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# The Administration Of Nebraska Public Schools: Present Perceptions and Future Needs

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The declining population with school-aged children means that many taxpayers no longer have involvement in schools. Resentment grows when schools offer family services that taxpayers regard as non-school concerns.

# THE ADMINISTRATION OF NEBRASKA PUBLIC SCHOOLS: Present Perceptions and Future Needs

Barbara L. Brock, Debra L. Ponec,  
Vincent Hamman, Lisa Nelson, and Lori Goff

The next generation of children will live in a world that promises to be substantially different than ours. The population is predicted to double within the next decade. More than 80% of our technological inventions have developed since 1900. The information available to us is said to double every five years. In accordance, American businesses are abandoning the antiquated systems of the past and re-engineering their operations (Price, 1993).

Dramatic changes are also seen in the American family. The family model that prevailed for the last several generations bears little resemblance to current family structures. Female employment, divorce, increased residential mobility, acceptance of alternative lifestyles, and a decrease in the supervision of youth have transformed the family structure (AASA, 1982). Martin (1995) cites the absence of parents from the household as a critical factor. Once considered the primary caregivers to their children, today's parents are transferring more nurturing responsibilities to schools.

Clearly, as society and the American family change, new roles are needed by the public schools (AASA, 1982). With these concerns in mind, a comprehensive survey was conducted of administrators, counselors, teachers, parents, students, and community members in the state of Nebraska to determine current levels of satisfaction with public schooling and to explore changes that are needed in the public schools.

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A grant from the Nebraska Department of Education, in conjunction with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, provided support for the study. The complete report of the study, *The Changing Face of Nebraska* (Brock, Ponec, Hamman, Nelson, & Goff, 1995) forms the basis for the data presented here and is available from the Nebraska Department of Education.

## Survey Instrument

A survey instrument was devised to record demographic data of the respondents, their perspectives on current performance of public schools, and their perceptions of what was needed within the state to ensure quality education in the future. Respondents were asked to rate as "outstanding", "satisfactory", or "needs improvement", specific areas of school administration, classroom instruction, counseling and guidance programs, college preparatory curriculum, vocational curriculum, technology, building and grounds, family services, and community involvement. The final section contained a listing of sixteen items that could be used to answer the question, "What can be done to improve the public education system of Nebraska?" The items were based on issues found in current educational research (Ciechalski & Schmidt, 1995; Coleman, 1995; Fairchild, 1994; Hardesty & Dillard, 1994; Magg, 1994; Welsh & McCarroll, 1993). Respondents were encouraged to identify any or all of the areas in which education could be improved. Personal comments, concerns, or suggestions were also requested.

## Respondents

The 100 school communities included in the study were randomly selected from the *Nebraska Education Directory*, 97th edition. Every tenth school listed in the directory was provided with an opportunity to participate. A cover letter and survey were sent to administrators, counselors, teachers, and the Chamber of Commerce of each community. Administrators were responsible for selecting a parent and a student to complete the survey. A second letter and survey were sent two weeks after the first deadline. A total of 232 surveys out of 635 (35.7%) were completed and returned by the second deadline. Those individuals responding to the 234 surveys included: 46 school administrators (19.7%), 52 counselors (22.3%), 58 teachers (24.0%), 13 students (5.6%), 24 parents (10.3%), and 41 community members (17.6%).

The low response rate of the students (5.6%) may be attributed to two factors. A few of the principals reported that they did not distribute the surveys because their students were too young. A second factor may have been the administrators' reluctance to ask students to participate due to the recent controversy regarding parental permission for students to complete survey questionnaires (Cordes, 1995). Although the students who responded expressed definite opinions, the low response limits the confidence which can be placed on the findings.

Most of the respondents were females, between 40 and 50 years of age, possessed masters' degrees, earned under \$40,000 a year, spoke English in the home, and lived in communities of less than 5000 in population. The only exception was the group of administrators, the majority of whom were male (80.5%) between 41 and 60 years of age (71.7%).

## Results of the Survey

Frequencies of respondents' ratings were first computed as a total group and subsequently divided and reported by each group of individuals responding: administrators, counselors, teachers, students, parents, and community members.

Overall, the total group of respondents rated the schools as satisfactory (54.9%), with 56.7% believing that classroom instruction was outstanding. The following issues rated highest in needing improvement: building and grounds (31.3%), family services (28.3%), and community involvement (28.8%).

