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A preferred vision for administering elementary and secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

My views have changed greatly on the responsibilities of an administrator. The job is not as easy as I first thought. There are many demands placed upon a principal. A principal never knows what to expect and I think that is why the job is now more fascinating to me because it presents a challenge.

Gorton (1991) suggests that an administrator is a manager, instructional leader, disciplinarian, human relations facilitator, evaluator, and conflict mediator. I believe this to be true because a principal has to be more than just the disciplinarian and evaluator of the building.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

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University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Jeffrey A. Hiser

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When I first entered this administrative program, I had just completed my first year with the Shenandoah Community School District after being out of education for four years. This was also a new teaching level for me, having previously taught in a lower elementary setting in a neighboring school district, and now teaching in a middle school setting. For four years I had been serving in an administrative position with the Shenandoah Police Department. When the Chief of Police retired I decided it was time to leave this area and reenter the education field.

Before I took my first teaching position in 1987, I was serving on the Shenandoah Board of Education and had just started my second year. Elected at the age of twenty-two, I continued to serve until 1991, completing a total of six years. It was during these years that I became interested in the area of administration, seeing a need for strong leadership in the buildings. As a classroom instructor, I feel an administrator can have a major affect on the educational lives of students and staff. When the Assistant Chief position with the police department became available I decided this would be a good chance to get some type of administrative experience. After four years I decided I could make a better contribution in education. Students needed guidance and knowledge before they made the bad decisions or took the wrong path and ended up seeing me at the police department.

With four years of administrative experience at the police department and my six years on the school board, dealing with policy issues, budgeting, negotiations, staffing needs, and many other areas, I

felt it was time to look for a program that would help prepare me to become an effective educational administrator. Several different programs were offered but I felt that with the University of Northern Iowa's reputation and the new ICN program being offered in the area, I would benefit greatly from the program and become an effective building administrator.

My perception of a building administrator was someone that maintained building discipline and evaluated teachers. On occasion he/she was in the hallways checking on students. Through my board experience I learned there was more to it but I had no idea just what a principal would need to know or what the most important issues would be. I wanted to be prepared with the best knowledge base that I could get so I could adapt it to my own building situations. Knowing each day would present a new challenge.

My interests were in the areas of student discipline/behavior, special education, technology and training, and staff development. These are the areas I hoped to learn more about in addition to school-based management which has become an especially interesting topic to me.

Student Discipline and Behavior

It seems to me that since I began teaching in 1987, students are getting bolder with their behaviors and at some point there needs to be a change. I believe that we need to work at changing behaviors by starting in the elementary and continuing through high school. The main topic of

concern should be to address the social and academic needs of the students so they will be able to maximize their potential to meet the challenges of an ever-changing world.

According to teachers and parents, administrators need to be strong disciplinarians and react positively to misbehavior. Believing that it deters students from repeating rule violations administrators induce punishment. However, this may not be the case and could lead to repeat offenses and a negative attitude by students, the administrator, teacher, and school (Gorton & Schneider, 1991).

An administrator must react quickly to an offense but must consider the cause of misbehavior, severity, number of repeated violations, and the students personality. Punishment should then be applied.

Corporal Punishment

Corporal punishment is one type of punishments that gets many mixed reviews. I am not totally opposed to corporal punishment if every other alternative has been exhausted with no change in the student's behavior. Alternatives may be suspension and expulsion, persuasion and exhortation, individual counseling, checking for learning problems, and changing a student's environment. I will address these individually. Administrators must keep in mind that in many states, because of state statutes, corporal punishment is not an option. It is very important to be familiar with the statutes regarding student discipline. If this type of punishment is chosen there are guidelines that should be followed.

Simpson (1991) suggests that employees follow district policies, have an adult witness, do not hit any body part other than the buttocks, and never use excess force or administer more than a few blows. Corporal punishment should never be applied because a student is unable or unwilling to do schoolwork.

