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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

Abstract

How it all began ...

July 31, 1991 (8:30 PM) 1 After a long and busy day, the phone rings. It is Kathi, a friend of mine, calling to see if I had a teaching job for the upcoming school year. Kathi had recently visited with a former colleague who was concerned that her school would not have a principal for the new school year. The principal of this small parochial school 25 miles from Storm Lake had just resigned to take another principalship in Eastern Iowa. Kathi had talked to the priest/superintendent and had mentioned my name. He requested a call from me if I was interested in the job.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Shalley K. Kappenman

May 1994

How it all began...

July 31, 1991 (8:30 PM)

After a long and busy day, the phone rings. It is Kathi, a friend of mine, calling to see if I had a teaching job for the upcoming school year. Kathi had recently visited with a former colleague who was concerned that her school would not have a principal for the new school year. The principal of this small parochial school 25 miles from Storm Lake had just resigned to take another principalship in Eastern Iowa. Kathi had talked to the priest/superintendent and had mentioned my name. He requested a call from me if I was interested in the job.

As I tried to sleep that night, visions of the school, staff, community and kids interfered with my sleep.

Thursday, August 1, 1991 (10:30 AM)

After several earlier tries to reach Fr. M. I dialed the phone and waited for an answer, almost hoping that he was still out. No such luck! We visited a short time and arranged an interview for 9:00 AM the next morning. Since there was not enough time to have my credentials sent from my college, I prepared a copy of my resume for our meeting.

Friday, August 2, 1991 (8:15 AM)

As I left the house to drive the 25 miles to the interview, I was excited, but I wondered if I were crazy. I had taken no educational administration classes and, worse yet, had no experience being an administrator. However, I taught school under five different administrators so I knew what I liked in a principal.

I arrived at the school 15 minutes early and wondered which door I should try first. A flight of about 15 steps led to a set of double doors at the front of the building. At one time, I'm sure, these doors were the main entrance to the building. However, now weeds grew out of every crevice of the paper littered steps. As I approached the corner, I noticed a gravel area on the side of the building where several pick-up trucks were parked.

The school building was large, and I could see from the outside that the whole top floor was not used. Faded, water-stained curtains were draped haphazardly across the dirty windows, and from the outside, I could see desks piled on top of each other.

As I approached the door, I kept asking myself why no one wanted this job. I pulled open the outside

door which was propped open with a board, and a stale musty odor engulfed me. As I climbed the dark flight of stairs, a priest met me. I knew immediately that this was Fr. M. because he looked so much like his brothers who lived in Storm Lake. He had such a kind and gentle face, and he smiled warmly as he greeted me and invited me upstairs to the office.

The huge office was painted a putrid mustard. It was an enormous room with towering, water-stained ceilings. A temporary partial wall divided the room into sections. As we walked past a long counter piled high with the summer mail, we came to the table where the school board waited for me.

Fr. M. introduced me to the school board members. He introduced John, a local farmer and the current president of the board. Then I met Tom, past president of the board who worked at the ASCS office in a neighboring community. Finally I met Terry, a local contractor/carpenter and Joan, a former teacher and homemaker/mother.

I spent two pleasant and informative hours with the school board. They called the last school where I taught and contacted and conferred with several of my

former colleagues so they already knew quite a bit about me.

The title for this position was "Master Teacher" with my responsibility lying totally with the administration of the school. Seventy-nine children attended the school, grades K-8. A professional staff of six included three shared sections of third/fourth, fifth/sixth and seventh/eighth grades. The kindergarten teacher taught three-fifths time and two new teachers held contracts for the coming year. It was my responsibility to find someone to teach PE six hours a week.

It took little time to realize the extent of this board's commitment to this school and their children. Each board member was proud of the school and all that it stood for. They had attended school here and felt responsible for keeping it afloat.

It was a part-time position, with a minimum of 100 days or 800 work hours to be spent on site. My salary was \$12,500 for 12 months. (Now I understood why people weren't breaking down the door for this job!) The newly hired secretary replaced a retiring veteran secretary.

They would let me know about my acceptance the following week.

Monday, August 5, 1991 (11:00 AM)

The wait was over! As I opened the envelope, I wondered how I would feel if there was a contract for the job...happy, sad, nervous, panicky or thrilled. As I read through the contract, I realized how lucky they were to get me for the job. I would work hard and I was truly committed to education. I had taught in a parochial school so I had acquired a little experience in private school politics.

Although I was thrilled at the opportunity I was being given, there was no time to ponder over what might happen. Registration was in nine days, workshops were scheduled in 14 days and our school would be full of children in three weeks. To top that off, the newly hired secretary was out of town until August 12!

That first day, I felt overwhelmed when Fr. M. handed me a key ring full of keys, and I knew what only one of them opened...the office. I called the former principal and made an appointment to meet with him as early as possible. He would be back in town on Saturday so we made an appointment to meet then. He

showed me around the school and allowed me to examine the files.

