

1993

## A vision for an effective principalship: A reflective essay

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### Recommended Citation

Frerichs, Scott W., "A vision for an effective principalship: A reflective essay" (1993). *Graduate Research Papers*. 2347.

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## A vision for an effective principalship: A reflective essay

### Abstract

One question I have often been asked is why did you decide to teach? My answer to this question often varied because there is no single reason for my making such an important decision. The initial reason for my choosing to teach was that I had several very positive role models who were teachers and I felt that I too could be such a role model. I also enjoyed school and was successful both in the classroom and with extra-curricular activities. I believed that I could make a difference through teaching. For these reasons I felt that teaching was a natural choice for me.

A VISION FOR AN EFFECTIVE PRINCIPALSHIP:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

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:

Scott W. Frerichs

July, 1993



One question I have often been asked is why did you decide to teach? My answer to this question often varied because there is no single reason for my making such an important decision. The initial reason for my choosing to teach was that I had several very positive role models who were teachers and I felt that I too could be such a role model. I also enjoyed school and was successful both in the classroom and with extra-curricular activities. I believed that I could make a difference through teaching. For these reasons I felt that teaching was a natural choice for me.

As a beginning teacher, I had a building principal who listened to me, helped me to grow as a professional, encouraged me, and motivated me to continue to grow. Pursuing my Master's Degree seemed a natural next step. I was also well aware that it was necessary to pursue graduate hours if I was to earn a comfortable salary as a teacher. I talked with several people who had taken many graduate classes but had not received their Master's Degree because the hours they had taken were not all in the same area and could not be applied to one degree. I knew then that I wanted to take graduate classes and that I definitely wanted to get into a program. A friend of mine was currently in the program for educational administration at U.N.I. and he persuaded me to join him. I felt that this was an excellent decision. I liked the idea of being able to have a positive impact on an entire building.

When I began my program for my Master's Degree I was uninformed as to the responsibilities of a principal. I had been teaching for only two years and

had spent most of my time simply working at improving my teaching methods and everything else that goes along with being a beginning teacher. Through this program I have gained many insights concerning the responsibilities and expectations of a building principal.

As a future secondary principal, it is imperative that I have a complete understanding of the goals and objectives of the principalship. Without this necessary knowledge and background, I would be unable to make informed and accurate decisions for the good of my school. At the same time, I must identify my personal characteristics that may influence my effectiveness as a principal. I feel that it is necessary for me to include my beliefs and values about the principalship because they will guide me in much of my decision-making as a principal. The following paragraphs will discuss the aspects that I feel a person must understand prior to becoming an effective principal and will also relate how my personal attributes will enable me to correctly apply this knowledge as a secondary school principal. Throughout this paper I will include examples of how my view of the principalship has changed as a direct result of the classes I have completed for my Master's Degree.

### Components for Effective Administration

#### Leadership

The principal is necessary for efficient operation of the school. One purpose of the principal is to provide educational leadership. The leadership role of the administrator cannot be overstated. "Clearly, the principal is important to the

effective operation of a school. The principal is perhaps the only individual who can see the whole picture in his or her school" (Rallis, 1988). An effective principal needs to be able to look to the future when making educational decisions. As an educational leader, the principal needs to encourage both staff development and instructional improvement. These areas are extremely important to me personally. Staff development and instructional improvement will immediately impact the quality of learning in my school. "The effective principal should not attempt to dominate his/her faculty but rather should promote followership" (L. Kavich, personal communication, summer,1990). Followership is a concept where the faculty and principal share the same vision and the faculty willingly follows the principal's lead knowing that they are working together to improve their school. Without a principal providing this type of leadership, it is possible that the teachers may actually all work towards their own private goals which will be much less efficient in the long run.

