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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

"Why do you want to be a principal, Dad?" asked my 10 year old the other day. "I know," he continued, "it's because you like kids and want to help people." I guess I really never answered him, and he left for some other interest, but that started me thinking as to the real reason I was entering the arena of administration. After being a junior high English and Special Education teacher for seventeen years, why would I want to change? True, there were days when the student behaviors overshadowed the satisfaction I received by trying to teach them communication skills and the enjoyment of good literature, but there were also days, at least as many, when I was thankful that I worked with the kids rather than the adults. So why put myself in a position where I was working more directly with the adults and more indirectly with the students?

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A
REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
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University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts in Education

by
Robert D. Howlett
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"Why do you want to be a principal, Dad?" asked my 10 year old the other day. "I know," he continued, "it's because you like kids and want to help people." I guess I really never answered him, and he left for some other interest, but that started me thinking as to the real reason I was entering the arena of administration.

After being a junior high English and Special Education teacher for seventeen years, why would I want to change? True, there were days when the student behaviors overshadowed the satisfaction I received by trying to teach them communication skills and the enjoyment of good literature, but there were also days, at least as many, when I was thankful that I worked with the kids rather than the adults. So why put myself in a position where I was working more directly with the adults and more indirectly with the students?

For the past few years I have watched the perceived value of education diminish. This depreciation of educational value was not only on the part of students, but also on the part of parents and even educators. This could be due, in part, to frustrated teachers who may have felt under paid and stretched too thin; to parents reacting to the many reports of the disintegrating school system; or to students overwhelmed by changing curriculum, delivery systems, and outdated evaluation procedures.

Realizing that my perceptions might be site or population specific, let me describe the setting of my teaching experience and describe the administrative arena in which I wish to serve.

I have spent my entire teaching career as a Special Education and English teacher and recently educational supervisor in a residential facility for emotionally disturbed and behaviorally disordered children and adolescents. The children served in a school setting such as this are those who have traditionally done poorly in their local schools due to poor academic skills, chaotic living situations, significant mental or emotional problems, or a combination. In dealing with this population I have seen needs which could be addressed only on the administrative level.

My reason for entering the field of educational administration is to prepare and qualify myself for the task of addressing these needs. My goal is to work with students, parents, educational professionals, and community members to provide an education which is valued by all. To reach this goal I must become an effective leader. I must become a person who has a clear, informed vision of what he wants his school to become - a vision that focuses on students and their needs; and a person who can translate these visions into goals for his school and expectations for the teachers, students, administrators, and community members. I must also become a person who can establish a school climate that supports progress toward these goals and expectations, and a person who continually monitors progress and intervenes in a supportive or corrective manner when necessary (Rutherford, 1985).

Cole (1985) described a leader as someone who articulates a vision and sets a course that others end up following. The National

Commission on the Principalship described a leader as a person who influencing school cultures by building a vision, stimulating innovation, and encouraging performance (Thompson,1990).

These descriptions of a leader and many more stress the importance of a vision. Webster (1965) defines vision as unusual discernment, foresight, understanding, an idea of what your school should and ultimately be. My vision is a school where education is valued. To accomplish this I must be an instructional leader who is aware of current teaching methods and curriculum and also knowledgeable of special education rules and documentation. I must provide a system to accurately monitor student progress and be a fair evaluator who can assess competencies of the staff and provide support or remediation when necessary. I must be aware of the school climate around me, monitoring expectations placed on staff and students as well as the safety and attitude of the students. I must communicate with the local community and with the educational community.

Instructional Leader

Instructional leadership may be defined as those “actions undertaken with the intention of developing a productive and satisfying working environment for teachers and desirable learning conditions and outcomes for children” (Greenfield, 1987, p.60). One of the most important areas for which an administrator has leadership responsibilities is the instructional program. The instructional program comprises all of the factors and conditions within a school that influence

student learning (Gorton & Thierbach-Schneider, 1991). My perception of the instructional program deals with curriculum and its presentation to students.

According to the "Iowa State Plan for Educational Excellence in the 21st Century" our educational system has been preparing students for their grandparents' world (Iowa Department of Education, 1992). Education today must provide students with technical skills that will be demanded in nearly every workplace. It must provide them with the ability to analyze complex information and make increasingly more difficult social, political, or life decisions. It is, then, the instructional leader's responsibility to work with faculty and community leaders to provide curriculum which will address these needs.

Gorton (1983) set forth some criteria for assessing curriculum which could be used by an instructional leader.

1. Has the school established clearly stated, operationally defined education objectives?
2. Is each course in the curriculum related to and supporting the achievement of these school objectives?
3. Does the planned curriculum take into consideration sufficiently the "hidden curriculum" to the school?
4. Does the curriculum meet the needs of all students? Is it comprehensive?
5. Does the curriculum reflect the needs and expectations of society, as well as the needs of the students?

