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A vision of a successful secondary principal : a reflective essay

Gregory P. Herbst

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Abstract

Being in education, whether it be as an administrator or a classroom teacher, is not about "us" and "them". It is about "we" -- and what can "we" do together to make every child learn as much as possible? What can "we" do together to make every child enjoy and at the same time be challenged by this educational experience? What can "we" do to encourage each student to become a lifelong learner and caring, responsible citizen?

Throughout this reflective paper, I will outline what I feel are some of the important qualities of an effective secondary principal. These qualities will include leadership, professional growth, and school and community partnerships.

A VISION OF A SUCCESSFUL SECONDARY PRINCIPAL:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Robert H. Decker

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Date Approved

Adviser/Director of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

7/15/98
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

July 15, 1998
Date Received

Michael D. Waggoner

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

When I was in high school, I did not have very much guidance when it came to deciding where to go to college or what to study once I got there. Only one other person from my family, an older brother, had ever gone to college and he did not graduate. Despite this and for reasons I cannot explain, I knew I would go to college when I graduated from high school.

I certainly do not fault my parents for this lack of direction, after all, it is difficult to navigate unfamiliar waters. They are hardworking people who care very much for their family of six. My dad worked thirty years at a meat packing plant, getting up at 5:00 a.m. and returning home at 5:00 p.m. My mom worked as a head cashier in a grocery store at night. With this arrangement, mom was home during the day and dad was home at night. It did not give them a lot of time together, but my brothers and sisters and I were too young to appreciate then the sacrifice they were making for us. I have heard it said the only place a kid should have to look for a role model is across the supper table ... for me it was. Simply by the lives they led, my parents taught me how to work hard, make sacrifices, and honor commitments.

I started working at a chain of convenience store gas stations owned by Iowa Oil Company (IOCO) during my sophomore year in high school. When I took a year off from college after my freshman year, my boss made me manager of one of the gas stations. He must have thought I had promise because he and his wife also asked me to be the godfather to their new daughter. At this point, I seriously considered foregoing college and making a career at IOCO.

Being a cashier at a convenience store requires more thought than it looks, but it is hardly the type of job that keeps a person intellectually stimulated. It was not long before I got bored and again started wondering what I should do with my life. One question led me to a career in teaching -- "When and where did I have the most fun in my life?" The answer was simple -- high school!

All four years of high school were wonderful for me. School work always came somewhat easy and was therefore more of an inconvenience than a threat. I saw my friends everyday and there were sports! I started at quarterback on the football team, forward on the basketball team, and shortstop and pitcher on the baseball team. Although I was not aware of it at the time, I believe I would identify sports as having provided me with my first leadership positions.

I enrolled back in college after my one year leave of absence and began coursework to be a secondary math teacher. As much as I loved sports and wanted to coach, I also had an appreciation for the teachers that actually taught me something ... not only academic material, but also responsibility and accountability. Some teachers you liked and others you respected. I knew I wanted to become the latter.

Don't be their friend - Be their coach.

My first job teaching was in Marceline, a small town in north-central Missouri. I would not trade those two years for anything in the world. I enjoyed the students and the experience and I think they appreciated me. My time there resulted in two "Most Influential Teacher" Certificates from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

The people of Marceline are fanatical about football. All other sports and activities are merely ways of passing time until football season rolls around again. In the four years prior to my arrival, the varsity was 47-4 with one state championship. I asked Galen Hicks, the defensive coordinator, (personal communication, Fall, 1988) what the secret to successful coaching was and he responded "Don't be their friend, be their coach -- they have enough friends".

As I look back, this conversation in the first month of my first year of teaching might have been the best coaching and teaching advice I have ever received. It has been the philosophy that I have used to run my classroom for the last ten years and I am convinced it has helped me avoid all of the challenges that beginning teachers have when separating being friendly from being friends. Although my two years in Marceline were professionally rewarding, I resigned my position there because my wife and I wanted to move closer to our families.

