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reflective essay**

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

The education system in the United States is changing rapidly. The role of teachers, administrators, parents and the community within this system should also change. This paper will examine my philosophy, experiences, preparation for leadership, and vision for creating a positive future for this nation through better education for our children.

A Preferred Vision For Administering Secondary Schools: A Reflective Essay

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Marla Marie Padget

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The education system in the United States is changing rapidly. The role of teachers, administrators, parents and the community within this system should also change. This paper will examine my philosophy, experiences, preparation for leadership, and vision for creating a positive future for this nation through better education for our children.

Philosophy

"I believe that children are the future, teach them well and let them lead the way. Show them all the beauty they possess inside, give them a sense of pride, let the children's laughter remind us how we use to be." These words come from a song that was remade by Whitney Houston (1985). As an educator, each time I hear these words I feel chills up and down my spine. Do the chills come from fear that we will fail in the tremendous mission of helping to mold the future, or from knowing that we must not fail? Through reflection and research, I have come to the realization that as an administrator I will have a key role to play in the challenge to create a positive future for the children as well as society.

The ever-changing society we live in places demands on our schools to adjust and to produce productive, globally-competitive students. Schools exist to enhance

the knowledge and understanding of the students enrolled within them. Given these challenges, it is the professional responsibility of administrators to effectively manage, and more importantly lead schools to fulfill the hopes of all individuals involved and as an end result for the nation serve society through a better educated citizenry .

The administrator, as educational leader, must lead from the soul to deal effectively with people (Bolman & Deal, 1995). Every day, educational leaders confront problems with both things and people. "Few leaders fail because they are unable to cope with things. When leaders blunder, it usually is because they have dealt ineffectively with people" (Combs, Miser, & Whitaker 1999, p. 7), and people are the most crucial to the success of an organization.

In order to deal well with people, the effective leader must know himself/herself (Bolman & Deal, 1995), "as what each of us believes about self is the most vital factor in determining behavior" (Combs, Miser, & Whitaker 1999, p. 17). Leaders will act based on what they themselves believe, thus it is imperative that you have a strong set of beliefs, and that these beliefs

center around personal growth with an eye to the betterment of fulfilling your role as an educational leader.

Your belief in self must also extend to your belief that others are competent and essential to the organization. Treat people as you would want to be treated. Together you can create a school that invites learning, basing decisions on what is best for the students. One way of achieving this goal is to ask, in all situations that arise in school, how would I respond if it were myself or my children in need.

Experiences

My experience in education has been compiled over many years as a student, then a teacher, teacher and student, and as an assistant principal for a short time. These experiences have allowed me to view education from many angles, concluding that there is a strong relationship between the school leader and the ability of the institution to accomplish goals.

As a student, my school years were spent going through the motions of doing what was expected to be successful. Education was learning by rote. While this served me functionally well, I do realize that many of my peers struggled. There was no room for individuality, and the fear of disciplinary measures

kept us in line. The school principal was someone to fear, as only the "bad" students were called to the office.

My experiences as a student served me well as a teacher, for I knew that I could not be comfortable teaching by rote and to only a select few students, with the fear of being sent to the office constantly dangling over their heads like the sword of Damocles. I knew that through comprehensive planning I could create a classroom that invited all students to learn. In each lesson that I created there were alternative ways for students to achieve the same objective, thus inviting all students to actively participate.

The inclusion of many learning styles in my teaching decreased the need for disciplinary measures with the students, allowing success for even the most "difficult" students (Canter, & Canter, 1993). My own thirst for creating a better classroom led me to return to academia to further my own schooling as an educational leader in order to create schools that held classrooms designed for the success of all students. Not only did I pursue a master's degree, I also furthered my education through attending seminars such as one on brain research and its implications for the classroom. I not only utilized the principles of brain

research in my own classroom, I also helped in the creation of a staff development program that was presented to all staff on the secondary level in the district. Through this process I came to understand how important it is to share and collaborate when there are ideas that would benefit the entire school and not just one classroom.

As a student, of educational leadership, I gained insight and a more global view of education. Although a single classroom is important, there are many other avenues in the success of the educational system, such as the style and vision of the leader. As a teacher I worked with six different administrators over the course of ten years, all in the same building. Through the furthering of my education I have been able to label the style in which they operated, as well as what a particular style did to the climate of the school.

Some of the administrators were bureaucratic, "maintaining firm hierarchical control of authority and close supervision of those in the lower ranks" (Owens, 1998, p. 30). The climate of the school reflected the hierarchical approaches of these administrators, with a lack of concern or response from the "lower ranks". People only did what was expected contractually, without much emotion essentially only going through the motions.

This occurred because people did not feel connected or valued, so their motivation was low. In these types of power relationships, "the power the dominant party exercises is maintained by the threat, acted upon or not, that abusive punishment, physical or psychological, could be used if the hierarchical structure is threatened" (Hooks, 1984, p. 120). This mode of operation erodes positive climate and destroys the culture of an organization. Instead we need to establish a collaborative school culture as a way to bring about significant school improvement and change.

