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My vision for becoming a secondary level educational administrator : a reflective essay

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My vision for becoming a secondary level educational administrator : a reflective essay

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss my beliefs about being a secondary administrator. The focus of this paper is to gain a personal understanding of what a secondary administrator is and does, based on various readings, discussions, practicum experiences as well as journaling activities.

MY VISION FOR BECOMING A SECONDARY LEVEL EDUCATIONAL
ADMINISTRATOR: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education
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In partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts in Education

by

Camelle C. Kinney

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This Research Paper by: Camelle C. Kinney

Entitled: MY VISION FOR BECOMING A SECONDARY LEVEL EDUCATIONAL
ADMINISTRATOR: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master
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The purpose of this paper is to discuss my beliefs about being a secondary administrator. The focus of this paper is to gain a personal understanding of what a secondary administrator is and does, based on various readings, discussions, practicum experiences as well as journaling activities.

I grew up in rural Nebraska. From a very early age I knew that hard work was essential to success. I have carried many of the values and beliefs acquired during my childhood into my professional career. It is interesting to see how some of the exact values that as a child I fought, I now embrace and want to pass on to the students, faculty and staff I work with today. I am a very passionate person, who ultimately seeks for the best in others and myself. This characteristic is one that has already proven to be helpful in my educational career. People who are passionate about what they do and believe are the exact people others want to not only follow but also work together. Passion is contagious. If we as secondary administrators can show the passion we have to our students, faculty, staff, and community, then they too will be more likely to become passionate about education. In Elliot Aronson's book, Nobody Left To Hate, he talks a great deal about being leaders that people can see your actions, "It is not only what students do, it is important what we teachers do (not what we preach, but what we practice. (Aronson, 2000, pg. 171). I

think that this applies not only to teachers but to administrators as well. As an administrator I am committed to getting my hands dirty, and becoming a collaborative participant with my entire building, working passionately to help all children learn and succeed. Additionally, many changes are happening in education. We are reasearching and finding more effective strategies for teaching. Basing the decisions we make on quality research is important. According to Marzano (2001) “Educators within a school who are enthusiastic about a particular innovation can infect an entire staff with that enthusiasm” (p. 158).

I have a lot of qualities that will help me to be a successful administrator. I am a very caring person. This is the primary reason I went into the field of education. As I was finishing my senior year of high school, I realized that I needed to be in a career that allowed me to care about others and to help them to become better. I thought about a number of different careers, but was finally led into the field of education.

Qualities and Characteristics

There are six different standards that professional administrators are expected to meet. These standards are to become visionary, instructional, organizational, collaborative, ethical and political leaders of our schools (Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education). This is a huge task to undertake, but one that

will allow me to begin my administrative career in a way that will help not only me, but my students, faculty, staff and community to be successful.

Visionary Leadership

Every person entering administration should have a vision of what their beliefs about education would look like in action. "How we think and what we believe-our personal epistemologies, if you will-have a tremendous impact on our abilities to prepare teachers for today's schools and on their chances of success "(Thomas, et al, 2000, p. 11-12.) It is crucial that we as leaders know where we want to lead our schools, students, faculty, staff and the community as a whole. "American's have always been school reformers. On some core issues we have changed our minds again and again" (McAdams, 2000, p. 248), this from a man who served on the Houston Independent School District School Board during a time of great reform. I think that we again, are entering a time of great school reform. As a leader into that time of great reform, I have to be prepared to help lead my school district in new directions.

There are six Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards (ISLLC) that help us to be able to focus our mission of leading schools into a new century. These standards are crucial in my development as a quality administrator (The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education, 2000).

The first standard, Visionary Leadership is about becoming an “educational leader who promotes the success of all students facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community”

(Orientation to Educational Leadership course syllabus, 2000). Being a visionary leader requires being able to look at the past, predict the future and act in the present. Almost as if to say, try to juggle a dove, a chainsaw and a brick while standing on one foot. This analogy might seem humorous but it serves as a fantastic visual in what I see myself doing as a school leader. The doves are the precious, fragile, learning-to-spread-their-wings-and-fly students. The chainsaw represents the people who do not look upon change as a good thing and want to cut it down. The brick symbolizes the foundations of education that we want instilled and having to do it while standing on one foot gives significance to the realization that we are going to have to try new and innovative ways to improve graduation rates, test scores and student and staff moral. Now for the question of how I am going to be able to do all of this without allowing the brick to knock out the dove or the chainsaw to cut my arm off.

