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## A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

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## A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

This paper will examine how the role of the administration, teachers, community, and students, communication, staff development, and safety all affect the school's climate and culture. As Lyman (2000) found, the "culture of a school has important and far-reaching effects on the thinking and actions of students and teachers" (p. 145).

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY  
SCHOOLS:

A Reflective Essay

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling

And Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Steven A. Winters

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A Reflective Research Essay

Has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the

Degree of Master of

Arts in Education

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The educational system in the United States is changing rapidly. As Thomas (2000) states:

"Our country has moved from an agrarian to an industrialized nation and now into an age in which change is recognized on an almost daily basis. The age of technology has created a superhighway carrying us where no person has gone before at the blink of an eye" (p. 64).

In order to meet these demands placed on our educational system by society, we all must work together to create quality schools for our children. Society complains a lot about our schools, but "most of the time we get what we deserve. If we want good schools for our children, we have it in our power to give it to them" (McAdams, 2000, p.12).

This paper will examine how the role of the administration, teachers, community, and students, communication, staff development, and safety all affect the school's climate and culture. As Lyman (2000) found, the "culture of a school has important and far-reaching effects on the thinking and actions of students and teachers" (p. 145).

## Administrator's Role in Schools Today

Today's fast paced society places new demands on our schools to adapt and produce productive, globally competitive students. Schools exist to enhance the knowledge and understanding of those enrolled within them. I believe that the main responsibility of administrators is to effectively manage these schools to produce self-sufficient members of society.

As the educational leader, the principal "plays a key role in determining the overall effectiveness of the school" (Glatthorn, 2000, p. 25). They must "blend educational theories with practical experience" (Thomas, 2001, p. 54) to restructure the school to meet the overall objective of producing self-sufficient members of society. Without strong school leadership, restructuring will not take place; so the principal must act as "the central figure from which restructuring models for schools can originate and through which they are implemented" (Thomas, 2001, p. 54). From personal teaching experience, I have witnessed many times where principals have

attempted to implement change, but have failed because they lacked the support of the staff. These principals took responsibility for change and made decisions, but "failed to listen to others, build consensus, support success, and set a personal example" (Lyman, 2000, p. 103). In order for any principal to successfully implement change they need to have the teachers, parents, and community buy into the plan.

Schwahn and Spady (1995) feel that "people must buy into why change is necessary...have ownership...and have a concrete picture of what the change will look like for them personally" (p.74). Those who will be most affected by the plan must be involved in "designing the new structure, and changes must be implemented in careful stages" (McAdams, 2000, p. 9). To make this change, the administration must "create a positive open climate" (Aronstein and DeBenedictis, 1988) by taking an active role in communicating the reasons for change with the staff, community, and students.

It is also important for administrators to create a caring atmosphere within the school. Administrators and teachers need to help foster a caring climate that will allow schools to become more humanistic and less beaurocratic (Berla, 1995). To develop a caring climate, the leadership must build learning communities that include everyone. Caring is really about providing students with everything they need to develop their full potential and become successful human beings. As Epstein (1995) writes:

Research results . . . indicate that caring communities can be built, on purpose; that they include families that might not become involved on their own; and that, by their own reports, just about all families, students, and teachers believe that partnerships are important for helping students succeed across the grades (pp. 704).

If the studies are correct and caring affects learning and every other aspect of school life, then the practices and challenges of caring leadership must be understood by school leaders who want to be effective. As Lyman (2000) points out



there are some common practices of principals who use a caring leadership style such as:

- Articulating values that support caring.
  1. All persons deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.
  2. High expectations for learning and achievement are essential.
  3. Caring is important in and of itself.
  4. Treat students as you would your own children.
- Embracing and viewing positively the complexity of difficult situations.
- Brining conflicts to the surface for constructive handling.
- Acknowledging and valuing the reality of diversity.
- Being flexible in interpreting and enforcing rules and regulations.
- Restructuring to support caring and create community.
- Inviting partnerships with parents in the education of their child.
- Modeling caring in culturally meaningful ways.
- Demonstrating commitment over time" (p. 139).

One problem that could arise from this, however, is that male principals need to overcome society's stereotyping of the male gender. Males are taught in our society that they need to be tough, decisive, and silent about their feelings since emotions should not be shown in the workplace. But, how can

a male administrator be a caring and compassionate person if he is not encouraged to show his true feelings? I know that many male administrators truly are caring individuals, but because of stereotyping, feel uncomfortable in showing this side.

