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

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

### Abstract

Jack Bowsher says- a system serving only a quarter of its patrons well. A system which seemed immune to its own failures. I don't see it as an indictment of the system, rather I see it as a challenge. My study in the graduate program has given me a perspective and sense of direction which can be used to make a difference. My graduate program, twelve years of classroom teaching and three years of administrative practice have been combined to develop a vision that, according to Jamieson and O'Mara (1991), reflects best practice, accepting individual differences, valuing people and providing choice. I have come to see a fundamental need to shift the responsibility for school improvement from teachers and students to the principal (Finn, 1986).

**A PERFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY 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  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education**

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**by  
Clayton Michael Wilcox**

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Entitled: A PERFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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## INTRODUCTION

### Leadership, the Principalship and School Transformation

We all assumed that the fact that only 25 % of our classmates did well and enjoyed school was a normal part of the education process. The next quartile did not enjoy school as much as the top quartile, but they struggled through and seemed, by graduation, to have survived the system that constantly reminded them that they were second best. And we thought it not unusual for 50 % of the class simply to drag through 12 years of schooling. These students really hated school because they were frequently told that they were the bottom half, the lazy ones, the failures (Bowsher, 1989, p. 1).

Jack Bowsher saw a system serving only a quarter of its patrons well. A system which seemed immune to its own failures. I don't see it as an indictment of the system, rather I see it as a challenge. My study in the graduate program has given me a perspective and sense of direction which can be used to make a difference. My graduate program, twelve years of classroom teaching and three years of administrative practice have been combined to develop a vision that, according to Jamieson and O'Mara (1991), reflects best practice, accepting individual differences, valuing people and providing

choice. I have come to see a fundamental need to shift the responsibility for school improvement from teachers and students to the principal (Finn, 1986). From courses like "Introduction to Educational Administration", "Supervision & Evaluation of Instruction" to "School and Community Relations" and "Technological Applications in Educational Administration," the central agent for establishing real and lasting change within the school has been the principal.

Upon reflection, I have come to realize that it must be the principal who steps forward as the change agent. It is the principal who makes his/her school more than the systematically failing institution seen by Bowsher. If indeed we accept the principal as the change agent, then we must also perceive the principal as a leader. Society is demanding change and leadership must respond to the demand for change. Studies have indicated (Jamieson, and O'Mara, 1991) that "the number of less educated people in the workplace is increasing, as is the number of people who are considered functionally illiterate, that is, who have not mastered basic skills well enough to meet personal goals and societal demands such as holding a job, balancing a checkbook, and understanding a newspaper." We cannot, as educators, morally defend continuing the same practices which have lead us to the current situation. According to a 1988 Business Week article, "Most 17 year-olds in school cannot summarize a newspaper article, write a good letter requesting a job, solve real-life math problems, or follow a bus schedule" (Jamieson,

and O'Mara, 1991, p. 129). In my experience, many educators and others in the larger community believe this to be true and see a great need for systematic reform and institutional change. The imperative for change is real and present, it will take the leadership skills of a new generation of principals to turn failing schools around. If one statistic could be used to illustrate the failing of our schools, it would be the number of students who leave school before they have acquired the skills necessary to be functional in today's society. Jamieson and O'Mara (1991, p.23) note that among eighteen to twenty-one year olds in 1988, 13.6 % dropped out of high school. Dropout rates were even higher among people of color, who make up a large segment of new entrants to the work force. For African-Americans, the rate was 17.5 %; for Hispanic-Americans 23.9 %. In some major cities with high concentrations of people of color, student dropout rates range from 35% to 50%.

### Need for Effective Leadership

The principal's role in the school of the future will change substantially. The principal exists today, in large part, in a hierarchical structure designed to facilitate communications between those who teach and those who don't. This is, like it or not, one of the principalship's main functions.

