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A preferred vision for administering schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

The whole process I have gone through in this program has taught many things. I am excited because these lessons do not apply solely to education. These are lessons I have learned to apply to other areas of my life. I never really had a vision for my profession. I think of the words of Lirah Sabir (2000), "Principals face many challenges to make each child a success. But what works for me is developing a positive mindset, always thinking of the total learning environment, being the best instructional leader I can be, and never being afraid to stretch my own and others' comfort zones." Being in this program has helped me develop goals I want to reach for others and myself. One of the important lessons I have learned through the last three years was that kids come first. In the decisions I make as an administrator, I must realize the students must be the ones who benefit. Vincent Ferrandino (1999) reminds me "in striving to educate children, we must remember to educate the whole child." There is more to each child than meets the eye. I have to look at all aspects of the child to gain a better understanding of the direction to take in decisions. I believe I have gained a great deal of knowledge and understanding through this program. I have spent many years going with the flow of things. I now want to move forward and make a difference in education.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SCHOOLS
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Reflective Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts in Education

David W. Baker

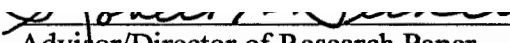
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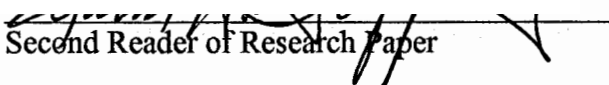
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In preparation for this paper, I have had to do a great deal of soul searching. I have taken the time to observe different administrators to guide me in the direction I might go. Along the way I have seen some excellent examples of people who have impressed me with their knowledge and ability to lead. I have attended classes, listened to instructors, read course textbooks, and interacted with classmates in the hopes of developing and strengthening my convictions of effective administration. I realize this is a never-ending process. I have already revised some of my ideals through the course of my educational journey. In the following pages I will try to share where I am at this stage of my education.

Personal Characteristics

The first area I needed to examine is myself. Do I have what it takes to be an administrator? What exactly does it take to be an administrator? I recalled an exercise in one of my classes that asked us to list the values we held. This process was referred to as "heartstorming". Values are a sense of direction for the way I live my life. Values inform us of what to do and what not to do. These are the enduring beliefs that I hold. As I went through the list, I was asked to start prioritizing them until I was left with one value. This was my core value. This was the one that I felt was the most important to me. I wondered if this would continue to be my core value, or if over the course of time it would change. I would hope it does not change. I hope my list does not change much because this is the person that brought me to the point I am at now. An important point I learned is to reflect and re-evaluate my values periodically. This will help me keep my focus and strengthen my beliefs.

There are many other values I believe that as an administrator I need to exhibit to be an effective leader. According to a survey of teachers conducted by Kouzes and Posner (1987), honesty is the number one characteristic attributed to a superior principal. Sixty-nine percent of the teachers felt this was important in being able to work with an administrator. I ranked this as one of the top three values I felt I needed to demonstrate. In dealing with people, honesty is a basis for trust. Can a teacher rely on the words or deeds of a dishonest leader? Will the students respect the decisions of a leader that lies? Can the parents feel comfortable entrusting their child in the hands of a person that cannot tell the truth? I do not believe that a person can be successful if he cannot be honest with those he works with daily. He would not be a leader if he has no followers. There may come a time when I could not be totally truthful. Depending on the situation, I may need to withhold the truth for the protection of a person. This would not be a practice of deception or dishonesty. The time may occur that withholding the truth may be necessary in order to keep confidentiality.

A study was completed to compare the attributes of a principal to those of a business manager (Richardson, Lane, Flanigan 1996). This study found both professions to be similar in regards to the type of person desired to lead the employees. Honesty, competent, forward-looking, and inspiring were the top characteristics on both lists. I realize running a school is a parallel to running a business. In a business you have employees, customers, and daily tasks. In the school a principal has teachers, students, parents, and daily tasks that must be met. Many customers will only deal with a reputable company. I want to be the leader of a school parents can feel assured is being run in an efficient manner. I am accountable to many and want to be a good steward of

what has been entrusted to me. The values I hold and the education I am getting are preparing me for that task.

