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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

The term instructional leader encompasses many aspects. The instructional portion includes the knowledge base, the master teacher, the evaluator, the mediator, and the communicator with parents, community and teachers. The leader portion includes the perceptive director, the goal directed visionary, and the organizer with enthusiasm and energy.

Teachers depend on the principal to assist them in gaining instructional skills and utilizing curricular material that is necessary to teach effectively. The principal should be their master teacher and evaluator. As an evaluator, a principal will confer with and provide feedback to the staff, and will evaluate the education programs.

PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY/SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Joyce M. Bechtel

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March 26, 1997

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“You will never make it through college, as hard as you had to work in high school” (G. E. Messerole, personal communication, January 25, 1968). That was the challenge my father presented to me as I graduated from high school and began my college career. Maybe that was the motivation I needed because I knew I wanted to teach, but was unsure of my own talents. I not only had to prove to myself, but now to my Dad, that I could do this. Decisions needed to be made. If teaching was my career choice, I had to decide what area. Special education always intrigued me, having seen my cousin struggle to learn in school, be held back two years and then just socially promoted in order to stay in her sister’s class. At that time Special Education was available, but not at her school and her parents chose not to seek opportunities elsewhere. School should have been more beneficial than it was for Sharon. I wanted to be part of making it more beneficial. I was going to teach those students with lesser abilities or those who had other problems that complicated their learning. College was a challenge. Was the struggle worth it? Yes, it was! I graduated May 27, 1972, from the University of Northern Iowa with a BA degree in elementary education (K-9), including a language arts emphasis and approval 80 to teach behaviorally disordered students. After teaching and learning from these students for 23 years, I decided it was time for me to present myself with a new challenge - to be a leader in education, to be an instructional leader and to join the administration team.

A principalship was made to appear easy by my first principal, for whom I taught for 16 years, at the Cherokee Mental Health Institute. It seemed his position presented him with challenges, but he handled them simply and matter-

of-factly. The next administrator who directed our program was very ineffective and did not benefit our program. His successor was a female who was capable of accomplishing the routine business, but allowed her emotions, especially anger, to make decisions for her. It was so simple to judge them. But then I was awarded the position of "acting principal of the on-campus school", during the one year interim between qualified professionals. This was an eye-opener and it became very evident to me that I had a great deal to learn and much to experience.

This situation helped me to sort out and set goals. I wanted to continue learning and become an effective educational leader, a leader as defined by Guthrie & Reed (1991), "an individual who accepts the authoritative expectations of others to responsibly guide the activities and enhance the performance of an organization" (p.10). The organization of concern here is the education system, the system that involves not only school staff, but parents, community and business people, the organization that works with partnerships. An educational system should develop the whole child; it should develop character, develop the mind, and create strong, self-sufficient, respectful citizens. In their text, Guthrie & Reed (1991) stress that schools must strive for excellence by providing equity (education for all), efficiency (productivity and outcomes), and liberty (freedom for parents to choose the best school for their children and giving parents some local control of what happens in their school of choice). School governance is proceeding toward site-based management. Apker (1978) wrote an article entitled, "Potential Changes in Educational Governance", in which he predicted three potential structures of governance. Today we are experiencing Structure 3, "A federal role of targeted funds or general aid, a strong state role, a fully

developed system of regional service centers, and a strong school-site role” (p.93). This local control is important. It develops ownership and what is owned is usually well-cared for.

After describing the organization, it would be necessary to articulate what it means to responsibly guide and to enhance. The term instructional leader clearly complements this definition. The instructional leader concept was developed in the late 1970’s. The goal of the instructional leader was to improve instruction and deal with all issues that effect student learning, having a two-fold intention: 1) to develop a productive and satisfying working environment for teachers, and 2) to develop desirable learning conditions and outcomes for students. Some descriptors of instructional leaders include: perceptive, visionary, highly visible, knowledgeable about different aspects of instructional and curricular programs, ability to develop good interpersonal relationships with others, well-organized, active, goal-directed, committed to improving education, possessing a high energy level, willing to take risks, and able to work with all types of people (Gordon & Schneider, 1991). To be even more complete, the list would include: motivating, daring, ethical, trustworthy, intuitive, problem solvers, strategic planners, team builders, evaluators, and communicators. The instructional leader needs to be both a lifelong learner and teacher (Payzant, 1992). Cunard in his article in the NASSP Journal (1990), adds the word empowerment to the list. A principal who shares power with teachers is still a leader, a more effective instructional leader, because empowering teachers helps them maximize their potential. As researchers continually look for more sophisticated expressions of leadership, they focus their attention on

transformational or facilitative leadership which emphasizes collaboration and empowerment. The facilitative leader's role is to foster involvement of all employees at all levels (Lashway, 1995). No matter what phrase or descriptor is utilized, an effective instructional leader can incorporate these concepts in his/her daily work.

