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A preferred way for leading secondary schools : a reflective essay

Travis M. Axeen
University of Northern Iowa

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A preferred way for leading secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Leadership education is the beginning step for those interested in the challenge of being a school administrator. A school administrator is a leader in the school and in the community. His leadership encompasses many different areas including vision, instruction, organization, collaborative dealings, ethics, and political areas. Leadership education forces students to begin thinking like an administrator and stresses the importance of a school administrator being an educational leader promoting the success of all students. As administrators we want to promote the success of all students. In order to do this a school vision must be formulated. A visionary leader will allow community stakeholders to give input towards this vision since people tend to support ideas they helped create. Then it is up to the visionary leader to make sure the vision is achieved. It may be a good idea for the leader to have smaller goals, which funnel towards the vision statement. This will allow the administrator to gauge whether or not the vision is attainable in the time that was set. Above all, though, the visionary leader keeps the school progressing forward and is positive about the school community.

A PREFERRED WAY FOR LEADING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

By

Travis M. Axeen

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Victoria L. Robinson

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

4-20-06
Date Approved

Robert H. Decker

Second Reader of Research Paper

4/20/06
Date Received

John K. Smith

Head, Department of Educational Leadership,
Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

Leadership education is the beginning step for those interested in the challenge of being a school administrator. A school administrator is a leader in the school and in the community. His leadership encompasses many different areas including vision, instruction, organization, collaborative dealings, ethics, and political areas. Leadership education forces students to begin thinking like an administrator and stresses the importance of a school administrator being an educational leader promoting the success of all students.

As administrators we want to promote the success of all students. In order to do this a school vision must be formulated. A visionary leader will allow community stakeholders to give input towards this vision since people tend to support ideas they helped create. Then it is up to the visionary leader to make sure the vision is achieved. It may be a good idea for the leader to have smaller goals, which funnel towards the vision statement. This will allow the administrator to gauge whether or not the vision is attainable in the time that was set. Above all, though, the visionary leader keeps the school progressing forward and is positive about the school community.

After the vision of the school has been implemented, the administrator must establish a good school environment. The administrator sets the example and then uses his leadership qualities to involve all community members. It is important everyone assists in promoting a good school environment, but as I stated earlier, the administrator is the one who sets the example. The school can be affected greatly by an administrator whose positive leadership skills challenge students to become their best. In an environment that stresses student achievement, students will achieve.

In addition to challenging students to work at their highest levels, an administrator must also become an organizational leader in the school. This leadership quality ensures that the school will run efficiently. The administrator needs to be able to look at programs and determine if they are supporting the school's vision. If it is not supporting the vision, then the administrator needs to be able to cut the program and explain the reasoning behind the cut. Finally, within the organizational leadership context, the administrator needs to be able to push the staff towards better teaching and to inspire different teaching techniques.

Perhaps the most important way to assist with teachers is to collaborate with outside community agencies. There are many members in each school community very willing to help students in the learning process. A collaborative leader finds these people and forms positive relationships with the different organizations. Although there are many willing community members, a collaborative leader will be the one in the community showing interest. Collaboration between schools and agencies benefits the whole community so administrators should strive to join forces with outside agencies. A positive outcome will follow from this collaboration.

An aspect dealing with collaboration is to be able to handle media and deal with others in an ethical manner. An administrator is an ethical leader that must have integrity; otherwise he will lose his effectiveness. There is no formula to determine whether a person is living life in an ethical manner so it is important for the ethical leader to stand by all decisions and explain the rationale for making these decisions. Being fair is also a characteristic of an ethical leader. Fairness is treating all people and all

situations in the same manner without bias. Although this is a difficult task in everyday life, an administrator is an ethical leader and must treat the situations in a fair manner.

