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A preferred vision for administering high schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering high schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

This reflective research paper is an accumulation of my belief on education and the four elements that I believe are the most important to creating a successful school district. The four critical elements are teamwork, developing leaders, ethical decision making, and professional development.

I believe our responsibility in education is to teach all students the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in today's world. Many people in society feel that education is a state of decay. There is the perception that teachers are inept and unqualified. I believe that the majority of teachers are motivated and qualified. We need to establish a better support system for teachers to work together and we need to keep qualified, motivated teachers in education. Teachers must continue to improve communication with parents and the community.

REFLECTIVE RESEARCH PAPER
ESSENTIAL FOR EXEMPLARY EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

And Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

By

Shane R. Knoche

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Dr. Greg Reed

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING HIGH SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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This reflective research paper is an accumulation of my belief on education and the four elements that I believe are the most important to creating a successful school district. The four critical elements are teamwork, developing leaders, ethical decision making, and professional development.

The main reason I went into education was because I wanted to make a difference in kids' lives. The same difference made in mine. My teachers taught me about responsibility, self-discipline, and accountability. I try to bring out these same qualities in the students I teach and coach. My classroom is setup on these principles to better prepare my students for living in today's society.

I believe our responsibility in education is to teach all students the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in today's world. Many people in society feel that education is a state of decay. There is the perception that teachers are inept and unqualified. I believe that the majority of teachers are motivated and qualified. We need to establish a better support system for teachers to work together and we need to keep qualified, motivated teachers in education. Teachers must continue to improve communication with parents and the community.

Teachers tend to think every student is going to have the same philosophy on education as they do. That means every student should come in for extra help if they do not understand something. The students should want to learn and if they do not, that is their problem. To an extent it might be the problem of the student, but there has to be a way to reach them. Twenty years ago the student had to adapt to the teacher and a disruptive student was removed from the classroom because the education of the many far outweighed the education of the one. Now with the no child left behind legislation, that

disruptive student has to be dealt with in a different way. Teachers need to have more opportunities to discuss strategies that have worked with certain disruptive students.

In my opinion, our teachers are as good as they have ever been. In fact, most are the same educators who were successful 20 years ago. We just need to improve the support system by not expecting our educators to do more and more with less and less, whether it be less time or less money. We need to provide more time to share our successful strategies as educators with one another. In order to improve the parent and community support, we have to improve communication with parents and community and involve them in the development of vision. That way they take ownership of the overall process.

Although I love teaching and helping kids, I decided to enter the educational leadership program because I wanted to learn more about teamwork involved in making a staff work together to create the best environment for students. An administrator is the leader of this team. An administrator has to keep high expectations for the staff while at the same time, work with the parents, the community, and the students to keep the focus on the district visions and goals. When this many people are involved, along with the financial difficulties that have developed over the last few years, it becomes a difficult task. I look forward to this upcoming challenge.

I believe leadership is the person or persons in charge that makes all the other parts of the puzzle come together. This leadership is broken down into six main parts. These six leadership standards are visionary, instructional, organizational, collaborative, ethical, and political leadership.

A visionary leader is a person who must be a facilitator of the vision. The visionary leader must bring the staff, parents, and community together in pursuit of this

vision. The community must be part of the plan so they can take ownership otherwise the school will never be able to reach its vision. We as educators are still the experts in the area of education but we have to work hard to get ideas from all areas of society. After all that is where the student population is coming from. This is where the parental and community support starts and if a leader doesn't get them involved it is hard for them to take ownership in the entire process.

An instructional leader is a person who continues to promote the development of student goals and expectations. These goals and expectations must be structured around the school vision. When any of these goals or expectations are met it is important to recognize them because this will help keep a positive school culture. An instructional leader will continue to evaluate and update these goals so that all students can continue to improve.

An organizational leader must realize the importance of School Board Policy, State and Federal Law, and new educational strategies. School policy, law, and the vision must back each decision. School policy and laws are there is to try to keep an equitable education available for every student. An organizational leader will keep these laws in mind so that policies and decisions are equal for all students. The key is to make sure to have data from every angle when making decisions. If a principal comes in and lays out his philosophy on communication and change immediately many image problems will be avoided.

A collaborative leader is a person who has to get involved in the community. They form partnerships with all aspects of the community. They have to get involved because they are one of the focal points of the school. A collaborative leader understands that the

community must see them as a proponent of the school and the community. This will make the community more supportive of the difficult decisions an administrator must make.

