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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

At some point in the near future, I hope to become the administrator of an elementary school. As I have continued the course work that will eventually qualify me for this position, a number of questions have surfaced in regards to this end goal. What type of role model will the principal need to be to the students, staff, and the community as a whole? What would the principal, as educational leader, want to accomplish? How will the teachers and principal work together to arrive at these decisions? And, will I be able to manage the day to day complexities of running an elementary school building? I hope to use this opportunity to reflect on these questions. Some of the areas that will be considered are my values, goals, beliefs, and visions and how these will affect a first year principal.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

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and Counseling

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Gary L. Whitmore

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At some point in the near future, I hope to become the administrator of an elementary school. As I have continued the course work that will eventually qualify me for this position, a number of questions have surfaced in regards to this end goal. What type of role model will the principal need to be to the students, staff, and the community as a whole? What would the principal, as educational leader, want to accomplish? How will the teachers and principal work together to arrive at these decisions? And, will I be able to manage the day to day complexities of running an elementary school building? I hope to use this opportunity to reflect on these questions. Some of the areas that will be considered are my values, goals, beliefs, and visions and how these will affect a first year principal.

### Values

During the past few years it has become more and more apparent that the school is expected to teach more values to the students we have in our care and to be looked upon as the provider of role models that our students look up to. Studies have shown that the growth of single parent households are on the rise. Robinson (1981) estimated that the number of mothers that worked outside of the home increased to 75%, and Lubeck (1989) concurred. These figures are based on the premise that the incidents of female head of households are on the increase and that welfare and child support did not cover the living expenses to enable mothers to not work outside of the home in order to support their families.

This in turn leads to an increase of students going home to an empty house. These latchkey kids are sometimes left to their own devices for an extended period of time. In fact, school occupies less than 10% of the life of a child, leaving 90% away from the role modeling that school can provide. This gives children fewer role models from the adult community and leads to more outside influences that impact negatively on their development. With this lack of positive adult influence, the community is looking increasingly towards the schools to provide education in values and to provide role models.

I feel that I can be a good role model to these students and to the community as a whole because of the values that were present while I was growing up. Granted, I did come from a two parent family, but one in which both my mother and father worked outside of the home. This taught me that I had to help with the duties of the house at a relatively early age. This is not to bemoan the fact that I had responsibilities as a child, but to illustrate that I am empathetic to these students who are going home to a house where both parents are working outside of the home and the child has responsibilities to fulfill.

Past experiences have ingrained in me a respect for authority figures that might be encountered, yet these experiences have also taught me not to fear persons in these roles. As a principal, I feel that I can earn the respect of the students and faculty that I will be working with without having them fear me or the position that I hold. I hope to do this by

showing my respect for their ideas as a matter of practice. If a student comes to the principal with a problem, I will want to listen to him or her before making a snap decision regarding their problem. This became apparent in regards to the staff during my practicum experience when a problem arose with the staff. My mentor chose to wait for the following day to render a decision. This allowed both parties to regain composure and greatly deflated the conflict. In approaching staff problems in this way, I hope to demonstrate my respect for them. I will also listen to any suggestions that the staff has without belittling them or their ideas. If I do not listen, I will not be showing them the professional respect and courtesies that they deserve.

#### Principal as a Role Model

When entering my first principalship, I plan to encourage teachers to have lessons that deal with what is right and wrong. This is done, surely, to a certain extent in classes today, but my hope is to emphasize this on a problem solving basis. If the teachers present this in terms of problems that are facing students now, hopefully this will help them when they get in a similar situation later. The principal can be a good role model to the student in this area by being a law abiding citizen. This would include, to the best of my abilities, following the laws of the city, state, and federal government. This, again, goes back to my upbringing and the role that the church played in our family. My hope is to model to

students and the community as a whole, the idea that obeying the law is positive and not as "uncool" as it seems to be looked upon in today's society.

