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1997

## A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

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### Recommended Citation

Jiskoot, Douglas B., "A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay" (1997). *Graduate Research Papers*. 909.  
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## A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

This is an exciting time for education. Education has come to the forefront at the national level with President Clinton giving a full twenty minutes to education in his latest State of the Union address, more than any other president in history. I see parents wanting to do more and become more involved in their children's education.

Innovations in technology are making it more exciting to teach and to engage young minds to their fullest potential. Ownership in the school is returning back to the original owners, parents, teachers and most importantly, the students. Schools are no longer "run" by principals, they are run by everyone with the principal giving ideas, facilitating, and communicating a vision for the betterment of the institution.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Douglas B. Jiskoot

May, 1997

This Research Paper by : Douglas B. Jiskoot

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SCHOOLS:  
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for  
the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

3-26-97

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The decision to enter into a masters program for school administration was an easy one for me. I began my teaching career during the fall of 1992. My goal from day one of my educational career was to become a high school principal by the age of thirty-five. I wanted to be the person that had the control; the power to make policies and decisions; the "go to" guy with all the answers. I wanted to experience the gratification of being the head of a well run machine; to be the head of a large organization that I could call mine. I wanted the responsibilities of leadership, and the accolades that came with it.

I knew that being a high school principal carried a lot of responsibility and had a great deal of stress associated with the position. Before I started on my masters, I visited the high school principal of my alma mater, wanting to know how he handles all the pressures of his job. I remember specifically asking him how he handled wearing so many different "hats" as a principal. How do you keep teachers, students, parents, and the community happy? His advice was reassuring and convinced me that I could do this. I could be a good high school principal. After teaching for two years at Abraham Lincoln High School in Council Bluffs, I enrolled at the University of Northern Iowa in the Masters program for Secondary Administration.

As I started to progress through the course work, colleagues would ask me what I am getting my masters in. I would reply with pride, "In Secondary Administration." The responses I most often received made it clear just how the faculty in my school, and faculty in most schools I suspect, view administrators. "Oh, you are going to be one of those", or "Why do you want to be an administrator?" Often, the look on their face was a subtle but noticeable look of disgust, telling me that I must be crazy to want to be an administrator.

Am I crazy for wanting to become an administrator? I am not sure. As I come close to the end of my masters program, I find that my original perceptions of administration have changed dramatically. When I reflect back on my motives for wanting to become an administrator, I can not believe how wrong and naive I was. Being a principal is not about power or prestige or accolades. An effective principal doesn't make dictatorial policies and decisions. Rather, I have learned, they are more like facilitators who seek out policies and decisions of others and then help them implement their own wishes. A school in which I am an administrator will not be "my" institution, it will be everyone's institution -- the teachers', students', parents', and the communities -- of which I am just a part.

So what now is my vision as I near the end of this administrative program? How has it changed? I now believe that an effective administrator creates a feeling of community among the school, is a facilitator for progress, and is an effective communicator with a vision.

Creating a school that is communal in nature, where everyone shares the same values, mores, and norms is vital if a school is to be successful in its goal to educate all students. No single factor can do more than establishing a community atmosphere in a school. Such an atmosphere provides centeredness and ties everyone together to one common goal -- the education of students. "The idea of a school as a learning community suggests a kind of connectedness among members that resembles what is found in a family, a neighborhood, or some other closely knit group, where bonds tend to be familial or even sacred" (Sergiovanni, 1992).

If a school is to be understood as a learning community, it needs to be defined by its values, sentiments, and beliefs which bond the people together in a common cause. These values, sentiments and beliefs become the norms that guide behavior and give meaning to community life. Sergiovanni (1992) states that:

. . . norms become compass settings or sometimes maps that guide our journey through community life.

They answer questions: What is this school about? What is our image of learners? What makes us unique? How do we work together as colleagues? How does this school, as a community, fit into the larger school community? How do parents fit in?

Every institution has a set of norms, but not every institution has positive norms. The administrator's job is to have the right norms emerge as the defining norms for the school. Only then will the school become a positive, flourishing educational community. How does one do that -- ensure that only positive norms are held by the educational community?

First and foremost, the principal cannot dictate what the norms will be for the school. Only what is agreed upon by the school community will be shared and implemented by that community. Norms that only come from the administrator will only be enforced by the administrator, ensuring failure. Positive norms of the school have to come from within the school itself. This can take a great deal of time and effort on the part of the administrator.

A principal can facilitate the emergence of positive norms in several ways. He/she can schedule time for faculty to correspond and share ideas of effective teaching practices. Leadership roles can be given to positive, innovative staff members. Positive teachers can be made more "visible" and encouraged to share their



ideas. Teachers can be encouraged to take risks in their teaching and to become innovators.