After thinking about the characteristic traits of an administrator, I thought about my beliefs in the area of education. As far as educational leadership, I felt a principal is a person wearing many hats. An administrator deals with many different groups each day. As a leader, I must know my audience and deal with them appropriately.

One of the groups I will face is the student body. I talked earlier about honesty in dealing with kids. Students can easily spot a phony. If you want to earn their respect, you need to show respect. I had the privilege of watching such a principal in action. He was able to deal with the students because they knew he would treat them fairly. He showed them he wanted to help them. It was an example of showing the students how to effectively solve the situation in a calm manner. I saw the need not only to be a leader by word, but by example. When the students see me in the hallway, I want to model for them the proper behavior. I need to speak to others in a manner of respect, and treat people with the dignity they deserve.

One of the points made in the previous paragraph is the principal need to be seen. "One of the characteristics, extremely important in the life of a school and often neglected, is that of being a visible principal" (Whitaker, 1997). If I am to be able to relate to the students, I need to be an informed member of the team. The only way to do that is to "keep up with the times." The message is to get out into the classrooms and hallways and see what is happening. According to Donald Phillips (1992) this is what would be called "managing by wandering around." I had the privilege of shadowing a middle school principal for a day. A point was made to be in the hallway as the students

were arriving at the beginning of the day. He supervised the halls between class periods. He even made it to the lunchroom as the students were eating. Not only did he observe the students; he made it a point to talk with them. It may have been a reminder of behavior or something on a personal note, but he made personal contact with many of the kids as they passed him. I was surprised he knew many of their names. He really had his finger on the pulse of the school.

The principal answers to the parents. Being a public servant, I am expected to do my best to ensure parents their child is receiving the best education that can be provided. If I do not accomplish this, I must face them and the student to provide an answer for not meeting the needs. Diplomacy is the key. Parents may become irate. I must be the calm voice of reason. A parent may come at a loss of what to do. I must be the one to assure them that an answer will be found. I believe educational leadership requires being informed and prepared as you face parents. As a principal, I represent the district, the school, and myself. I want my actions and reactions to be a positive reflection of professionalism.

Another group to face is the staff. This includes the teachers and support staff. There are many roles an administrator plays to this group. I am a resource. Teachers might need help finding methods of performing in the classroom. I may be an arbitrator when there is a problem between people. I will be an enforcer when a teacher brings a student in for disciplinary reasons. I will be the one to "right the wrong" or punish the offender. I am also a learner. I will not always have the answers. There will be teachers with more experience than I that can be of assistance to me. I realize I am not the knight that has come in to save the school. I can learn from others through observation.

I feel that it is important to know your staff. I do not mean just being able to name them by looking at them. I think I need to show an interest in them. There must be a professional relationship between an administrator and his staff. I do not feel there can be a social closeness, but one that would allow a staff member to be comfortable in approaching me with a problem. I have come to appreciate my principal more as I have gotten to know him. I do not believe this would have happened had I not been in this program. I do not want it to take a special occasion before I feel I can approach my staff. I want to treat them with the respect and professional courtesy they deserve and have earned. It will make working together a little easier.

The last concern I have is how I deal with myself. I have talked about my beliefs and convictions. I want to live up to those so I might be able to look at myself in the mirror. I will have to live with myself long after I have left a school. I want to feel I did the job in an honest, forthright manner. I want others to feel they were treated fairly and with respect. Most importantly, I want to believe I stood by my convictions and made the best-informed decisions I could make for the good of all.

Public service is the tuition you pay for living where you live. I am the type of person that takes joy and pride in what I do. I believe you will get out of it what you put into it. I hold to the ideal that I will gain a measure of satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment if I put in the effort. I realize that I am putting myself out for inspection. My life will be put under the scrutinizing magnifying glass. This is to be expected being in a position of leadership. I feel I am going to enjoy most of what I will be doing as an administrator because of the accomplishments and goals that will be met advancing a school to a new plateau in education.

