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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

To be an effective administrator in the 21st century one will need to acquire help from the students, parents, community and governmental agencies. Children today are faced with so many complex issues and obstacles. As educators we need to take all of these issues into consideration when working with kids. We need to be thought of as the teachers of children, not a subject matter. Yes, it's important that kids learn the basics and that college bound kids are ready for there next educational experience, but we have an obligation to our community in helping in the development of their children.

Children are the reason schools exist today, they are the schools most vital resource. A resource that needs nurturing, care, and love in order to grow and succeed in life.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
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by
Stephen J. Haberman

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I chose Educational Administration graduate work with the ultimate goal of becoming a middle school principal. As I reflect back on why I pursued a degree in educational administration, it became very evident that I could not fully answer that question without first stating why I became an educator. My family has a strong background in the field of education. Both of my parents were teachers. My mom was a kindergarten teacher and my dad taught high school business classes and coached track. My grandmother, and many of my relatives are also in the field of education. I guess you could say I grew up with the school community. As a child I remember playing with other children of teachers, having my dad take me up to the basketball gym on the weekend, and going on vacations with teaching families. As I look back, I realize how my entire childhood was enveloped in the world of education. The education profession brings with it a unique bonding process amongst its peers; it's this bonding that I enjoyed as a child and even still today as an adult. My wife is an early childhood instructor and I find the two of us becoming involved in the same lifestyle as my parents and their peers. All of these events over time directly influenced my career path, my philosophy of education and how I act as an educator.

I have taught in the Hampton-Dumont School District for eight years. During those years I have accomplished many of the goals that I have set for myself. Just recently, I received the "Excellence in Education" and "Golden Apple" awards for teaching practices, both of these awards came from the kids, which makes it even more special.

Last year I had the opportunity to be selected as one of 150 participants in the world to take part in AT&T's Virtual Classroom. This was a collaborative project among other classes around the world in developing web pages via the internet. All of these rank small in comparison to the real reward in education, that being the daily interaction with students. I absolutely love associating with middle school students. I have never even thought of my job as "work." It has always been a pleasure to come to school and teach kids. There is something about witnessing students coming into your room excited and eager to learn, it's the greatest natural high out there.

The teaching profession has brought me so much joy and happiness that I often ask myself "Why do I want to be a principal?" One of the major reasons is that I can make more of a difference in the lives of children from the role as an administrator. I see things that I would do differently if I were the principal. This is frustrating in a sense because I know I could make an impact if I were to deal with the the situation. There are also a lot of things I would like to try doing in the school system that would make a positive difference in the lives of children. I find myself in a leadership role often in my job. Peers come to me asking advice or seeking answers to problems they might have. The current principal and I collaborate on many agendas at school. The administrative position also brings with it a new challenge. It's the challenge and finding success in the pursuit of the challenge that I am really looking forward to.

I started my masters program in 1993 after receiving encouragement from my principal, family and peers. As you can see it's taken me five years to reach my goal in obtaining my administration degree. Over the past five years of my graduate work in educational administration, a variety of sources have impacted my professional beliefs and values. I believe this has been very advantageous to me. The five years of time has allowed me to mature in the area of administration, to be able to see things from an administrator's point of view. I have also been given the opportunity to associate with more graduate students in the field of administration and have been able to listen to their views on educational issues. Because of this I have broadened my knowledge base as an administrator.

Being a principal will allow me to put my ideas and beliefs into practice. In this paper I will discuss my vision as it pertains to student responsibility, curriculum reconstruction, parental involvement and the knowledge base of a successful administrator.

Student Responsibility and How It Relates to Academics

As a future administrator there is no topic as relevant to the climate of a building and student performance than academic achievement and responsible adolescents. Traditionally the development of citizenship skills and adhering to societal norms of cooperation, positive social interaction and school rules has been a valued educational objective. In the classroom this objective has been promoted by classroom and school rules prohibiting disruptive behavior.

There is a great deal of research indicating that behaving in socially appropriate and responsible ways can be a strong indicator of academic achievement (Wentzel, 1993a).