I accepted a position with the Cedar Falls School District in the fall of 1990 and have been there ever since. My first two years were spent teaching and traveling between the two junior highs. The last six years, I have been teaching and traveling between one junior high and the high school. Three years ago, I received the nomination for the University of Iowa Distinguished Teacher Award, as voted on by the high school faculty and seniors. As with my experience in Missouri, I would not trade my time there for anything. I enjoy the people I work for and the people I work with. I enjoy my class schedule and the students I teach.

Becoming a school administrator never crossed my mind until three years ago. Until then, I thought I would be a teacher and coach until I retired. There is a provision in the master contract that each teacher is to earn six graduate hours every five years in order to advance on the pay scale. I had thought about getting a second bachelor's degree, this time in computer science. With this I could continue using math logic and problem solving skills that originally drew my interest toward mathematics.

My other choice was to become a secondary administrator. My primary reason for choosing administration is going to sound very idealistic, however, it is also very genuine. I wanted to make sure that when my own children go through school that everything is "right", and what better way to make sure that everything is "right" than to be there.

Certainly there were other reasons for wanting to become a secondary administrator -- the same reasons I entered into the teaching profession ten years ago. I thoroughly enjoy being a part of a high school environment. I get unparalleled satisfaction in knowing that I have made a difference in the lives of some of my students. And I still love the excitement generated by high school athletics and activities. Administration seems like a natural progression. It will afford me the opportunity to come in contact with more students, allow for a more flexible work schedule, and provide me with new and exciting challenges unique to education.

Intrigue, Perception, and Trust

The position of school administrator is very interesting to me. If the most important people in the school are the students, then the most important employees of the school district should be the teachers because they have the most direct daily contact with the students. Assuming this premise is correct, then herein lies the intrigue ... as a secondary principal, I should find myself working for the very people who work for me! It should be my job to make the teachers' jobs as easy, effective, and efficient as possible -- whether it be a box of colored chalk or a computer lab with internet capabilities. I have taught under five different principals and six different associate principals, and although these people unconditionally supported my teaching efforts, none of them ever asked me if there was anything they could do to make my job more effective.

There is a perception, however misguided, about the division between administrators and teachers. I have been continually fascinated by some of the comments directed toward me since my colleagues heard I started taking administrative classes three years ago. They range from simple and seemingly innocent statements like "Oh, you're going to the other side" and "So you're going to become one of them" to more candid thoughts like "You know that job comes with a permanent headache". Then there's my personal favorite "Be careful. There's a course toward the end of that program where they suck all your brains out".

I can only assume that the cause of such negative perceptions about administrators is the consequence of years of distrust. However,

Dr. Robert Decker (personal communication, July 6, 1995) told me in Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction that for administrators, "... the faculty's perception is both their and my reality". Regardless, this perceived division has always disturbed me. Being in education, whether it be as an administrator or a classroom teacher, is not about "us" and "them". It is about "we" -- and what can "we" do together to make every child learn as much as possible? What can "we" do together to make every child enjoy and at the same time be challenged by this educational experience? What can "we" do to encourage each student to become a lifelong learner and caring, responsible citizen?

Throughout the remainder of this reflective paper, I will outline what I feel are some of the important qualities of an effective secondary principal. These qualities will include leadership, professional growth, and school and community partnerships.

Leadership

I believe that one of the most important prerequisites to being an effective principal is having solid leadership skills. I will look at several parts of being an effective leader, including philosophy and vision, instructional leadership, shared decision-making, knowledge of school law, and communicator.

Philosophy and Vision

It is imperative that a principal have a sound philosophy of education. I believe this philosophy goes to the very soul every person - to the belief system that each of us use to govern our actions. My philosophy about education is that we have a responsibility to educate

the whole child - not just academically - but in all areas. Individuals should not only be better students upon graduating from school, they should be better people. Dr. David Else (personal communication, July 31, 1997) in Seminar told us what a principal does on a regular basis over time will become the most important thing in that school. I hope Dr. Else is right, because this is the very reason I want to become a principal.