### Instructional Leader

The term instructional leader encompasses many aspects. The instructional portion includes the knowledge base, the master teacher, the evaluator, the mediator, and the communicator with parents, community and teachers. The leader portion includes the perceptive director, the goal directed visionary, and the organizer with enthusiasm and energy.

Being aware of what is going on is only part of being perceptive. One must analyze what is happening and accurately perceive any instructional problems or areas that need to be addressed. The principal should not find or create problems when none exist, but should be available to people who bring problems to his/her attention and should seek feedback occasionally from students, teachers and parents about possible instructional needs. To create this perception, the principal needs to be visible while observing and soliciting ideas. When a leader who is committed to high quality education has a set of long-range educational goals and has worked with the teaching group to develop their own vision, these improvements and changes are easier to implement.

### Visibility

When a principal is highly visible, it not only enhances perception, but it assists in developing a strong relationship with students, a trusting relationship for



teacher evaluations and input, and an open relationship with parents. When this visibility is extended out into the community, the school and community relations are increased. This is important because schools are rich in information but poor in experience. The parents and communities are the ones who can provide activities that will translate this school information into new life experiences (Love, 1996).

### Discipline

Any group or individual involved with the educational system expects their leader to be knowledgeable. The students rely on the principal to know what to do in any situation, especially in the area of discipline. The school administrator must know those strategies for effective school discipline that encourage responsible behavior, provide students with a satisfying school experience, and discourage misbehavior. The principal plays an important role in establishing school discipline in two ways: by effective, knowledgeable administration and by personal example. Well-disciplined students are lead by principals who are highly visible, are liked and respected, and who demonstrate a caring attitude for students, but are also willing to impose consequences when necessary (Gaustad, 1992).

### Supervision and Evaluation

Teachers depend on the principal to assist them in gaining instructional skills and utilizing curricular material that is necessary to teach effectively. The principal should be their master teacher and evaluator. As an evaluator, a principal will conference and provide feedback to the staff and will evaluate the education programs. When evaluating teachers, the principal looks at the teaching

methods and approaches, and the learning that is taking place but not so much the subject area. A principal can not become proficient enough, especially at the secondary level, to evaluate all subject areas, so teachers determine the subject and the principal evaluates the teaching methods and the effects on the students. The purpose of these evaluations must be the improvement of instruction, insuring students and appropriate education. They must be fair and supportive. I will use Robert Goldhammer's five stages of clinical supervision: 1) preobservation conference, 2) observation, 3) analysis and strategy, 4) supervision conference, 5) post-conference analysis (Pojack, 1993). In stage 1, together we will decide what and when I will be observing. In stage 3, together we will analyze the scripting that I do and I will set up my strategy for stage 4 - giving feedback. In stage 5, together we will plan for improvement and stretch the faculty member to use all of his/her talents. During this stage I would encourage the faculty member to be reflective and ask him/herself these questions. What did I do? What did it mean? How did I come to be this way? How might I do things differently? The last question gives the call to action to improve instruction (Smyth, 1989).

If remediation is necessary, that is also the responsibility of the evaluator. Teachers need reassurance (even the veteran teachers) and constructive criticism. This reassurance has to be genuine and based on specific examples of doing good things in their classrooms. As Dr. Decker said many times in class, maintain this attitude - "catch them doing something good" (personal communication, July 8, 1996). Constructive criticism is important because no one is perfect and if only positive and glowing reports are given, the teachers may begin to feel the

evaluator is phony or unknowledgeable. Good supervision and evaluation are essential to being a good principal (Marshall, 1996).

### Change Agent

Parents, communities, and businesses believe the principal should be knowledgeable about introducing changes necessary to improve education, because they want to see results or outcomes. The principal's superior trusts that he/she knows the workings of the building, knows the laws, and knows how to deal with people.

When working with many types of people and serving as a facilitator of human relations, an instructional leader must concentrate on meeting the personal needs of employees and develop cooperative and harmonious relationships among them. The principal must maintain a healthy school environment where the staff morale is high. A principal must display a positive, workable relationship with people.

### Conflict Mediator

When turmoil surrounding education erupts, it is clear that the role of a conflict mediator is another essential element of leadership. A conflict resolver must stay objective. He/she must secure the facts; hear both sides; present the *give and take, the options, the alternatives*; discuss and determine a solution the group or individuals can live with or accept (Gorton, et al., 1991). In working with so many types of people, a principal may get discouraged when trying to build a community with students, teachers, parents, community members and businesses. Looking at Sergiovanni's (1994) list of characteristics of a true community may be beneficial to support his/her efforts. He writes that a true

community is inclusive, meaning that everyone strives to ensure that all have a place to belong, and that all points of view are heard and valued. A true community is reflective. Members of this community make every endeavor to understand strengths and weaknesses of themselves and the organization.