A very important component in promoting responsible students is teacher expectations. Teacher expectations of positive student behavior relates directly to positive academic outcomes. Positive outcomes are consistently related to academically oriented behavior such as high interest in school, effort to earn high grades, and student efforts to master subject matter outside of the regular school hours. In addition, studies have shown that teachers prefer students who are cooperative, conforming and responsible versus independent and assertive. As a result, the cooperative student receives greater academic attention and individual instruction, which impacts the quality of instructional exchanges (Wentzel, 1993b).

Obviously, student perceptions of academic achievement impacts their accomplishments. Central to most motivational theories is the notion that goals are powerful motivators of responsibility and behavior. During early adolescence, children experience new demands to combine diverse social and academic goals in positive ways. Goals to demonstrate one's ability are reflected by two possible outcomes: obtaining positive judgments or a judgments of one's ability. Students who pursue multiple classroom goals earn higher grades than students who do not. Second, students who pursue social responsibility goals, but not academic goals, tend to earn higher grades than students

who do not pursue either. This reinforces that educational institutions objective to socialize children into adult society by teaching behavior and responsibility is in conjunction with achievement in the learning process (Wentzel, 1993b).

Schools should teach students how to be responsible, as well as hold them responsible. One way to do this is to give them the opportunity and guidance to learn positive behaviors. Far too often, students are being held responsible by someone. According to students, one learns by doing what the teacher asks, a negotiated peace, getting assignments done just to get the grade. Much of this is done in trying to satisfy the demands of their teachers. In fact, some students refuse to do the work as a way to control the situation. As a result, students see little connection between school and the rest of their lives (Bacon, 1994).

One result of the above situation is that students develop little intrinsic motivation towards schooling, which impacts achievement in negative ways. Students who develop mastery-oriented belief systems display more achievement outcomes than do students with responsibility oriented beliefs. Responsibility oriented students tend to earn the lowest grades. This being so, these students are not intrinsically motivated and will over time, stop trying to achieve academically at all (Wentzel, 1993b).

We need to be very careful with how we reward students for being responsible in the academic setting, and in behavior. Too many times kids get the wrong message when it comes to rewards. There are at least seventy studies showing that extrinsic motivators, including A's,

infrequent praise, and other rewards, are not only ineffective over the long haul but are counter productive to a desire to learn and commitment to good values (Brandt, 1995).

How might schools address this situation? Clearly, a change of philosophy needs to be implemented. It becomes necessary to move from punishment and punitive measures to responsibilities and consequences for negative behaviors. In a study conducted by Denise and Gary Gottfredson and Lois Hybl on middle schools and their discipline policies, it was found that schools can impact adolescent conduct. They suggested policies that reduce the amount of punishment and create a climate of respect, support and fair treatment of students is beneficial. Simply adding a cosmetic system of positive reinforcement to a punitive system is not productive. The underlying approach to discipline must be restructured to provide students' opportunities to "learn" responsibility and positive behavior (Gottfredson, 1994).

It is a major responsibility of schools to establish positive self-image and belonging. A number of studies support the contention that positive self-concept and academic achievement are inter-woven. Students who self-rate their drive to achieve, are likely to remain in school. The opposite of this is also true. Academically under prepared adolescent students with low self-concept and achievement expectancies are more inclined to suffer school withdrawal (House, 1992).

Developing responsible students

One of the major premises of the middle school concept is the establishment of homerooms or advisor/advisee programs. In this context schools can greater address the needs of young adolescents. Today's school children often come from homes that are dramatically different from those of 25 years ago. To help this new generation of students, many schools have developed homerooms. The homeroom concept seeks to provide the young adolescent student with a home base. A primary goal is to help students feel significant and to guide them in developing meaningful interpersonal relationships. It gives students the opportunity to develop self-understanding and positive self-esteem (Phyllis, 1995).

In our homeroom at the Hampton-Dumont Middle School we have on the average fifteen students, made up of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. We meet every day for fifteen minutes and cover a wide range of topics dealing with, self esteem, student responsibility, peer pressure, school and community pride, hobbies, manners, respect, conflict resolution, and diversity. In addition, an effort is made to insure that the students develop a positive relationship with their homeroom peers and teacher. Research show that positive student/teacher relationships have great potential for improving academic and social/emotional environments in the school setting (Liu, J. 1997).