An ethical leader is a person who looks at the situation and acts the same no matter what area of society the situation arises from. That leader must look at all the factors, break them down, include the other decision makers, and always try to act with integrity and fairness when confronting an issue. Another important aspect in any person, let alone an ethical leader, is the ability to admit when they have made a mistake. This is a tough quality to develop because many people in our society try to blame others instead of being accountable. If a person admits to their mistake and shows a strategy to correct it, they will gain respect. This mirrors great behavior for students and faculty. Dealing with mistakes in this way allows parents to realize you are human and accountable for your own actions.

A political or contextual leader must not only have an awareness and understanding of political, social, economic, legal, and cultural theories and concepts, but they must also be able to apply them in practice and become an advocate for all students and families. A leader must collaborate with the community and understand the goals of the community. Spending extra time in collaboration with the community will really make a difference in the future if a tough decision has to be made. The more you get involved in the community the more they feel comfortable that you are looking out for their best interests.

A person in school leadership has to be able to lead from these six standards. If any are left out problems could develop because they are all intertwined. I liken it to Algebra, each concept builds on the previous. If one concept is weak it makes the others difficult to accomplish.

I have worked in business, worked for the city, worked for the county, coached various sports, as well as taught over the last fifteen years. In each of these jobs the most critical element, which caused either success or failure, was teamwork.

I am going to take this a step farther and say that building teamwork is the first critical element of educational leadership. It is this teamwork that is necessary to make the vision of the school attainable. If you do not have a unified team working as a whole you will never reach as high as you should in any situation. Teamwork must be built with staff, students, parents, and community.

When I was coaching basketball I went to a Nike Clinic to listen to Mike Krzyzewski. I learned from him that there are five fundamental qualities of teamwork. They are communication, trust, collective responsibility, caring, and pride. I will try to incorporate these five qualities when I become a principal. Each part is extremely important and a reason why teamwork is a critical element.

Communication is essential in any system and communication is what lays the foundation for the next four parts. As we reach out to different groups and issues within our communities, one of the first things we must do is learn to “seek first to understand other people’s interests, needs, and perspectives” (Covey, 1990).

“This is essential in developing effective communication and relationships with families and other community members, groups, and agencies. It is also the backbone to the development of collaborative partnerships” (Wilmore, 2002 p.67).

Trust must be built between the principal and the faculty, the principal and the students, the principal and the parents, and the principal and the community. A principal builds this trust by being straightforward and honest. A leader must be willing to confront

an issue immediately. Many people are scared of confrontation, but confrontation is just meeting the truth head on. When you are straightforward with people, whether they agree with you or not, they will respect your truthfulness and you will earn their trust because they realize that you will always be truthful with them.

It is important to take collective responsibility in both good and bad situations because there are going to be mistakes. If you have a strong team concept there are no excuses or finger pointing. This is an area where many schools system break down.

Some people like to win individually and some like to lose selectively.... But one of the key components of keeping the team together is taking responsibility for you actions as a team. We win or lose together. Great teams embrace responsibility. (Krzyzewski, 2000, p78).

Caring is the fourth element of creating a solid foundation for teamwork. You must get to know you faculty in and outside of school. Get to know them in other ways. Ask them how their family is. How was there weekend? How is their mother doing? Let them know you care about more than just how they are doing professionally. Sit down and talk to everyone individually throughout the year. Take time to let them know that you care about their well-being. "In no small way, caring can be a powerful motivational factor on any team" (Krzyzewski, 2000, p.79).

Pride is the fifth element of creating a solid foundation for teamwork. "Everything we do has our personal signature on it. So we want to do it as well as we possible can." (Krzyzewski, 2000, p.80). Take pride in what you do at school and whatever it is, do it as well as you can. It is important to get every member to the school to feel the same way. "Two are better than one if two acts as one. And if you believe that two acting as one are

better than one, just imagine what entire team acting as one can do” (Krzyzewski, 2000, p.83).

I will incorporate this philosophy of teamwork by first developing communication. I will get to know the community, the school culture, and the faculty. It is important to find the leaders of the staff and work through them to develop a solid understanding of the school.

The second thing that I will do is build the trust that is essential. I will let the faculty know my door is open and I will always be straightforward and upfront. I will also expect the same in return. The door to communication will always be open.

The third thing that I will build is collective responsibility. I will do this by developing leaders. By delegating responsibility and letting them lead while involving the community, parents, and a student advisory committee, they will all have a sense of ownership. “People support what they help build” (Wilmore, 2002, p.24). Building this collective responsibility in our school will make everyone accountable in good and bad times.

