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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

My perception of what an administrator is and does has gone through a great evolution since my first encounter with a principal as a student in junior high school. When in junior high, the principal was someone you didn't want to go see. This changed in high school when I thought the principal just took care of discipline problems, organized things, and sat in his or her office waiting for problems to arise. The evolution continued when as a teacher, I saw the principal as the boss, the disciplinarian, the controller of the budget, the problem-solver, the evaluator and the person in charge of scheduling. However, as an aspiring administrator, I have been exposed to a whole new framework of complex roles, duties, and skills needed and performed by the principal of the '90. In this reflective paper, I will concentrate on three areas necessary to be a successful principal: manager, communicator, and leader.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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In Partial Fulfillment

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by

Craig Josh Youel

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My perception of what an administrator is and does has gone through a great evolution since my first encounter with a principal as a student in junior high school. When in junior high, the principal was someone you didn't want to go see. This changed in high school when I thought the principal just took care of discipline problems, organized things, and sat in his or her office waiting for problems to arise. The evolution continued when as a teacher, I saw the principal as the boss, the disciplinarian, the controller of the budget, the problem-solver, the evaluator and the person in charge of scheduling. However, as an aspiring administrator, I have been exposed to a whole new framework of complex roles, duties, and skills needed and performed by the principal of the '90. In this reflective paper, I will concentrate on three areas necessary to be a successful principal: manager, communicator, and leader.

I became aware of the vast amount of responsibility placed on the principal's shoulders through my previous course work. The success of the school hinges on the administrator's knowledge and ability to handle the challenges and problems facing him/her. Today's administrators have numerous demands facing them that administrators of the past didn't encounter. Some examples of these new problems are, dysfunctional families, student drug use and abuse, state mandates, open enrollment and the technology explosion. Including

these and innumerable problems coming in the future, I feel that my previous experience as a teacher (eleven years) and the educational administration graduate program at the University of Northern Iowa have given me the confidence and base of knowledge to take on the challenges, opportunities, and demands awaiting me as a new principal.

Manager

The course, Administration of the Secondary School, emphasized the importance of good managerial skills. I know new principals must possess the skills to make the school run smoothly or they'll be labeled a poor administrator from the beginning. The first impression the teachers have of a new principal is good if everything goes like clockwork at the start of the school year. When this happens, the principal will have the image of being well organized and effective.

I believe the top two tasks the principal should concentrate on as manager are: scheduling and problem solving. Hall and Parkay (1992) included scheduling and problem solving in the top ten internal issues facing beginning high school principals. Sevgiovanni (1987) also stated that, "Management refers to budgeting, planning, scheduling of school events, and running a smooth, attractive and efficient school" (p. 296).

Schools today are offering students more and more activities and programs. With all these options, there

are bound to be scheduling problems. I will use a plan my current principal, Tom McDermott, uses in handling scheduling problems. Once a week, activity people (coaches, directors and sponsors) meet to go over the events of the coming week. This helps eliminate conflicts for time, space, and people in several, sometimes overlapping, programs. Another advantage of these meetings, is that communication and cooperation is initiated between people and programs that are sometimes at odds with each other.

The ability to be a good manager can be a help to the teacher and the overall instructional process. Duke (1982) believed establishing orderly classrooms depends to a great extent on the establishment of an orderly school environment. A principal can provide an important instructional support function for the teachers by collaboratively setting, publicizing and enforcing the rules .

Problem-solving is another skill a principal, as manager, must grasp firmly. Carkhuff (1973) stated, "Problem-solving is one of the skills essential to effective human functioning. The ability to resolve problems insures survival. The ability to resolve problems increases the possibility of growth" (p. 1). Everyday, the principal is confronted with dozens of unexpected problems. If the school is going to be successful and grow, the principal has to be able to

handle them. This idea was confirmed when McDermott commented that the vast majority of his time is spent dealing with unplanned questions, problems, and situations of the day. (T. McDermott, personal communication, fall, 1991)

The problem-solving model I have adopted will give me a method to attack almost any situation that arises. This model suggests using the following steps to deal with a problem: (a) diagnose and define the problem, (b) gather and analyze the facts, (c) develop alternatives, (d) evaluate alternatives, (e) select best alternative, (f) implement the decision, (g) evaluate the decision. I believe this problem solving model, which I obtained from my graduate course work, is a sound method in attempting to solve the many situations confronting me as an administrator. (J. E. Albrecht, personal communication, summer, 1990)

Communicator

We live in a society that is highly information oriented. Local, state, national, and even world news can be seen or read as it happens everyday. People in a school system, however, sometimes can't communicate to the public or even amongst themselves. The principal can play a key role in the positive communication process if he/she has the ability to communicate with the public, the staff and the students.