We are definitely on the right track with our homeroom model, five years ago McRel came out with the McRel Middle School Advisement

Program designed to provide middle school students with an environment in which they can adjust to new school responsibilities and grow and develop in positive ways. The McRel model is organized into nine modules: orientation, self-awareness, personal responsibility, goal setting, decision making/problem solving, relationships, communication, conflict resolution, and stress management. (Whisler, 1992).

The major themes covered in our homeroom program directly correspond with our districts performance goals. The Hampton-Dumont School District has thirty performance goals that they feel are essential to student performance and sixteen of those performance goals are covered in our homeroom program.

1. Exhibit skills and attitudes to become a self-directed learner.
2. Demonstrates knowledge and skills in all curricular areas.
3. Exhibits self discipline, responsibility, honesty, loyalty, cooperation, friendship, loyalty, and compassion.
4. Sets goals effectively.
5. Demonstrates the ability to work both independently and collaboratively.
6. Use time effectively.
7. Exhibits initiative.
8. Prioritize effectively.
9. Analyze and identify issues.

It has been established that teacher expectations relate directly to student achievement. This suggests that teachers must insist upon their students meeting high academic standards. I agree, however, I believe the key is to challenge each student to the best of their individual ability by assessing their competencies on an individual basis. One must realize that in order for the students to achieve, they must set high standards for themselves.

As I mentioned earlier in the paper, there is a big difference between teaching responsibility and holding students responsible. The goal of a school system is to present the opportunity for students to learn responsible behavior. Students will have this opportunity in their homerooms. Middle school students need to feel a sense of belonging that a homeroom type atmosphere brings. Research shows that students with a high level of self-esteem demonstrate better behavior towards schooling, while those students with a low self-esteem tend to generate a negative behavior not only towards school, but also the community.

I thought that Kohn summed this up beautifully in his concept "The Three C's of Motivation".

The first C is *content*: has the child been given something worth learning. Second is the C of community: Do the kids feel part of a safe learning environment in which they feel free to ask for help, in which they come to care about one another. And third the C of *choice*: making sure the kids are asked to think about what they are doing and how and with whom and why (Brandt, 1995).

One of the best ways to increase academic achievement, promote student responsibility, and diminish negative behavior is to take the

family approach. Schools should take every opportunity possible to include parents in their child's education. Too many times we as educators believe that the parents need to come to us. A good example of this is parent teacher conferences during the school year. The key to successful parent interaction is to seek them out, make them feel important in their child's education and let them know how much you care about their child. This might mean going to their house for a conference, making extra phone calls, and writing letters to parents, but the rewards will outweigh the extra time that you have spent in helping a child succeed.

A positive school climate welcomes and encourages family involvement. Family involvement brings about improved teaching by generating a positive attitude among teachers and raising teacher self-esteem; teachers feel respected by families who are involved. Improved teaching leads to greater academic achievement by students. Academic achievement and student success lead to a positive school climate (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory [NCREL] ,1996)

As an administrator, it will be my mission to get the staff to believe in this philosophy and to take ownership in the process. As you know, this is easier said than done. I believe as an administrator or teacher you must always try to do what is best for kids.

Curriculum Reconstruction

This is an area that is gaining a wealth of attention since I started my graduate program. I also believe that the school districts of the future

will be placing a much greater emphasis on curriculum reconstruction. Districts will be looking for principals who cannot only lead and facilitate the change process with their staff, but also show them the importance of doing so.

Despite Iowa's traditionally strong record of high academic achievement, teachers and parents know that not all students are achieving as they should. Even though high graduation rates and achievement scores for the average Iowa student continue to be among the very best in the country, we know that those are the standards of the 1950's and the 1960's and they do not serve us well today (Hadley, 1998).

I have been involved in the curriculum reconstruction process twice. Once with our Social Studies curriculum and the other with the writing of our homeroom program. I am fortunate in the fact that our district is known as a leader in curriculum reconstruction and the writing of benchmarks and standards. If done correctly it can be very beneficial for all stake holders: parents, students, teachers, and community. If done incorrectly, it will be a big waste of time and money.