Paula Evans and Nancy Mohr work at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. They wrote an article (1999) in which they listed seven core beliefs they felt principals need to have to be successful. I agree with many of the points they brought out in their findings.

1. Principals' learning is personal and yet takes place most effectively while working in groups. This process allows me to seek other opinions and advice on matters. It allows me to be more open to the fact that I may not have all the answers and that there could be a better way to solve a situation. I have found this to be true while listening to others as we take classes. Listening to reasoning and other sides of the story can influence one to change their own mind.

2. Focused reflection takes time from "doing the work," and yet it is essential. I have been weak in this area. I have been keeping a reflective journal since the beginning of the program. It has been a requirement for the course. As I sat and read through them, I realize I have grown in my thinking. The classes I have taken have shown me I need to stop and reflect. I need to examine my feelings and compare them to what I have learned. The two do not always come up with the same conclusion. Reflection can help put the information in front so I might make a more sound judgment. I used to think keeping a diary was for "sissies." Now I do not feel the same. It has helped put things in the proper perspective on many occasions.

3. It takes strong leadership in order to have democratic learning. A weak leader can "sink the ship." It is okay to listen and disagree with others, but the bottom line is I will be accountable for the decisions made in the school. It takes informed, sound decision-making to run a school. Communication will be one of the keys to being a good

leader. I would try to inform them (as much as I can) with the background of the decision. I think a faculty and staff would respect this even though they may not agree with the decision.

Though the article listed seven, these are the three I most strongly felt are important to the development of a principal. These are beliefs that I hold and I feel will allow me to effectively lead. They closed by saying that a principal's work is essential. "The success of a school depends upon the principal. A school where the students learn has a good principal; a school where the students don't learn has a poor one" (Curtis, 1993). It is important to periodically reexamine one's belief system and adjust the methods and practices used. This will lead to change in the school and enhance the education process.

After looking at the beliefs and characteristics mentioned above, I would like to break down my philosophy of education into two areas. The first of these is in the area of administration. It is said educational administration has matured as a specialization over the past seventy years (Kowalski, 1993). Because of this maturation, it is suggested that administration be defined as a "process that encompasses both leadership and management responsibilities" (Kowalski, 1993). There are many definitions of leadership and management that would apply to administration.

Leadership involves the influencing of others to make common gains in the goals set before them. Administrators influence the teachers toward the goal of educating students. They may do this in a number of ways. Each way is not used for all teachers. Varying methods of influence can be used to reach the goal that has been set. No matter what the method, the outcome will be the same. The influence should be positive. Using

negative methods of influence can result in loss. This loss may be in the form of a teacher, student, or loss of support from other staff members.

A leader needs to be involved. Leading includes setting an example. As a teacher, I do not ask students to do anything I would not do myself. As an administrator, I would want to keep this same philosophy. If I would not perform a task, how can I ask a teacher to do it? Being actively involved in the programs of the school is a good way for the teachers to see I am concerned about what happens in the building. I want them to see I am not a "desk jockey", but I am also a concerned participant of the mission at hand.

Being an example would mean keeping informed of the latest trends and styles of teaching. My education will not end at the receiving of a Master's degree. The lessons will continue long after that occurrence. It may include attending workshops, conferences, or classes to improve myself. I do not want to rely on a degree to think I am at the point of being an administrator. Once an educator gets to the point they feel they have reached "the peak of the mountain", it is time to bury him. Learning does not stop until the day you die.

As an administrator, I will need to be a manager. There are so many areas to be managed to keep the school going. The first would be the staff. I will need to know how to use the talents of the staff in the building. I will need to really know them as closely as I can. I will look for the strengths and weaknesses. I need to explore for opportunities of building up the weaknesses and reinforcing the strengths. I need to use the skills of tactful evaluation to ensure the staff feels there is light at the end of the tunnel, and not that I am out to throw the last shovel of dirt on them.

The administrator has to manage the finances of the school. This is a major responsibility as a steward of the funds provided by many different resources. The taxpayer has the right to know how their money is being spent. The government wants to be sure the money is being used according to the guidelines established. The school board has to be aware of the spending. Each penny must be accounted for in the books. An administrator has to answer to so many people on the financial stability of the school. Not being able to manage funds could be the downfall of an administrator.