The final leadership characteristic of an administrator is leadership in the political realm. This leader is an advocate for all students regardless of background. This leadership quality encompasses the previous in that it is the general leadership skill that administrators must possess. He promotes the success of all students regardless of background and uses positive reinforcement to challenge all students. The administrator must also be able to speak with groups of people to discuss the school's vision. Like any politician, an administrator must be able to campaign with other school officials and community members so that the school is heading in the right direction. Being a political leader will give a certain amount of power to the administrator. He should channel any power he may receive and be able to use this in a positive manner to help the school achieve its vision.

I feel the critical elements that are essential for exemplary educational leadership are involving parents in school, hiring effective teachers, promoting a positive school climate, and promoting teacher leadership within the building.

Parental Involvement

One of the most important leadership skills that a new administrator must attain is in the area of collaboration. This leader collaborates with the parents and the community to build a productive relationship, which in turn will ensure success of all students. In my opinion, parent involvement with schools is a critical element essential of an outstanding

administrator and it is the administrator that must encourage the parent-school relationship.

Parent involvement in schools is generally an elementary school concept. As children grow and move on to middle school and high school parental involvement seems to decline. Reasons for this decline vary. Some parents are discouraged from involvement because of fear of embarrassing their child or the parents believe that they can trust their child more so involvement isn't needed (Leon, 2003). I believe that parental involvement in the secondary setting is just as important as the involvement in the elementary setting because in the secondary schools the children begin to form attitudes and values that will define them. Parents working together with schools can help form the most positive and productive individuals.

As an administrator it is important to let the parents know they do have some input in their child's education. A group comprised of parents discussing important education topics with their school's administrator is an easy first step. When the administrator takes time to talk with parents the parents will feel more involved with their child's education. The input the parents give to the administrator will also be great information the administrator can use to make the school better. Also when students see their parents are a part of their education the students will take more ownership.

Beyond setting up a parent committee, the administrator needs to stress the importance of parent-teacher conferences. The conferences should be set up so that any parents that need to speak to any teacher can do so. I favor the parent-teacher conference set-up where parents go to the classroom and speak with the teacher. The set-up where all teachers sit in the gym is not very personal to me. I think during the conference the

parents need to get know their child's teacher and with hundreds of other people in the room this cannot be accomplished. Giving parents an adequate advance warning about the conferences will ensure more parent participation, also.

Another way to get parents in the school is to invite them to school at various points in the year, possibly after grade reporting periods. Open houses can allow parents to "walk through" their child's schedule. At this time, teachers can go over expectations and rules concerning the specific class or show class projects. I think that parents are more apt to come to open houses because they will be with other parents and they may feel more comfortable in coming to conferences or joining parent committees.

The administrator has a number of things he can do to get parents more involved with their child's school. As stated above, the administrator needs to let the parents feel comfortable in the school by inviting them to open houses, encourage parent-teacher conferences and by starting a parent committee. The more important piece of this parent involvement may be with the teachers, though. The teachers also need to be open with the idea of more parental involvement. The administrator needs to portray to the teachers the importance of getting parents involved with their child's education. The teachers need to see the positive outcome of the open houses and conferences. The teachers can also go a step further with this notion by involving the parents as much as possible throughout the year with their child's progress. Making phone calls to parents and inviting the parents to come in for a meeting with the child will involve the parents in their child's education. The problem most teachers have with parent involvement is that the teachers wait too long before involving parents. The teachers need to reach out to the parents first.

In my opinion getting parents involved with the school will not be a difficult process since I believe that parents want to be involved; they are just not asked. The difficult sell, though, is with the teacher. I feel that if I let the staff know that I am a proponent of parent involvement through my words and actions it will be easier for the teachers to involve parents.

Speaking with a group of parents about this topic of parental involvement with the schools I found that most parents want the administrator to a visible part of the community. If an individual is visible within the community and the school itself, he will be more approachable.

An article dealing with the success of two middle school teachers that involved parents included five important keys to nurturing parent involvement. I believe these five keys are important to involving parents and keeping them involved.