In an address to the Harvard Club, former secretary of Education, William Bennett (1986) discussed this issue by indicating that he had never been particularly pleased with the term "values." Rather, the word "character" was more to his liking. To build upon this he quoted Webster in defining character as "strength of mind, individuality, independence, and moral quality" (p. 1). Mr. Bennett continued on with such traits as "thoughtfulness, fidelity, kindness, diligence, honesty, fairness, self-discipline, respect for law, and taking one's guidance by accepted and tested standards of right and wrong rather than by, for example, one's personal preferences" (p. 1-2).

Mr. Bennett also goes on to allude to a Gallup poll that showed Americans "overwhelmingly" indicating that they wanted schools to "first, teach our children to read, speak, think, write, and count correctly; and second, to help our children develop reliable standards of right and wrong to guide them through life" (p. 3). This writer agrees with this poll, even though, unfortunately, Mr. Bennett does not provide the specific numbers that would substantiate the desires that parents want the schools to perform.

One of the questions that Bennett replies to is that many of the critics indicate that, as educators, we cannot reach a consensus as to what



to teach. Granted, we will not agree on everything, but as to the basics, he felt that we could build upon "moral literacy" instead of reinventing the wheel. He suggests going back to the classics that we have already been using such as teaching about honesty (Abe Lincoln), courage (Joan of Arc), and compassion (A Christmas Carol, or The Diary of Anne Frank) (p. 10-11).

The Citizens for Excellence in Education (CEE) have yet another point of view as to what they feel should be the responsibility of the school to teach (Simonds, 1994). They feel that the public schools should stick to what "they are intended to do: teach reading, writing, history, science, geography, English, grammar, Composition, mathematics, patriotism, democracy, and our American culture" (p. 14). They indicate that the schools have done more to undermine what they want their children to learn about morals and character than any good they might have provided (Simonds, 1994).

After reading the speech that Mr. Bennett gave, it is easy to see that this is something that he very strongly believes in. It is something that needs to be addressed in today's schools and soon. As a principal, it is indicative to provide guidance to the staff as to which direction we're moving toward. This will need to be a team effort and not one in which the decision is handed from the top down.

## Goals

The second question that was posed at the beginning of this paper was what I, as the educational leader of a school, would want to accomplish. One of the most important aspects that a principal can and should foster is that of setting goals.

Each individual in the school, as well as the school as a whole, needs to have a goal or vision to look and strive toward. If one is not working toward a predetermined goal, one is standing still, or even worse, sliding backwards. A goal that I have for myself would be to show that if a person wants to do anything of value with their lives, they must set goals and spend some time and energy working toward them. This can either be personal goals or those for a group (such as for the entire school). If the goals are personal, staff as well as students need to be shown how to go about setting them. If they are for the entire school, then they must be in which everyone involved will benefit from. The school must be shown that there will be times that risks need to be taken in order to achieve these goals. As a principal, and thus the educational leader, I will need to encourage the settings of goals; help in any way to see that they are for the benefit of the school overall; monitor the progress; build-in a system of safety nets to encourage risks and thus, hopefully, success; and evaluate the end results. I am certain that these goals are achievable and hope they can be in practice in the building in the future.

### The Principal as Community Leader

An area that is important to the goal setting process is the role of the principal in encouraging the interaction between the school and the student's home environment. I feel that this is an area where the teachers and the administration need to work together to enlist support from the community in a united and well-planned effort. This is one of the decisions that can, and should be decided upon together.

In Hammond, Indiana, the school and the community are working together to set goals and improve their schools in such a manner (Casner-Lotto, 1988). One way in which they promote involvement is to implement "pyramiding." This encourages more active participation by involving more people in their School Improvement Process (SIP). It works by having the core members of the team (the core being made up of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other concerned members of the community) regularly meet with five to seven of their peers and give them information while at the same time gathering feedback to bring back to the SIP team. These people then each meet with five to seven peers and the process continues. If this is an area that the school team organizes well and is willing to work toward, it can be very successful for the school.