It is a thankless job- you are damned from below by those you are trying to direct and damned from above for not getting the

directions right. The principalship is the focal point for much of the dissatisfaction in today's organizational life. In trying to rationalize its own existence, it has created rituals and in pursuit of these often questionable rituals has perpetuated a mythology of rationality and modern management techniques even where it doesn't work. It is often a barrier to improving effectiveness since it acts as a filter of enthusiasm, ideas, and initiative from below" (Deal, and Kennedy, 1990, p.186).

I see principals confronted with a new paradigm as they work to restructure the schools of the twenty-first century, places fitted with the realities of highly decentralized workplaces. Sparks (1991), reported that restructuring meanings "changing rules, roles, and relationships within the schools and between schools and their communities" Sparks also reported in his conversation with Phil Schlechty that school reform is not the same as school improvement, as school improvement implies that you are going to do better than which you already do, whereas reform implies that you will accomplish things differently.

My experience at the university and in the workplace has helped me to shape an organizational format dissimilar from what I had previously envisioned. Deal and Kennedy (1990) suggested the organizational format in their book, Corporate Cultures. First, principals will structure and negotiate appropriate teaching teams of "empowered" teachers (semi-autonomous units). Second, given the



increased voice of these teachers in the day-to-day affairs of the schools, principals will serve as brokers to balance the legitimate self-interests of the students, the teachers, the school and the community. Third, on behalf of the district, principals will work at making individual teachers, staff members and teams aware of, and proud of, being part of the larger whole. Thus, principals will be both the bearers of culture as well as its promoters (Deal and Kennedy, 1990). Without principals playing this culture-bonding role, the educational benefits of the restructured schools will be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

How exactly will principals achieve this reformed vision of education? I believe the answer lies in leadership and leadership training. My coursework at the University of Northern Iowa, twelve years in the classroom and my current position in the Division of Human Resources Management for the Waterloo Community School District has allowed me to re-examine my thinking about schools and to look closely at the leadership dimension in the schools, particularly as it pertains to the new principal who faces the prospect of comprehensive school transformation. This paper will focus on my thinking about changing school cultures, in an effort to effect significant change to impact more positively educational processes and outcomes.

## Leadership

I believe successful school leaders recognize that true and lasting organizational change, which allows the organization to move in a positive direction, is not built through renegade acts of defiance rather lasting organizational change is built through commitment to a future-oriented vision, (Kotter, 1988) the development of ownership and through the recognition of, and deep respect for, the aspirations of others. Effective leaders must possess the ability to inspire through thought or action. Effective leaders share their passion and elation, their intensity and appreciation of a challenge, they demonstrate kindness and caring, and they must even show their ability to love unconditionally. "Leadership is not a spectator sport. Leaders don't sit in the stands and watch. Neither are leaders in the game substituting for the players. Leaders coach." (Kouzes and Posner, 1987, p. 200). School leaders must be energetic and enthusiastic. I believe leadership emanates from a strong belief in a purpose and a willingness to express that conviction. Leaders in tomorrow's schools will not control others through application of a one-size-fits-all policy and procedure. Tomorrow's leaders will enable and empower others to act in continually changing sets of circumstances to the benefit of the organization. The principals who actually place themselves in positions of educational leadership within their schools, districts and communities will have come to the profound conclusion that leadership is not a place, but a process that

involves continuous development and utilization of skills and abilities over the long haul. Sergiovanni (1987) pointed out that successful leaders see organizations differently. He stated,

When they open the clock, they see a mechanism gone awry. The wheels and pins are not connected but instead turn and swing independently of each other. These leaders recognize that, in the real world of organizational functioning, enterprises operate far more loosely than we commonly assume and certainly more loosely than the organizational chart depicts and more loosely than we are willing to admit.

During a course entitled "Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction" in which I was enrolled during the summer of 1991, Dr. Robert Decker, Professor of Educational Administration, at the University of Northern Iowa, noted skills that effective school leaders possess, in addition to, Sergiovanni's "loose organizational vision". Decker's list of effective skills included:

- (1) ability to communicate;
- (2) expertise/experience;
- (3) empathy/compassion;
- (4) sense of mission/solid values;
- (5) commitment/consistency;
- (6) perseverance tempered with flexibility;

- (7) willingness to admit human frailties;
- (8) organizational skills;
- (9) persuasive/motivational skills; and,
- (10) ethical/professional demeanor.