1. Use varied types of personal contacts repeatedly to invite parents' participation.
2. Provide direction for parents by clearly outlining what they can do to help, when they can do it, and how they can do it.
3. Promote ownership and pride in the involvement by including parents in the planning and decision-making processes.
4. Take time to reflect on parents' progress and adjust their efforts accordingly.
5. Acknowledge parents' contributions through personal expressions of appreciation (Halsey, 2004).

The research on parent involvement with schools indicates that the involvement increases student academic achievement and includes higher test scores, better

attendance, better grades and a positive motivation and attitude about schoolwork (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). The research is undeniable; parent involvement is a key for the success of students. Administrators need to make the parents feel important in their child's learning or they will not become involved. The administrator that can successfully collaborate outside resources into the school and stress the importance of parent involvement will lead a positive school and produce successful individuals.

Hiring Effective Teachers

Hiring effective teachers is a challenge that most administrators face on a yearly basis. As veteran teachers retire and new positions are created in a school district, the most important job of the administrator is to hire a teacher to fill the position. The administrator needs to learn as much as possible of the candidate's background, involve others in the decision, and conduct a meaningful interview process to ensure the candidate will be the correct addition to the school. "Hiring is the most important thing administrators do. Teachers actually fulfill the mission the school is all about. Good teachers make school fun and effective for students (Slosson, 1999)." Although a challenging process, the reward for hiring an effective teacher will be evident in student successes.

I think it is important to, first, characterize the type of person that will give all students the opportunity for success. Slosson outlines characteristics of candidates that I find valuable in determining if they truly are the right teacher.

1. Hire happy people.
2. Hire adults who genuinely like kids—all kids—especially hard to-like kids.

3. Hire team players.
4. Hire good instructors who like to teach.
5. Hire people with strong content knowledge (1999).

I think that hiring happy people speaks for itself as positive attitudes breed positive attitudes. Students can pick up on the slightest hint of negativity, so a teacher displaying negativity will affect each child that he or she comes into contact with in a manner not conducive to learning and success. I want to hire a teacher that will help all students, not just those students that are already successful, but also the students that are having difficulties with the concepts or are struggling to keep their disabilities in check. Speaking with teachers or administrators that have been in contact with the teacher candidate can give me insight to this information. The last three characteristics deal with the teacher candidate being able to collaborate with coworkers efficiently. This is important because I believe that teachers become better at their skill by listening to others that have gone through similar situations. Teacher candidates that demonstrate these five general characteristics will be at the top of the list as I look at possible candidates.

Aside from the characteristics, I believe it is important that a process is in place so I can ensure myself that I have hired the right person. Albert Coppola, Diane Scricca and Gerard Connors, all administrators in New York school districts, have developed a 10-step program used to identify the right teacher.

Step 1: Setting Goals and Identifying Needs

Step 2: Recruiting Teachers

Step 3: Establishing Interview Criteria

Step 4: Reading Resumes

Step 5: Forming and Training Screening Committees

Step 6: Interview Candidates

Step 7: Using Rating Scales

Step 8: Demonstration Lessons

Step 9: Decision Making

Step 10: Preteaching Training Program (2004).

First, a school district needs to identify all openings and the qualifications that each opening requires. Then, the district needs to recruit prospective teachers. The most common technique is to advertise in the newspaper or in an electronic database.

Although this method is useful, I would encourage districts to participate in teacher job fairs with other school districts. At job fairs a school district can open itself to numerous teachers at once and can get teacher candidates interested in the school district.

The interview criteria, as stated above, should include the special needs related to the open position. Some positions will require teacher candidates to have certain endorsements or a certain number of experiences dealing with needs of the open position. Also, the criteria may include the number of candidates that will be interviewed. Reading the resumes will be connected with the criteria as I will look through each resume and keep those that satisfy those conditions of the interview criteria.