The administrator has to be a manager of time. There are meetings to attend, evaluations to perform, activities to oversee, and still find time for himself and his family. There must be a balance or an area will suffer. If one area gets more attention than another does, it could lead to stress and have an affect on the ability of the administrator to lead. I think most importantly, the administrator has to set aside time for himself. Stephen Covey (1989) refers to this as sharpening the saw. This is the practice of renewal takes place in the physical, mental, social/emotional, and spiritual realm of life. This is a proactive exercise that cannot be ignored. If there is no time to unwind and reflect, this can lead to a short tenure for the person. It could lead to a physical and emotional demise. I like to plan short "get-a-ways" as a time to clear my mind. It may be anything from a daylong drive to working on a project to relieve some stress. I think personal time has to be included in the schedule.

There are many other areas management and leadership can apply to the administrator. It is important to remember that one can be a leader without being a manager and vice versa. This is why I have the desire to try to find a "happy medium"

that will include a balance of both. The successful mixture will open the door for success.

The other area of my philosophy would be education. Education has expanded through the course of time. It is an ever-changing field. As an administrator, I must be prepared to change with it. During one of our class sessions, types of education were explored. The divisions listed were the Perennialists, Essentialists, the Progressive, and Social Reconstructionists (Kowalski, 1993). The question was posed to us which category we thought we might feel we belonged. I would say for myself, I would fall between the essentialist (a "back to the basic movement") and the progressive (making knowledge available for life skills). The fundamental skills of the three R's need to be taught and reinforced, but I feel it is important we teach the skills that will allow the student to be successful in any field of service they may choose to serve. If I do not accomplish this, I will have failed in the goals I have set for myself. I would like to believe that all my students would choose to go on to a form of higher education after high school, but I realize that this is not a practical idea. I recognize that not everyone is college material. With this in mind, I need to be part of that child's preparation of being a productive asset to the society in which we live.

An important point to ponder is the purpose of the school. In the pamphlet "Do We Still Need Public School" (Kober, 1996), these suggestions were given as the purpose:

- 1.) To prepare people to become responsible citizens.
- 2.) To improve social conditions.

- 3.) To promote cultural unity.
- 4.) To help people become economically self-sufficient.
- 5.) To enhance individual happiness and enrich individual lives.

Many believe the responsibility of the school is to meet these goals. I agree to an extent. The school is a large part of the formula for these goals to be attained. The school is not the sole source of all this occurring. As an institution of learning, we must do as much as we can to help students reach these goals. As an educator we must seek to motivate them to make the attempt to learn.

In the government class I teach, I have tried to motivate the students to become aware of the political happenings around them. One day each week we would have a time of discussing current events. The students were asked to bring articles demonstrating the role of government. We would discuss the levels of government and the effects each had on them as a citizen. It was a time students were encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings on the issues. It is important that students are aware of the issues and speak their minds in order for them to feel a part of the system. Decisions made today can have an effect on the future.

Social conditions continue to be an issue in the school. Considering the violent acts that have been perpetrated in the schools in recent months, the crimes committed by the youth, and the different forms of abuse taking place daily, I am led to believe the school needs to take a more active role in developing and promoting social awareness. This nation is truly a "melting pot" of races. We are all here for the duration and for the same reason. The reason is for a better way of life, and that way is through an education. If we cannot co-exist, we are headed down a path of destruction. Many of our youth do

not come from homes that promote cultural unity. The number of students coming from broken homes is staggering. If the example is not set at home, the school is the most logical place for the learning to take place. School is where they spend most of their day on a regular basis. The school is many times the place of security and aid in times of trouble. I have observed many teachers taking their own time to talk with a student about personal problems. There is a sense of hope for some kids because the staff of the school has opened its arms to them. I do not want the school to take the place of the parents, just be an arm of support.