Instructional Leadership

In McAdams (2000) book he talks about how, “we accepted our responsibility as elected trustees to mandate change, but we

acknowledged that effective reform had to be built from the bottom up” (p. 9). This fits with the second ISLLC standard of instructional leadership. “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture” (Orientation to Educational Leadership course syllabus, 2000). These are the doves from my picture. As an administrator I have to find a way to help them learn to fly and apply those skills to their lives outside of the school building. I think schools have the responsibility of being able to help all students and adults working there succeed. Students know when teachers are passionate about learning: it rubs off. The janitors know when their job matters to the principal. It is the job of the leader to instill a sense of pride and accomplishment in a job well done in everyone in the building. In Speck’s book (1999), she talks about how “schools should foster learning not only for students, but also for all adults in the community—teachers, staff, principal, parents, and others, creating a community of learners” (p. 5). I believe that part of being an instructional leader is opening the doors of the school and helping all who walk through them learn to not only fly like a dove, but to soar like an eagle. This is not an easy task. It takes a lot of committed involvement of everyone in the community.

It is through the instructional leadership component that I believe I can have the most impact on improving student achievement. As an administrator it is crucial that instructional leadership is continuously and consistently modeled. Also, staff development is a crucial component of instructional leadership. If we are changing the way that instruction is given to our students, we should also change the way instruction is given to our teachers. "Professional development should be targeted and directly related to teachers' practice" states James Stigler in an article by Scott Willis (p. 6). We have to target our professional development so that it will help teachers help students achieve. As an administrator it is my job to see that this type of professional development occurs.

Political Leadership

This is where the ISLLC standard of an educator being a political leader ties in. "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context" (Orientation to Educational Leadership course syllabus, 2000). I teach in a community where there is a great diversity of socio-economic status. Many of the students I am working with are likely to be the first in their families to graduate from high school or to go on to post-secondary education. As a leader, I have to foster that quest for knowledge in all

members of the community. As a political leader I have to be able to share my passion for education with the community as a whole. It is important as a political leader, in a community of any size, to be able to show the community how you are working to turn it as a whole around. Too often, it seems, that we as schools look for a quick fix. We hire consultants to come in and wave a magic wand to make everything better. Often, the consultants can help point us in the right direction, but it is a community undertaking to help solve the real problems that schools face. "Quite often, the work of the consultant is simply to point out things that are obvious. Training educators to step back from a situation in order to see it clearly is a simple common sense technique" (Monroe, 1997, p. 185). As an educational leader it is crucial that I work to create staff development to help my teachers solve the problems that they are facing.

Organizational Leadership

A third ISLLC standard of being an organizational leader states that "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment (Orientation to Educational Leadership course syllabus, 2000). In this day and age of violence in schools the part of this standard that resounds is the safe environment. We have to strive to make

students, staff and the community believe that school is a safe place to be, and make that a reality. I think that this is done partially through the development of relationships. It has been documented that if students know that someone cares about them, they are more likely to stay in school, and graduate.

Students need to acquire a respect for faculty, and vice-versa. Going to school today is a much different experience than it was even ten years ago. "It is essential that we learn to respect one another and to feel empathy and compassion for one another even for those who, on the surface, might seem very different from us in race, ethnicity, interests, athleticism, appearance, style of dress, and so on" (Aronson, 2000, p. 170). After Columbine we gained a much-heightened awareness of the diversity in our schools. Some of it we can see by the colors of skin, or the uniforms worn, but some of it lies deep within our students and ourselves. As educational leaders we have to be able to teach respect. This is accomplished by modeling it. It is still true, that children will do what you do and not what you say. "A school learning community is one in which students learn to use their minds well, and the adults and students model that practice every day throughout the school" (Meier, 1999, p. 5).

Not only do we as administrators and faculty need to model the behaviors we want to see in our students. We also have to send a message of support to our teachers. "The leader needs to send the message 'I am here to support you in whatever way you choose, as long as your way improves children's academic and social achievement'" (Monroe, 1997, p. 191). Reform is a long road. In education it often is a road that goes in circles. As a young administrator, I need to be able to listen to and incorporate the wisdom of others in the building. This does not mean that I can not be a metaphor for change, but it does mean that I have to be able to collaborate with all in the building in order to implement it. This leads to the fourth ISLLC standard, being a collaborative leader.

Collaborative Leadership

Being a collaborative leader means being "an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources" (Orientation to Educational Leadership course syllabus, 2000). Collaborative leadership is truly working together for the good of all. And in education, all is not only, the student, building, district but also the community as a whole.