A statistical view of respondents' ratings regarding present school performance is noted in Table 1.

**Table 1. Respondents' Beliefs Regarding Present School Performance**

	Outstanding	Satisfactory	Needs Improvement
Rating of Schools	32.6	54.9	12.4
Administration	29.6	44.2	19.3
Instruction	56.7	33.0	11.2
Counseling/Guidance	25.3	37.3	21.5
College Prep Curriculum	32.6	30.5	17.2
Vocational Curriculum	18.0	35.2	22.7
Technology	30.5	32.2	23.6
Building/Grounds	26.6	35.6	31.3
Family Services	14.2	31.8	28.3
Community Involvement	21.9	23.6	28.8

Note: Percentages may not total 100 as respondents were not required to respond to each area.

**Table 2. Respondents' Beliefs About Future Needs of Education**

Discipline/Classroom Management	63.9%
Training for Technology	52.4
More Social Skills Training	48.5
Increased Communication Between School, Home, Community	48.1
Curb Violence	42.5
More Vocational Education	41.6
Early Childhood Education	41.1
Address Needs of the Community	36.9
Assessment Procedures	33.0
Curb the Drop-out Rate	30.9
How Subjects are Taught	29.2
Involve Community in Decision Making	27.0
School Calendar	25.3
Issues Regarding Diversity	24.0
How Classes Are Scheduled	18.9
Length of School Day	12.4

Table 2 presents a picture of the total group of respondents' beliefs regarding future educational needs. Discipline and classroom management were reported as critical issues (63.9%). Respondents also reported that training for technology (52.4%), social skills training (48.1%), and increased communication between school, home, and community (49.1%) were issues that should be reviewed and improved.

A report of administrators' views regarding present and future performance and a report of individual groups' perceptions of present and future administration of school are provided. The statistics provided are based on the total number of respondents in each group.

**Administrators' Responses Regarding Present School Administration**

In rating current school performance, 91% of the administrators reported the schools as satisfactory or above. Administrators rated present school administration as outstanding (50%) and satisfactory (33.0%). Administrators who rated present school administration as outstanding described administrators as caring, informed, fair, consistent, progressive, experienced, committed, responsive to the public, cooperative, and hard-working.

Administrators who rated present school administration as satisfactory (33.%) reported the following concerns, "weak

links due to focus different than district goals," "spread too thin—too many duties," and "need more teacher leaders and curriculum developers." A few administrators (10%) rated administration as needing improvement, reporting that administrators were "not meeting the needs of today's schools" and "needed to improve in teacher assistance."

Administrators identified family services (47.8%), community involvement (37%), and buildings and grounds (35%) as areas that they deemed as needing improvement.

The family services area received several comments, such as, "system needs to bridge the gap between haves versus the have nots in schools," "practically no program in this area," "parents don't have the good parenting skills that used to be passed down," and "because we're a rural school few parent services are available."

Administrators expressed a strong desire to improve community involvement, making comments such as, "community involvement should be expanded and encouraged," "too many parents do not support or encourage student academic endeavors," and "parents and community need to understand why schools should be changing."

Concerns about buildings and grounds included, "lack of space and adequate facilities", "deterioration of sites due to age", and "ADA concerns." Clearly, improvements in these areas will require skillful leadership.

**Administrators' Beliefs About Future Needs of School Administration**

Administrators were asked what could be done to improve the public education system in Nebraska. The areas selected impact administration in that they require skilled leadership. Administrators rated changing assessment procedures (63.0%) and addressing discipline/classroom management procedures (50.0%) as the most critical needs for education in the state. In the area of changing assessment procedures administrators suggested, "moving away from paper and pencil testing and grades" and moving toward "assessment that is authentic, performance based, portfolio style, requiring the application of knowledge." One administrator suggested that schools should, "use assessment that reflects local norms rather than national norms." Suggestions for improving discipline and classroom management procedures focused on increased "parental support and involvement."

The inclusion of more social skills training (47.8%) and more training for technology (47.8%) were also reported as important areas. Administrators suggested that a curriculum for social skills be developed. Technology needs were summarized by one administrator, who said, "more, more, more."