It is equally important that the principal be prepared to manage the school's business affairs. In order to be an effective principal I will need to make wise use of all resources within my school district. As principal, I will authorize expenditures for instructional supplies, instructional software, printing costs, phones, travel, and various miscellaneous items. Every community has a certain percentage of people who are solely interested in how well the principal manages the employees as well as the financial aspects of the school. I have

heard it said that the way to get a job as a principal is to be an educational leader and the way to keep your job is to manage the school wisely. I am certain that there is a considerable amount of truth in this statement

### Cooperation

The principal is responsible for making the actors (faculty and staff) within the school cooperate. "Two factors shared by ineffective schools are fiscal instability and internal turmoil" (Pugh, 1989). Professional staff members who cooperate are more likely to share planning as well as effective teaching strategies. One way a principal can provide for sharing is to schedule a common planning time for either grade level teachers or all teachers within a certain subject area. This is a problem we are currently trying to address at our school. We have experienced difficulties in establishing a common planning time due mainly to an inflexible schedule and an unwillingness to change from the current routine. I believe that it is a responsibility of the principal to require that his/her staff cooperate and work together in this type of situation when improvement of the educational process is at stake.

As a building principal, I will need to recognize different personalities and communicating styles of my teachers. Some faculty members are logical and systematic in their work while others want results now. When it is necessary to group faculty members to work on a project I must consider their personalities so that they are comfortable and productive. "Most people prefer to work with others like themselves" (D'Onofrio, 1992).



## Evaluation

Every organization becomes more effective when provisions are made for evaluating both the organization and its product. A school is no exception to this rule. The principal plays an extremely vital role in evaluation. Although evaluation is formally done only once or twice a year, I believe that the effective principal makes a point to note both the good and bad events in the school almost continuously. The motivated principal should acknowledge positive events and actions either through verbal or written communications. These simple communications will send a message to my staff that I care and that I am aware of what happens in our school. "Teachers like to know that their hard work and efforts to maintain high standards are appreciated; but far too often, positive feedback on a personal level is slow in coming from the principal. While staff compliments are good, nothing takes the place of a pat on the back from someone who recognizes your contributions and achievements" (Hoversten, 1992). Evaluation of personnel is second only to the hiring process for achieving and maintaining a quality staff. Not only does the school administration need to evaluate its personnel, but it must also use feedback from the community to evaluate how well the entire school system is performing. Evaluations will only be a benefit to the educational process if the results are communicated and shared.

I believe that evaluation of personnel is one of the most important aspects of the principalship. Before beginning the program for my Master's Degree I had

feelings of uncertainty and lacked confidence in myself to effectively evaluate others. I feel now that although I am lacking in actual experience in this area, I am more comfortable that I can properly observe another teacher and effectively communicate my observations with another professional in a one on one setting. I look forward to the challenge of making these evaluations an experience that both my staff members and I can grow from.

### Individual Needs

Another requirement of the effective principal is to meet the needs of the individuals within the organization. The principal must develop a threat-free climate within the school. This is an atmosphere where both the students and faculty feel free to express their views and feelings. Pressures perceived as threats by either the students or teachers will decrease the effectiveness of the school. According to Maslow's Model, the needs for safety and security must be satisfied or our students will never reach the higher levels of autonomy and self-actualization which is the development of maximum potential (Morphet, Johns, and Reller, 1982).

Additionally, the curriculum must satisfy the needs of the student body. Where do the various subjects fit into the the educational program? What is necessary to accomplish our mission? "Curriculum grows out of the statement of philopophy and objectives. The school which has developed a clear cut statement should not experience great difficulty in determining what its offerings should be" (Maguire, 1978).

### Goals

The principal is responsible for getting individuals within the school to accept and facilitate the attainment of the goals of the school system. The principal may want to refer to the Getzel/Guba Model of observed behavior when it becomes necessary to motivate teachers to move towards a new objective (Morphet, Johns, and Reller, 1982). The efficient principal needs to consider both the Nomothetic and Idiographic dimensions in persuading faculty that a new educational objective is a goal worth pursuing. At the same time, an effective principal will consider the maturity level of individuals when deciding whether to be high or low with respect to both task and consideration.

Through coaching and working with students I have found that people are much more motivated to attain goals if there is ownership. It is easiest to establish ownership if the people who the goals are meant for are the ones who develop the goals. These same people need to be responsible for the objectives that will measure the extent to which the goals have been achieved. As a principal, I will need to include my faculty in the goal-setting process for our school.