According to Decker, these skills provide some of the "tools" necessary to assume a leadership position in the restructured school.

However, the challenge of school leadership is not simply in knowing or even possessing the characteristics and virtues that I've identified through study and reflection. The challenge, as John Gardner, former cabinet secretary and founder of Common Cause, has put it is not to find better values but to be faithful to those we profess. I would amend Gardner's idea only slightly. The challenge, as I perceive it, is not to find better values but to *examine* and be faithful to those we profess. Put another way, true school leadership involves more than just "talking the talk" of school reform. True leadership means that the school leader must "walk the walk" of school reform. If a principal values truth, then he/she must be truthful; if a principal values respect and fairness, then he/she must be respectful and fair in all of their daily actions. I have come to realize that while we often speak of core values like truth, honesty and respect, which "guide" our schools, we rarely "see" those values played out in the larger or institutional sense of the school setting, what we "see" is how the values manifest themselves in the opinions, attitudes, preferences, desires, fears, actions and strategies that

comprise the daily lives of the people in the schools.

To profess to have a organizational ethos which values and celebrates life-long learning and not as a principal develop a culture that supports a "community of learning", (Barth, 1990, p. 162) is both hypocritical and educationally bankrupt. To speak of empowerment and then not make the resources available to truly empower is merely paying lip service to a trend. Professional reading, work responsibility and the class entitled "Administrative Applications in a Field Setting" has helped to focus my thinking on a set of core values (Deal and Kennedy, 1990) as they pertain to educational leadership and school reform. According to Kotter, (1990) leaders have:

- (1) a vision of what should be, a vision which takes into account the legitimate interests of all people involved;
- (2) a strategy for achieving that vision, a strategy that recognizes all the broadly relevant environmental forces and organizational factors;
- (3) a cooperative network of resources, a coalition powerful enough to implement that strategy, and
- (4) a highly motivated group of key people in that network, a group committed to making that vision a reality (p. 19).

I have come to value the concept of a school as a community of learners (Barth,1990), where people accept individual differences and in fact, celebrate diversity for the strengths found in it. I value a school or district where people themselves are valued because of their basic human dignity and are then provided choices which develop them as individuals and as members of the learning community. I have come to value collegiality, where arbitrary lines of power are lost to task/outcome oriented teams. I have also learned to value humor because schools are funny places.

In addition, I have also begun to examine the congruence between my views on leadership and school/cultural change to see if they are consistent with my values and daily practice. There seems to be dynamic tension building as my vision takes shape. To me this is personally exciting. I can best describe this professional development as tension between identifying and preserving what works and identifying that which must be cast aside, but is culturally so ingrained, that casting it aside or changing the past practice appears impossible. "Change is also hampered by resistance and the difficult process of individual transition" we must remember that schools are foremost human environments, "Resistance is quite natural" (Jamieson, and O'Mara, 1990, p 176).

Not all professional educators welcome or accept change. In fact, here in Iowa, people are content with the status quo, many people find security in the traditions which have left us first or second in the nation in terms of school achievement as measured by

a variety of standardized testing services. Jamieson and O'Mara have identified some of the reasons people resist change:

- 1) they are pleased with or prefer what is currently in place;
- 2) they may fear personal loss;
- 3) they may lack information or understanding about the change;
- 4) they may feel criticized or blamed for the way things were being done as though they were responsible for the need for change;
- 5) they may feel resentment for not having input into the change;
- 6) they may feel cautious due to a lack of trust or respect for the change initiators.

While many people, especially emerging leaders, recognize the rationale leading to resistance to change, they also see and feel the overpowering need to begin the change process.

