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A preferred vision for administering elementary and secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

There was a time the school principal's job was clear and relatively simple - not easy, but simple. Everyone understood the role of the principal. That is no longer the case.

In today's society, the public education system in America is one that is fraught with dissension, politics and numerous other variables. Leaders and managers in the public sector are under far greater scrutiny than those in the private sector and the school principal is one position that is frequently caught in a maelstrom.

This essay will explore the literature to identify the numerous characteristics, knowledge and skills that are linked to an effective principal.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY AND
SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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James D. Moeller

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There was a time the school principal's job was clear and relatively simple – not easy, but simple. Everyone understood the role of the principal. That is no longer the case. As the society has become more diversified and as the literature on effective management and leadership has grown, the principal's job is now extremely complex. It is also much more difficult. More demands have been placed on all educators and the old way of managing a school just is not acceptable or appropriate today.

In today's society, the public education system in America is one that is fraught with dissension, politics and numerous other variables. Leaders and managers in the public sector are under far greater scrutiny than those in the public sector and the school principal is one position that is frequently caught in a maelstrom. Typically, everyone on the school board and in the community knows how to run the school better than the principals who have been hired to do so. Anyone in the world can take pot shots at the identified educational leaders with no ramifications. Educators do, however, feel the pressure and the stress that is put upon them and thus, they are continually attempting to find new ways to manage and lead that will have acceptable results.

This essay will explore the literature to identify the numerous characteristics, knowledge and skills that are linked to an effective principal.

It is the principal's leadership that leads to the school's success. Portin and Shen (1998) reported a compilation of what the literature says about the principal: "Principals remain key individuals as instructional leaders, initiators of change, school managers, personnel administrators, problem solvers, and boundary spanners for the school" (p. 93). Even though leadership models have changed to that of more collaborative operations and decision-making, the principal is still the single person in the school that is responsible. One of the many reasons for the principal being the nexus of leadership is the fact of increasing diversity of the school population. Another reason has to do with the demands placed on schools to become more effective. Principals, then, are concerned with organizational, instructional and statutory leadership (Portin and Shen, 1998).

Portin and Shen also declare that as an instructional leader, the principal is expected to be well versed in the practice of effective instructional practice, both curricular and pedagogical. Organizational leadership is comprised of numerous responsibilities, including the evaluation of staff. Certificated and classified staff unions continue to look to the principal as the leader. Finally, as statutory leader, the principal must know and understand codes, statutes and policies. As long as

these leadership responsibilities are placed solely on the principal, there will not be a great deal of substantive change in the models of leadership available to the principal. There are simply too many systemic barriers.

There are numerous laws, statutes, regulations and policies that govern the activities at a school. The principal needs to have a basic knowledge of these and specific knowledge of laws and policies that are directly related to schools, such as disciplinary limitations and special education regulations. The principal needs to know and understand the contracts that govern both certificated and classified personnel. Any violations of the clauses in these two documents will result in grievances.

Besides the legal aspects of the school, the principal needs to understand the specific governance procedures in their school district. The local Board of Education has a significant amount of power in dictating the operations of schools. This leads right into the need to understand school finances. In most school districts, the principal will have an opportunity to make requests to be included in the annual budget. Once the local Board has approved the budget, the principal must then live within the budget. This means that the principal must be able to explain the budget to the staff. Monitoring the school's budget is one of the essential activities of the principal.

Sergiovanni (1996) identified nine tasks of the principal:

- Purposing: bringing shared visions together.
- Institutionalizing values: devising a set of procedures and structures to actualize the school's vision.
- Maintaining harmony: building mutual understanding.
- Managing: planning, record-keeping, providing procedures; organizing, etc.
- Motivating: encouraging staff and faculty.
- Enabling: removing obstacles that prevent faculty and staff from meeting their objectives; providing needed resources.
- Explaining: giving reasons for asking staff to do certain things.
- Modeling: being responsible for modeling the school's purpose.

Modeling is an important activity for the principal. Teachers model the appropriate behaviors and responses for students in the classroom and principals need to model the appropriate behaviors for teachers, staff members, parents and students. This inherently requires the principal to become an integral part of the school and to be visible to staff and students.

- Supervising: ensuring the school meets its commitments and when it isn't, to find out why and change it.

Sergiovanni devised this list after the advent of shared-decision making became the thing to do in schools but the fact is that the principal has always been involved in these roles. True, there were plenty of autocratic principals; they set the rules and everyone in the school followed them. It was a simple way to manage but that style began phasing out by the early 1960s and principals began adopting a more participatory leadership style.