Another important aspect of effective leadership is to use educational values to create a vision for the school district. The vision provides the measure of what the district wants their students to be able to do. The actions of the district must coincide with the values of the district. To ensure the success of a district's vision, it "must be incorporated into the district's goals, strategies, policies, processes, cultural practices, management behavior, and accountability systems" (Tewel, 1996, p. 16):

It is important for school districts today to have a shared vision. Dictatorial approaches that were effective thirty years ago are less effective today. Times have changed and people have changed, therefore management styles must also change. Building consensus and collective vision takes time and effort, but the trade-off is strength of conviction and increased probability for realization. Again in Seminar, Dr. Else (personal communication, July 7, 1997) defined consensus as a decision collectively reached by team members after all have had an opportunity to influence the decision and all agree to support it without sabotage. Since total agreement is improbable, if not impossible, consensus among interested parties provides a realistic alternative.

Instructional Leadership

I believe the principal should be the instructional leader of the school. This is not to be confused with being a curriculum leader. Typical high schools offer a wide variety of disciplines -- mathematics, science, history, literature, etc. -- and many of these include upper level classes which are quite advanced in content and construct. It is unrealistic to think that one person can be a curricular "expert" in all of these disciplines. However, although the principal might not know the intricacies of each discipline, that person should know good teaching. "Principals must ensure that schools attend to different student learning capabilities and create settings that reflect diversity of methods, technologies, and styles" (Foriska, 1992, p. 16). At the secondary level, I believe this is the key to being an effective instructional leader ... to be able to recognize and develop good teaching.

Smith & Andrew (1989) identified four progressive competencies required of principals to be effective instructional leaders. They believe principals should (1) have clear, informed visions of what they want their school to become and these visions should focus on students and their needs; (2) translate these visions into goals for their school and expectations for teachers, students, and administrators; (3) continuously monitor progress; and (4) intervene in a supportive or corrective manner when deemed necessary.

Shared Decision-Making

I believe an effective principal will use shared decision-making strategies within the school. Teachers are professionals and their input

must be valued. Employing shared decision-making practices will greatly increase the probability of a faculty implementing decisions within their classrooms where it will benefit students. I believe this is true because by making people part of the decision making process, it also makes them responsible and accountable for implementing agreed upon decisions.

I think there are three potential areas of conflict that beginning principals need to be consciously aware of when using shared decision-making. First, it is important to not use shared decision-making for everything. Some decisions I will have to and others I will want to make myself. As Dr. Dan Smith (personal communication, June 14, 1995) humorously phrased it while guest-lecturing in my Administration of the Secondary School class, if there is a fire in the school, you're not going to have a meeting to decide whether or not to pull the fire alarm.

Secondly, although actual percentages vary from school to school, there will be a faction of the faculty that does not want to be a part of this process. Personal experience has taught me that some teachers would simply prefer to be told what to do.

Finally, if I am going to charge a committee of teachers to study an issue and offer suggestions, I must be willing to accept their proposals. This may be difficult because I realize that, as principal, I will be held accountable for all decisions made in our school. However, by not doing so, I will discourage any future teacher involvement in decision making processes and, perhaps more importantly, undermine the collegial atmosphere that I want so much to create. Leithwood (1992) offers the

idea that there need not be an all-or-none philosophical stance -- schools can rely on both top-down and facilitative forms of decision-making. Finding the right balance is the challenge.

Knowledge of School Law

As a high school principal, I must have a working knowledge of school law and how it will affect some of the decisions I will make. For decades, schools have enjoyed the luxury of operating under an umbrella of immunity from student and parent litigation. It was a long-held belief that schools are agents of the state; therefore, students and parents could not sue the school because, in effect, they would be suing themselves. More recently, students and parents are willing to challenge this authority in the presence of alleged constitutional abuses by school officials. The result is a series of landmark cases that have set the standards that schools use to guide their own behavior and a legal framework when implementing school policy.