### Empowerment: Creating A Professional Climate

Through my experience, employment and research, I have come to believe that the greatest strength of any successful organization rests in the people who occupy leadership positions within the organization. I have also come to believe the real work of

any organization gets done by those people closest to the service delivery point (Tucker, 1988, p. 45) and only rarely are these people thought of as leaders, in the traditional sense. In education, those who teach are the ones closest to the delivery point. Hence, the work of the educational organization gets done by teachers in the classrooms throughout the district. This dichotomy presents a very real problem for educators, our greatest strength lies in leaders, who are removed from the work of the organization by a structure that has survived a century of assault. Let me interject here, that I do not mean to discount the effort of support staff. In their own time support staffs provide services that, at a particular point in time, are the work of the organization and should be viewed as equally important to the successful operation of the school or district.

However, this paper concerns itself with the relationship between the principal and the teaching staff. If teachers are to be allowed and empowered to make decisions which make them more effective in the work of the organization, then empowerment must be defined as providing education (giving direction to act) , enabling (giving authority to act) and resources (both human and financial.)

Creating opportunities where situational teacher leaders could emerge has been a long and difficult process for me. It has not come about through a site or district wide initiative. It has occurred because I have believed in the ability of teachers to control their professional destiny. Many of the pieces fell together through trial and error, some through direct challenge and design, others through



accidents of fate. I have been extremely fortunate to serve in the capacity of Phase III Project Specialist for the Waterloo Community Schools for the past three years. I have often said that Phase III, Iowa's Educational Excellence Act, (House File 499) has benefited me personally in ways that those who conceptualized the legislation intended, but only rarely saw. I have served in a quasi-administrative role; designing, developing and monitoring a program which allows teachers to take risks, to be innovative and to be entrepreneurial. I have had opportunity to see best practice and dismal failure. I have had opportunity to both dialogue with and work with leaders in in the field of education and business. But most importantly, I have been given the opportunity to test my skills of leadership and the application of my vision in a field setting. While I was not able to simply impose my will, I was placed in a situation that allowed me the freedom to express my ideas in a powerful forum. If the ideas that I expressed were sound and well thought out, then there was the very real possibility that they would be put in place and I would have the opportunity and responsibility to monitor their effectiveness. In regards to Phase III our original district plans were exercises of control over professional growth opportunities for the teaching staff. The original plans reflected my view and that of several other key central office administrators who shared a vision which we assumed was automatically shared by those who choose to participate in the program that we created. Teachers had to apply for every opportunity to address both student

and professional growth needs through a committee structure which had very little contact with or knowledge of the request or rationale behind the request. It was only as a variety of factors came together that we moved away from this autocratic model in favor of a more progressive and responsive Phase III program. I believe that one of the central factors of this transition was the philosophical change that I was undergoing. I have moved through an educational process and work place mentorship which continually stressed moving the authority and responsibility closer to the individual or individuals that have the perspective necessary (Bacharach, Bauer, and Shedd, 1986) to make the right decision. I have been rewarded as our Phase III program has evolved and changed to reflect that practice. For instance, the district has seen positive growth in terms of the professional growth of the teaching staff, expanded opportunities for students, a renewed curriculum and the birth of several programs that will have long term implications for the future of education in the Cedar Valley area.

Today Phase III activities are largely a matter of simple choice for Waterloo teachers. We have placed the decision-making authority for professional growth opportunities with the individual classroom teacher. The decision to attend a professional meeting, to enroll in a university course or to meet with colleagues in an extended day centered on professional growth is now a personal professional decision in the daily life of the classroom teacher in Waterloo. It is my belief that decisions such as these, were not only important for

teachers to make, but imperative if we are to give teachers a sense of control in their professional lives and perhaps more importantly, if we are to see the most appropriate decision being made in terms of the needs of the service deliverer. My role in the process has changed from that of a "controlling" project manager of unrelated events, to one of an enabler, organizing and brokering internal consultancies and educational experiences as teachers gain and share their expertise with colleagues across the district through self-initiated, needs-based, professional improvement.