According to Musella (1982), these communication skills are defined as the capability to "...listen effectively...respond clearly and directly...write and speak appropriately for the situation...prepare clear, concise reports and records...interpret instruction ...describe and explain information, concepts, ideas and instructions" (p. 30).

Mazzarella (1982), reiterated these characteristics, "Most true leaders enjoy social participation and do a lot of it, have an ability to communicate and have well-developed communication skills, and are good listeners" (p. 29).

There are numerous reasons for principals to possess effective communication skills. One reason public communication is needed can be found by simply opening a newspaper and reading one of the many negative articles that appears on student test performance, teacher incompetency, or school system failures. These types of negative publicity make it vitally important to get every bit of good news exposed at every possible opportunity.

Vann (1992) stated:

Some principals are the envy of their colleagues... they never seem taken by surprise by parent request or complaint in public forums... instead, they handle potential problems or embarrassing questions quickly, long before they

might come to the attention of district office superiors, the board of education, or the community. (p. 30)

In the class, School and Community Relations, we discussed and analyzed the many ways to communicate with the public. At first, everyone came up with the old reliable school newsletter. Before we were finished however, the list included: news releases, radio and television programs, brochures, posters, slogans, phone contacts, open houses, meetings, and exchange days in a person-to-person program. In my opinion, one of the most important ideas presented was: when you communicate with the public, do a quality job of representing yourself and your school; and head off bad situations and publicity before they happen. (N. McCumsey, personal communication, Fall, 1989)

Communication inside the school must include rules and processes developed and enforced by the staff and principal. Not all topics and subjects can be openly shared and discussed with the entire staff, student body or public. The principal is at the center of all information and must know what to do with it, when to do it, and who to give it to. This is paramount. I find the method used at North Tama High School for getting information out on private matters works well. When a situation arises that is confidential in nature, all the

teachers are personally handed a sealed note from the school secretary which explains things. This way accurate information is spread quickly with great confidentiality.

A new area of communication has developed from the method of decision making in schools. It wasn't long ago that the principal made all decisions in the form of directives from the top down. My recent experience in Dolan Training at North Tama has taught me that this isn't the best method

Gardner (1988) agreed by stating:

At this moment in history, participative management is an interesting initiative on the part of business... they discovered that things like quality control, productivity, morale, have to be dealt with locally, not in corporate headquarters... the educational system must take a page from industries' book. (p. 75)

Peel and Walker (1994) also found the following characteristics common to empowering principals: "(a) a strong commitment to shared decision making, (b) a willingness to take risks, (c) a willingness to communicate, and (d) an awareness of potential problems" (p. 42). I am convinced that the whole movement toward decentralization of initiative and responsibility is appropriate. If principals can let teachers make more decisions, we will have better and more viable schools.

Communication with students is really the same as with teachers as far as the administrator is concerned. The principal has to be fair, honest and consistent. Plus, the principal has to really care about the students and let them know that he/she cares. This can be done simply by talking to students on a first name basis if possible, in the halls, at ball games, and on the streets. Just showing an interest in students goes a long way toward positive principal-student relations. Quite often the principal is the person that just punishes or suspends students from school. I know from coaching with and talking to my present principal, he believes that he gets a lot of positive progress from his coaching responsibilities. The students see him in a different situation when he's coaching compared to when he's in the halls at school. They see him as someone there to help them with something they like and want to do (T. McDermott, personal communication, October, 1992). As an administrator I hope to make a habit of trying to catch students and teachers doing something right or well and praising them for their effort and behavior.

Leader

The remainder of this reflective paper deals with the definition of an effective leader, the important personality traits and behaviors involved with effective leadership, and the role of the instructional leader.

Brennan, Klopff, and Scheldon (1982), noted, "An effective principal usually is not difficult to spot because the gauge of principal effectiveness is the school itself" (p. 35). I define an effective leader as a person who can motivate, influence and move people in the direction he/she wants to go. Also, a leader must have a clear vision of where they are going and what they want to accomplish.

Gardner (1988) stated:

Leaders tend not only to look far out ahead, but also to look out to the sides more broadly to see the context in which their system is functioning, how it relates to other systems in the environment, to history, and to the economy. (p. 70)

During the class, Administration of Secondary Schools, I developed my own list of personality traits and behaviors that I feel leaders should have. On the issue of leader verses manager, I agree with Gardner (1988), "Leaders are preoccupied with vision, values, motivation and renewal. If they're doing their job, they are more leaders than managers" (p. 70). Kotter (1988) said it another way, "There is nothing inherent in the management function that requires the same strong interpersonal skills that seem to be so necessary for leadership" (p. 32).