### Vision

The principal is necessary for developing and maintaining a vision of what the school must be in order to best meet the needs of his/her particular community. "For schools to be effective, they need effective leaders who express their values. These individual values must become shared goals so that

the entire community shares a vision" (Buell, 1992). Educational expectations vary from community to community and school to school. "The obvious first step for all beginning principals is to determine where his school is going as an individual unit. Each course charted will necessarily be unique. One must get a fix on his present position prior to charting a future course" (Maguire, 1978). An effective principal must have a vision that is both clear and challenging. Most school districts communicate their vision through a district mission statement. As a principal, I will have a responsibility to convey my vision of education to my faculty. "There can be little dispute that the most effective principals are those whose teachers have ownership in the mission of the school" (Erlandson and Bifano, 1987). This vision will then be a source of stability during times of educational change. Every principal must model behavior consistent with the district's vision at all times. Every faculty needs to pull together and work towards a common vision and good leaders will be prepared to guide his/her school through both times of stability and times of change.

Prior to beginning the program for my Master's Degree, I knew very little about having a vision for education and our school district was without a mission statement. I now realize that as a principal I will need to combine the resources of both the school and community with my beliefs of what education should be in developing an educational vision for my school. The New Hampton School District's current mission statement is "To Empower All Students to

Succeed in a Changing World." This statement summarizes well, how I feel about the concept of education. Our main goal is to provide opportunities for all students to receive the education that they need and desire. We must teach our students how to learn as well as a love of learning. While teaching our students we must be sure to vary teaching styles and methods. It is equally important that the classroom teachers use various types of motivation within the classroom so that all students can achieve a maximum amount of success in school.

#### Student Opportunity

One very important responsibility of the principal is to ensure an equal opportunity for all students. The effective principal must tie together aspects such as the interests of the community, the motivation of the faculty, and the aspirations of the students in developing an educational setting that provides every person a chance to excel. Every student has the right to pursue and emphasize their personal areas of interest and strength. Principals of good schools will balance the needs of the community with national values. Teachers must be required to use all resources available to them to vary learning styles and use various types of motivational strategies with their students.

#### Teacher Empowerment

"Empowerment refers to the opportunities a person has for autonomy, responsibility, choice, and authority" (Lightfoot, 1986). An effective principal must have enough confidence in teachers to grant his/her faculty

responsibility, choice, and authority. "Shared responsibility, teacher empowerment, and community growth are the three principles necessary for schoolwide staff development" (Emmons, 1990). The extent to which teachers feel they are allowed to participate in decision-making processes directly affects how they approach their profession. "Strengths of teacher empowerment include recognition and nurturance of teachers as professionals and improved teacher-administrator relations" (Irwin, 1990). Not all teachers are comfortable with the idea of empowerment because it makes them responsible for making decisions concerning the educational process. "If teachers feel self-confident, responsible, and influential, and feel that they are the key decision makers and that their wisdom is valued, then it is likely that they will encourage these qualities in their students" (Lightfoot, 1986). If increased empowerment leads to increased teacher involvement and increases the teachers feelings of self-worth and importance; the concept of teacher empowerment will go a long way in improving the educational environment for our students.

I have strong feelings about teacher empowerment. I believe that teachers who are proficient at what they do and who are enthusiastic about their profession want and need to be empowered to make decisions regarding the educational process. "It is important for a principal to relinquish decision-making authority to teachers. But teachers will not become leaders within the school community if, when the going gets rough and an angry parent makes a

phone call, the principal violates the trust and reasserts his or her authority" (Barth, 1988). As teachers begin to feel comfortable with the shared decision-making idea they will become more involved with other concerns in education. The bottom line regarding empowerment is that it will lead to a healthy educational climate where the entire staff is participating in making decisions for the good of the students.

### Community Relations

Community relations is of particular interest to the effective principal because expectations vary from school district to school district. For this reason, a principal needs to adapt his/her communication methods and timing to be most effective within his/her immediate community. "The principal should keep all communications brief, factual, and complete" (D. Else, personal communication, summer, 1991). One efficient method of communicating with the public would be through the use of a monthly newsletter. This newsletter would include important dates and information that the school's administration believes the public should be made aware of. The drawback to this type of communication is the cost to the district. Many districts will use the local paper and radio station as well as to get information out to the public.