Suspension and Expulsion

Another type of punishment is suspension and expulsion. Again, I believe that this should be applied when all other measures have been exhausted. This method can be counter productive in its effect on the students. If a student presents a danger to other students or to himself/herself, then I would not hesitate to recommend suspension or expulsion. As a guide and to insure consistency a policy should be in place (Gorton & Schneider, 1991).

I believe that many students see expulsion and suspension as a way to get a day or days off from school. Based on my personal teaching experience many students like the idea of being isolated when given in-school suspension because they can get all their work completed without interruption. This could be a sign of a learning problem that may need to be explored (Sullivan, 1989).

Due process is an important legal issue and whenever punitive action is taken against a student, the staff as well as the administrator must insure that due process is applied.

The decision to impose certain punishments should be preceded by a careful and thorough process of investigation into the allegation of

the offense. the student should have an opportunity to refute the charges or challenge the legitimacy of the violations. I want to make sure I treat the student fairly and justly (Gorton & Schneider, 1991).

As principal I will make sure the student is given either oral or written notice of the charge against him/her. If the student denies this charge I will make sure they are given an explanation of the evidence I have for making the charge. I will give the student the opportunity to tell their side of the story. I would also make sure that I discuss the misconduct with the student immediately after it has occurred.

Persuasion and Exhortation

Before punishments are administered non punitive approaches should be explored. One type is persuasion and exhortation. Administrators and staff should talk with the student and explain why his/her behavior is not acceptable. Some students may respond to this but it may not be a good approach for repeat offenders. A key point is that an administrator must have a high degree of credibility, respect, and be trusted by students to be effective (Gordon & Schneider, 1991).

Counseling

Counseling is another important area. Although I have no formal training in this area, I would want the students to know I am someone with whom they could feel comfortable talking. The school counselor in the building should be available to students to help them with problems that may be related to their behavior (Schneider & Burgos, 1987).

Remediation of Learning Problems

On occasions I feel that certain learning problems do contribute to behavior. If this is the case the school has an obligation to help correct the learning problem so the student can be successful and not a discipline problem. I do feel, however, it is a poor defense by parents to condone the behavior because of a learning disability. I feel we should do all we can to help but to use a disability as an excuse is unacceptable if the student knows right from wrong.

Changing a Student's Environment

Gorton and Schneider (1991) suggest changing the environment of the student at school, in the home or the community. They also mention that we have little control over the home or community environment. It is vital for good school and community relations that the school should work closely with available agencies to help assist students and their families.

Alternative Educational Programs

Another area in which we can make a difference is in the school environment. If students continue to misbehave I feel that the educational system should not give up on them. We must do whatever we can to see that students remain in school. Alternatives for the students could include work study, alternative classes or school, or developing individual education programs so students can continue to benefit from the educational system (Martin & Pear, 1988).

"By far the most significant factor in school discipline is the leadership roles of the principal. Weak leadership is likely to produce increased discipline problems, and strong leadership is likely to reduce them" (Gordon & Schneider, 1991, p. 441). To me, this does not mean you rule with an iron fist but students should realize that you mean what you say and will stand behind discipline decisions. I think it is also important to come across to students as someone who is understanding, fair, and consistent.

Special Education

Knowledge and skill in administering special education is essential to the building principal. One key term used today in special education is inclusion. Inclusion is one way a school can best serve special needs students.

Inclusion

Rogers (1994) defines inclusion as the practice of educating children who are disabled in classes together with non disabled peers. The Individuals with Disabilities Act in Education (IDEA) requires that children be educated in the least restrictive environment with whatever supplementary aids and services are needed so that the child can benefit (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Incorporated, 1991).

I feel it is my responsibility to help the special education staff in educating regular classroom instructors on the changing needs of disabled students and help them to see that the changes are to benefit

the student and not to place any additional burden on the teacher. The first step is to help the staff see that there is a difference between inclusion and mainstreaming.