6. Does the content of the curriculum provide for the development of student attitudes and values, as well as knowledge and skills?
7. Are the curriculum materials appropriate for the interests and abilities of the students?
8. Are the educational objectives for each subject in the curriculum clearly stated and operationally defined?
9. Is there subject matter articulation between grade levels, and correlation among the various subjects of these curriculum?
10. Are the various subjects in the curriculum achieving their proposed objectives? (pp. 303-307)

In reviewing these questions I found numbers five and six to be especially relevant to instructional leadership in this more technical but less value-ridden society. In establishing the needs and expectations of both students and society, parents and community can be valuable resources. Parent and community involvement can help to (a) strengthen the bond between school and community, (b) convey information from schools to parents, (c) help develop public confidence in the school curriculum, and (d) encourage community residents to evaluate schools in terms of students' needs (Else, 1983).

I also believe that staff input into curricular needs is essential. In giving teachers involvement, principals help teachers become better informed about aims of education, better able to interpret the school's program to the public, and more willing to act upon newer views of subject matter, learners, and societal needs (McNeil, 1988).

Assessment question number six above addresses attitude and values. This, I believe, is the most difficult but most needed area the school has to deal with today. What are values, and whose values do we teach? How do we teach the value of an education? How do we teach the value of cooperation or pride in workmanship? How do we teach the value of fulfilling our responsibilities as citizens, husbands, wives, parents, employees, and students? For most students as well as adults, the best teaching method is example. Therefore, I would stress to the staff the importance of modeling our values in the way we perform our responsibilities and in the way we interact with others. We must help our students to value themselves and teach them the importance of responsibility as well as rights.

Two other areas of importance that fall under this umbrella of instructional leadership and curriculum are technology and special education. Technology is breaking down the walls between the classroom and the real world. It is also an enabling tool which facilitates the process of writing so that students and teachers can interact with the text in useful ways that are difficult with pencil and paper (Kozma & Johnston, 1991).

It is important to remember, however, that technology does not replace the regular teacher. It is a supplement to regular classroom instruction (Van Horn, 1991). Technology is especially motivating to students because it is hands-on time (Thode, 1988).

An instructional leader will follow a plan to include technology in the curriculum. This plan must include in-service/staff development for teachers and be constantly reviewed and revised. While writing this paper I reviewed the technology plan I had written for Technology Applications in Educational Administration class a few years ago. It was completely out of date because of the constant change and progress in computer hardware and software.

The other area to be addressed by an instructional leader is that of special education. Special education is a subset of the overall educational effort which provides expertise and services for students with unique needs who require specially designed instruction to facilitate their educational progress. In implementing PL 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, a separateness of special and regular education emerged and limited the use of special education instructional and support personnel to those "identified" as special needs students.

There is now recognition of the need to blend and merge regular and special education efforts and resources if public education is to meet the broad array of student needs. As an instructional leader I would take a problem solving approach focusing on concerns of all students. Special education would be viewed as a funnel, the top of which represented the broad base of student concerns expressed by parents and educators. As the funnel narrowed, the student's needs became increasingly unique and required more specialized interventions in

response to an increase in the intensity of the problem. With this method, all student learning and adjustment problems would be addressed and maximum effectiveness and efficiency of services would be provided to solve student problems.

Assessment and Evaluation

If our students are to value their education, they must feel that we, as professionals, are giving them credit for their work and accurately assessing their progress and performance. Assessment tools which have been used in the past have not been comprehensive enough to judge student performance. Today a combination of assessment tools is necessary to monitor individual development and curriculum mastery.

Portfolio assessment is a powerful strategy for assessing the growth and development of individual learners. Through collection, analysis, and reflection upon a collected body of work, it is possible to see the progress of skill development (Monson & Monson, 1993).

Performance-based assessment is the other tool to be used to gain the complete picture of a student's performance. This procedure allows the student to demonstrate his learning in comparison to other learners who have participated in the same experience. By using both of these assessment tools, portfolios to see development and performance-based to reflect curriculum mastery, we can see a complete picture of the student as a learner (Monson & Monson, 1993).

School employees, just like students, have the need to feel that their efforts are fairly evaluated. In the past emphasis was placed on job

evaluations which rated an employee's performance. The activities involved in an evaluation were to judge the performance of a teacher, offer a global overview of their teaching efforts, and make the teacher aware of his/her weaknesses. This process was often demoralizing to the teacher and resulted in frustration (Knoll, 1987).

Supervision as opposed to evaluation is more of a leadership role. Its results are teacher motivation, inspiration, and trust (Knoll, 1987). The supervisor using this approach diagnoses teacher performance needs and then guides, directs, assists, suggests, supports, and consults with the teacher.

As a leader in my school I hope to foster the feeling of trust between the teachers and myself. I will promote personal improvement instead of judgmental examination of abilities.

School Climate

School climate, to me, is that overall bonding element which develops trust among staff, students, parents, and the community. Short (1994) identified important elements of good school climate as positive parent-teacher expectations of students, respect for students, and good communication.

Paredes (1993) examined the relationship between school climate and student persistence. In this study he discovered that schools with positive school climates had higher achievement and lower dropout rates. This study found that teacher expectations for student success and teachers' instructional goals most favorably impacted student climate.