The formation of the screening committee may be the most crucial step in this process, as the people in the committee will help the administrator with the decision. Having students and teachers on the committee will give different aspects of each teacher candidate. In Sewickley, Pennsylvania, the Quaker Valley School District uses teachers and students on a committee. "Because we want our staff and community to appreciate

the importance we place on teaching, we involve teachers and students in the hiring process. Their participation removes the mystique of how and why a teacher is chosen. Involvement makes the hiring process credible (Longo, 2003).” I believe that getting input from other professionals and students will help with the selection of the correct candidate for the teaching position.

During the interview process it is important that the administration is prepared for all interviews. Just as an administrator is interviewing a teacher candidate the teacher candidate is interviewing the administrator to find out if this would be a suitable place of employment. During this time it is important that the administrator asks questions that are tailored to give responses about the candidates’ strengths, weaknesses, beliefs and commitment to this profession. Asking good questions will allow the teacher candidate to give insight to the previous items without having the candidate stating them directly (Tooms, 2004).

After the interview process, the committee should rate each interviewee based on a predetermined rating scale. This allows each person of the committee to give information without bias from another committee member. Detailed conversations about each candidate will be completed after all have been interviewed.

A relatively new concept being used during interviews is to have the candidate teach a 20-minute lesson in the area of his or her application. This will give insight to interactions with students, preparedness, and overall classroom management and direction. During this process I will be able to see if the candidate is a happy person and is willing to help all students. Although this will be a time-consuming process, I will strive to add it to my interviews.

After the interviews and lessons, the committee will meet to give its recommendation. I will use their recommendation as a valuable tool in determining which candidate I offer employment. Upon hiring a new teacher I think it is important to give the teacher some direction about the school and district by assigning them to a new teacher workshop. In this workshop the new teachers will meet other new teachers, along with some veteran teachers, and be able to tour the building and learn about the intricacies of the school.

Hiring effective teachers is an important duty of all administrators. I believe that if I look for general characteristics of a prospective teacher, that I believe will ensure success of students, and apply that knowledge to a specific set of steps leading to employment, I will hire effective teachers for every open position.

Promoting Positive School Climate

Promoting a positive school climate is a necessary component in school districts everywhere. The climate of a school can either be a positive influence on student achievement or the climate can be a barrier to students not allowing them to succeed. The school climate can also have its effect on the teachers in the building. Many schools have worked for years on promoting a positive school climate but no school has achieved the perfect climate as the process is on going. I believe that promoting a positive school climate is an essential element in school leadership and an element that I intend to push forth and make as many strides as possible with every coming year.

Although promoting a positive school climate is usually an effort begun by an administrator, it is a movement that involves the entire school community—teachers,

staff members, students, parents, and all other people with ties to the learning community (Pasi, 2001). When new initiatives are being set forth by an administrator there tends to be a group of people that are against the initiative. I believe that if you involve all community stakeholders in the process of promoting a positive school climate there will not be any groups that disagree simply because a positive school climate is a need for student success.

A few things that an administrator can do immediately to begin the change to a positive school climate deal with the building itself. Although all schools are different when speaking of the facilities, all schools can choose to have children's schoolwork line the hallways. By having students display their schoolwork the school is promoting accomplishments, a key ingredient to promoting a positive school environment. The administrator can also be visible in the hallways, as opposed to being in his or her office everyday. Greeting students in the morning or between classes builds a sense of community in the building. Lastly, the administrator can make time in the school day to praise and recognize the students and teachers that receive awards or other special recognitions. By doing this it is apparent to the school that good deeds will not go unnoticed and may spark different students or teachers to work more to achieve.