My list of leader characteristics are:

1. Leaders are people-oriented. They are outgoing and successful in dealing with people.
2. Leaders have good social and interpersonal skills. They are able to work with different kinds of people having various needs, interests and expectations.
3. Leaders are able to communicate. They can speak and write effectively to a diverse range of individuals or groups.
4. Leaders are good listeners. They show caring, absorb ideas, and respond to what is said.
5. Leaders have a vision and set goals. They don't waver from their goals, and they make opportunities to accomplish them.
6. Leaders are secure. They aren't threatened by new ideas or confrontations.
7. Leaders are very active and vigorous. They make things happen, get things done, and don't let up.
8. Leaders are firm but flexible. They have to do what is right but be able to change when change is needed.
9. Leaders are good managers of time, materials, problems, money, and schedules.
10. Leaders are good instructional leaders. They know, assist, develop, and evaluate, the instructional process. (L. Kavich, personal communication, Summer, 1990)

Lemley (1987) offered sound advice about having a strong foundation in developing leadership skills.

If the following, simple and elemental behaviors are in focus, consistent positive results can be achieved:

1. Clearly define limits and constraints of the jobs in the organization.
2. Make certain the members of the organization understand their jobs.
3. Define the school's mission clearly for the members of the organization.
4. Help the members of the organization understand what everyone in the organization does.
5. Encourage autonomy in ideas and discussion in the organization.
6. Give the members of the organization ample opportunity to make decisions.
7. Educate members about time management.
8. Let the members of the organization develop friendships with others and you.
9. Learn the value of reward systems.
10. Learn how to function as the cheerleader in the organization. (p. 58-60)

Even though these two lists have some similar ideas, I believe they are two very different and important lists for an aspiring administrator. I intend to have these lists posted prominently in my office to keep my vision clear and focused on leadership.

I conclude my paper with what I think is probably the most important job a principal does -- instructional leadership. A quote from Morphet, Johns, and Reller (1982) summed it up well, "Although educational

administrators must be knowledgeable in matters of school management, their basic focus must be on educational leadership. Their key contribution to education is not that of efficient management but an effective instructional program" (p. 333). As instructional leader, I believe the principal has to know the learning process, develop it in his/her staff, control and monitor the process, and finally evaluate it for success.

When it comes to the learning process I firmly believe in the idea of students learning to learn. Goodlad (1983a) reported that,

We forget 80 percent of the factual information we collect at school within two years. Therefore, school should be the place that students learn how to present themselves with knowledge. Thus, learning how to learn is the key for long-term usefulness. (p. 32)

It is ironic that recently North Tama developed and adopted a new mission statement, "Opening doors to life long learning." This fits well with the idea of students learning to learn.

Students must be able to teach themselves some specific instructional strategies if they are going to be able to be life long learners. As principal I hope to stress and reinforce the active use of these strategies used by teachers: (a) group activities, (b) open-ended questions, (c) oral reports, (d) individual work,

(e) problem solving, (f) brain storming, (g) research projects, (h) role playing, (i) speeches and (j) essay tests.

One of the reasons students want to go to school is to socialize. Goodlad (1983b) confirmed this idea, "...the most important thing about school for the children and youth who go there is the living out of their daily personal and social lives, not academics" (p. 9). Lecturing doesn't allow any interaction among the students. However, if the goal is to have students capable of communicating ideas through writing and speaking, having the abilities to use and evaluate knowledge, and develop positive attitudes for further learning, the teaching process must change. The change must make students active participants, with the ability to present themselves with knowledge. Tye (1984) stated, "...learning is both more meaningful and more likely to be permanent when the learner has an opportunity to make it his or her own through both active involvement and reflection" (p. 30).

It is useless to try to teach a student who doesn't care about school or learning. Glasser (1987) made the point, "...at least half of all students are making little or no effort to learn, because they don't believe that school satisfies their needs" (p. 656). If a student finds no sense of belonging in school, no sense of being involved in a caring school, that child will pay

little attention to academic subjects. Add to that, a feeling of having no power or freedom in what they are doing in the classroom, and it's no wonder students don't like school or learning. The answer to this problem is establishing a classroom where the students feel they are wanted and cared for, that they have some power and freedom in what they do, and that school is a fun place to be. I know as a teacher, I get caught up with pushing hard to cover and learn all the material and I sometimes forget about enjoying ourselves and having some fun along the way.

The best place to attack student apathy is in the classroom with the teacher. As a principal I hope to be the catalyst and motivator for solutions to this problem. Students must know that the principal and teachers care about them and that each student's education is important.