He was gentle and generous as he shared some information he thought I should know. His frustration with the system was still evident even though he worked very hard to be positive. After two and a half hours of briefing, it was time for him to go. I could feel the emotion build within me, and I felt like I was losing my best friend.

It would be impossible for me to list the experiences and learning that took place during that year. Many of the lessons were frustrating, but I tried to always do my best, and I was never afraid to ask for help. I was fortunate to work for and with people that appreciated what I did. They were supportive, enthusiastic and always there for me when I really needed them.

I experienced the wonderful opportunity of working closely with the superintendent of the public school in this district to implement a sharing program for our students in band, Chapter I, athletics and TAG. More important than the sharing between the two schools, past misunderstandings and distrust were put aside, and we once again became partners in the

education of our children. This superintendent and his secretary became mentors and friends to me.

I used the same strategies as a principal that had benefitted me as a teacher. I knew I was there to provide as positive a learning environment as possible for the students and teachers. I applied myself to the job and used good common sense while listening to my heart.

As I reflect on my experience in administration, I look back with pride and happiness. Although it was difficult at times, meeting the challenge was most rewarding. The people made it a wonderful learning experience.

Excellence can be attained if you
Care more than others think is wise
Risk more than others think is safe
Dream more than others think is practical
Expect more than others think possible.

-Author Unknown

"Leadership mindscapes are shaped by what we believe and value and by our understanding of the world. They create the reality that drives our leadership practice" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 41).

I have many reasons for wanting to become an elementary principal. When I began work on my Masters in Educational Administration I was the Master Teacher at a small private elementary school. My duties consisted entirely of administrative responsibilities which were both challenging and rewarding. It was imperative that I go back to school to continue in this position.

Vision

Today I am driven by a different force. I truly believe that I can make a difference in the education of our children and for the staff in our schools. I have a vision, a vision of a school where I would like to work; one of which I can be proud, and would without hesitation send my own children.

Vision gives meaning to our lives. It is the most powerful motivator that we possess. It can motivate people to extraordinary achievements. Vision precedes success (Barker, 1988).

Barth (1990) talks about his vision of a good school. Everyone will be learning and teaching simultaneously. All relationships will be cooperative and collegial, with principals and teachers talking

and listening to each other, observing, sharing and helping each other.

My vision, although a personal one, is influenced by everything I read and study. The many facets of my vision are becoming much more clear. The blurred edges are beginning to have distinct definition as my level of reflection grows. You see, my vision is now coming from my heart, as much as it is coming from my mind. My vision is attainable and worth working for because it will affect our most valuable resource, our children.

When I sign my name to my next administrative contract, my vision will be the motivation behind my signature. However, I will not be blinded by my vision. Fullan (1992) believes that the principal's vision should be provisional. He warns not to set one's vision too early but to foster a collaborative vision within the staff. The principal should be the leader of instructional leaders and should learn as well as lead.

The Learning Consortium (Fullan, 1992) has formulated these eight guidelines for principals as they approach the task of working interactively with

teachers and communities to develop a vision blueprint:

1. Understand the culture of the school before trying to change it;
2. Value your teachers; promote their professional growth;
3. Extend what you value;
4. Express what you value;
5. Promote collaboration, not co-optation;
6. Make menus, not mandates;
7. Use bureaucratic means to facilitate, not constrain; and
8. Connect with the wider environment. (p. 20)

This collaboration to create, coordinate and develop a vision for the school will take time and patience.

Since schools are communities of learners, I envision all people within the school as learners. As a principal, I will model a passion for learning. Providing the staff with opportunities for learning will invigorate the learning atmosphere.

Barth (1990) puts the primary responsibility of being learners on the adults of the school. Teachers and administrators will "engage actively in their own learning, make their learning visible to others in the

community, enjoy and celebrate their learning and sustain it over time" (p. 513).

I will become and encourage those around me to become "creators" of knowledge not just "consumers" of knowledge. The techniques of examining and questioning at all levels and by all people will expand our programs as well as our minds.

I want any school that I am associated with to be full of people that want to be there and are committed not only to the students and what they do but to each other. Hopefully, with my modeling and guiding and by supporting each other, learning will become a WIN-WIN situation.

The personal relationships in a school ARE the school. An atmosphere of honesty, sincerity and trust will guide us toward our vision. It is my job as a principal to encourage all people in the school to work toward an atmosphere in which people can laugh or cry, and one in which they eagerly and actively help one another.

Role of Instructional Leader

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (1991) discusses four prerequisites to success as a school leader:

1. Advanced skills in the teaching and learning processes;
2. A thorough understanding of practical applications of child growth and development;
3. A solid background in liberal arts;
4. A sincere commitment to children's welfare and progress. (p. 3)

The first three of these are a direct function of educational preparation. Formal classes and informal self-study are a necessity if a principal is to remain proficient in these areas. However, the fourth prerequisite is, without a doubt, the most important. This commitment to the children's welfare and progress comes not only from the minds of all of us in education; it comes from our hearts. We want the best for all children and believe in these children. Excellence in teaching and learning is more than our "job." It is our passion.