The State Board also believes that there must be increased accountability for student achievement at the local level. School districts should adopt a philosophy of high expectations for all students and continuous improvement and report progress to their community (Hadley, 1998).

When a school district takes on the implementation of standards based education they need to address many important issues: (1) where will the education community get the standards; (2) who will set them; (3) what types of standards should be included; (4) in what form will these standards be written; (5) at what levels will benchmarks for the standards be written; (6) how should the benchmarks and standards be addressed; (7) how will student progress be reported; and (8) for what things will students be held accountable (Marzano, 1996).

The key to successful implementation of standards and benchmarks is accountability. Our district is struggling with this topic right now. What do you do with the students who don't meet the acceptable level of mastery on their benchmarks and standards. Do you retain them or pass them on? I have a difficult time answering this question, because it's very easy to see both sides point of view. I believe that the students should be accountable for what they have learned. We as educators have gotten into a bad habit of moving kids through the system. If we continue this trend in the future, then there is no real good reason for implementing standards and benchmarks. A high school diploma should stand for something other than a certificate of achievement.

One of the major reasons that our district has had success in this process is that we have been provided with a great knowledge base of reconstruction from The Northern Trails Area Education Agency. We have a super curriculum coordinator that has given us complete ownership in the process and has listened to our input about

reconstruction. And most important of all our administration has given us the time and resources to reconstruct the curriculum effectively. This has allowed the teachers to see the “big picture” or the importance of the reconstruction. I have also learned that restructuring the curriculum is not a one time event. It is an ongoing process where one edits and revises the existing curriculum each year to come up with a better product for not only yourself but for the students. Then and only then can you correctly call the process curriculum reconstruction.

Knowledge Base of an Ideal Administrator

I believe that an ideal administrator is one that is composed of the following characteristics and traits. These are not from a textbook or class discussion, but from my own beliefs of what I believe are essential in being an effective administrator. Principals can no longer rely on authority derived from position but must instead cultivate a credibility based on competence (Stalhammar, 1994).

1. Communicator- All strands of being an effective communicator hinge on the ability to communicate a vision to your staff. Everyone in our building needs to be on the same page and working towards the same goal or vision. This will decrease the chance of unwanted gossip, which can result in the destruction of the vision. Communication continues to be the best source of positive reinforcement (Nickerson, 1988).

2. **Listener-** This is one of the most important traits of an effective administrator. It is important to know how people are feeling about their profession. Listening creates an opportunity to gain respect and to interact with the people you will be working with. I need to take the time to listen to what our staff and students are saying. You can learn a lot from remaining silent.
3. **Facilitator-** I need to be able to guide, lead, direct, and maybe even persuade our staff towards the vision of our building. A necessary condition for empowering employees is a willingness to delegate authority and redefine their role from giver of orders to the developer of human potential. A key detail to remember is that you too were once a teacher and try to see things from their point of view (Dufour & Eaker, 1987).
4. **Disciplinarian-** This is one of the major characteristics that the staff will judge me by. They will want me to be fair and yet at the same time be consistent, which is never true from all of their varying perspectives on the matter at hand.
5. **Manager-** I will need to be a business person. Handle the budget, set up the schedule etc. all of the mundane aspects of the job. Organizational skills are extremely important. Knowing what needs to be done and in what order.

Organizing and managing are essential in maximizing an administrator's productivity.

6. Public Relations- This what I do well and enjoy doing. Not enough educators tell the community what's happening in their school and it seems like when they do hear news pertaining to the schools it's of the negative stature, instead we need to get out there and celebrate all of the great things that our schools are doing. Educational leaders express pride in their school. They make a point of telling the rest of the community about what the school has achieved. The key is being able to balance developing community support for the schools and keeping the community informed about school related issues (Bagin, 1994).
7. Reflector- I need to look back and reflect on the the days events, the decisions that were made and ask myself why did I do this and was it effective or not. This is crucial if I want to grow as an administrator.

