategies are used by effective principals. I would feel comfortable using the following suggestions: (a) informing teachers of professional opportunities, (b) disseminating professional and curricular materials to teachers with a

personal follow-up, (c) soliciting teachers opinions about their classroom activities as well as broader school issues, (d) focusing teachers' attention in staff meetings on specific themes, (e) encouraging peer observations, or (f) inviting outside instructors to expand concepts or specific practices. I also believe that teachers should receive support or recognition for efforts above and beyond the average expectations.

After the vision is initiated, the administrator needs to utilize the principles of situational leadership to monitor and encourage progress. With shared decision making the principal's new role involves consultation and collaboration with staff. Change and growth occur slowly and need plenty of nourishment to be sustained (Lewin, 1945). That comes from the administrator, but should eventually come from all involved in the process. It takes a lot of nourishment from a

variety of sources to promote change and growth (Maeroff, 1988).

## Situational Leadership

Today's effective leadership in school necessitates a variety of techniques to identify and resolve problems (NAESP, 1990). Blanchard and Hersey (1976) have introduced a theory of diagnosing the demands of a situation with relation to the amount of direction (task behavior) and the amount of socio-emotional support (relationship behavior) a leader must provide. Task behavior is the extent to which a leader engages in one-way communication by explaining what each follower is to do as well as when, where, and how the tasks are to be done. Relationship behavior is the extent to which a leader engages in two-way communication by providing socio-emotional support, psychological strokes, and the facilitating behavior.

Situational leadership theory is based upon an interplay among (a) task behaviors, (b) relationship behaviors, and

(c) the maturity level that followers exhibit on a particular task that the leader is attempting to accomplish through collaborated effort. Maturity refers to the capacity to set high, but attainable goals, willingness and ability to assume responsibility, and the experience/education of the individual or group.

According to situational leadership theory, leadership style moves through four dimensions: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating based upon the maturity level of the individual or group. Effective leaders must know their staff well enough to meet their needs at the specific time and place. Over a period of time, individuals and groups develop their own patterns of behavior and ways of functioning. The leader must gradually adjust leadership styles to meet the needs and levels of development.

Gradual developmental changes are a result of planned growth and the creation of mutual trust and respect. Working

together to set goals, creating plans to make visions become realities, evaluating steps along the way and supporting positive measures help build confidence. The skills in situational leadership, if successfully employed, enable the school to reach its goals. Achievement comes about because of the joint efforts of many people.

I feel comfortable with the theory of situational leadership. After 20 years of experience working with students of all ages, I realize that I have been employing situational leadership. Students have given me many opportunities to shift between the four dimensions of directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. I also feel my roles as Human Growth and Devlopment Resource Committee Chairperson, Science Curriculum Coordinator, and Public Relations Chairperson for Waverly-Shell Rock Education Association have given me ample opportunities to employ these techniques with adults. Assuming leadership roles with

community functions like the Waverly Parks and Recreation Commission, the Heritagefest Board of Directors, and the Environmental Night Hikes, I have worked with a number of people all working toward specific goals. I discovered that being able to adjust leadership styles among groups was a matter of success as well as survival.

School Cultural Network

One aspect of leadership that I never considered much before was the school "cultural network." As defined by Deal and Kennedy (1982), "cultural network" refers to the informal means of communication within an organization, the "carrier" of values (basic concepts, and beliefs shared within the school environment.) Realizing where staff members are coming from (understanding the roles they play within a hidden hierarchy of power) enables the administrator to work more effectively to get things done or to understand what's going on within the school.

Understanding the subtle cues of a school culture can enable the administrator to create task groups utilizing the skills and abilities with which people feel the most comfortable. A strong culture emanates a system of informal rules that allows staff to know exactly what is expected. "A strong culture enables people to feel better about what they do, so they are more likely to work harder" (Deal & Kennedy, p. 16). I believe a strong leader needs to provide enough structure so that staff understands the values and beliefs that guide actions within the school (Joyce, 1990). Communication on a daily basis, both informally and formally, can affect how teachers interact with the administrator and with each other. Communication can clarify what actions teachers take and define their commitment to the task (Leithwood, 1990).