Although there are others, I hypothesize that most legal issues are composed of students' freedom of speech and expression and illegal search and seizures. Concerning the former, School Law taught me that students are prohibited from expressing, publishing, or distributing any material that is obscene, libelous, or slanderous, as well as material which encourages students to violate school regulations or cause the material and substantial disruption of the orderly operation of the school.

In the latter, the courts have relaxed the rigid criminal-law interpretation of the Fourth Amendment in favor of a balancing test, whereby " A student's freedom from unreasonable search and seizure

must be balanced against the need for school officials to maintain order and discipline ..." (Alexander & Alexander, 1993, p. 339). In either instance, I feel I have a solid foundation of knowledge to draw from when making decisions as well as having my American Public School Law text within arms reach in my professional library.

Communicator

I recently served on an attendance review committee at the school where I was teaching. One of the things we did was to hold "town meetings" with teachers to hear their concerns with the current attendance policy. Although several common threads were voiced throughout this process, one message came across louder than the rest - communication.

I believe that a successful principal must also be an effective communicator. Inaccurate information and ignorance have fueled more than their share of teachers' lounge gripe sessions. Although seemingly a simple process, communication can be quite complex and can manifest itself in varied forms. We communicate in ways other than speech -- eye contact, body language, written notes, and more recently e-mail. Although it will not always be feasible, I intend to communicate in person. One way communication leaves too much open to interpretation. I tend to agree with Boyle (1996) who maintains face-to-face communication is ten times more valuable than written communication.

Another part of successful communication which often gets overlooked is the art of listening. There are times when people simply need someone to listen to them patiently, nod at their rhetorical

questions, or simply hear them vent some frustrations. I hope I have the wisdom to recognize and distinguish between these instances and times when people are asking for input.

Professional Growth

I believe that a second area of strength required to be an effective principal is being able to promote professional growth among staff members. I will look at three areas where opportunities for professional growth might present themselves, including evaluation of instruction, professional improvement commitments, and staff development and technology.

Evaluation of Instruction

Although my personal experience with evaluations has always been positive, I have concluded that evaluations conducted in their present form are ineffective. My reasoning is simple -- in every school system that I have taught, there have been marginal, if not incompetent, teachers. Yet, year after year these teachers continue with (bad) business as usual. To my knowledge, little has been done to improve the performance level of instruction in these teachers' classrooms. Under these circumstances, my personal perception of evaluations is that they are a required duty for most administrators and have become primarily routine and ineffective.

Despite professional titles and contractual obligations, I imagine that it must be very difficult to sit in judgment of others. Just the word "evaluation" carries with it connotations of judgment, subjectivity, and distrust. A good beginning to alleviating these feelings of uneasiness

would be to replace "evaluations" with "observations". The purpose of observation feedback should be for teacher improvement and not evaluation (Pajak, 1993). The third of W. Edwards Deming's Fourteen Points suggests that we "Cease dependence on inspection to achieve quality. Eliminate the need for inspection on a mass basis by building quality into the product in the first place" (Deming, 1986, p. 23).

Establishing a relaxed atmosphere will aid in developing the needed trust between teachers and myself as to the genuine purpose of the observation process -- to improve instruction within the classroom. After all, improvement should be based on trust, not fear.

As I enter my first principalship, I need to convince my faculty that I am committed to the primary purpose of observation as stated above, that is, to improve instruction. I think this should be the underlying motivation behind everything we do as educators. If we are to make a positive difference in the lives of kids, all of our energies should be focused on improving instruction within the classroom. For this ambition to be realized, observations should take place on a weekly basis rather than the once-every-three-years format found in many master contracts. Peters and Waterman (1982) refer to this as "management by wandering around" (p. 67). Using this approach, the principal will be more cognizant of what is happening in teachers' classrooms (Reitzug & Burrello, 1995).

In the case of a teacher who needs improvement, here lies a golden opportunity to demonstrate to the teacher and faculty that I am truly dedicated to the purpose of improvement. Working collaboratively,

the teacher and I can develop a plan for improvement. A cautious reminder - as the administrator, I need to avoid using the word "we", whereby I might develop ownership over the improvement plan.