The school has the responsibility to prepare the student to attempt success in a field of the student's choosing. Eleanor Duckworth (1996) uses ideas and research to support this theory. She explores different approaches teachers take to attaining this goal. Duckworth takes the ideas and essays of famous educators to draw her conclusions. The ultimate goal is to learn a trade to earn a living. The need for welfare would not be eliminated, but there would be fewer in need of it if we fulfill our task of teaching. Being able to read and write are basic needs to succeed in the world. A new need has been emerging of late. Technology has become an essential part of education. Computers are the wave of the future. As I look around at the different job markets, many are turning to the computer in some fashion. A basic understanding of the computer is becoming one of the essentials in teaching.

Another spectrum is the vocational classes. It is obvious some are not going on to college to earn a degree. The vocational schools are another possibility for students who may not be able or desire to attend a four-year program. This allows them to learn a skill they may enjoy doing. I know a young man who struggled in high school. He passed,

but knew he could not make it in college. He enjoyed remodeling and working with his hands. He attended a technical college and is continuing to make a living building homes. It was because someone recognized his ability and guided him in a direction where he has seen success. All most people want to do in life is succeed. Educators need to be sensitive to the needs and abilities of our students, and assist them in any way possible to have success. I believe this is part of our responsibility as teachers and administrators in this preparation.

Finally, the school is to enhance happiness and enrich lives. By finding success, people achieve happiness. Their self-esteem is built up. This allows them to be a contributing part of society. An education can do much more than most students want to admit. They do not know why the teacher is pushing them so hard, but we do. Most educators have gone through the same feelings themselves. Students do not realize until the goal is achieved there is a reason for all the studying and homework. Once they have reached the goal of a diploma, the pride they feel may help them realize all they went through was not so bad after all.

Attained Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes

Is there still a need for the public school? I say there is. Is it fulfilling the original purpose? I believe it is. As much as I have enjoyed being a part of education as a teacher, I am excited about the opportunities that await me as an administrator. The many challenges that lie ahead will not only help the student, but will allow me to grow as an educator and a person.

The growing process has not always been easy. The classes I have taken in the preparation of being an administrator have caused me to change my thinking in many

areas. The first area was with myself. The growth development course caused me to see myself as others see me. After studying the scores on the LSI test, I was no longer sure I was in the right program. I remembered a quote from a friend of mine who said, "You can let things make you bitter or make you better" (E. Bouvier, personal communication, August, 1980). I chose to make me a better administrator and person. I could have ignored the scores and moved on. I realized that would serve an injustice. If I could face the scores given by peers, I would not be willing to listen to others. This would have stunted my growth as a leader in education. I credit that class with being the "eye opener" I needed to reach my personal goals set before me.

The laws and legal issues are important. Precautions are needed to protect the school and the staff from legal actions. It is important to have an understanding of the rights each side has in each incident. The boundaries set by the laws may not agree with my own thinking, but I must be knowledgeable of what is permissible in educational situations. I have found publications that will help keep me updated and informed of the changes that would apply to me as an administrator. I appreciated the class that allowed us the opportunity to study the law and discuss the implications it has on education.

Facilitating Professional Growth taught me a valuable lesson. I learned to take a closer look at people. I had a narrow view of educational methods. Learning to evaluate teachers and look beyond the lesson gave me a greater insight to my own teaching style. I discovered there are many teaching and learning styles. The style I have may not match that of the one being observed, but that does not mean they are not teaching correctly. It means I must look at whether a connection is being made between the student and the lesson. Watching myself on video caused me to find areas that I need to correct in my

methods. I learned not to be so critical of others. I recalled how I felt after being picked apart by an evaluator during my first years of teaching. I want to encourage those I will have to evaluate. I want to catch them doing something right. As I catch them doing right, I may see an area that needs improvement. If this occurs, I must remember to “criticize in private, praise in public” (R. Decker, personal communication, June 16, 1999). No teacher deserves public humiliation. I believe to move a teacher toward improving their methods, approach negatives in a positive manner. If they choose not to follow, a completely different situation occurs.