Rogers (1994) implies that with mainstreaming, students keep up with the work assigned to them. Inclusion, on the other hand, is concerned with bringing the support services to the child in the regular classroom. It is not concerned with the student keeping up with the other students in the class. The idea is to have the student benefit in some way from participating in regular classroom activities. Teachers are aided by support staff who help with procedures that permit all the children in the class to benefit from instruction and not just students with special needs.

Madden and Slavin (1993) conclude that special needs students who participate in regular classes with proper support have better self-esteem, more appropriate behavior, and are less deprecating than students in special classes. Students with mild academic disabilities have a simple goal of belonging.

Keith Feldmann and I, became interested in helping certified and support staff have a better understanding of inclusion and ease any fears they might have. We started a district wide group that met monthly to share information about inclusion. We did so by showing videos from the area education agency, reviewing literature, and having special education instructors speak to the group not only about inclusion but about other special education issues as well. This was done with the approval of the local administration. I feel this has been beneficial not

only to me but to the staff. As a new administrator I will better understand some of the issues that are involved in the special education program because I belonged to this group.

O'Neil (1994) states that inclusion allows you to create a world in which all children are welcome, where all children grow up feeling comfortable interacting with all kinds of children. Inclusion is consistent with multicultural education, creating a world in which people of diversity have opportunities to know, play, and work with one another. I believe that is what education is about and everyone can help achieve this with a little willingness to change.

The area of special education cannot be overlooked because of the ramifications it has on what occurs and how things happen within the building. I feel the more knowledgeable an administrator can be in this area the easier it becomes to help make necessary changes in the building.

Technology

Technology has become a major part of education. Technology is a part of the future and school districts are starting to budget more for technology than in the past. Besides providing money for technology, a district must come up with a technology strategic plan and how it will be incorporated in the education process (Lovell, 1993). As an administrator I need to be involved in developing a plan to utilize technology and training. The first step school administrators should take is developing a comprehensive master plan (Church & Bender, 1985).

Committee and Planning

Over the last two years I have been involved in the Shenandoah Community School District's technology committee. Our first goal was to develop a plan and we started by developing the committee. The committee was composed of staff, administrators, and community members, who had an interest in technology. The committee then started with a vision deciding where we wanted to go with technology. We came up with a mission and as See (1992) suggests, we asked our committee just what it is that we want the students to be able to do with technology as they move through the system and what we want the staff to be able to do.

Our philosophy is that all students need technology skills to live and be knowledgeable citizens in a culturally and economically diverse society. Students will recognize the need for technology in their lives and that technology is an integral part of all learning. The students will develop positive attitudes about technology, develop problem solving skills so they can make informed decisions, work cooperatively and independently, communicate effectively to a variety of audiences, recognize and apply appropriate technology to real situations, and utilize information in a global environment.

Staff members will need technology skills to facilitate the process for students to be knowledgeable citizens in a culturally and economically diverse society. The staff members will need to recognize the need for technology in their lives and that technology is an integral

part of student learning. The staff will provide an intellectually challenging and developmentally appropriate instructional program for each child. They should be able to use instructional technology effectively when it is appropriate to meet curriculum goals.

Staff Training/Development

One area that is extremely important is staff training or development. If we expect staff to use technology then training or development must be made available (Luehrmann, 1990). In our district our training has been set up through an agreement with the Iowa Excellence in Education Phrase III program. Teachers can purchase computers using Phase III money in return for committing to attend training sessions over the next three years. At the end of three years the staff will own the computer and may take it home.

Teachers must feel confident using new technology if we are going to expect them to incorporate the new knowledge into their curriculum. If they are uncomfortable using the technology then promoting the use by them will not be successful.

As I mentioned earlier, our district now provides for inservice for both IBM and MAC users. The training is done by our own staff members. The district has two trainers who train the building facilitators, who then train the staff. I was chosen as one of the staff facilitators for the middle school. At this point we train about twenty staff members every other week. It is a very non threatening atmosphere where the staff feels they can take risk. The inservice is provided twice a week to

accommodate staff schedules. Ideas for what the training will cover is provided by the staff and stems from their interests and needs.