Deal and Kennedy (1982) believe that the most successful administrators strive to create guiding visions, shape shared values, and provide leadership for the people with whom they

work.  Administrators need to work hard at understanding,

building, and managing the culture of their school.  I believe I

can cue in on the special relationships formed with the school

cultural network and tap those natural energies to work

toward a common goal.  The establishment of a collegial

climate can advance the prospects of staff development and

shared decision making.  It can utilize the school cultural

network to the advantage of staff, students, and community.

True collaborative cultures are deep, personal, and

enduring (Fullan, 1990).  I realize that working within the

school culture can be a complex and, in some cases, extremely

difficult task even for a strong leader.  However, I believe that

I have the stamina and perseverance to work toward that goal.

### Curriculum Development

Being a school leader means making decisions that affect

children every day.  It means choosing curriculum and programs

that enhance learning and build self-esteem.  It means making

school a special place where students find meaning for their lives today and the skills they need to be successful tomorrow. In the leadership role I hope to be the catalyst to implement new technology and practical hands-on experiences into the school day.

Students need to become actively involved in their own learning expanding beyond the traditional textbooks and traditional activities of reading, math, and language arts. The world of tomorrow requires different skills: working together with others in planning and implementation, being flexible with lots of technology, utilizing creative higher-order thinking and communication skills (Walker, 1985; O'Neil, 1992).

Curriculum is an on-going process that involves teachers, students, and community input. I really feel that the community needs to become active in teaching and working alongside its future leaders. Community and educational

leaders need to plan for interactions that enrich the curriculum at all levels. Partnerships with community businesses would provide academic input and enrichment as well as financial support for educational programs. Parents should be involved in classroom activities sharing information, expertise or assisting with instruction. The effective principal places high priority on organizing the human and material resources that provide an outstanding school program and inspire students for life long learning (NAESP, 1990).

Basic knowledge needs to be emphasized and performance standards ought to be fixed for all students. Having taught elementary students at various levels, I do know that all students don't achieve mastery at the same rate or in the same way. As a leader I would seek to bring about a more flexible time component for those students requiring more time and/or assistance in meeting common goals. Creative planning for use of staff and budget would be a challenge for me to meet the

goal to provide students with ample opportunity and time to be successful. "All kids would learn a whole lot better if there was a constant interplay between learning content and applying it" (O'Neil, 1992, p. 21).

Higher level thinking skills must replace memorizing facts. The old paradigm of education must accommodate the current and future needs of students (Walker, 1985). This requires flexibility and cooperation from all the decision makers in planning for curriculums to meet those needs and skills. The obligation of the administrator is to keep alive a long range vision that encompasses these goals. Utilizing higher level thinking skills in shared decision making the administrator models the techniques he/she wants to see in others.

My task as administrator is to encourage these challenges. The administrator needs to be the catalyst to work among staff members, district leaders and community

resources to direct the development of a curriculum that reflects the shared vision and provides learning experiences to make that vision a reality (NAESP, 1990). Working with staff members the administrator plans for development in the area of technology. The principal models and encourages the use of new technology as a part of staff meeting and communications. Whenever the opportunity arises to recruit new faculty, I believe it would be advantageous to select persons experienced with innovative technology.

Above all, as a leader, I need to create a support staff to share the excitement and help implement the program (NAESP, 1990). Nurturing staff members with special expertise and developing interested personnel with necessary skills, the principal encourages others to share the responsibility of instructional leadership. The success and confidence of these leaders would be crucial to the success of the total program.

Today's students come to school with various needs, interests and levels of maturity. Curriculum must provide these students with experiences for teamwork, higher order thinking skills, technology and communication skills. In the past the curriculum focus was on content acquisition and ability to score high on standardized tests (Hughes & Ubben, 1989). While certain basic skills do need to be mastered, the curriculum should also address relevant needs/issues in the student's immediate world. The development and implementation of the school curriculum should be an on-going process by teachers and administrators with community and student input (Brandt, 1989). The organization of the total school program should accommodate all students with reference to their needs, abilities, and interests (Fitzpatrick, 1991).