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned thus far is to listen. It is one thing to hear someone, but to listen is a whole different subject. I have sat in classes week after week and listened to what my fellow future administrators have said. It has caused me to look at my own opinions and alter them. I have changed many after listening to the reasoning behind the arguments. I have taken this back to my classroom and applied it in dealing with my students. It has allowed me to solve problems in a more professional and timely manner, as misunderstandings are fewer. This is a skill I plan to take with me and use in all areas of my life.

I have talked about many of the classes that have helped me grow as a future administrator. There are two other factors that have played a major part in influencing my approach to administration. The first is the practicum projects. These activities supply an example of what will be expected of me as an administrator. I have appreciated the mentors I had who guided me in selecting the projects to do. Having practiced as principals, they know what areas are most important and will benefit me the most. Through every one of the practicums and projects I saw my leadership approach

and abilities take shape. I was able to see areas I needed to strengthen to become more effective. The hands-on approach to learning was practical and gave meaning to the material being taught in the classes.

The other factor that has helped me in this program is the professors. I have gained a great respect for the men and women who have taught or facilitated the classes. The insight from years of experience has helped build on the foundation created by the books. The accessibility and willingness to help in many ways set an example of how to lead. They welcomed the thoughts and comments of the students. I never felt I had made a mistake in entering this program. The encouragement and constructive criticism has helped me to formulate my approach to leading in education. I feel I can go to any one of these people as a resource in the future. This is something that is very important to me. I feel as if I am more than just a student to them.

Personal Professional Vision

Another important lesson I am taking with me is to have a vision. A vision is needed for the future of a school. Without having a dream to strive for leaves a school without growth. A school without growth has no future. It only has existence. I did not decide to enter the administrative field to float along for the rest of my days. I am excited about having the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of students, teachers, and surrounding people of the school district. I feel I have talents that can be used to have a school grow and reach its potential. I would like to reach that goal and go beyond, to see education become something that everyone connected with the school would want to be a part of.

The vision has to be realistic. I cannot go into a school and make it into one that is already in existence. I need to examine what the school has to offer and build on it. The vision has to be introduced to others. They will need to "buy into" the plan. It is a shared process. As time goes on and teachers decide to catch the vision, the boundaries of the vision can be broadened. A vision will not take place overnight. A thoughtful plan must be laid out with a timetable included. Short goals need to be established. As those reachable goals are met, new ones will be set. Growth will occur. Eventually, there will be a school many will be able to take pride in as a school that encourages the development of young lives. School will be looked upon as an adventure in learning. I would like to consider it the spark that starts the educational fire in students and teachers alike.

The vision has to be personal. Roberta Bernstein (1990) wrote an article asking if a person had what it takes to be an administrator. She noted it takes time to implement a vision and see it improve. I realize to see a vision through will take diligence and perseverance. It is not something that you start and it will take off and fly. There may even come a time that I will see my vision may need to be adjusted. Obstacles arise in many different forms. Your supervisor, the budget, the staff changing could have an influence on implementing a vision. I do not want to get discouraged and quit. I want to grow from trials and use them to strengthen my desire to succeed. If I should see success turn to failure, I want to accept it gracefully and move forward with a new vision in mind.

Closing

The whole process I have gone through in this program has taught many things. I am excited because these lessons do not apply solely to education. These are lessons I have learned to apply to other areas of my life. I never really had a vision for my profession. I think of the words of Lirah Sabir (2000), "Principals face many challenges to make each child a success. But what works for me is developing a positive mindset, always thinking of the total learning environment, being the best instructional leader I can be, and never being afraid to stretch my own and others' comfort zones." Being in this program has helped me develop goals I want to reach for others and myself. One of the important lessons I have learned through the last three years was that kids come first. In the decisions I make as an administrator, I must realize the students must be the ones who benefit. Vincent Ferrandino (1999) reminds me "in striving to educate children, we must remember to educate the whole child." There is more to each child than meets the eye. I have to look at all aspects of the child to gain a better understanding of the direction to take in decisions. I believe I have gained a great deal of knowledge and understanding through this program. I have spent many years going with the flow of things. I now want to move forward and make a difference in education.

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