Recommendations

Three good recommendations were made by Scrogan (1989) for helping administrators facilitate the use of technology. First, administrators should help teachers develop a technological vision. Second, administrators should support experimentation and innovations from the staff. In our district the staff has been given the opportunity to purchase a computer for their desk so they can experiment. The third recommendation is to provide the staff with time for learning and practice. Again, inservice can facilitate these recommendations.

As the building principal, I feel I need to support and encourage the use of technology in my building. Eiser (1990) suggests that administrators take a training course along with the staff. This is one of the reasons I have agreed to be a facilitator in our building. I think it shows everyone you are human and have an interest like they do. It helps to build good rapport with the staff as well. By going through the training it has helped me to see that staff needs the support of the administration for a program to be effective.

Staff Development

When I first got into teaching I didn't know what to expect when it came time for staff development. Things that came to mind, after my first staff development program were that it was boring, a waste of time, and irrelevant to my needs and the district's needs. Most teachers grumbled

about it not being effective and the fact that it kept them from doing what they really wanted to do, which was to be working in their rooms.

It seems that planning falls short in meeting anticipated goals and expectations. Sparks (1992) states that school improvement efforts are linked to quality staff development. Key points for staff development should include having a clear vision for the school, having a collaborative attitude, and encouraging faculty to get involved.

Professional Development

Professional development should respect the intellectual and leadership capacity of teachers, principals, and others in the community. It will enable teachers to develop further expertise in subject content, teaching strategies, uses of technologies, and other elements in teaching to high standards. Professional development is planned collaboratively by those who will participate in and facilitate development. It will require time, resources, and need a long-term plan (Geiger, 1996).

Black (1995) mentions to improve staff development a school first needs to adopt new premises of teaching and learning. Teachers need an opportunity to practice new knowledge they gain from in-service training. This can be done by providing teachers time to practice what they have learned. Allowing time to practice increases confidence and willingness to take risk with new techniques for the classroom. Staff development should prepare teachers to use research-based teaching strategies that are appropriate to instructional objectives.

Staff members should learn and apply collaborative skills to conduct meetings, make shared decisions, solve problems, and work collaboratively. Through collaborating and networking teachers can improve their knowledge of strategies (Lewis, 1994).

Teachers need the support and advice of a principal who understands the demands placed on teachers and what it takes to change teachers' roles and practices. They also need support of the community, administrators, students, parents, and school board members.

In our district I was recently appointed to our new staff development committee. Most of our attention is being given to establishing a clear, shared vision of what good staff development programs should look like. A shared vision of what good staff development programs look like should be established by both staff and staff development planners (Grossnickle & Layne, 1991).

Our goal is to develop an environment in which growth, renewal, and improvement have a good chance of succeeding. The purpose of all school activities ultimately is to improve the learning of the students. The purpose of staff development programs then should be to provide content in areas that promise increases in student learning and aptitude to learn (Joyce, Showers, & Rolheiser-Bennett, 1987). We want to create staff development programs that are relevant to the needs of school administrators, the district, teachers, and other school employees.

Our district, has proposed to the board a plan to provide staff development on a weekly basis. At this time the board does not want to lengthen or shorten the day to provide for staff development. Through our district's Interest Based Bargaining, the association and the district came to an agreement that time was necessary in order to provide effective staff development. The agreement is to dismiss two hours early each Wednesday.

The first Wednesday of the month will be used for grade level/curriculum area collaborative planning. The second Wednesday will be used for building level collaborative planning and specific building level training. On the third Wednesday staff will meet in their study teams, such as Advisor/Advisee or special teams, such as Teacher Assistance Teams. The fourth Wednesday will be for district staff development initiatives, such as cooperative learning.