Teacher William Funk-Houser uses three practices that any administrator, teacher or supervisor can use to promote responsibility and create positive, pleasant environments. The three practices are positivity, choice and reflection (Marshall, 2005). Being a positive person, especially when dealing with children, will go a long way in determining how they perceive and act in school. It is difficult to be motivated and productive with people that are negative. Keeping a positive attitude about everything—

class routines, discipline, interactions—will, in turn, produce a child that looks at the positive aspect of all situations. Giving children choice may not be the easiest concept to introduce, especially when dealing with discipline issues. But, if an administrator lets a child discuss the different choices that could have been taken, the child will begin to see that the reason for being disciplined was truly a choice he or she made. When it comes time to punish the student let them offer some ideas, because his or her punishment may be stricter than the administrator. Finally, it is important that everyone takes a step back from situations described above and reflects on it because people can't change others; people change themselves. As an administrator I believe that it will be important for me to display these three practices, but more importantly, share them with the faculty so they can begin to use them with their daily interactions with students. This can be done before the school year begins so teachers can document their progress with students and this will be the beginning stage of promoting a positive school climate.

Looking at success stories and modeling behaviors of successful schools is an idea that I embrace. After reading numerous accounts of different schools' attempts at creating a positive school environment, I believe that Orem High School in Orem, Utah is a school that has made the most strides in a positive environment. As an administrator I will be able to incorporate some of the ideas that Orem High School.

As I stated earlier, facilities in schools are different, but it is how a school utilizes its facilities is the most important. Orem High School has created a warm, inviting environment. Courtyards are used for daily interactions amongst students and there are numerous places in the school where students can work on homework or read a book, but more importantly, the students are able to enjoy the school. The hallways are painted

with school colors, a concept that instills pride in school activities. The principal's office is also atypical of offices, as it appears to be more of an antique shop (Hansen, 1998). It is evident that students enjoy being at the school. A positive climate is produced almost immediately just by the way Orem High School utilizes its campus.

Orem High School does more than just decorate their building to promote a positive school climate. In addition to creating a school where students enjoy being, the school offers many diverse programs in the hopes of having all students join an extra-curricular activity. Other than fielding sports teams, it is important to create opportunities for all students. I also think it is important that students are also able to implement different programs in the school, with administrator approval. If schools are the only ones that implement programs students may not feel that they have a say in new ideas, but if a school allows students to formulate different programs and clubs the students will feel that they have more say in their education. Hansen (1998) finally adds, "Orem believes that school and work can be pleasurable. Joy, a sense of thrill and satisfaction, should accompany work. Unfun places collect casualties. A school with humor is OK."

The final piece to promoting a positive school climate is an issue on the rise in recent years due to tragedies occurring at schools. Children need to feel safe in schools if we want them to be successful. Bullying prevention has come to the top of many school initiatives to ensure that all students are feeling safe in their school. I believe that a school admitting they have a problem with bullying is a crucial first step and a program that evolves from this should rely on a number of components. Schools should have increased supervision during the school day and during times when students arrive and

leave school (Peterson, 2001). Schools should also have a set of guidelines that everyone in the school—administrators, teachers, staff, students, visitors—follows and fair consequences should be set up before so all know what to expect if they are bullying a student or if they are a victim of bullying. Having an effective program in place and making sure all involved in the school are aware of the program will decrease the amount of bullying and will create a positive school climate.

Promoting a positive school climate will ensure that all students in the school are having an equal amount of opportunity to achieve success. The administrator of the school can take small steps in introducing different aspects of a positive climate, but ultimately, everyone involved in the school can improve the climate of the school.

Promoting Teacher Leadership

The realities of today are different than they were 20 years ago. Gone are traditional families. Gone are life-long jobs. Gone is the idea that a high school diploma guarantees a job (Lieberman, 2005). As industry and companies have changed due to the previous circumstances, so should the school system. The principal can no longer be the person sitting in the office making decisions without the input of others. Rather, the principal needs to be a systems thinker, a principal that learns “to see the global picture, to understand how the actions of all players affect the total organization” (Teschke, 1996). From this idea of a systems thinker spawns the concept that principals need to empower teachers to become leaders. In other words, the principal needs to be a leader of leaders.