Practicing this type of communication with the community will lead to a healthy school-community climate necessary in developing an effective school.

As a building principal, I will encourage my teachers to communicate regularly with parents. "Most parents form their impressions about a school

primarily from their experience with their children's teachers. If the experience is positive, their feelings about the school will usually be positive" (Vann, 1992). It will be necessary for every student to be issued a student handbook at the beginning of the year. These handbooks will serve as a reference for parents concerning our school policies. "Parents should be your allies, and regular, open, and honest communication is the surest way to build such an alliance" (Vann, 1992).

I would have to describe myself as uninformed at least to the importance of school-community relations prior to completing my graduate classes. This is one aspect of being a principal that is increasing in importance. It is my opinion that the public is becoming increasingly concerned with the educational process and school affairs. Some sectors of the community are concerned with the financial matters of the school while others are more interested in what is being done to improve education. Regardless of the reason, this interest in public education exists and the effective principal must not only recognize it, but he/she must use this interest to improve his/her school. "Middle level and high school educators too often neglect the importance of involving parents in their student's education. Incorporating an effective parent involvement program at the secondary level is both vital and relatively easy" (Stauffer, 1992). We have established a school advisory council consisting of community members, parents, school faculty members and administrators as a method of



involving the public sector and allowing them a voice in school matters. The advisory council certainly has proven to be an asset for our school district.

#### Personal Beliefs and Values

A principal's personality plays an important role in determining how effective he/she is with respect to the position. There are three aspects of my personality that I feel will enable me to succeed as a secondary school principal. The first is my consistency. An effective principal must live by the same values that he/she employs when leading the school. The effective principal must walk the talk! This type of personal consistency is important for piece of mind and also serves as an example for others to follow. For many people, these actions speak louder than words. There are always those people who are looking to find fault wherever possible. Some individuals are particularly critical of the school and its administration because their tax dollars are supporting the school system. Their negative feelings can be kept to a minimum if you are consistent both as an administrator and a person and live by the words you speak.

I believe that every person needs to respect others rights and choices. This does not imply that I will always agree with the decisions others make. People differ in their personal beliefs and values and everybody has a right to their own. This is true in education as well as other aspects of life. Effective principals will acknowledge differing values with respect and consider all possibilities when making decisions for the good of the school district.

Above all else, I feel it is extremely important to be open and honest. As a principal, I would initiate and maintain an open door policy with my staff. They would be free to stop in and share ideas and concerns with me when appropriate. Honesty is generally valued by all and is considered to be extremely important by those peers whose opinions I value most. Without honesty you cannot have respect and it is virtually impossible to be consistent. I believe that my consistency, the respect I have for and from others, and my honesty are three personal attributes that will allow me to be a successful principal in an effective school.

A school system should be an open, social system that needs to reach a balance among the many factors acting upon and within the system. A responsibility of the principal is to ensure a balance for his/her respective school. There are two types of equilibrium that may exist. The first is stationary equilibrium which exists when the school returns to a balance after any given disturbance. The second, dynamic equilibrium, exists when the school reaches a new balance after any given disturbance. The principal needs to be able to predict and evaluate factors that may disturb the current operation of the school. The principal may choose to resist the disturbance and build a protective wall for the school and students. In a different situation, the principal may choose to accommodate the disturbance by moving to a new equilibrium. Feedback from the community should be used when deciding how various disturbances are to be treated. By maintaining such a balance for the

school system the principal is keeping entropy within the school to a minimum and providing a climate conducive to both teaching and learning.

The education a person has been provided can and does affect the quality of their future life. It will be my responsibility as an effective principal to provide a quality education to all students entering my school intent on learning. Being an efficient and effective principal is not an end for me. Rather, it is a process of combining my personal strengths with the strengths of the school system in which I am working and minimizing all factors that may have a negative influence on the students, faculty, school, and community.

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