## Human Relation Skills

### Administrator-Teacher-Student-Community

According to Max DePree (1989), leadership begins with an understanding of the diversity of people's gifts and talents and skills...diversity allows each person to contribute to the corporate effort. He goes on to say that leadership requires us to think about the "leader-as-steward in terms of relationships: assets and legacy, of momentum and effectiveness, of civility and values" (p. 12).

Human relationships within the school environment certainly do encompass diversity. To effectively guide the school, the principal interacts daily with teachers, students, and community members all with diverse needs, talents, and abilities. Building a caring relationship and a "trust" rapport among these parties comes from consistent interactions that project feelings of confidence and goodwill. Keeping in mind the common goal of educating young children, all parties must

work collaboratively to make decisions that focus on students. When the principal believes in and trusts staff, students, and community personnel there is a shared sense of direction that moves the school forward.

Understanding the concept of culture within the school allows the principal to work more effectively. My philosophy about education is that the principal can maximize the learning of children (and adults) by being warm, humane, and acutely sensitive to the needs of children and adults. My experience indicates that when teachers feel satisfied with their performance, students usually reap the benefits. The positive cycle continues when students have high achievement and teachers are reinforced.

In order to ensure consistent communication and encouragement I would develop and implement an action plan as a major vehicle for communicating my beliefs and values and developing commitment to the shared vision. The plan

would involve formal and informal activities. Some formal actions would include developing a system for staff evaluation, recognition of achievements by staff, students, and community supporters, weekly bulletins, monthly newsletters, regular meetings that provide time for socializing, professional sharing sessions, instructional development and school business. Informal actions would include creating a social and school climate committee, parent support groups, eating meals with teachers and students, promoting school celebrations, writing notes, making informal classroom visits, and encouraging professional staff development.

## Student Behavior

Even when human relationships are optimum there will be student behavior problems. A discipline policy needs to be developed by all those concerned. Effective administrators have high expectations for all students and enlist the support of others in meeting common goals (Hughes & Ubben, 1989).

Effective schools research depicts such schools as orderly places with high expectations and a caring environment (NAESP, 1990).

I believe a quality school provides a well-planned code for the social development of students. The written code of student behavior should be developed through a collaborative effort of teachers, parents, students, and administrator. It should be well understood by all involved. Parents and students need to be informed, in writing, of expectations and consequences. Teachers need to have a consensus understanding so that consistent policies can be maintained throughout the school. The administrator and teachers are available to offer support and counsel when needed (NAESP, 1990). Overall, responsible student behavior and citizenship should be emphasized and recognized in a positive light. Responsible behavior should be evident to visitors in the school building at all times.

As principal I feel it is important to follow through with consequences for irresponsible behaviors. Keeping records and ensuring consistency will be a challenge. Having an efficient method of recording infractions and monitoring children with discipline problems, a well-defined plan for behavior modification can be implemented. Students' misbehaviors need to be dealt with quickly, fairly, openly and without recrimination (Hughes & Ubben, 1989). Expectations and consequences need to be clearly stated and understood by all concerned.

It is easily understood why discipline is top priority in many school environments. The diversity of needs, abilities, and maturity levels in students affect the school climate. Students are complex beings governed by many forces outside the school setting. A strong instructional program geared to individual needs and a strong shared vision is the foundation for good discipline (NAESP, 1990).

The principal should use all preventive measures to steer away from capitalizing on negative discipline (McCormack, 1989). Developing "care" teams, involving school counselors with student advisors and guidance sessions, coordinating AEA-personnel and human service people, the principal devises a proactive approach to management of discipline. Rewarding and recognizing positive behaviors encourages good role models for others to follow. A daily plan for recognizing those behaviors should be developed by teachers, students, and principal and time should be given for recognition each week.

## Summary

I have identified five areas I feel are particularly important to my performance as the principal of an elementary school. These areas are (a) vision and staff development, (b) situational leadership, (c) school cultural network, (d) curriculum development, and (e) human relation skills. An effective leader recognizes the gifts of all individuals and

nourishes those individuals to lead others toward a common goal. I believe the effective leader keeps the shared vision in sight and encourages others daily.

I look forward to coordinating the abilities and services of teachers, staff, students, and community to meet the needs, abilities and interests of the students in my school. Administration of the elementary school is a challenging and demanding position and I am eager to try it!

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