In the early 1980s, the term 'instructional leader' became popular in describing the principal's primary function in the school. The title was based on some older notions of leadership including those on role theory, expectancy theory, and adaptive-reactive theory. Smith and Andrews (1989) defined the instructional leader as: 1.) a visionary; 2.) being a skilled communicator; 3.) the person who provides the resources needed to meet goals; and 4.) possessing knowledge and skill in curriculum and instructional arenas, which results in improved instructional practices among the teachers (p. 23). Another important skill for an instructional leader is to have a bias for action. According to Speck (1999), "a principal must have a bias for action if they expect to succeed at changing the school into a learning community that values and makes a difference in each student's life" (p. 21). The roles of the principal continue to change.

The effective principal needs to possess numerous skills, characteristics, and abilities. Schmieder and Cairns (1998) surveyed 450 school principals and 206 school district superintendents to determine the most important skills principals need to be successful. The ten most important skills and characteristics were:

- Have a vision and an understanding of the steps needed to achieve goals (p. 28). The vision is a goal for the school, it is where the principal sees the school going, in terms of student performance, school climate and so on. The vision can only be realized if it is shared. In other words, the principal and staff must share the same vision; they must be going in the same direction. If they are not doing this, the vision will never be realized because people will be going in different directions. The only way the identified leader can promote a shared vision is if they are involved at the human level with staff members.
- Be able to demonstrate a desire to make a significant difference in the lives of staff and students.
- Exhibit a sense of self-confidence on the job.
- Be aware of your own biases, strengths and weaknesses.
- Know how to facilitate and conduct group meetings, large and small.
- Know how to evaluate staff effectively and fairly.
- Know how to assess job responsibilities in terms of "real" roles (p.28).

- Know how to encourage involvement by all the parties in the educational community, e.g., faculty, staff, students, parents, community members.
- Understand that change is ongoing and that it results in a fluid vision of school leadership. It needs to be remembered that the community is always changing. Therefore, the principal must not only be able to deal with changes within the education system, she must also be able to work with changes that occur in the community.
- Know where the ethical limits exist within the district or building and balance that knowledge with your own professional values (p.28).

The Coalition for Essential Schools (1992) adds that the principal needs to be a leader of leaders. Each teacher is a leader in their own right; therefore, the principal must be able to lead these leaders. They must distribute their authority and believe that the teachers and other staff members will use that authority well. The principal must then be able to facilitate conflicts that will naturally erupt in a shared authority environment. This means that the principal must have excellent communication and problem solving skills.

Hausman, Crow and Sperry (2000) offered a number of characteristics and skills of effective principals based on research studies. First, The effective principal must be able to develop an environment of trust. Teachers and staff

must perceive their relationship with the principal as being an open one. Parents must believe they can talk with the principal. Second, the effective principal has excellent human resource skills. These skills include the ability to mediate and the ability to build consensus. These skills will be used with teachers and staff, students, parents and community members. Next, the effective principal establishes a culture within the school that includes values and norms for behaviors among staff and students. Also, the principal must also have good political skills. Mandates and demands necessitate the need for being politically savvy, tactful and diplomatic in working with diverse groups. Education is a political organization and anyone who does not recognize that fact is naive. Researchers have argued "schools should be recognized and understood as political entities wherein school members (that is, individuals and groups) develop micro political strategies in an attempt to achieve their own personal and school goals" (Spaulding, 2000). These researchers go on to note that small groups of members of the school community will develop shared objectives and then they will devise micro political strategies in an attempt to achieve their objectives. In other words, they are forming coalitions.

Spaulding (2000) reported, "the principal's micro political behavior results in either negative or positive consequences for teachers depending on the strategy of

micro political influence that he or she uses" (p. 37). Research has clearly concluded that using authoritarian models of leadership, using coercion or showing favoritism correlate with a lack of loyalty and a lack of commitment on the part of teachers.

The effective principal must have highly developed public relations skills in order to promote the school and to work with diverse groups of demanding people. This leads into having the ability to work collaboratively with numerous groups from the top administration to the board members to the community and all groups within the principal's particular school.

When making decisions about the curriculum and instructional practices, the effective principal must make decisions based on empirical data rather than anecdotal data. This means the principal must have analytical skills.

According to Hausman, Crow and Sperry (2000), principals must have a high degree of self-awareness. They need to know their own strengths and weakness, their own biases, their own needs, beliefs and values. The self-awareness is a component of emotional intelligence, which is defined as: "Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to recognize feelings, control emotional balance, maintain a positive attitude when confronted by frustrations

and difficulties, and connect with the feelings of others" (University of North Carolina). Effective principals have a high degree of emotional intelligence.