Processes for reflection are built into the system. A true community is safe in that individuals can express their feelings, opinions, and perspectives in an atmosphere of acceptance. A true community is collaborative so that when differences arise, members of a true community practice graceful fighting, conflict resolution and keep in mind the greater good. A true community encourages leadership. All members take on leadership roles at different but appropriate times and this leadership is able to flow from one to the other, yet is the responsibility of all. Building a true community is a tall order, but certainly is a goal to strive to achieve. It is one of those risks that an effective instructional leader would be willing to take.

### Management

Besides the qualities that have been discussed already, an instructional leader must take care of the basics, manage the workings of the school. As a manager, the principal's main role is to develop or implement policies and procedures for the efficient operation of the school. A manager keeps things running smooth, gathering and disseminating information, maintaining the building. Donmoyer & Wagstaff (1990) list six managerial tasks that have significant influence on teaching, learning, and instruction: scheduling; articulating policies, rules and norms; hiring personnel; supervising personnel; coordinating pupil services; managing staff development; and budgeting. An

instructional leader must be an active person with a high energy level. If a principal becomes skillful at being a manager, he/she will have more time to be an instructional leader.

“If I ran that school...” This statement may be made by a disgruntled parent, an unhappy citizen or a discouraged student. The expectation here is that the administrator singly manages the school. Is that the concept I want to encourage? No. So I need to look at what I will do as an instructional leader.

In the class, Administration of the Elementary/Secondary Schools, Dr. Smith gave us five minutes to answer this question: What is it I need to know to be an effective principal? I responded, “I need to learn to manage people, control my feelings and work as a group member. The routine things of the school will need to become automatic. I need to become more of a risk taker. I need to listen and digest what people are telling me so I can put plans together. Continuous learning about innovations in education will be necessary so I can become a good evaluator, a teacher of teachers. Documentation will need to become part of my routine. Becoming more knowledgeable about school law and curriculum issues will be necessary.” This response was adequate for the time allowed for the assignment and it encouraged me to think more about what kind of an administrator I would become.

#### How I Fit In

In entering a new venture as a principal, it will be essential to examine my qualities and list specific things to do in that first year of administration. People have considered me to be active, well-organized, focused, able to facilitate a meeting, and goal-oriented. I consider myself committed to these goals of

education - to develop the whole child, develop character, develop the mind, and create strong, self-sufficient, respectful citizens, prepared for the changing society. Being perceptive with my family, friends, the students I teach and my colleagues at the residential facility has been comfortable for me. Through these family experiences, my teaching position and my activities outside the school, I have gained the ability to understand individuals and their differences, to accept these differences in order to facilitate growth in myself, the individual and the group involved. Now I will expand the field of perception and be involved with many more situations that require more advanced educational perception.

Before acquiring perception about educational needs and improvements, groundwork needs to be done. Getting to know and talking with teachers, students, parents, non-certified staff, superintendent, board members, other principals of the district, and the AEA will be a priority. Listening will be very important. I would adopt an open door policy. This process of getting acquainted will include review of such school related items as the activities program and the current policies and procedures.

As relationships are advanced, movement out into the community will be a natural process. Making myself visible, not only in my building, but also in the community will be part of my understanding of the demographics and the power groups. Micropolitics will be a challenging concept for me. Blase (1991) composes a complete definition of micropolitics, "Micropolitics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations." He continues to explain:

Micropolitics is about power and how people use it to influence others and to protect themselves. It is about conflict and how people compete with each other to get what they want. It is about cooperation and how people build support among themselves to achieve their ends. It is about what people in all social settings think about and have strong feelings about, but what is so often unspoken and not easily observed (pp. 53-60).

As an effective instructional leader, the goals would be to develop associative political relationships which would promote cooperation, support, and trust.

Communication in all forms will be vital. Listening and repeating only facts will strengthen the trust factor.

#### Some Other Thoughts

After developing an understanding of the nature of the district, it will be essential to examine some issues such as violence, suicide, safety and crisis management. Working with the AEA will be helpful in planning training for teachers to handle various classroom situations and setting up strong teams to handle any crisis.

#### Technology

One of the goals of education is to prepare students to live in a changing society. The use of technology can help reach that goal. Technology can be used with so many different levels of students and accommodates many learning styles. Technology can make communication much more efficient in a school system. There are drawbacks to this fast-paced pursuit. Many dollars are spent and caution must be taken. The technology committee will have need to justify the money being spent on software. Here are a few suggestions I may give the committee when evaluating material. First, look at the objectives and specify

what you expect ahead of time. Read all the materials that accompany the software. Experience the first run through to look for errors, judge the quality, check the credibility and relevance to the needs, compare the stated objectives in the documentation with what is experienced in the program. Take a second run through to catch anything you missed the first time or reconfirm your first impressions, put it through its paces and see how it handles errors or unexpected user action, and third, view different aspects of the program not seen in the first run. Keep a record of judgements made in order to report to the funding personnel (White & Hubbard, 1988, p.164).