Another aspect of the principal as a community leader was discussed between myself and my mentor. My mentor is heavily involved in local charities, service organizations, and local politics and is a very visible personality. In the observations that I made during my practicum

this became very obvious as I was fortunate enough to attend a breakfast meeting and tour that my mentor provided to a service organization from the local community. Although not as many members attended as had been indicated prior to the tour, my mentor was pleased and was able to add their support to the school and add them to the list of volunteers and contributors that were already in place. It was evident that the principal was proud of our school and that he enjoyed having these people come in and see it. During our discussion he made it evident that this was an important aspect of his job and one that he enjoyed immensely.

I feel that a principal must be visible in the community that surrounds the school. An excellent way to do this and to become better acquainted with the business community and its leaders is to belong to a service club or to become involved in local government. This allows the community to become acquainted with the principal and also benefits the school by allowing the school a different avenue to access the community. It also demonstrates to the community the interest that the principal and the school has in the whole community. I plan on becoming involved more in my community within the next year because of the interest I have in the overall development of the community. I plan to continue this practice when I begin my first principalship.

## Beliefs

The third question at the beginning of this paper was how the principal and teachers can work together to achieve the beliefs that they hold in common? One belief I feel would be important to hold in common is that all children can learn to a certain extent. I am sure that my point of view in this belief comes from my background in special education. If everyone were not able to learn something, why would they be in a school setting and not educated at home? I am sure that some of the actions that these students learn are quite small and may seem unlikely items to be considered learning, but if a severely disabled student learns to chew when they did not before, is this not learning? Surely the vast majority of students under my responsibility will function at a much higher level, but I strongly feel that even the lower functioning student is able to learn. Hopefully, this attitude can be emphasized to the teachers and to the other students.

An interesting point that could be pointed out to teachers would be to point out an article by Wright (1994). In this article, the author promotes the idea of figuring the average grade for a student by using the median score rather than the mean grade. He discusses how this does not penalize the student for the weakness they might have at school, but instead emphasizes and builds upon their strengths. Wright goes on to point out at least seven "beneficial byproducts" including motivation, higher expectations without hurting grades, lessening of the anxiety for the

students along with improved attitudes, and the easier process of figuring grades by the teacher (p.724-725). His closing message contains a key phrase that should be given to teachers: "By providing choices and by using the median to reward success, we can make 'success for all' a reality" (p. 725).

### The Principal as Site Leader

Another belief is that teachers and parents should be allowed to participate in the decision making process that guides and maintains a school. This goes back to the first question posed in this paper of what the educational leader should want to accomplish in an educational setting? Having worked in the past in schools and on committees where this was practiced, it soon became apparent that the teachers and parents seemed to be much more interested in the decisions and the outcomes that were involved. Personally, this contributed to a feeling of becoming a more productive and effective teacher in working with parents and the community, and that the decisions were of a greater overall benefit to the school as a whole. This attitude can hopefully be passed on to the building in the future.

Moreover, we can make a difference in a child's life when the parents are involved in the child's academic career. I feel that this is another area where the administration and the teachers can work together to decide the best approach for their individual school. According to

Fox (1993), the press has been saying that the problem lies with the schools, but he puts the responsibility back on the parents and the attitudes that they displayed continually in various hearings that he, as a school board member, observed. So much good can result for students, but only if we form a working partnership with parents. The only way to do this is for the teachers and administrators to demonstrate how and why they should become involved. If we, as professional educators, can show parents specific ways in which to participate, then we can show them how it will benefit their children. Such simple ways as being willing to volunteer in various programs (e.g., oral reading to younger students, PTO's, fund raisers, committees, cross walk monitors, etc.) would not only benefit the schools, but the individual students to see their parents becoming involved and showing an active interest in their education. Hopefully, this will encourage the children to strive and finally achieve more in school.