Five different skill domains have been identified as making up emotional intelligence (University of North Carolina, 1997). They are:

1. Self-Awareness: knowing oneself and recognizing one's feelings.
2. Motivating oneself: This means that even in the face of frustration and problems, the principal is still able to motivate himself or herself.
3. Managing one's emotions: The principal must be able to control and manager their feelings rather than allowing their feelings to rule their actions.
4. Handling relationships: This refers to the ability to help others manager their own feelings and emotions. It also means possessing the social skills that are necessary for cooperation, teamwork, negotiation and leadership.
5. Empathy: the ability to perceive life and the particular environment as others perceive them.

If one considers the myriad of incidents and events that the average principal faces in one single day, it is easy to understand why that leader must have a high degree of emotional intelligence. In any given day, the principal may have student fights to deal with, teacher and/or staff conflicts, classroom disciplinary issues,

board members stopping by, community members dropping in, irate parents who are in no mood to listen to reason, breakdowns of equipment, a few dozen phone calls, new directives from the district office and three meetings to attend. And, then, there is a stack of paperwork that must be completed. These typical events would be enough to drive any person to the brink of frustration. It would be all too easy to feel overwhelmed. A high degree of emotional intelligence, however, along with numerous other skills the principal possesses, such as time management, will help that professional get through another day and be successful and effective doing it.

One of the factors in successful schools is the involvement of the community and in particular, the involvement of parents. Parent involvement has repeatedly been shown to be a major component in successful schools. In fact, research has consistently concluded that students whose parents are actively involved in the children's education achieve at higher levels. This kind of research has led to the establishment of coalitions that are composed of parents, educators, civic leaders and business leaders. The coalitions' purpose is to identify parents who are motivated to become involved and then to train them in the skills needed to become leaders in their communities. For example, the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership in Kentucky is focusing on creating 'an army of parents' to

serve as advocates for their children and for the state's reform initiatives"

(Considine, 1999).

Keller (1998) reported there are several characteristics that are found in good leadership. The principal:

- Promotes an atmosphere of trust and sharing.
- Communicates the school's mission clearly and consistently to staff members, parents, and students.
- Recognizes teaching and learning as the main business of a school.
- Fosters standards for teaching and learning that are high but that are also attainable.
- Provides clear achievement goals for students and monitors the progress of students toward meeting them.
- Spends time in classrooms and listening to teachers.
- Builds a good staff and makes professional development a top concern (p.25).

This list was devised by studying schools that were identified as successful and effective. The investigation found that the principals in these schools demonstrated these characteristics and skills.

Effective schools research has resulted in much of the same characteristics of the effective principal. Whitaker (1997) reported that in terms of being an

effective instructional leader, certain themes continually emerged. The principal was a people oriented and interactional individual. The principal functions within a network of other principals at formal and informal levels. Effective principals tend to have a mentor, another administrator in the education system.

Summary and Conclusions

Here, I compiled the myriad of characteristics of the effective principal and the skills and knowledge that person needs to be effective. There is no particular order to the list with the exception of the first item - this is always the most important:

- Vision – the principal needs to be a visionary, i.e., plan for the outcomes and must have a vision for the school. That vision must be communicated to the staff, students and parents because it will not be achieved if nobody knows about it.
- The ability to establish an environment of trust and sharing.
- Exceptional communication skills.
- Problem solving and conflict management.
- Analytical and critical thinking skills.
- Negotiating skills.
- General organizational and managerial skills, e.g., the ability to organize and keep records.

- Knowledge about the governance of schools.
- The ability to understand laws, statutes, regulations and policies and how they affect the school and the school's operations.
- Knowledge about fiscal matters and the ability to monitor budgets.
- The ability to set objectives and develop steps and plans to achieve them.
- The ability to motivate others and understanding human nature.
- Be an instructional leader, knowing about curricular and pedagogical matters.
- Possess a high degree of emotional intelligence. This means being aware of one's own feelings, biases, strengths, weaknesses and limitations.
- The ability to establish a nurturing collaborative environment for staff and students.
- Political savvy, knowing how to work with the myriad of and diverse nature of community groups as well as the members of the local board of education, teachers, other staff, students and higher administrators in the central office.
- The ability to observe teachers objectively and be able to discuss their observations with the teachers.
- The ability to set high expectations but that are also attainable.

Even though this is a long list, it is not all-inclusive. There are so many areas in which an effective principal must have knowledge, skill and ability. They need a degree of charisma in addition to all the others on this list.

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