A good way of giving the students some power and freedom is to let them help set the rules for the classroom and school. They will develop some ownership and pride if they have some say in the rules. I have seen teachers do this in the classroom. The student council can also do this for the school in general and it has been successful. The principal can be the key person in making some of these things happen. Site-base management is the tool to use in getting the students and teachers involved and committed to what they are doing.

As a principal, I hope I can develop and instill this into the teaching staff. I feel these are truly important concepts and they must be included in the learning process. Inservices for the staff dealing with these concepts are one way I could facilitate integration into the learning environment. Looking for ways of encouraging teachers in my evaluations of them is another way I could incorporate these concepts into the classroom. Finally, allowing as much freedom as possible in the classroom and supporting new and innovative ideas can help instill these basic ideals of a caring, active and goal orientated school.

I want to address career goals as another way of approaching student apathy in school. Too many times I see students go through high school with no idea of what they are going to do after graduation. Without career goals, students won't see the need nor value of an education. I believe if a student has a goal and knows what is needed to achieve that goal, he/she will try harder in school. Goals may change, but the positive attitude will remain

A new buzz word and idea in education today is, Tech Prep. The Tech Prep Program is designed specifically for the apathetic and ordinary middle half of the student population, called the neglected majority. These students may have the skills, but not the desire to go to college. Consequently, these students don't have

career goals towards which to work. Tech Prep gives them a plan and a route to follow for success in choosing a career. Hull and Parnell's (1991) book, Tech Prep Associate Degree: A Win/Win Experience, described the Tech Prep model, "This model, showing all high school students in career preparation, embodies a higher expectation and greater opportunities for the two-thirds of all high school students who are not in a college-prep/baccalaureate plan" (p. 22). As a principal I will actively work to implement a Tech Prep Program in the school system. I can say I'm doing this already, as Tech Prep Coordinator at North Tama High School.

"The development of an effective teaching staff has little to do with luck," according to Duke (1982), "It results from at least three activities in which principals can play crucial roles -- recruitment, inservice education, and staff motivation" (p. 4). Taking the process one step further, I would include making sure objectives and ideas are being reached. The primary sources of checking for these achievements are evaluation and supervision. A skilled principal knows when to use each of these to obtain quality performances from teachers. I hope to be able to decide which method to use in each unique situation.

Evaluation of teachers is one of the most neglected duties of a principal. I state this because of my conversations with my principal and his experience with

the lack of time for teacher evaluations. Evaluation is very time consuming, and time is of short supply for a principal. (T. McDermott, personal communication, fall, 1992) I don't have any solution to this problem, except to be aware of it and try to make evaluation a high priority.

The actual system of evaluation I would like to use has two components; the formal evaluation process and the informal supervisory aspect. These two are very different in process and intended outcomes. The formal evaluation has the principal, observing in the classroom specific times during the year. Some observations would be announced and while others would be unannounced. This evaluation system will include the pre-conference for explaining the process, the visit with scripting and observation, the post conference discussing and evaluating the lesson, and finally the positive comments and suggestions for improvements. The intended goal of this evaluation is support, encouragement and improvement of the teaching process. This evaluation is not to build a case for dismissal; though it can lead to that in some cases.

The informal supervision component consists of the principal dropping in on a class to observe for fifteen to twenty minutes. This will occur in any class and at any time of the year. The goal is not to formally evaluate, but to keep in touch with what is happening in

the school and make myself visible. I want the teachers to know that when I show up in this situation, nothing will be said or written formally as an evaluation. This should be a very relaxed situation that occurs often in classrooms during the school year. I can see many benefits from this in teacher performances, student actions and principal involvement in the school. For example, the principal will be viewed as just another person in school instead of the heavy every time he/she shows up in a class. The principal will also have a better feel and knowledge for what is going on in the school and with the students.

In the class, Administration of the Secondary School Curriculum, I was taught the administrator is the catalyst, the teacher is the manager, and the student is the worker. (J.E. Albrecht, personal communication, summer, 1989) I like this concept from the standpoint that it gives everyone a place, a purpose and some importance in the educational process. The key is getting everyone involved and accomplishing their part of the proposition.

Conclusion

In the graduate class, Introduction to Educational Administration, Dr. Albrecht stated, "that the only reason a person should go into administration is because he/she thinks they can make a difference." (J.E. Albrecht, personal communication, summer, 1988) I hope

to make a difference in young people's lives and in any educational system I am associated with. If I can make a difference and leave a mark (an educational mark) I will have been successful and happy.

I conclude with a quote from James Olivero (1980) "Without leaders, any dream is likely to fade in and out of focus. For today's education, the principal -- more than any other person -- is the keeper of the dream..." (p.1).

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