By empowering teachers principals empower themselves. My first reaction to this statement was giving leadership opportunities to teachers and administrator loses decision-making power, when actually the opposite occurs; the principal will gain more power (Chandler, 1999). The teachers are the difference makers in the lives of the students, so giving teachers opportunities to lead makes sense and should all school administrators implement a concept of teacher leadership.

As a part of an administrative team, I will need to take care of the daily management issues that arise—budget, discipline, reports from the central office, and so on. I will empower teacher leaders to take care of instructional responsibilities such as scheduling, faculty meeting development, professional development, and so on.

At the end of the school year I will meet with other building principals to identify those teachers that we believe will excel in leading other teachers. After identifying the teachers, we will narrow down the list of instructional duties to be completed by the teacher-led groups the following school year. At the beginning of the new school year all teachers will be able to choose which team (or instructional duty) they would like to be a part of. I will expect every teacher to be a part of at least one teacher-led team; what they do with this opportunity will be up to each individual teacher. It is my hope that this teamwork will inspire other teachers to become leaders, which will force me to find new opportunities for leadership. I will allow time during the school day as well as time during professional development for the groups to collaborate with their teammates, knowing that each teacher-led group will have a leader facilitating the group through the meeting. Lastly, it is important that school districts allow teachers to attend workshops at

the local, state, or national level so they may find new ideas and suggestions to bring back to the school (Kelehear, 2005).

The case for teacher leadership, as described by Ann Lieberman (2005) is that of a cosmopolitan rejoinder because, “it supports policies that enable good practice rather than prescribe it; recognize the knowledge, skills, and abilities of teachers; and provide incentives to increase their knowledge.” With this interpretation of teacher leadership, teachers will assume various roles, thus expanding the role of a teacher—a leader who makes a difference in schools. Among the different roles and responsibilities, three appear critical:

- Challenge the dominance of tests and offer alternatives
 - Influence organizational practices
 - Promote a profession that views itself as an intellectual and collective enterprise
- (Lieberman, 2005)

At a conference a teacher leader may find a new approach to testing student’s knowledge and growth in a specific subject. Upon returning the teacher uses the new approach with his or her class successfully, so at the next staff meeting the teacher reports his or her findings to the rest of the teachers. By trying something new and by being the “local expert” on the topic, this teacher is the leader and will be able to entertain questions on the subject. All teachers will be involved in this process because of a teacher leader.

As stated earlier, I feel it is important for teachers to have planning power for staff meetings and professional development. Too often teachers attend a staff meeting or professional development day with an agenda forced upon them by the administrative

team, when the agenda doesn't support innovative ways for teachers to become more involved. Although there may be some important local or state objectives that need to be accomplished, it is important for teachers to have a say in a part of the meeting.

Allowing teachers to lead certain portions of meetings will create buy-in for teachers.

The last responsibility Lieberman describes focuses on job satisfaction and job description. As a teacher I want to be known not only as a classroom operator but also a leader in the community. I believe other teachers feel the same; the teaching profession employs many individuals with leadership skills. Teachers want to be involved and display leadership qualities, so administrators need to encourage and empower teacher leadership.

As the principal's job is ever-changing, so too, should the role of a teacher. Giving teachers opportunities to lead will empower teachers, create a cohesive staff, and most importantly, benefit students.

In conclusion, Leadership education is the process that I am undertaking in order to realize the leadership skills I already have and to introduce new leadership skills that I have not had to use in my profession. To become a successful administrator a person needs to own numerous leadership skills, including visionary leadership, instructional leadership, organizational leadership, collaborative leadership, ethical leadership, and political leadership. Just like a sports team, all of these skills should work together to produce a well-rounded individual. If one of the previous leadership skills is absent then something will be affected, directly or indirectly. If our mission is promote the success of all students regardless of background then Leadership education is a crucial process. Being able to become a leader is the first step in becoming an administrator.

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