Another way to institute positive norms and help establish membership in the community is to give teachers a sense of ownership in it. As stated earlier, this is not the principal's school, it belongs to everyone. Everyone needs to have an active role in the learning community. "School administrators should provide a meaningful opportunity for teachers to participate in school decision making and should include a significant role for teachers in the making of final decisions about those activities directly affecting them" (Gorton & Schneider, 1991).

As the school becomes more and more of a community, the practice of teaching transforms from an individual to a collective one (Sergiovanni, 1992). Teachers will start to collaborate on innovative teaching methods they have tried in their own classrooms. Teachers will begin to collaborate more to solve problems. Curriculum lines will start to become blurred with teachers teaching across content areas. A simple math lesson might be taught in an English class. A science project may be analyzed in a math class. It doesn't matter in a learning community. The feeling becomes that every teacher is responsible for the child's whole education, not just a specific content area.

"In organizational life, people make the organization. The school or the school system is nothing more or less than the sum

of its people and their collective willpower and energy” (Black & English, 1986). It is the administrator’s job to channel that energy into a collective unit, a learning community of similar goals, values, and norms. “What makes two people colleagues is common membership in a community, commitment to a common cause, shared professional values, and a shared professional heritage. Without this common base, there can be no meaningful collegiality” (Sergiovanni, 1992).

Once a learning community is established in the school, the principal can afford to give much less attention to the traditional management functions of planning, organizing, controlling, and leading, for these become built into the everyday life of the school. The principal can then concentrate on becoming a facilitator for good teaching.

A good principal will facilitate good teaching in the school. He or she becomes a servant to the faculty so that they can do their jobs in the most effective and efficient manner possible. This can take the form of removing obstacles to new and innovative ideas, providing material and emotional support, providing opportunities for teachers to attend training and/or informative workshops, and taking care of the management details that make teaching more effective.

One such management detail involves supporting teachers on issues and problems of student discipline. Teachers value

administrative support in regard to their problems with pupils more than anything else the administrator can do (Gorton & Schneider, 1991).

If there is to be successful implementation of a learning community and if the principal is going to be a facilitator for teachers, the principal must also be an effective communicator. "School administrators probably engage in communicating more often than any other process, with the possible exception of decision making. To persuade, instruct, direct, request, present, stimulate, or develop understanding, administrators must communicate" (Gorton & Schneider, 1991).

James Guthrie and Rodney Reed (1991) believe communication is vital for school success:

Since almost all administrative actions or decisions must eventually be communicated, the extent to which administrators are capable in this regard is ultimately associated with their overall effectiveness. Clearly the ability of school executives to communicate with various constituencies associated with schools -- students, instructional and non instructional staff, parents, and a diverse school community -- is vital for school success. (1991)

The above statement implies that formal communication methods are of critical importance. However, one should not overlook informal communication methods as well. Often, the informal methods -- speaking in small groups, hand written notes, use of the “grape vine” -- are more effective than formal methods. Effective organizations rely heavily on informal methods of communication (Gorton & Schneider, 1991).

Administrators in effective organizations allowed time for ‘no-holds-barred’ communications, where discussion is encouraged from all participants, the exact opposite of what was found in other organization where people who had worked together for a long time relied only on written communication. (Gorton & Schneider, 1991)

Of key importance to the above statement is that discussion is encouraged by all participants. In the educational arena, those participants are parents, students, teachers and staff, as well as other community leaders. They must be a part of the learning community and feel free to communicate within it. Difficulty arises, however, in providing time for all of these participants to communicate freely. The principal must arrange time through

creative scheduling and other means to give adequate time for free discussion.

A wise principal will spend more time being an active listener rather than actually speaking or writing. Listening to all participants and their ideas or concerns will go far in creating a learning community.

Establishing a learning community, being a facilitator, and being an effective communicator are all vital factors, I believe, in effective administration. However, none of these factors will matter if the principal does not have a vision for his or her school. If the school leader does not have a vision, the school will falter. A particular vision I have as a perspective principal is to implement the effective integration of technology into the school curriculum.

The need for school children to have access to the latest technology has never been more pronounced in the United States. Many adults complain about their own computer illiteracy, and many employers regularly deny jobs to applicants who have little experience with computers. Educational leaders and communities they serve are becoming increasingly aware that current and future classrooms must be equipped with the latest technology so that pupils may engage their intelligence and the curriculum more productively.

In the past, it was felt that if a computer or two were placed in a classroom, they would get used. However, "technophobia"

experienced by teachers, along with a general ineptness on how to integrate technology into the curriculum all but prevented the wide use of computers in the classroom. The desired results were not being met and it was getting expensive. With the rapid changes that technology undergoes every six months, it soon became apparent to educational leaders, that a more precise process for bringing technology into the classroom was needed. A technology plan with a long range vision must be developed by individual school districts if technology integration is to succeed in the classroom.