This work-related change, I believe, represents the type of change that principals also must make and accept. The principals of the future must enable and empower their teachers and support staffs. The service that principals provide is not one of decision maker but of providing clear information in a simple and concise fashion, upon which a decision can be made. From this type of leadership, teachers can then make many of the decisions now made by the principal, based on information and an articulated vision, shared by the stakeholders.

At the 1990-1991 American Society for Training and Development International Conference held in San Francisco Bill Byham, President of Developmental Dimensions International, spoke of the lightning of empowerment. The lightning Byham spoke of is the energy that bursts forth within an organization when people are empowered. Byham has written a fable set in a magic land called America, where a normal guy named Ralph Roscoe lived. Ralph

worked in Department "N" of The Normal Co. in Normalburg, USA. For years, Normal had been a leading manufacturer of Normalators, those amazing devices that are so fundamental to society as we know it. As one might expect, just about every thing was normal at Normal, including the understanding of who was normally supposed to do what: managers did the thinking; supervisors did the talking and employees did the doing. So begins Zapp! The Lightning of Empowerment. As the fable develops, a new way of doing the business of leadership/principaling emerges through the recognition of what it is that people really want in their workplace if they are to make a difference.

Jamieson and O'Mara (1991) echod the message delivered in Byham's fable. They advocated that people are looking for new alternatives from their place of employment and the leaders who run them. They suggest the following changes to the workplace and I concur:

- 1.) **Recognition for competence and accomplishments.** People want to be seen and recognized, both as individuals and teams for their value, skills, and accomplishments. They want to know that their contribution is appreciated.
  
- 2.) **Respect and dignity.** This value is focused on how people are treated, through the jobs they hold, in

response to their ideas, or by virtue of their background. The strong support for this value indicates that most people want to be valued for who they are. They want to be valued.

3.) **Personal choice and freedom.** People want more opportunities to be free from constraints and decisions made for and about them by authorities. They want to be more autonomous and able to rely more on their own judgment.

4.) **Involvement at work.** Large portions of the workforce want to be kept informed, included, and involved in important decisions at work, particularly as these decisions affect their work and quality of life.

5.) **Pride in one's work.** People want to do a good job and feel a sense of accomplishment. Fulfillment and pride come through quality workmanship.

6.) **Lifestyle quality.** People pursue many different lifestyles and each person wants his or hers to be of high quality. Work policies and practices have a great impact on lifestyle pursuits.

7.) **Financial security.** People want to know that they can succeed. They want some security from economic cycles, rampant inflation, or devastating financial situations. This appears to be a new variation on the desire for money, not continual pursuit of money, but enough to feel secure in today's world, to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle, and to ride out the bad times.

8.) **Self development.** The desire here is to continually improve, to do more with one's life, to reach one's potential, to learn and grow. There is a strong desire by individuals to take initiative and to use opportunities to further themselves.

9.) **Health and wellness.** This value reflects the aging workforce and increased information on wellness. People want to organize life and work that are healthy and contribute to long term wellness. (Jamieson, and O'Mara, 1990, p.29).

Leadership is about developing and focusing the energy Byham called "Zapp" while balancing all of the other human aspirations of those in the schools. The principal must provide the time (enabling) for developing and implementing a participatory management model. He/She must have secured the tools for implementing those

decisions (resources). To some, giving up the “right” to make decisions and the “control” of resources indicates a loss of one’s ability to lead successfully. Empowering and enabling should never be confused with loss of leadership potential. In fact, the most effective leaders, those whose organizations experience the greatest degree of success, measured in terms of profitability or in the difference they make on the community in which they are located, are the leaders who truly empower. For these leaders, their time can be spent on vision building and developing a sense of commitment to that vision. These leaders have the time to seek out individuals who have the skills and competencies needed within the empowered organization. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts wherein opportunities to make decisions is given to individuals selected to make decisions. In contrast the leaders who chose to hold on to power, protecting and guarding their “right” to lead, order needed or not needed reading workbooks and other supplies, and to monitor the comings and goings of professionals who are forced into unprofessional activities.