Ownership is the responsibility of the teacher.

In the event that a teacher does not improve, I have learned the importance of specific documentation throughout the formative observation process. The acronym NEAT (Notification, Explanation, Assistance, and Time) will help minimize the chances of making my own "fatal error". In the event that I reach the point of termination with a faculty member, I will also remember that their only defense is to discredit me as an evaluator/administrator. "Identifying, evaluating, remediating, and if necessary, discharging incompetent teachers, is critical to improving the instructional process in schools. It is also a process that is personally unpleasant, frustrating, and at times anguishing for school administrators (Waintroob, 1995, p. 20). However, I understand that if I am not willing to do that part of the job, then I am not willing to do the job.

I like Madeline Hunter's conferencing techniques (Pajak, 1993, p. 200) and plan to use it in some modified form. I see the importance of starting out with the positives, again to build the necessary trust. I also like her conferencing techniques for excellent teachers, described in the next section, as a way of stretching them to become even better. Although compliments of "You're doing a great job for us", etc., are warmly accepted and much appreciated, they do more to stroke egos than stretch potentials. Excellence, after all, does not imply perfection.

Professional Improvement Commitments

A concept that I believe strongly in is having faculty members develop yearly Professional Improvement Commitments (PIC's). PIC's should concentrate on areas that a teacher wishes to improve in and can be especially effective in encouraging faculty members to practice self-evaluation. As Dr. Decker (personal communication, July 24, 1995) said in *Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction*, "Even if a teacher only improves an inch [due to a PIC], it's an inch more than they probably would have improved on their own."

In talking with practicing principals about why so many formative evaluations take place in April and May, a common response is that there is not enough time in the school year to do them earlier. Given this, it might be even more difficult for a principal to maintain the informal monitoring of each teacher's PIC progress accordingly to their individual timelines, especially in the case of a larger faculty. That is, if you accept the lack-of-time argument, which I do not. I believe, as suggested earlier, the reason for the April/May evaluations is because it is difficult to sit in judgment of others and consequently principals put it off until the end of the school year. However, principals might be able to "find" more time for this exercise in the PIC process given that it is less evaluative and less judgmental.

Staff Development and Technology

As the person who sets the tone for professional growth throughout the building, I believe that if I expect teachers to improve

professionally, than I must provide opportunities for such improvement through in-service and collaboration.

There are certain criteria that must exist for meaningful staff development to take place. First, I must provide for teacher planning and input on program content. Teachers should be allowed to explore on-the-job needs that are significant to them. This increased faculty input brings with it increased potential for classroom implementation. Secondly, emphasis should be given to competent demonstration and opportunities for staff to practice the new skills as well as receive constructive feedback. Too often during in-service situations, teachers view concepts or tools that spark an interest but are never given a hands-on opportunity to explore these areas. Staff development should be circular, not linear. Thirdly, effective staff development includes opportunities for teachers to observe other teachers who have mastered and are practicing skills within their classrooms. The benefits here are twofold -- it provides concrete examples of the applicability of presented concepts as well as promoting professional collaboration among the staff. Finally, I, as the principal, must be involved as an active participant in the in-service program. Following the old cliché of "practicing what you preach", I need to be involved and excited if I expect my staff to show reciprocal enthusiasm.

I also believe that a major portion of any staff development program needs to focus on integrating technology into the classrooms and curriculum. So many jobs, both present and future, are or will be technology based. By not incorporating technology into teaching

practices, we are doing a terrible disservice to our students. It is estimated that 95 to 98 percent of class time is still spent with the teacher lecturing and the students passively listening (Luehrmann, 1990). Some reasons for this already slow integration include insufficient money, teacher resistance, and little administrative support (Cuban, 1994). As a perceived leader in the community and definite leader of the school, I can have a positive impact on all three of these obstacles.