A solid, long-term plan recognizes that implementing technology is an ongoing process, not a one-time matter of putting a computer or two in a classroom. “Often there is a perception that technology is an event, that it is something that happens at some [specific] time,” says Kerry Johnson, Director of Educational Technology for the Poway Unified School District (Wall, 1994, p. 45). Technology changes the ways people do things. A plan should not be so restrictive that it cannot adapt to these changes and yet it must provide enough vision so that the full benefits of technology can be planned for and utilized. “There must be an eye toward the future in meeting tomorrow’s needs . . .” (Sydow & Kirkpatrick, 1992, p. 32). People involved in the planning should not be limited in their thinking by what now is deployed or available. They need

a vision for the use of technology in the schools and districts of tomorrow (Sydow & Kirkpatrick, 1992).

The most important factor to the success of technology integration is planning for staff training. The plan needs to specify how the teachers will be trained to use the new technology. The old days of simply putting a computer in a classroom in the hopes it will be used, proved to be a dismal failure. Technology will only be integrated into the curriculum when teachers feel confident to use it and more importantly, see the value in its use. “Dollars spent training and equipping teachers will provide a return many times over” (Martinsen & Adams, 1993, p. 26).

Once a commitment has been made and the technology plan has been adopted, it needs to be implemented. This will not happen by itself. Having a committed planning committee is key at this juncture. The committee must ensure the plans success. In addition to having a dedicated committee, there are other ways of increasing the effectiveness of implementation.

Communication is a vital component for managing the complexities of the plan and its subsequent implementation. Kim Carter, Director of Information Services and Technology at Souhegan High School in Amherst, New Hampshire, advocates the use of newsletters to best accomplish this. Carter states:

Newsletters for staff can share information such as ongoing decisions, resource allocation, staff development opportunities, successful practices, and specific areas of technology development that colleagues are working with. Newsletters for parents and community members can report on implementation progress, sharing the impact technology is having on students and the community. (1996, p. 32)

Offering community access to the school's technology is another important aspect to implementation. Community participation is a valuable means of increasing awareness and understanding. This can be accomplished through adult night classes. The more taxpayers get excited about what is happening in schools, the simpler it will be to maintain commitment to long range plans.

Teachers are not likely to promote the effective use of computers in education if they are uncomfortable and unskilled in using the technology themselves. Furthermore, just because a teacher maybe comfortable in using a computer, does not mean they know how to integrate the computer into the classroom. Failure to properly prepare teachers and staff is considered one of the major causes for unsuccessful technology programs. This was



the down fall of years past when it was hoped that if a teacher had a computer in his/her classroom, it would get used. The problem was, the teacher did not know how to use the computer, so it just collected dust. Only when teachers have been trained on: (a) how to use technology and (b) how to integrate technology into the classroom, will technology become part of the teachers' curriculum, and not just a reward for students when they finish their work.

Staff training should be conducted by district personnel whenever feasible. This has a number of benefits. First of all, it makes the learning environment for the teacher as non threatening as possible. There is not some guru from IBM up there. It is a fellow teacher. The perception being, "If she can learn this, I can learn this too." Likewise, it is helpful to have someone on staff within the building that is able to answer questions when they come up. Having a technology specialist within the building is considered one of the keys to successful training of the staff. Teachers will become frustrated quickly if they are not able to get their problems and/or questions solved in a timely manner.

The training should occur at convenient times for teachers. This may mean creative school scheduling (e.g. every other Wednesday students arrive one hour later so that staff can receive training). Meeting times may have to be arranged in the mornings before school begins and/or after school dismisses in the

afternoon. Training workshops can be conducted during teacher preparation periods as well.

Surveying the teachers as to what they want to learn is very helpful when designing inservice training. It doesn't make much sense to teach teachers something they are not interested in. One school district in Jackson, New Jersey, after surveying teachers and finding out their needs, developed seventeen different classes that teachers can take throughout the year. It must be remembered, that in a building, there will be various levels of technology skill. Some teachers will not even know how to turn a computer on. Others, will have almost as much knowledge as the instructor himself. Having different workshops for teachers to attend will provide something of interest to everyone.

It is strongly recommended that a hands-on lab approach be used at a paced schedule with structured activities between workshops. Although this model is the most effort-intensive option for the trainers, it is often the most effective. If highly interactive, hands-on sessions offered at regular intervals in lab settings are supplemented by structured, motivated activities between sessions, the technology application is much more likely to become ingrained in the teacher's daily activities.