An example of the last two beliefs in action is taking place in Colorado Springs, Colorado. In the spring of 1992, the district established a policy of how to go about selecting textbooks for their district (Yaffe, 1994). It involved a committee of teachers as well as parents in the process. The district consciously included as many publics as possible, including a representative from the "religious right." This was done to give every group a voice from the beginning of the process, instead of waiting until there was a problem that would need to be mollified after the fact. This seemed to have been well thought out by the district before they gave

the approval to implement. Not only for the community involvement, but with basic public relations also being kept in mind. Inclusion of all identifiable publics in your community is common sense and basic survival.

Another aspect that was appealing with the approach in Colorado Springs was the guidance supplied by the administrator during the first meeting. This group eventually consisted of three parents, four biology teachers, the assistant principal, and two students from the current and past biology classes. He then allowed the committee to complete their assigned function even when controversy arose dealing with creationism and evolution. It was the committee that eventually worked this out while the principal remained informed on their progress.

#### Other Critical Concerns

The aspect of being informed addresses the last question stated at the beginning of this paper, which dealt with whether I will be able to deal with the complexities of the everyday running of an elementary school building? In looking at this question, it becomes apparent that it would only benefit the principal to be as informed as possible in as many facets of the overall school as he/she can realistically handle. In discussions with the mentor of my practicum experience, it became apparent on his feelings towards the importance of staying informed. In the school in which the practicum was completed, it is the practice to have teachers as



well as parents participate in various committees. In the beginning, the principal attended every one of the committee meetings to set the structure and direction of these groups. There were also only three to four groups meeting at this time. Since then various committees have been added and the principal attends these until each can continue on their own. After each begins to take on more and more responsibilities, the principal phases himself out and then monitors from a distance. I agree that the administrator needs to be as informed as possible to run the school as efficiently as possible.

Another way in which the principal can add to the overall process of running an elementary school building is to be as visible as possible. Getting out into the classrooms and hallways on a regular basis lets the staff and the students know that you are interested in them and also alleviates some of the apprehensions of having the principal stop into the classroom on an informal basis. This also helps deflate the fears during the evaluation process by having the teachers and non certified personnel accustomed to having the principal in their classes. This person will know the principal and be able to talk more effectively during the pre-observation and debriefing conferences and be much more open and willing to accept suggestions from the principal if an improvement plan would be warranted.

The final aspect to be addressed is to have the administrator know and be aware of as many publics in the community in which the school is

situated, especially in the immediate area surrounding the building itself. It would also be a positive situation to have as many of these publics involved in your school as can be handled. This is not to say that the school should overburden itself by having too many people coming into the building on a day to day basis. Knowing who these people and groups are and having a working relationship with them would help if conflict arose in the future between the school and community. This is also beneficial to the school if it finds that it is in need of something the community can either provide or possibly join with the school to obtain. This was recently evident in a local school's efforts to build a new playground. The school and a large part of the community joined together to provide the materials, funds, and labor needed to build this playground.

### Vision

"Creating a vision forces us to take a stand for a preferred future" is the way in which Block (1987, p. 102) discusses the importance of having a personal vision. And Fullan (1993) continues to pursue this by indicating that vision must come from within and asks us to examine and reexamine why we become teachers in the first place.

A personal vision of a school is where active student learning is taking place on a day to day basis, professional growth of the teachers is a reality on a regular basis with the teachers being dedicated to this and where there are decisions being made in conjunction with the home.

Barth (1990) describes this as "a community of learners" where everyone, from the students to the teachers to the administrators are actively engaged in teaching and in learning. Technology will be accepted and encouraged in the classroom and various avenues of this technology will be sought out to fulfill each students independent learning style. It is very apparent that these goals will not occur over night, but by sharing these visions with the staff, hopefully they will begin to share in the ownership and together we can assure the implementation throughout the school with the support of the community. I am looking forward to beginning my principalship and these values, beliefs, and visions will be an integral part of that career. Standing by the values, goals, beliefs, and visions that have been discussed here, I feel that I can be the difference in being an effective principal and a non-effective principal. This in turn will make the difference in whether I am a leader of an effective school or not. As a leader of an effective school, the faculty, and more importantly the students, can only benefit. I hope to be the change agent that the school I become the administrator of will need to expand their role into the next century.

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