The fourth thing that I will do is let the students, staff, community, and parents know that I care about them not only in school, but on a personal level as well. I will get involved in outside activities before school starts. After school starts, it will be important to be visible during passing times to talk to the students with a smile. During class, I will set up one period per week when I will visit classrooms for short intervals and pay close attention to at least one positive thing I see. I can then share that with the staff member later. I also want to set aside a half-hour each week before school where I can take time to

talk to each faculty member individually. I truly believe that these measures will go a long way into building the caring atmosphere that is necessary.

That last thing that I will do is let the faculty and students know that whatever they do, I want them to give their best effort. For students, whether it is homework, class participation, fine arts, or athletics, I want them to take pride in what they do. For the faculty, I want them to take pride in all the work they do with students, but I also want them to put in a professional effort in what is asked of them and to take pleasure in a job well done.

These five things are the essential components of teamwork. I believe this teamwork is the most important part to Standard 1: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community (Wilmore, 2002, p. 19).

In my critical element, Teamwork, I discussed building collective responsibility as a component of teamwork. I believe the best way to accomplish this objective is by developing leaders. Administrators have a tremendous amount of responsibility and because of this they must surround themselves with people that hold the same beliefs and objectives for the school system. It is not always possible to get this done the way it currently is, but it is possible to get people heading in that general direction. It is important to seek out staff that can help you lead in that common direction. Identifying and developing leaders from among the staff and community is essential. Administrators must be able to find qualified staff to take the school system to the next level.

Good leaders foster good leadership at other levels. Developing leadership at other levels produces a steady stream of future leaders for the system as a whole. (Fullan, 2001, p.10) Developing a strong system eventually makes transition easier. I like to think of this as the next man in philosophy (Kirk Ferentz, 2004). An example of this is happening at Kennedy High School. Kennedy has twelve school improvement teams with various goals that each believes is better for the school. The problem is although each team believes it is doing what is best, each group is heading in a slightly different direction (figure 1). We want all our teams to head towards four main goals. In order to do this we are going to have two people who understand what is expected and can share this with the various teams underneath each goal. These leaders will be developed by the administration and chosen by the leadership they have already shown. They will be taught what is expected and will keep each team as productive as possible. This should take some responsibility off the administration allowing them to focus on other areas while also providing some consistency between teams and keeping them heading toward common goals (figure 2).

The larger arrow represents the overall direction the school wants to go. The smaller arrows represent the goals of the school improvement teams.

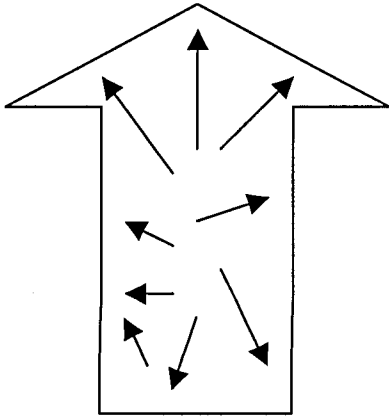


Figure 1

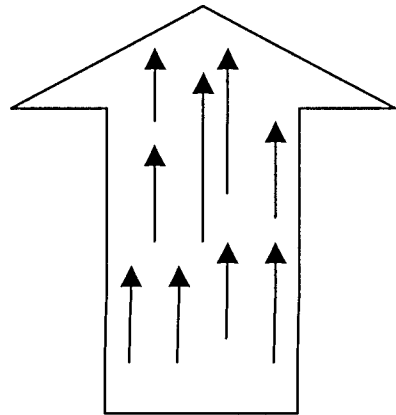


Figure 2

With all the responsibilities that are put on to administrators they must be able to delegate comfortably. This means granting someone authority within, a specific area of responsibility and holding them accountable. Good delegating involves trust (Douglas, 1984, p.204-205). This is where the developing of leaders is essential. If an administrator has not taken the time to seek out leaders it is impossible to trust others in areas where he/she is accountable.

There are seven steps for good delegating from Success Secrets (Douglas, 1984, 206-207).

1. Think first. Plan out what you intend to do. This is probably the most neglected step. Don't try to wing it.
2. Clarify the exact responsibility and what results you expect.
3. Select the right person. Sometimes you should pick who needs to be developed most, not necessarily the one you can trust the most now.
4. Grant them enough authority to do the job right.