I believe that the plan we have come up with is one that starts to meet our needs for staff development. This plan also helps with the morale of staff members that already feel they are spending many extra hours of their own time to accomplish many of the things I mentioned. Roy and O'Brien (1991) say that successful schools are the ones where student achievement is greatest, collaborative planning is encouraged, and collegial relationships are valued.

School-Base Management

School-based management involves shifting the initiatives in education from the school board, superintendent, and central

administration office to the individual schools. The purpose is to improve performance by making teachers and administrators more collaborative and responsible for the school's operations (Hill, Bonan, & Warner, 1992; Lyons & Shelton, 1994).

Ownership

The belief is that schools will become more effective if teachers and principals take responsibility for student performance. It gives teachers a feeling of ownership in the decisions that need to be made. "The ultimate goal is to improve the teaching and learning environment for students" (White, 1989, p. 2).

Lyons and Shelton (1994) suggest that the rationale for school-based management be based upon: (a) the school as the primary decision making unit, with decisions made at the lowest level; and (b) commitment to change that comes with ownership. That ownership comes from having the chance to participate in defining change.

Philosophy and Vision

If a district is going to use school-based management each school district should have an educational philosophy and a vision. I believe the vision should include clear goals, support for each teacher, and a constant focus on the students. The district must develop a strategic plan that the school council can refer to when setting priorities. The strategic plan should allow people to participate in decision making. It should be used as a development and training guide. Planning will help with communication and with making decisions that will focus on the future.

Promoting Shared Decision Making

A district will need to make sure to build a strong alliance with the teachers' union. Do not rush into it without a careful plan developed by those involved. The district needs to promote shared decision making. There needs to be encouragement for experimenting and risk taking. There will be a need for a broad range of staff development. The district will need to decide who will make up the school council team. One of the most important things is to make sure that the principal is willing to participate (Matranga, Horner, Hill, & Peltier, 1993).

School Councils

Once a district has decided to set up school-based management in their district a school council, site council, building team, or management team must be formed. The makeup of the school council will vary in number and people involved. Some councils involve teachers, parents, non-parents, non-certified staff, and occasionally students. The makeup depends on the district and who district leaders feel should be involved when getting started.

David (1994) mentions that school councils may need some type of training to introduce them to school-based management. Trainers may be chosen by individual councils to provide counsel in a variety of areas, such as group decision making, planning, agenda setting, and communications. There may also be a need for ongoing training in procedures and operations for the school in time management, evaluation of objectives, and team motivation.

White (1989) says that three of the most common areas of decision making under school-based management are curriculum, budget, and staffing. Curriculum development enables staff to develop instructional programs, select instructional materials and textbooks, and design in-service training programs that will meet the needs of students. Each school district will have different areas of decisions they are concerned with depending on the building needs.

The Shenandoah Community School District has just started taking a step toward site-based management. Superintendent, Jim Matre, believes in getting others involved including community members. He has encouraged the building principals to get the staff and the community involved in decisions they feel will affect the overall school district. As of December 9, 1996, the superintendent, special needs coordinator, and middle school principal selected a school council, called building team. The team consists of community members and middle school staff. The team just completed the first phase of training in Des Moines and will be having several more training sessions in the near future.

The staff at the middle school has been getting a chance to deal with a few decision making areas of school-based management. The staff has been allowed to make some decisions dealing with the budget, middle school technology and district wide technology, master scheduling, ideas for building discipline, and the selection of new staff members. We have started with a building team at our level.

Principal's Role

School-based management will allow the principal to assume a new level of involvement. The principal can see different situations from the view point of others (Bergman, 1992).

The principal should be responsible for facilitating the change and helping the staff in setting up school-based management. He/she must have a knowledge of the school program and express a vision for the school. After the principal has expressed his/her vision the staff should express their vision. Once both have had a chance to express their vision then collaboratively they should develop a shared vision. The principal needs to build trust with all involved. Decisions may be slower with site-based management but will have a longer lasting affect. A principal will need to learn to be a good listener.