As a school leader I will build a positive school climate by providing clear and specific expectations for staff and students, by providing a discipline system that is fair and functional, and by maintaining an open communication policy between myself, staff, students, and the community. These things, I feel, lead to a trusting environment for academic and personal development and encourage the desire to be life-long learners.

Clear and specific expectations make any project easier. When we understand the intended outcome and the steps involved in getting there, the path which leads from one to the other becomes clearer. It has been my experience that most people, students and educational staff, usually meet the expectations set for them. We must, therefore, set our expectations high enough that the result is acceptable to both parties involved.

School discipline is the foundation of education and ensures a safe and peaceful environment in which to work and learn. Establishing rules and the use of reward and sanction to enforce rules are the primary aspects of school rule formation. Incentive-based rules improve discipline better than punishment-based rules, which hurt the student-teacher relationship (Pang, 1992). Punitive approaches, whether based on rewards or punishment, simply employ techniques to control student behavior. They produce little self-discipline and only short-term compliance. Discipline must be viewed as part of the larger learning

system whose goal is to strive for long-term learning that produces mental and moral involvement (Short, 1994).

School discipline systems must include clear and specific expectations for students. These expectations must be viewed as part of the final outcome of the educational process. Discipline systems should not only include student rights, but also student responsibilities for ensuring a good school climate.

Unfortunately, school discipline systems are having to address issues of much more consequence than in past years. Assaults, batteries, weapons confiscations, drug possession, sale, and abuse, as well as gang activity represent the school administrator's worst nightmare. Routinely, the most disruptive youths in communities across the nation are purposefully placed into school classrooms instead of facilities designed for serious habitual offenders with problems far beyond the expertise found in traditional curriculum. This is usually justified as a condition of probation and reform without any realistic hope of proper supervision (James, 1994).

These conditions call for measures which surpass traditional discipline systems and provide for campus safety. Interventions necessary to ensure school safety often have far reaching legal implications. When the educational process is threatened by criminal activity, the courts respond differently. School officials are permitted to base campus safety plans not on cause but on suspicion. The actions of

school officials are validated as long as they are reasonable (James, 1994). Therefore, carefully planned school safety programs are critical as a means of responding effectively to campus problems as well as maintaining favorable treatment by the courts.

The commitment of good two-way communications with all the audiences served by the school is important to school climate. An early step in building confidence in our schools is to let everyone know what the school is doing well, what the problems are, and what's being done to solve the problems. "Constituents don't expect leaders to be perfect; they do expect them to recognize challenges and explain what's being done to meet them" (Kindred, Bagin, & Gallagher, 1984). The key is to establish a spirit of honesty and sincerity so the staff and community believe the information being shared.

Conclusion

Realizing that past experiences affect our attitudes, the way we perceive things, and the actions we take in performing our responsibilities, I have reflected back upon my years in education, both as a student and as an educational professional, to see how those experiences have affected my thoughts and values concerning educational administration. I have also reflected upon my graduate studies to see how this training has blended with my experiences to clarify my beliefs and values concerning educational administration.

Education has always been valued in my family. My mother and an aunt were teachers, my father had a degree in education, and an

uncle was a university president. During my graduate studies I have come to realize that for education to be valued by everyone, we must have a product that is continuously evaluated and improved. It must be a product that addresses the current needs of students by providing curriculum which students see as relevant and addresses student future needs by providing the knowledge base to be successful and life-long learners. A quality product also provides an activities program which meets students' school-related needs not met by the curriculum, teaches wise use of leisure time, and helps them use constructively their unique talents and skills.

During my studies I have been able to clarify the true meaning of leadership and how to use the "power" that comes with it. I have learned that power should not be based on fear or a person's "connections" or the ability to provide a reward for someone. Rather it should be based on skill, knowledge, ability to access information valued by others, and personality traits. I also learned that management keeps an organization functional, that leadership identifies a new direction for that organization, and that a good administrator is both.

As an educational supervisor I had done job evaluations, but during Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction I learned to blend both aspects of the process. This has changed the whole focus of my responsibilities of supervision and has improved communication and interaction with the staff for whom I am responsible. I have become more focused on improvement and teacher effectiveness.

The most important thing I have gained from my studies and interactions with professors and classmates is my perception of a "real school", its functioning and administration. Even though I attended public schools all my life, my professional experience has been limited to a small, residential setting. I have become aware of programs, policies, and people involved in the operation of a school. As a result of this I have purposely placed myself in situations where I deal more frequently with "regular school" settings and personnel and have instituted in-service situations which ensure my educational staff's awareness and understanding of all school settings.

I have come to realize that the principalship is the very best position in the school because of the number of people you can impact (D. Else, personal communication, January 26, 1994). But I have also come to realize the tremendous responsibility the principalship represents. I have prepared myself to face those responsibilities.

My goal is to be the leader in a school where education is valued because the relevance of its curriculum is evident; where students and teachers alike are encouraged to improve and improvement is fairly assessed; where students and staff feel safe; and where communication is open and honest.

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