**Administrators' Suggestions For Improving School Administration**

The focus of the administrators' suggestions for improving school administration was the improvement of administrative preparation. Administrators suggested offering "more practical classes, workshops, and conferences", and providing "training in all aspects of administration." Another administrator suggested evaluating "preparation programs for administrators." Other suggestions included, "better screening for candidates", "a need to increase accountability", and "more cooperation with other schools."

**Counselors' Responses Regarding Present and Future Needs of School Administration**

Counselors who rated administration as outstanding (30.7%) commented that administrators were "organized and striving for improvement." Administrators were also described as "caring, innovative, and encouraging." Counselors viewed outstanding administrators as "experienced, competent, capa-

ble people doing a lot with few resources available to them." They also possessed "positive leadership skills", "fiscal responsibility", "vision", and "exhibited great concern for students."

Administration was deemed satisfactory by the majority of counselors (59.6%). Those identifying administration as satisfactory noted that in some instances there was "great competition" between administrators. Counselors rating administration as satisfactory described administrators as "inconsistent", "mediocre", and "in need for constant renewing." The counselors voiced concerns regarding a lack of women in higher administration, the need for additional administrators, and the administrator's "ability to do as well as they can within the constraints of time and funds available."

Counselors rating administration as needing improvement (13.5%) criticized administrators for not enough teacher support, lack of backbone in issues dealing with discipline and parents, and ineffective evaluation. The counselors remarked that administrators must get out of the office and into the field.

Counselors suggested that administrators could make improvements by being available and consistently supportive of teachers. They suggested that administrators should empower teachers, be in touch with classrooms, and stay current with new methodologies. Counselors encouraged the practice of placing more women in administration, allowing administrators' greater control of teachers' activities, promoting teachers by merit, and removing poor administrators or teachers (even tenured) with mandatory state evaluations. The counselors felt that Nebraska students deserved the best...which meant greater communication, decision making, and cooperation between administration and staff.

#### **Teachers' Responses Regarding Present and Future Needs of School Administration**

Few teachers rated administration as outstanding (13.8%). Those who rated the administration as outstanding commented that administrators took the time to get to know students, staff, and the community. Teachers reported that outstanding administrators "demonstrated fairness", and were "personable", "experienced", and "knowledgeable".

Administration was rated as satisfactory by 48.3% of the teachers. Teachers reported that administrators were willing to work hands on with students, were effective and understanding, and tried earnestly to run schools effectively and efficiently. While administration was rated as satisfactory by almost half of the teacher respondents, this category was the highest rated area in need of improvement (39.7%). Teachers commented that administrators needed to get more involved with students, be more decisive in decision making, be consistent in enforcing rules, deal more effectively with discipline, and lessen their focus of athletics/sports.

The focus of the teachers' concerns was the improvement of discipline, summed up by this response, "My biggest concern is the lack of discipline which leads to a lack of respect toward teachers and parents. Administrators often do not back teachers when it comes to discipline problems." Teachers suggested that administrators maintain stricter enforcement of disciplinary procedures.

#### **Students' Responses Regarding Present and Future Needs of School Administration**

Students who rated administration outstanding (23.0%) commented that the administration is "willing to work with students" and is "effective and understanding." One student who rated administration as satisfactory (53.8%) reported that the administration is "more understanding and has more control than last year." Another said, "schools are mostly well run and efficient." None of the students rated the administration as unsatisfactory. The only suggestion that the students made for school administrators was to, "get more involved with students."

#### **Parents Responses Regarding Present and Future Needs of School Administration**

Most of the parent respondents rated the administration of schools as outstanding (33.3) or satisfactory (54.2%). Parents who rated administration as outstanding used the following descriptors in their comments, "flexible, willing to work with parents and community, outstanding principal, good listeners, school is growing, staff improving, up-to-date, visionary, progressive, and caring for each student."

Those parents reporting administration as satisfactory indicated that there are many outstanding administrators, but some are mediocre. Parents also stressed a need for consistent discipline. Parents who rated administration as needs improvement (12.5%) commented that Class I schools should not have all eight grades. Some parents criticized administrators for not being motivated and having poor communication and public relations skills. One parent said, "Since these jobs are paid for by taxpayers, all of these areas should constantly look for ways to improve. I don't think any school system should ever be exempt from striving to improve every area within their system." Suggestions for improving administration included, "small schools should not be in charge of their own special education," and administration "must expect the best from the staff—don't keep dead-beat teachers." Other comments suggesting bringing the schools into the '90s, needing principals who are honest, business minded, and who have good public relations skills. Some parents suggested that administrators enforce stricter discipline and increase their communications with parents.