I think that this collaboration starts with caring. I have to care about others in order to be striving for everyone's best interest. "To care for

another person in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself" (Lyman, 2000, p. 6). In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the top one is self-actualization (Feist, 1994, p. 599). To help a person achieve this means that we have to care about the other levels on the hierarchy. The first level of needs is physiological (Feist, 1994, p. 598). Too often at the secondary level we are more concerned with the curriculum that is being taught and not our student's basic needs. We have to be able to allow ourselves to listen to the students, to help them, to find resources to meet those physiological, and safety needs. Then, and only then can we proceed to the next level.

It is however, important, that we not let students use poverty or lack of these basic needs as a crutch. Instead we must help them overcome these socio-economic differences. "School trustees must not accept low levels of performance from poor children" (McAdams, 2000, p. 257). Often times children from poverty are missing some of the experiences other children might have had. Aronson, talks about the importance of using experiential learning or learning through direct experiences. He states that it helps students "discover the humanity and the beauty of their classmates, not because a teacher lectures them about the essential brotherhood of mankind or the importance of being nice to one's peers, but through their own actions and experiences" (Aronson, 2000, p. 170).

We in education talk a lot about how all children can learn and then expect less from poor children. "The national data are consistent, poor children do not perform as well as middle-class children. But if we do not expect them to, they probably never will" (McAdams, 2000, p. 257).

Ethical Leadership

This leads to the final aspect of leadership addressed by the ISLLC standards, ethical leadership. "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner" (Orientation to Educational Leadership course syllabus, 2000). Again and again we hear that resounding statement about success for all students. As talked about above, as an educational leader we have to strive for this in an ethical manner. All kids and teachers can learn, we just have to continue to work with them to be successful. This goes back to the common theme of caring, "Caring gives meaning and purpose to one's whole life" (Lyman, 2000, p. 6). I believe that this is an ethical statement. It says that I have meaning in my life, because I care about yours. It is not fair to only care about the kids who are easy to care about, but as an administrator I must care about and respond to all kids' needs. "Standardized tests may tell us what a person knows, within framed parameters, but they are not valid indicators of what a person can learn" (Thomas, et al, 2000, p. 72). We have to care enough

about all students to help them find the ways that they can and will learn.

Caring is very personal. It requires us to get involved in shaping and developing the lives of others. "Caring is always a personal path, crowded by complexity, unfolding into possibility" (Lyman, 2000, p. 152).

As administrators we have to look past that complexity and look forward to the possibilities.

Conclusion

Kids need us to be outstanding educators. "Good instructional practice would increase the likelihood that more students would understand their work and be willing to do it" (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 121). Because of this, we must also find ways to help teachers learn how to use best practices in their classrooms. In this day and age of fast technology, and bright, glitzy computer games, we in education have to help students connect their learning to their lives. According to Wilson & Corbett, (2001) p. 122 the key is emphasizing and maintaining the quality of the relationships between teachers and students. "We maintain activities that challenge existing thinking skills while helping students bridge gaps between what they already know with the knowledge we want them to learn. The key is respect, the belief that students do have a library of information" (Thomas, 2000, p. 73). It is so crucial in memory to be able to tie new learning into the schemata that exists. Students come

with prior knowledge about the world they live in; we must use that knowledge to help them gain valuable new information about it. We not only have to help students succeed in the classroom, but help them to be able to succeed in society. According to Wilson, one way to achieve this is to extend extra help beyond schoolwork to how to succeed in the future (2001, p. 125). "Students were able to be so specific about what they valued in teachers because they had had such extended experiences with them" (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 125).

As educational administrators it is crucial to be prepared. In your career and in your life, it pays to be prepared for the unexpected, both good and bad. No one can predict where any choice will ultimately lead. In that sense, everything we do is filled with risk (Monroe, 1997, p. 176).

I will be confronted with risks and changes will evolve. I have to be able to determine what the right risks are to take and how to make changes that can best help the most people succeed.

"Making sure all these things happens requires administrators, implementation plans, teaching materials, training for principals and teachers, reports to demonstrate compliance, program evaluations and policies and procedures to deal with noncompliance" (Speck, 1999, p. 251). All of this seems like a huge handful to juggle, but it is just part of the bricks, doves and chainsaws of education. We must lay a good solid foundation with the bricks of good teachers; staff and administrators

working towards helping all children succeed. Then, the people using chainsaws will not have the power to harm education. Educators must also remember that we are caring for very precious doves. These are the children and their families we are trying to help improve the lives of.

As a future administrator I have a big job, but one that I look forward to with great anticipation.

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