### Teachers Role in Today's Schools

The teacher's role in the classroom is to develop a learning environment in which all students are able to succeed. To do this, teachers must push students to complete assignments, maintain order, offer help whenever and for however long it takes, explain assignments and concepts, vary activities, and respect students and their outside worlds (Wilson & Corbet, 2001, p. 3).

I strongly believe that once the boundaries have been set and a classroom environment has been established students will realize that the teacher is there to assist them. That they are there to help them in the transition from childhood into adulthood.

Teachers show caring toward the students by "refusing to allow them to fail. Teachers who taught, cared" (Wilson & Corbet, 2001, p. 63). Wilson and Corbet noted that "students connected how the teacher conducted the class, the students' relationship with the teacher, and the students' sense of whether they were learning anything as the ingredients for creating a productive classroom" (p. 54).

Through my experience, I feel that a positive discipline climate in the classroom is what students want from their teachers. Students know which teachers are going to require them to do work and behave in class. When teachers set clear expectations and follow through with real consequences, it defines the role of the students in the educational process and helps the students realize what it will take to succeed in this classroom. Another challenge that schools present to educators is "the challenge of designing school environments that take as their starting point a fundamental belief in

every child's ability to learn and grow under the guidance of caring professionals who not only have a sound understanding of a respect for human variation but are able to commit themselves to bringing out the very best in every child entrusted in their care" (Thomas, 2000, p. 95). Unfortunately, I feel there are a lot of teachers who do not believe this statement to be true. There have been so many times, that teachers have made comments about how certain students aren't capable of learning because of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or special needs.

According to Monroe (2001), teachers need to be prepared:

"to teach the children who come regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, or gender, how to read, write, think, compute, appreciate the arts, speak well, and behave in socially acceptable ways, so that they can become economically independent, contributing members of society" (p. 32).

Assisting in changing educators views about students are the revisions that are occurring in special education and drop out prevention programs. These programs have come along way

in the past several years to help these students become responsible members of society.

The special education departments are the fastest growing departments in most schools today. Do we really have more special education students today than in previous years? I believe that the answer is yes but it is also due to the fact that we have now established guidelines to more accurately identify these students and monitor their progress. Teachers are now equipped with the knowledge to individualize educational programs that will best meet the needs of special education students and through this will learn new techniques that will assist them in meeting the educational needs of all students (Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, 1998). Hence, this should help teachers realize that all students are capable of learning if given the correct type of instruction for their learning style.

Drop out prevention programs designed to minimizing the number of students quitting school have become increasingly

popular in the past decade. School districts have developed alternative schools that are designed to keep at risk students in school.

The United States is realizing that to be globally competitive, we can't allow any of our students to slip through the cracks. All students must become productive members of society which will benefit not only the individual but society in general.

### Student and Community Roles in Education

The role of the students is to become actively involved in their own education. Students must seek knowledge and want to succeed. I see a problem with this because "everything can be traced to parents, family, a home, or the lack of a home" (Monroe, 2000, p.23). Students do not have the family structure that was common in the 50's and 60's. The decline of the family system has forced education and teachers to become surrogate parents. But should this burden be placed in the hands of the school system and educators? I feel that for

now, this burden is in the right hands and until a generation of students who have come from caring schools become adults and can choose to make better decisions than their parents, educators have an added responsibility in the classroom. But, it is the responsibility of the students to take control of their own education and actively make positive choices to assist in the completion of their high school diploma and more.

The role of the community is to assist the schools in caring for the children within the community. This is done through partnerships formed with businesses, churches, and concerned individuals. These partnerships benefit the school by creating a network of organizations and people who are willing to donate their time, money, and expertise to the schools. The community benefits as a whole, when schools produce well-educated individuals who are ready to enter the workforce and become responsible citizens (Comer & Haynes, 1996).

## Enhancing Communications

Another important step in meeting the challenges facing schools today is improving communications within our learning communities. Communication between staff and administrators has taken a turn for the better through site-based management.

"Schools need to have the authority to make decisions independent from the central office" (McAdams, 2000, p. 83).

If the teachers initiate the change, it has the potential to increase the productivity of the teachers and ultimately affect the students in a positive manner (Fullan, 1991). Through site-based management, teachers will communicate what needs to be done to meet the needs of the individual school's population.