Sergiovanni (1987) discussed situational leadership and schools lead by multiple leaders in his book The Principalsip: A Reflective Practice Perspective. Site-based decision-making or shared-decision making, which involves the teaching staff in decisions that closely affect them, concerns the redistribution of “power.” According to Segiovanni, (1987) it is the “power to” as opposed to the “power over” that makes a difference in leadership

styles. "Power to" leadership regards putting decision making where it most appropriately rests, which upon reflection, appears to me to be closest to the delivery point. I am aware that some decisions are best made from a "centralized" location and that some decisions must be made away from the delivery point to expedite matters. I am committed, however, to moving as many decisions as possible "back" to the point of service delivery. I believe that the point of service delivery is where the greatest investment in successful implementation is located. For example, teachers charged with teaching reading are best able and most vested in selecting appropriate materials such as basal curriculum materials or whole language/literature based materials, to teach identified objectives.

### Responsibility for Decision-Making

My experience in the course "Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction" coupled with work experience has caused me to reflect upon and add to the formula for an empowered workplace that I have conceptualized:

$$\underline{\text{Education (E}_1\text{)} + \text{Enabling (E}_2\text{)} + \text{Resources (R}_2\text{)} = \text{Empowerment (E)}}$$

In reexamining my vision for changing the school culture, I see the need to add an appropriately designed responsibility factor. I've chosen to place the term measurement under the formula, as the



divisor, which allows us to find the impact of the model and to address the perception that, “if it doesn’t get measured, it doesn’t get done” (Decker, 1991).

$$\frac{\text{Education (E}_1\text{)} + \text{Enabling (E}_2\text{)} + \text{Resources (R}_3\text{)}}{\text{Measurement}} = \text{Empowerment (E)}$$

This model now allows the leader or “keeper of the values”, to establish a point where they must step in to signal the need for celebration or to refocus the individual or team on the shared vision, values or goals of the organization.

Through continually assessing the organizations or individuals movement towards the goal, the principal can document incremental change and measure the continuous improvement of the organization. Assessment or evaluation focused on incremental change (professional growth), must be rooted in a belief that no matter how good or proficient we are in teaching or learning, we may still improve. To my way of thinking, this mindset focuses principals on the positive aspects of growth, not only in individual terms but for organization growth as well. It allows us to move away from a defect-oriented (Shrestha, 1990) atmosphere filled with distrust and instead presents a growth-oriented program which implies that teaching and learning are complex and continuously evolving activities that cannot truly be mastered. This view of continual improvement also places performance evaluation in the

light of a continuous process as opposed to isolated events of a single outcome. This vision embraces the concept of an effective and interactive formative assessment process, coupled with summative documentation of professional improvement as discussed in the course "Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction." A corollary benefit to this type assessment process is that it also indicates the areas for additional training (staff development) and individual growth. The principal is presented with the opportunity to be perceived as an educator who models new techniques, effective strategies or inspiring scholarship which are all focused on the already articulated vision.

In the course "Seminar: Administrative Applications in Field Settings" Dr. David Else explained visioning as stating what you believe schools can and should be. I was excited by this model of leadership. I have begun to reflect on my future as a school administrator and the role that visioning plays in a continuously improving school. Vision is dynamic and constantly changing as one examines what is and its relationship to what should be. It is being able to digest the impact a changing community poses and articulating a pathway which addresses the changing community, while attending to the "health" of the entire school organization.

The school that I see myself administering, will be a school that enjoys the very real "Zapp" of an empowered workforce. "Situational leaders" will be directing work teams in positive problem solving strategies and activities. These teams will be made up of

teachers, support personnel, students, and community members. They will be focused on a shared vision, driven by a commitment to living and working in a community of learners. There will be learners of all ages working hand-in-hand. Everyone who starts in this school will finish in this school, unless they move away, for those who dropout can always drop-in. We will not be bound by trivial time-based student outcomes like, "You should have learned this then." We will live out values that reflect our respect for learning as a life long process, each other and the diversity that we represent.

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