I worked for three administrators that used the hierarchical management style never giving a thought to establishing a collaborative school culture. These autocratic principals left me feeling that I should only do what was asked of me, never suggesting new methods or ideas for the building or the classroom. These same people looked at a classroom as successful if all of the students were sitting quietly in rows. Timely paperwork seemed to be more important than the actual students. There was no meaningful interaction amongst teachers and administrators.

The leaders that were more democratic, operating from an "open systems model" (Owens, 1998, p. 43) of governance were more successful. These leaders realized

that they did not stand alone, that people inside and outside of the organization were necessary for the success of education. This is a more human approach to leadership, and one that I could be comfortable with as a leader and as a teacher.

The open system allows for people to feel connected, and for students to see how what they are learning affects their lives and the future motivating them to be successful. The use of an open system allows for the "integration of academic and career education that will equip all students with skills that will enable them to function in a changing economy and a changing workplace" (Glatthorn, 1997, p. 7). In my mind an open system perpetuates success through a continuing cycle, taking into account outside influences on the educational system in order to have a more complete end product.

The true educational leaders that I worked with operated with a human approach in an open system. It was under the direction of these leaders that I was allowed to grow professionally, with a higher level of professional cooperation amongst the staff. I was allowed to seek and help create staff development opportunities, chair committees, create new courses to be integrated into the curriculum, and motivated to be

an advisor for student organizations or even to create new organizations depending on the needs of the students. It is this type of an educational leader that I hope to emulate in my own career.

It was just such a leader that allowed me the opportunity to have first hand experience as an assistant principal. I took on the role of assistant principal with much enthusiasm and with the idea that I could help to make difference. What I found, was that in this case the role was very reactive. I was use to being proactive and dealing with students on a more positive level. Most of the job entailed dealing with students who had been sent to the office for some infraction, breaking up fights, supervising the hallways, and doing the much dreaded cafeteria duty.

Was this all there was to the role? There had to be more, or why was I spending so much time and money on my education? Was all that I had been learning a farce?

Through further reflection and research, I found that assistant principals can be instructional leaders. The role of the assistant principal should change from the traditional disciplinarian, to that of a supervisor position, which should be viewed as helping teachers do their job better (Golden, 1997). I see improved classroom instruction as a clear way to decrease

discipline problems which would enable the assistant principal to spend more time being a leader instead of just a manager.

If the students are actively engaged in the learning process in a clear and meaningful way the school and the community will prosper. As an educational leader I will provide the opportunity for any assistants to be more proactive, thus making them feel more motivation and commitment to the organization. In all undertakings people want to feel valued (Bolman & Deal, 1995). In allowing people to be proactive they will feel valued.

Vision

My vision for leadership comes from Jerry Patterson's definition which posits, "to lead is to influence others to achieve mutually agreed upon and socially valued goals that help an organization stretch to a higher level" (Patterson, 1997, p. 5). It is my intent that I will have a leadership style that motivates people at the grassroots level, and empowers them so that change can continue, even after I am gone. This would be a school where caring with passion was the norm and not the exception.

This vision can only begin to emerge if the leader is willing to examine himself/herself, which can be painful, but is imperative to self growth and ultimately the growth of the organization. The principal must live the vision and be a strong example for others to follow continuously reflecting and questioning his/her own practices. Through reflection the vision and path for the school to follow can emerge as clear and challenging, stable but constantly subject to question, and planned for the future. In this reflective manner the school organization can grow with unlimited possibilities.

To achieve growth in the organization, principals should lead through shared vision and values rather than rules and procedures. This is tough since many teachers are still looking for "unfettered autonomy" (DuFour, 1999, p. 12). Teachers seek unfettered autonomy, yet expect principals have the students strictly comply with school rules.

I see too many teachers who are unwilling to examine their own practices. For them it is better to blame the students and the principal for the failure of education. As the instructional leader the principal

should influence the staff in growth, this can be aided through the use of Richard DuFour's (1999) conclusions on leading from the center:

1. Principals should lead through shared vision and values rather than rules and procedures.
2. Principals should enlist faculty members in the school's decision-making processes and empower individuals to act.
3. Principals should provide the staff with the information, training and parameters to make good decisions.
4. Principals should be results oriented.
5. Principals should concentrate on posing the right questions rather than imposing solutions. (p. 13)

Applying these conclusions will allow the principal to influence, leading from the center instead of the top.

In moving from the top to the center as a leader, principals of today have competing demands that seem to pull them in opposite directions. They must be able to stay grounded with a core set of beliefs to succeed, and be willing to help build and share vision, not impose solutions. As a result DuFour (1999) tells us that principals end up living with "paradox" (p. 17).

They must have a sense of urgency about improving their schools, balanced by the patience to sustain them for the long haul. They must focus on the future, but remain grounded in today. They must see the big picture, while maintaining a close focus on details. They must encourage autonomy

while at the same time demanding adherence to shared vision and values. They must be strong leaders that give away power to others. (p. 17)

Today's educational leaders should act according to principles (honesty, respect, responsibility, compassion, self-discipline, perseverance, and giving), and display a commitment to themselves, the school, and the community, leading by example through the empowerment and care for self and others.