5. Decide how you will control their progress. You want to avoid both over-control and under-control. Tell them how and when you will check on their work. Help them how and when they need it, but don't breathe down their neck.
6. Give them the job in a motivating manner. Do everything you can to get them off to a positive start.
7. Hold them accountable for their performance.

“Most school systems are far better served identifying and developing leaders from among their colleagues” (Reeves, 2002, p.160). Effective team leaders will make sure those under their supervision understand that they are working with the leader and not for the leader. It is important to develop a shared sense of ownership, and a cooperative learning community.

“The best way to carry the momentum of the organization forward is to fill it with the best people available, then empower them to do what needs to be done to reach the community's goals” (Wilmore, 2002, p.38)

Delegating and developing leaders is extremely important for internal and external communication, which helps with the collaboration inside and outside of school. This communication and collaboration is the main objective of Standard 3: 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.

Many people believe that decision-making is important for Exemplary Educational Leadership. I am going to take that a step farther and say that ethical decision-making is a

critical element. Standards of conduct are reinforced in the school community through the vision and mission statements of the school or district as well as the rules and regulations developed by the stakeholders and adopted by the school board. A leader must make decisions based on the vision of the school. Difficult decisions must be based on his personal beliefs and in order to stay consistent in these situations one must develop strong ethical beliefs while falling within legal and policy guidelines.

Coach Mike Krzysewski has one major rule built into his system and that is: do not be detrimental to yourself (Krxysewski, 2000, p.76). He believes that covers a lot of things because if you hurt yourself you are also hurting your TEAM. The reason he keeps his rules to a minimum is because he believes too many rules get in the way of leadership. Coach K believes some people set rules to keep from making decisions. I will not go quite to the extent as Coach K, but his idea behind his belief is valid. Always be equitable and fair to everyone. Fair is not always going to be what is equal. Our students come from various backgrounds and each student has individual needs. Fair will always be the decision that is in the best interest of that individual student. Your behavior will speak for itself and reap multiple benefits for itself and for the culture, climate, and equity of the campus.

I believe that teaching morals, values, and ethics begins with the administration and is shown by their decision-making. This fact alone is a major reason why I believe that ethical decision-making is a critical element of Educational Leadership. Standard 5 of the ISLLC standards states; a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner. I believe there are two main components of ethical decision-making. They act with integrity

and fairness. An ethical leader is a person who looks at the situation and acts the same no matter what area of society the situation arises from. Administrators must look at all the factors, break them down, include other decision makers, and always try to act with integrity and fairness when confronting an issue. If anyone acts with these two qualities in mind then they will reach an ethical decision.

To me, acting with integrity means being honest and sincere. All school leaders must act with integrity because trust is an easy asset to lose and a tremendously difficult asset to regain. Demonstrate respect for every stakeholder through honesty and a straightforwardness that allows the stakeholder to feel you are not going to just say what they want to hear. Hold confidences and treat everyone with dignity no matter what circumstances they come from. If you do these things the community will see you as the steward of the vision and deserving of trust. In other words they will see you as a person with integrity. The school administrator accomplishes this by being straightforward and upfront. One of the best ways to build integrity is to admit when a mistake has been made, to apologize for the mistake, and to take all necessary steps to correct the mistake. Sometimes it might involve hurting someone's feelings, but as long as you "praise in public and criticize behind close doors" (Dr. Finch, 2003) you will build respect and trust. It is important to be open, honest, and sincere with everyone the administrator comes in contact with. This includes building relationships with all of the stakeholders of the school community, fellow administrators, staff, parents, and most importantly, students. In developing these relationships the administrator must remember that the best interests of all students and the school community as a whole must always be taken into consideration.

The second part of standard 5 asks that a school administrator act with fairness. I believe the best and simplest way for an administrator to ensure fairness within the decision-making process is by developing plans and systems upon which decisions must be based. The plans and systems should provide consistency in the process. There are no easy answers to ethical questions. In all cases, you must seriously consider every aspect of the situation, empower those empowered in the decision making process, stay open minded, analyze all factors and then reach the best data-driven conclusion you can based on the information presented.

To do your best to resolve the problem with integrity and fairness, which will lead you in an ethical direction, there are seven ethical benchmark questions to ask in decision making that I have learned from Dr. David Else. They are:

- 1) Is it legal?
- 2) In both the short and long terms is it ethical and fair to all concerned?
- 3) Am I deceiving myself? Check your rationalization.
- 4) Are there factors that may consciously or unconsciously affect my decision?
- 5) Are there elements of the process or decision that I am keeping secret? If so, is there a compelling justification for doing so?
- 6) Would it matter if it were in the newspaper tomorrow?
- 7) How would I feel about myself later?