The principal needs to think with new perspectives. There will be many issues to deal with and decisions to be made. A variety of styles will emerge that reflect individual personalities. The principal needs to let those involved express their perspectives about the problems they see and work together to solve the problems from different viewpoints (Bergman, 1992; Lyons & Shelton, 1994).

The principal should help the staff determine needs, identify problems, and help implement solutions. The staff may need resources, information, and expertise in the planning process. It will be the principal's responsibility to see that they get it. The principal should see that the best possible decisions are being made (Tranter, 1992).

Working collaboratively will promote positive feeling for those involved. Together an assessment can be made of the areas that need the most attention. Decisions are made by individuals who are affected by them (White, 1989).

Barriers

A few of the barriers that the education professionals face with school-based management are the fear of losing power, taking risks, and the resistance to the change in their roles and responsibility when setting up the program (Matranga, et al, 1993). One of the barriers that education professionals face with school-based management is the fear of losing power. School board members and administrators sometimes have a fear of losing the power they have in the traditional decision-making process compared to that of the shared decision-making process.

David (1994) describes school-based management not as a matter of setting up a school council for the school but as a matter of changing roles and responsibilities throughout the educational system. The idea of changing roles and responsibilities is something that will take time and patience. It is not something that will happen overnight and must be understood by everyone involved in the process. "America 2000: An Education Strategy" states that, "because real education improvements happens school by school, the teacher, principal, and parents in each school must be given authority and the responsibilities to make important decisions about how the school will operate" (Uhl, Boschee, & Bonaiuto, 1993, p. 6).

School-based management is not something that can be copied from one district and applied to another. When implemented in a district, it will take time to develop its own character, goals and styles. Districts that have successfully implemented school-based management have done so over five to ten years (David, 1989; Drury, 1993). The school district that is committed to site-based management can be very successful. The district will need to develop a careful plan collaboratively by those who will be involved in the implementation. As a principal there are a lot of advantages to having school-based management in the building. A principal will want to make sure there is a commitment from the superintendent and the school board before getting started.

Closing

Over the last three years I have gotten involved in a number of committees. I first got involved so I could complete my practicum requirement. However, as time passed I felt that what I was doing was valuable experience. The areas I chose were ones that I felt would benefit me as a building administrator. To be effective I should get as much experience as I can in areas that staff feel are important. I think it actually helps to provide insight to what is involved in different committees. If I were hired today as a principal I would have a good working knowledge of committee functions.

The most valuable practicum experience came from being named the associate principal of the middle school building. Over the last three years I have had many chances to fill in as the building principal. It was

uplifting when the district hired a substitute for me when the principal was gone so I could attend to the day-to-day operations of the building.

Serving in this position has given me a new perspective of what is involved in being a building principal. I learned about the day-to-day operations such as checking on absent students or taking calls from parents. I have also dealt with more serious issues such as fighting, removal from class, in-school suspension, and in one case, expulsion of a student with a knife. I feel I have a real advantage entering the job market by serving in this position for the last three years.

I don't remember working harder towards a goal than I have worked on this degree. It has not only taken lots of personal time but also time away from my family. I remember after the first initial meeting thinking to myself "Do I really have the time to commit to this program?" The desire to obtain an administrative degree and achieve my goal overcame any negative thoughts I had. Enrolling in the program has proven to be one of the best decisions I have ever made. I feel that I have a broader knowledge base than I did before. The program has not only prepared me to be an effective administrator but has made me a better teacher.

My views have changed greatly on the responsibilities of an administrator. The job is not as easy as I first thought. There are many demands placed upon a principal. A principal never knows what to expect and I think that is why the job is now more fascinating to me because it presents a challenge.

Gorton (1991) suggests that an administrator is a manager, instructional leader, disciplinarian, human relations facilitator, evaluator, and conflict mediator. I believe this to be true because a principal has to be more than just the disciplinarian and evaluator of the building.

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