I see a school where the educational leader helps to create an atmosphere where learning processes, for staff and students alike, involve group learning activities that demonstrate the importance of teamwork, collaboration, and collegiality. In the classroom, rather than lecturing for an entire period, student needs will be better served through simulation activities, case studies, or role-playing activities to enhance dialogue, engagement, personal meaning, and relevance. This type of classroom will better prepare students for the rest of their lives. In order for a school to achieve this goal the educational leader must instill an open atmosphere where creativity and communication are the norm, and not base evaluations

solely on the appearance of good classroom management where all students are sitting quietly in neat rows day after day.

In the past teachers were seen as effective if the students were all sitting quietly with the appearance that they were studying. I believe that administrators must challenge themselves to move from an authoritarian, managerial mode of operation to one of proactive leadership. We must now utilize leadership principles such as empowerment, cooperation, and shared responsibility.

We must now see education as a shared public responsibility (Meier, 1995), where we provide leadership that allows and influences teachers to teach in a way that the education we offer makes sense to the students and has purpose in their lives. We need to promote self-learners that take inherent pleasure in the learning process, making students parties to their own education. Today's educational leaders must strive to influence a connection between student effort, school success, and ultimately life success.

To achieve success in this endeavor, today's school leaders must break out of the past molds of restraint that made them only managers and disciplinarians. In order to break the past molds they must become

calculated risk takers. "The principalship requires a high degree of political acuity, visibility and accessibility, the ability to delegate tasks, and the ability to see the big picture. These type of principals understand the limits to rational decision making within a turbulent political environment" (Davis, 1998, p. 52).

I believe that through rational decision making we can and must relate academic learning to real life, even if it means completely realigning the curriculum, to meet the needs of today's students. As educators we even need to go so far as to redefine what it means to be well-educated. Deborah Meier(1995) suggests that we could now view the well-educated person as one who has communication skills, work ethic, respect, imagination relative to how others think, observation skills, skepticism, open mindedness, and the ability to interact well with others. Keeping this definition in mind, educational leaders should seek avenues of change through the curriculum and the structure of the school day. I believe that we must also open our minds to the possibilities of technology in the school, block scheduling, and even year round schooling. The principal must explore with staff, in an open manner, what is best for students.

Dialogue and open communication pave the way for deeper understanding and personal meaning to emerge. When staff and students experience understanding and personal meaning they will feel more connected to the organization leading to higher success for all involved (Combs, Miser, & Whitaker, 1999). Open communication can happen through collaboration. The effective leader will empower the staff to become involved in all reform measures, which will help to ensure the success of the reform. "When principals and assistant principals allow teachers to take leadership roles, the administration gives the teachers ownership of the new model" (Queen & Isenhour, 1998, p. 97). Personal ownership creates an environment that allows teachers to also take calculated risks in an effort to improve instruction.

In the effort to improve instruction principals as well as teachers must be role models for the students in leadership behaviors, as it will be the students in years to come that make decisions affecting the future (Krajewski, 1996). I believe that the students need role models to help them see that problem can be viewed as opportunities, and that solutions can happen collaboratively and in a congenial manner. The leaders

of the school must focus on solutions, thereby modeling for students how to better work through their own problems.

In order for the adults in a school to become models for the students, the principal must provide opportunities for staff development. Staff development can keep experienced teachers fresh and provide new teachers with direction. Students deserve teachers who are working to become stronger educators. There is nothing more appalling, to me, than teachers who hand out the same worksheets that they used for several years in a row. Students change, and to keep interest levels and excitement in the classroom high, educators should be exposed to new or alternative strategies in education. The teacher must continually strive to learn new teaching methods. The principal should lead the way in providing the opportunities for staff to be exposed to new ideas, and to build the school into a learning organization. "The long-term success and survival of any business or enterprise depends on its ability to function as a learning organization" (DuFour, 1997, p.81).

I believe that the key to student growth and success is educator growth. As an educational leader, I must create a learning environment, through staff

development, "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (Senge, 1990, p. 3). I believe that teachers, both individually and as a group, know what they need for their professional growth. As an administrator I will need to provide the opportunity for growth to take place.

Reflection has led me to see that I must practice what I preach. I must be ready to be a partner, a facilitator, a negotiator, and a resource manager while continuously providing protection for others in the school who join me in redefining and strengthening the school to fit the needs of students in a fast changing world.

I see an excellent school as one that has an educational leader that prepares students and teachers for a rapidly changing world, and the best way to achieve this is through involving all stake holders in the school's change process. Together behavioral and academic expectations must be defined and encouraged throughout the school year in a manner that can then be carried over to success outside of the school setting.

Summary

I believe that the success of education, and our future as a nation, depends on the ability of all people involved to create a shared vision of success for our children. Education must be viewed as a shared public responsibility that we need attend to in the creation of a positive future for this nation. Through working together we can help to ensure effective leadership, and create a learning community. It is the role of the educational leader to influence people in the process of attaining the vision, and preparing our children to lead the way.

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