School and Community Partnerships

Schools have traditionally used a public relations approach to communicate with their customers -- newsletters, school newspapers, etc. have provided effective one-way communication of school goals, upcoming activities, and academic and athletic achievements (Crowson, 1992). However, the operative word in the above subtitle is partnerships, implying close cooperation between both parties having joint rights and responsibilities. The development of a true partnership requires both parties to be aware of their roles and each must trust that the partnership will be beneficial to both partners (Winlock, 1994).

This concept is vastly different from the closed systems theory that schools operate and exist for themselves. In fact, recent developments have underlined the need for public schools to change the way they do business and move toward an open systems theory of being responsive to the external environment. Although parents have always had a choice between public and private education for their children, they have not always had the right to use public education dollars on a private school education. This separation was disturbed recently when the Wisconsin

Supreme Court upheld the "voucher plan" decision to use public money to pay for parochial school tuition for low income children (Waterloo/Cedar Falls Courier, June 11, 1998). Implications of this decision are forthcoming; in any case, there is obviously a perception by some that public schools are not providing the quality of education that private schools are. Similar to what was mentioned earlier, that a faculty's perception becomes administrative reality, Willis (1995) contends that a public's perception becomes the reality of the school district.

All too often, teachers will only contact parents directly to discuss an academic or behavioral concern. Consequently, parents only hear negative comments about their student. As a teacher, I learned a valuable lesson when talking with a friend a few years ago. We were discussing parent/teacher conferences and he used the example of his own son to illustrate a point. He shared with me that whenever he went to his son's conferences, teachers would always tell him "what a good kid" he was but rarely ever offered information about the type of student he was. The father later had regrets for not requesting more information of this type because his son turned out to be less than academic. What I learned was this -- it is easy to give positive feedback to parents. I start all of my conferences by talking first to parents about their son/daughter and then discussing their student. I actually had a father cut a conference short when I told him his son, who was a marginal student, was a very respectful young man and that he should be proud. It was the first good thing he had heard about his boy and he started to cry.

Another thing that is important to remember when talking to parents is to use jargon free language and avoid using a we-know-best attitude (Willis, 1995). By keeping in constant contact with parents, providing positive feedback when possible, and encouraging two-way communication with the home, schools can begin developing the partnerships needed to educate the whole child.

Conclusion

It is a mystery to me how days can pass so slowly yet years seem to slip away. Three short years ago, I began coursework to become a secondary principal. Adding "student" to my already full list of roles, including husband, father, teacher, coach, son, brother, and friend, has added more late nights and early mornings to an already full schedule.

Some nights I lay awake wondering if I can do it. Other nights I wonder if I even want to. Although I struggled with these doubts, I accepted them as natural, knowing the lingering shadow of change is uncertainty. My life was so comfortable and so secure before all of this.

However, there are two constant reminders of why I chose this path, and they both call me "daddy". When I look into their trusting faces and innocent eyes I know I have made the right decision. When my wife and I filled out our daughter's preschool forms last fall, one of the questions asked what we wanted for her from this experience. We wrote that we wanted it to be educationally beneficial and emotionally rewarding. These wishes will always be the same, whether my child is 3, 10, or 17.

I want for all children what I want for my own. To be treated fairly, to be taught in an atmosphere of earned and mutual respect, to experience true friendship, and to be held accountable for their actions. Doing what is right does not always mean doing what is easy. A student who earns an "F" has every right to that grade as the student who earns an "A". Short term favors too often result in long term failures.

I know what lies before me is a difficult task. Many kids come to school with so much extra baggage it is a wonder they can concentrate at all. It seems unfair that schools are asked to solve societal problems they had no hand in creating while at the same time cuts in funding require us to do more with less. But together we, parents, teachers, students, and community can do it ... we will do it ... and I am going to be right in the middle of it to make sure that it is "right".

I know I will make mistakes. I do not profess to be infallible. Nevertheless, I gladly accept the challenge of educating anyone's child. And when they leave our school, they will be better people, not just better students.

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