These questions are a takeoff from the four questions from the Rotary Club International and Elaine L. Wilmore: Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and facilitate greater student learning and success? Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

Decision-making by leaders models the process for students and the community. Daft describes ethics as the code of moral principles and values that governs the behavior of a person or group with respect to what is right or wrong. He believes that leaders influence ethical values through their personal behavior as well as through the organization's systems and policies. It is important for the leader to work from an ethical framework because students learn about values from watching the actions of leaders. Values-based leaders know what they stand for and they have the courage to act on their principles when making decisions (Daft, 2001).

“The best way to carry the momentum of the organization forward is to fill it with the best possible people available, then empower them to do what needs to be done to reach the community's goals” (Wilmore, 2002, p.39). Unfortunately as an administrator in education, the opportunity to hire every position is not there because the people you work with were there many years before you. Improving teacher performance becomes an essential component of a principal's responsibilities because a teacher's performance directly leads to student achievement. The problem is determining how administrators can effectively improve a teacher's performance. I have come to a realization that this is best accomplished by providing well-designed professional development. “The principal is charged with the responsibility of facilitating professional growth plans and development activities for all members of the learning community” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 39).

Professional Development then becomes my fourth critical element.

In the past, the first problem with professional development was not that it was not established with sound ideas, but that there was never time after the in-service to contemplate and put the ideas into play.

Those who facilitate professional learning have come to believe that no matter how meaningful the initial learning, it is what happens after that matters most. It is the job-embedded practice, the follow-up and support that most often lead to sustained improvements in professional practice...peer coaching, action research, and teacher-led study groups, which turn fragmented professional learning into meaningful opportunities for growth resulting in changes in practice and ultimately increased student achievement. (Tate, 2004, p. xiii).

The second problem with professional development was that for the most part the presenters lectured the entire time.

Wouldn't it make sense for those who facilitate professional learning for adults to model the same strategies and practices during the learning opportunity that they would expect their participants to use with their own student? If you are not modeling what you are teaching, then you are teaching something else! (Tate, 2004, p. xiv).

The third problem with professional development was that there was never any time provided to discuss ideas with colleagues. There was never anytime provided to discuss with other teachers what was going well and what was not.

Collaboration among classroom teachers is one of the most basic and effective ways to improve instruction. Remember, our goal is to help all teachers be as good as our best teachers. A logical place to start is to give everyone a chance to observe and learn from quality. When we use our most effective teachers as positive role models, we multiply their productivity and help others maximize their talents...share the wealth. (Whitaker, 2003, p.41).

Does it not make sense that one of our jobs as administrators is to teach the teachers. We accomplish this by providing them opportunities to learn from one another. “Emphasis on professional development as multiple learning opportunities embedded in authentic tasks such as collaborative action research, study groups, participation in decision making, co-planning, mentoring of new educators” (Lambert, 1998, p.123).

The fourth problem, which is teachers having a negative attitude towards professional development. This problem is a chain reaction of the other three. Teachers have felt like professional development was not beneficial for them because of the first three problems. If we can fix the first problems then we have already established an importance to each educator. In other words, we have established a sense of ownership in the entire professional development process.

As a dimension of empowerment, professional growth refers to teachers’ perception that the school in which they work provides them with opportunities to grow and develop professionally, learn continuously, and expand their own skills through the work life of the school. Glenn suggested that the real power behind the concept of empowerment is authority derived from command of the subject matter and essential teaching skills. Maeroff believed that helping teachers become more knowledgeable about teaching and assisting them in developing a repertoire of teaching strategies is requisite for empowering teachers. According to Firestone, an effort to professionalize teachers (i.e., to empower them) builds teacher commitment and improves instruction through increased teacher skill. (Short & Greer, 2002, p.152).

In order to establish this idea of continued learning, we as administrators must model life long learning. "Principals must model this behavior for the learning community by developing, implementing, and assessing their own. This is letting your walk match your talk and being a true role model" (Wilmore, 2002, p.38).

The main goal of any administrator is to improve student achievement. However what student achievement is varies by school district. I believe student achievement is more than standardized test scores. Student Achievement is more than just test scores. Student achievement is also dictated by developing social skills, self-worth, behavior, responsibility, and involvement in school. Establishing the four critical elements teamwork, developing leaders, ethical decision--making, and professional development are the key to improving student achievement.

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