#### Administrative Support Groups

An instructional leader is knowledgeable about all aspects of education. I will need to constantly read to keep up with what's happening in education. These reading resources would include journals such as: Phi Delta Kappan, The School Administrator, Educational Leadership, American School Board Journal, and Journal of Curriculum and Supervision. These can all be purchased by subscription but can also be borrowed from the Area Education Agency. Membership in the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development may result in various newsletters and curriculum pamphlets that advertise what curriculum is available.

I also will be involved with a principal's support group in the area and will attend educational conferences and meetings that are appropriate. In this area there are two principals' groups, one for elementary and one for secondary. These groups meet once a month during the school year to discuss school issues such as: special education, school laws, funding, etc. Although not affiliated with the



AEA, communications about meetings are sent through the AEA for convenience (R. Messerole, personal communication, February 16, 1997).

Another important group to associate with would be the School Administrators of Iowa. Some benefits to joining this group would be: 1) having an attorney on staff; 2) providing inservices on such issues as special education, management, school law, and curriculum on all levels, elementary, secondary, and the central office; and 3) publishing a monthly newsletter that keeps administrators abreast of employment issues, legal changes, upcoming conferences, and other interesting school related articles. Two national groups are the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). These groups lobby for education, conduct research, and share results. The Iowa Association of School Boards also provide a great deal of research and legal advice. They assist with management issues, understanding the budget, and curriculum development. They relate those issues and solutions that work in Iowa (R. Messerole, personal communication, February 16, 1997).

### Areas of Growth

Some key issues that I will need to concentrate on would be school law, curriculum and discipline, and assessments for both students and teachers. In the area of legalities, I will document all contacts with students, parents and teachers, notify parents when action needs to be taken, and remember that, as principal, I can deny any activity that is disruptive to the school environment. The five steps of due process, which were studied in our School Law class and reviewed in both Supervision and Administration, must be committed to memory and followed

when disciplining a student or a teacher. First, the student or teacher must be aware of and know the charges. Second, they have the right to confront their accuser. Third, they have the right to counsel (parents, lawyers). Fourth, the student or teacher has a right to present his/her own explanation of the situation. Fifth, the punishment must fit the offense. Listening, documenting and seeking the facts are necessary at all times, but especially in dealing with legal issues. These same issues may be a good reason to be friends with a lawyer, and if different, get acquainted with the school's attorney.

Curriculum, discipline and assessment knowledge are linked together. When curriculum is relevant and assessment is realistic, discipline will be an easier task. When students, teachers and parents are part of the goal setting and understand the purpose of curriculum and discipline, they are more cooperative and committed to success. Student outcomes and progress are the best way to evaluate curriculum. Those student outcomes should be authentic, where students can apply their knowledge, skills and understanding of real-world context. If students are expected to improve their performance on these authentic measures, then they must be engaged in performance based instruction in which 1) students expectations are clear; 2) knowledge and skills reflect the world outside the classroom, making it relevant; 3) the criteria for evaluation is known and it is in terms of qualities rather than letter grades; 4) models and demonstrations are provided to illustrate what excellent work looks like; 5) strategies are taught explicitly; 6) assessments are on-going and provide feedback to enhance performance; 7) progress is documented and celebrated. This documentation and celebration can be accomplished by the use of portfolios, a collection of student's

selected works to measure progress and explain work to parents or other adults (McTighe, 1997). This is an exciting concept, especially for middle and high school students. Students of all levels can be involved and this would make inclusion of special education students more beneficial.

Knowledge will need to be imparted to school personnel. It will be my responsibility to set up inservice programs for teachers and non-certified staff. This will be a joint effort. Together we will decide topics and fit them into the district's inservice time allotment. Together we will also decide who will facilitate the inservice. I think using our own staff people will be important in developing empowerment, but also bringing in outside people will be valuable.

### Vision

Education is a complex organization. There is so much to know and learn, that the learning never stops. The preparation program and knowledge base of this administration degree presented me with a challenge. I took this challenge because I want to be the individual who accepts the authoritative expectations of others and responsibly guides the activities and enhances the performance of the educational system. I have a vision. I want to be the leader of a school that is safe for students and teachers; that displays a climate of caring and trust with open and honest communications; that encourages improvement and assesses it fairly; that disciplines in a fair and purposeful way; and that handles conflicts by resolution and respect.

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