#### **Community Members' Responses Regarding Present and Future Needs of School Administration**

Although community members rated the schools as satisfactory (46.3%) in performance, in their comments they generally agreed that administrators had room for improvement. Comments included, "They should work for all kids—not just athletes" and "be less administrative and more real world" focused.

#### **Implications of the Study**

Several themes were identified from the data collected. Future leadership, family services, discipline, technology, aging buildings, and community involvement were identified as areas of concern.

The ages of administrators represented in the study were indicative of a concern for adequate school leadership in the future. Most of the administrators who responded were between the ages of 40 and 60, with many between the ages of 50 and 60. The small number of administrators in the 30 to 40 age group (17%) indicated a small pool of leadership to meet future retirement needs. A study of administrative career aspirations of Nebraska student teachers, (Grady, Carlson, and Brock, 1992), reported that student teachers indicated an interest in administrative careers. However, whether these teachers receive the encouragement to change interest into active pursuit of an administrative career is questionable. A need exists for experienced administrators to seek out young teachers with leadership potential, provide encouragement, and sponsorship toward administrative careers.

Sponsorship for females entering school administration is particularly important. As noted in this study, the administrators who responded included few females. The counselors also commented on the lack of female administrators in the schools. This small percentage of female administrators is typical of the scarcity of females in educational administration on a national level (Pigford and Tonnsen, 1993). Increasing the number of females in school administration is an issue that needs to be addressed by school districts as well as preparatory institutions. Young women who are interested in administration need models, mentors, and encouragement. Women who already

hold administrative positions can be instrumental in identifying and sponsoring other females who aspire to leadership positions (Pigford & Tonnsen, 1993; Grady, Carlson, & Brock, 1992; Grady & Brock, 1993).

The needs of the family was a noticeable concern of the administrators. Parents are busy working, and in many instances a single parent is in charge of the family. In short, the family structure is changing and new roles are needed by schools and administrators to address the conditions. If children are to learn, their families must support education, and the school must be supportive of the family. Part of a school's function is to recognize what families need and to use the school as a location for the delivery of these services (Jeffer & Olebe, 1994; Joint Economic Committee, 1988). The administrators indicated that schools need to be responsive to the changing needs of students and families. Most reported a need to improve services that they offer.

Although most of the respondents believed that administrators were performing satisfactorily, concerns were identified in the areas of discipline and involvement with students. Teachers, counselors, and parents mentioned a need for more consistent enforcement of discipline by administrators. Teachers also expressed concerns about the lack of administrative support for teachers in disciplinary situations. Students, parents, counselors, and community members identified a need for administrators to become more involved with students. Clearly, these are areas in which administrators need to make improvements in policies, procedures, and consistency.

Concurrent with family transformation, the nation is experiencing a technological explosion. Technology that changed slowly in the past is now multiplying on a daily basis. During the last 15 years of the 20th century we will see as much technological change as there was in the first 85 years (Price (1993). This new information society requires a person comfortable with and competent in using the ever-changing technology (Negrone, 1992). Small wonder that the administrators expressed a need to narrow the widening gap between technology and training in the schools.

A need to improve physical plants surfaced during the study. Administrators reported that buildings were aging and in need of improvements. Inadequate space and poor facilities were obstacles in providing optimal educational experiences for students.

A pervasive theme of the survey was a need for increased dialogue and reciprocal involvement of parents and community members with the schools. This is a key issue. School improvements occur only when parents and the larger community of taxpayers know what the school needs and are willing to financially support the changes. Administrators need to update strategies to communicate with parents and community. The school newsletter, once the key communication tool, is no longer the only solution. The use of mass media needs to increase. Parent conferences, open houses, and volunteer opportunities should accommodate parent work schedules.

The declining population with school-aged children means that many taxpayers no longer have involvement in the schools. Citizens may not be aware of the demographic and societal issues that require curriculum changes and building improvements. Resentment grows when schools offer family services that taxpayers regard as non-school concerns. For example, some respondents in the study expressed the opin-

ion that parents should be home with their children instead of relying on schools to offer programs. The community of taxpayers and voters must clearly understand the need for change before funding will be provided. Community involvement is the key to taxpayer support.

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