One way that communication has improved is through the use of technology such as electronic mail (email). Teachers feel more comfortable sending messages to the administration because they do not have to interrupt their schedules or the administrator's. Not only can the teachers send emails to the administration; they are able to communicate with parents,



students, and community members. Email has proven to be a vital link in the communication process.

### Professional Development

Another point that I feel strongly about is staff development. Students deserve teachers who are working to become stronger educators. I know that there is nothing more disturbing than a teacher who has taught the same way for twenty years. Students have changed over the years becoming more and more reliant on technology for their information so if the teacher doesn't realize this, he or she may lose students in the transmission of material (Moffett, 2000). To keep interest levels and excitement in the classroom, educators should try new or alternative strategies in education. The teacher must continually strive to learn new teaching methods. Personally, I believe that this can only be done through teacher in-services and pay increases for those who take courses. It is also important that if districts want students to become life longer learners, then teachers and administrators must model this

behavior. As Aronson (2000) so eloquently put it "it ain't what we say that matters it's what we do" (p. 169).

Students today have smaller attention spans and expect to be entertained. Teachers must meet these needs by devising lessons that facilitate learning along with entertainment. Teachers of all ages should feel comfortable using technology in their classrooms. This will only happen if teachers are given the time to learn to use the technology and taught how to implement it into their curriculum. This can be done through incentive programs designed to provide teachers with a computer after completion of 72 hours worth of technology coursework. A prime example of this program was installed in the Waterloo Community Schools in Waterloo, Iowa. I had the opportunity to earn a computer through this program. It may sound easy but trying to take technology classes while coaching, taking college courses, teaching, and having a family makes it very difficult. Plus, the teacher earning the computer is required to pay the taxes for it.

Also, the increased role of technology within the workplace demands that schools teach students to be self-sufficient technology users upon graduation. Without teachers modeling technology usage and students being taught how to use it, education is failing to produce people capable of meeting the global workplace needs.

Another critical step in staff development is the implementation of a mentor system for new teachers. As new teachers enter the teaching ranks they should be paired with a more experienced teacher to help guide them through those first critical years. This mentor is someone who will be there to answer questions or simply listen to their problems. Most teachers that leave the teaching field do so within the first five years because the tremendous responsibility of educating children burns them out. A mentor program could help reduce the amount of teachers leaving the field in times of a growing teacher shortage.

## Student Safety in Schools Today

It is my intention that students need to be safe within the confines of the schoolyard. Schools are meant to be a safe haven in a world that is otherwise chaotic. People need to realize "the enormous power a social institution can exert on individual behavior...humans are social animals...deeply influenced by other people...as well as by the general climate of any situation" (Aronson, 2000, p. 21). As we have seen in situations such as Columbine, "a major root of cause of the recent school shootings is a school atmosphere that ignores, or implicitly condones, the taunting, rejection, and verbal abuse to which a great many students are subjected" (Aronson, 2000, p. 74). It is my personal belief that to combat this, schools need to promote diversity while focusing on similarities so that all student know that humans are the same. Plus, schools need to develop ways of teaching students how "to gain greater control over their impulses and how to get along with others so they

can resolve interpersonal conflicts amicably" (Aronson, 2000, p. 17)

Another suggestion would be to physically make schools a safer place through the use of metal detectors, police liaison officers, and video cameras in the hallways. In Aronson's book, students mentioned that "metal detectors made their school the safest place in the neighborhood" (Aronson, 2000, p. 55). This is not only needed for urban high crime areas anymore, as school violence knows no socioeconomic boundaries. The most recent shootings have taken place in upper middle class neighborhoods such as Columbine.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have addressed the role of the administration, teachers, students, and community along with how communication, staff development, and safety contribute to the overall effectiveness of the educational system. As administrators, we need to actively seek the advice of the

students, staff, parents, and community members to ensure that our school's vision is a reflection of the community's vision for the school.

It is the conclusion of this writer that schools play an enormous part in the development of young people. Schools need to be structured around the needs of young people, safe, positive, and supported by the whole community to effectively produce caring, self-sufficient citizens who will give back to their communities to continue the positive cycle. This environment needs to be structured as a safe haven where all children can have the opportunity to learn within a positive atmosphere that will best meet the needs of each individual child. To do this, schools should promote staff development, have long and short-range plans, and promote open democratic communication. When these things are present, there will be an administrator with whom the staff will respect and work for to create a better atmosphere for all the students, teachers, and

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