Parental Involvement

Promoting and maintaining a positive school climate is instrumental in how a school functions. The family in America has changed. The responsibility of school in America is changing. It has been identified that 50,000 to 200,000 children do not have a place to call home (Hodgkinson, 1991).

The day to day reality of the American family is different today that a generation ago. Parents and children spend far less time together and almost all parents face an on-going struggle to balance the demands of their family life with their jobs. At a time when parents are under tremendous pressures that make them less able to participate in their children's lives, there is a greater need for them to be involved, particularly in education (U.S. Department of Education [USDE] , 1994)

As I mentioned above, the family of today has changed and the school is taking on more and more responsibilities that were never before asked of them. I believe it's more important now than ever that we reach out to the parents of our children.

Reluctance to recognize the importance of parents in the education process has been overcome in the past few years. consequently, states are searching for and implementing programs that involve parents in education. A survey of educators in the Midwest revealed strong support for parent involvement among teachers, principals, and superintendents. An unstable family life and lack of parent involvement were cited often as barriers to education. Parent involvement needs to be well planned, comprehensive, and continuous. Parent involvement can result in higher grades and test scores, improved student attitudes, and more effective schools (Foster, 1990).

Too many times we ask the parents to come to us, just think what could be possible if we went to them. I believe I can obtain this goal by doing a few simple things. Once a week my staff members will place a

positive phone call home to one of their students. If they would like to make more than one great. At mid-term the staff will send happy notes to deserving students. I hope this will start to take away some of the negative image that goes along with the mid-term break. I would also like to build into the year time for the staff to make home visits with parents. I believe by doing this we can knock down some of the barriers between home and school. I have seen kindergarten and special needs teachers do this over the years and I know it works. Parents start to view teachers differently when they see them making efforts to help their children. They come to understand that both sides are working towards the same goal, that being what is best for their child.

Parents can become involved in their children's education by scheduling daily homework time, reading together, keeping in touch with the school, offering praise and encouragement, and talking to their child about school. The school can help out by extending school hours so families can engage in learning activities, offer parent inservices/training, volunteer work, and by designing homework that engages parents in the process (Lickona, 1996).

Schools must respond to the needs of parents and provide the supports necessary for them to be involved in their children's learning. At the same time, parents need to slow down their lives, stress the life-long importance of getting a good education, and serve as role models for their children. Research confirms that regardless of the economic, racial, or cultural background of the family, when parents are partners in their

children's education, the results are improved student achievement, better school attendance, reduced dropout rates and decreased delinquency (USDE, 1994).

Conclusion

Administrators of the future will be faced with a variety of challenges and problems. I believe that my vision, philosophy, and expanding knowledge base will be essential in helping find solutions to these problems. These beliefs will also aid me in becoming an effective administrator. Most importantly they will allow me to create a school that will be able to meet the needs of all children in a positive school atmosphere.

To be an effective administrator in the 21st century one will need to acquire help from the students, parents, community and governmental agencies. Children today are faced with so many complex issues and obstacles. A recent report on children living in the United States shows that 13 million children live in poverty and that 27 of those children die everyday, that's 1 child every 53 minutes. Teenage pregnancy is also on the rise, everyday 2,740 teenage girls get pregnant in the United States. Everyday in the U.S. 3,288 children run away from home, on the average, that is one child every 26 seconds. We have also seen a recent upswing pertaining to violence in the schools. This year alone saw witness to eleven horrible shootings in U.S. schools. Another startling fact is the number of children that drop out of school before graduation.

On the average the U.S. schools lose 1.370 students everyday (In the U.S. Each Day 1990).

As educators we need to take all of these issues into consideration when working with kids. We need to be thought of as the teachers of children, not a subject matter. Yes, it's important that kids learn the basics and that college bound kids are ready for there next educational experience, but we have an obligation to our community in helping in the development of their children.

I have always held on to the fact that all children can learn. It is our job as educators to provide kids with an opportunity to be successful in school. As a principal it is my responsibility to surround students with quality people who will give children the chance to find this success. Children are the reason schools exist today, they are the schools most vital resource. A resource that needs nurturing, care, and love in order to grow and succeed in life.

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