It is not sufficient, however, to just teach teachers how to use a computer or other technologies. In a survey conducted by Electronic Learning, (1995), and reported by J. Siegel, sixty-six

percent of the most recent staff development offerings were, in fact, training on individual software titles or specific hardware. Only twenty-one percent of the courses focused on curriculum integration. Teachers want to know precisely how they can use a particular program in conjunction with a specific lesson that they can teach. They also like to know how other experienced teachers fared when they tried the same type of lesson with their students (Nuccio, 1990). Workshops must be provided that show teachers how and give ideas on ways to integrate computers into the curriculum. This is perhaps the most crucial part of the training process. Once the teacher has become accustomed to usage and their "technophobia" has been erased, teacher enthusiasm is most often so high that they naturally want to learn more on how to integrate their new found knowledge into the classroom.

Principals and other district education leaders need to support and encourage the implementation of skills learned in the inservice. In fact, it is strongly recommended that administrators take inservice training right along side the faculty. Leslie Eiser, in Technology & Learning, (1990), sites six other areas an administrator can show leadership:

1. Time. Time to learn the new equipment, time to search for new ideas, and time to discuss with colleagues.

2. Equipment. The teacher should have access to the same equipment that he or she was trained on.

3. Trust. Software purchases should not be an administrative decision; the teachers who will use the software should be able to select it.

4. Encouragement. Encourage staff members who want to be involved. Allow them to take risks.

5. Collaboration. The administrator should encourage collaboration between teachers so that they can learn from each other.

6. Role Model. Set an example for the staff by using computers on a regular basis.

If technology is to truly become a part of the learning process and be involved in the everyday educational life of students', the following key areas should be addressed:

1. Even if outside consultants are used for workshops, local staff needs to be available for follow-up.

2. Following workshops, teachers have easy access to the same technology they were trained on.

3. Teachers are the primary trainers of teachers.

4. Training is tied directly to classroom and curriculum objectives.

5. A minimum of twenty-five percent of the technology budget is set aside for staff development.

6. Principals, superintendents, and other administrators take technology staff development along with their teachers.

7. Time for technology staff development is integrated into teachers' work schedules.

The field of education is being influenced by a new understanding of how we learn and new applications of technology to facilitate learning. Allan Collins, a noted cognitive psychologist, has identified eight shifts in teaching methodology when technology is used. The following was reported in Technology Making a Difference: The Peakview Elementary School Study, (1994):

1. A shift from whole-class to small-group instruction. New research shows a dramatic decrease in teacher-led activities when computers are used, from seventy percent to less than ten percent.

2. A shift from lecture and recitation to coaching. New research also shows an increase in the class time teachers spend serving as facilitators (rather than directors of behavior) when using computers, from twenty percent to fifty percent.

3. A shift from working with better students to working with weaker students. In traditional classrooms, teachers most often interact with brighter students who raise their hand; ignoring slower students to avoid embarrassing them. With technology, that pattern is reversed; slower students receive two to four times more attention from the teacher.

4. A shift toward more engaged students. A number of studies have demonstrated that students who work with computers become more involved in their studies, often to the point of fighting over computers between classes and after school.

5. A shift from assessment based on test performance to assessment based on products, progress, and effort. Teachers have traditionally relied on end-of-unit tests for assessment. Technology shifts the focus of assessment from tests to progress on projects and to the final product of students' efforts.

6. A shift from competitiveness to cooperation. A number of researchers have noted greater mutual assistance among students when using technology.

7. A shift from all students learning the same things to different students learning different things.

Technology helps students maintain focus and manage information as they work on separate aspects of a problem.

8. A shift from the primacy of verbal thinking to the integration of visual and verbal thinking.

(Harris, 1994)

The benefits of technology are clear. The time has come for educational methodology to significantly integrate technology into the teaching of our students. Computers are more powerful and affordable than ever before. Software is more advanced and educationally sound. Critical to success are the teachers, who are more receptive than ever before. Quite simply, the future demands that the children of today be able to manage the technology of tomorrow. Technology is no longer a luxury. It is a necessity.

As I near the end of this masters program, I find myself questioning my abilities more and second guessing myself. Do I really have what it takes to be an effective administrator? Will I be able to establish the kind of communal feel that I feel is so necessary? Will I be able to handle the pressures of wearing so many "hats" and trying to be a facilitator for so many diverse groups of people? These and many more questions have crept into my mind of late.

Am I crazy for wanting to become an administrator? I don't think so. This is an exciting time for education. Education has come to the forefront at the national level with President Clinton giving a full twenty minutes to education in his latest State of the Union address, more than any other president in history. I see parents wanting to do more and become more involved in their children's education. Innovations in technology are making it more exciting to teach and to engage young minds to their fullest potential. Ownership in the school is returning back to the original owners, parents, teachers and most importantly, the students. Schools are no longer "run" by principals, they are run by everyone with the principal giving ideas, facilitating, and communicating a vision for the betterment of the institution.



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