According to Stephanie Parker (1993), leadership is multidimensional with values, goals, beliefs, and decision making interacting to influence practices and behaviors. She calls it the linchpin in a complex process that involves developing strategies to

facilitate learning, creating an environment that fosters the motivation to learn, and shaping the way students come to view learning (p. 230).

I was afforded the opportunity to examine my thinking and behavior to recognize my strengths and weaknesses in the Life Styles Inventory. My strengths, as indicated on this inventory, of being humanistic/encouraging and alleviative reinforced my awareness of my ability to guide and help others.

Leadership is one of my personal strengths. A strong, effective principal has the potential for leadership, not only in the school setting, but also in the community. Sergiovanni (cited in Brandt, 1992) believes that "the only thing that makes the leader special is that she or he is a better follower: better at articulating the purposes of the community; more passionate about them, more willing to take time to pursue them" (p. 47). I firmly believe in the strength of others' ideas and thoughts. I know that I cannot do the job of a principal by myself.

Role of Risk Taker

"To take the chance of" is how Webster defines risk. Success in administration, just as any other profession, involves a certain degree of risk

taking. Moving out of one's comfort zone means risking failure.

I have never looked upon myself as a great risk taker. My motto has been, "It's better to be safe than sorry." However, when I took my first administrative job, without prior formal training, I threw caution to the wind. Any rational thinking about how unprepared I was for this challenge was overcome by overwhelming enthusiasm.

As I spent this past two and one-half years studying to be a principal, I realized even more that the strength of a principal is determined, to some extent, on her ability to take risks. There was strength in the spontaneity of my leadership. My year was characterized by rational thinking and good judgment. I used problem solving strategies, analyzed the problem and looked carefully at all of the options. My administrative skills grew naturally out of my vision of what the school could become.

Role of Communicator

Communication is another key to the success of a school administrator. Communication means that a message was not only sent but received and responded to in a way indicating that it was understood

(Gorton & Schneider, 1991, p. 70). A principal communicates, formally and informally, with both internal and external publics on a variety of topics.

Administrators communicate to persuade, instruct, direct, request, present, stimulate or develop understanding. It is most important to keep the intended audience and method of distribution in mind, as well as using appropriate language in the use of printed material, whether it be the weekly staff bulletin, the parent newsletter or handbook or an annual report.

The principal exemplifies the behavior expected of others in verbal, nonverbal and written communication. Communication skills needed by an effective principal are: to articulate beliefs persuasively, effectively defend decisions, explain innovations, and behave in ways that are congruent with those beliefs and decisions; to write clearly and concisely so that the message is understood by the intended audience; to utilize basic facts and data, and recognize values when communicating priorities; and to use current technologies to communicate the school's philosophy, mission, needs and accomplishments (NAESP, 1991).

Identification of key communicators in the community and one on one conversations with these people can be used not only to inform the community of what is happening in the school, but to get the community's reactions on important issues, according to Kindred, Bagin, and Gallagher (1990).

The importance of school-community relations and communication can and will be felt in every heartbeat of the school. I will work diligently to promote a positive image of any school in which I work. Dr. Robert Decker (personal communication, July, 1992) stated that what is going on in a school is a direct reflection of the administrators. Since I want my image to be strong and positive, the image of my school must also be strong and positive.

Violence

John O'Neil (1991) notes that the lives of some children bring them into frequent contact with violence. The chance that a teen would die a violent death, whether by accident, murder, or suicide, increased 12% from 1984 to 1988, according to information released by the Children's Defense Fund (1991). One survey of 535 elementary school children on Chicago's south side found that 26% had seen

someone shot and 29% had seen a stabbing, pointing out the realization that "neighborhood violence is a part of the fabric of life of many children" (p. 6).

Schools may provide a safe haven, but they are hardly immune from the increasing violence. Every day nearly 135,000 students carry a gun to school. In 1987, 415,000 violent crimes occurred in and around schools (Children's Defense Fund, 1991).

School safety is always on the minds of administrators and cannot be compromised. Grover (1993) talks about the imperativeness of safety. "No child should feel intimidated or be fearful. No parent should fear for the safety of his or her child in the conscripted public school condition. No teacher should be exposed to threatening circumstances or students" (p. 31).

The harsh reality of violence in schools is no longer something that occurs only in big city schools. After being the victim of a student attack within the last month, I realize even more the urgency of being proactive rather than reactive in cases of violence. Administrators must have a plan of action to deal with inappropriate behaviors such as harassment, intimidation and fighting.

Alex Molnar (1992) talks of our world's being awash in violence with no one suffering more than our children. Psychologists talk of children suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, a psychological condition first associated with combat veterans returning from Vietnam. Sociologists are concerned about the individual and social consequences of kids growing up in fearful and dehumanizing circumstances. Molnar says, "For too many children, our society is a fearful wasteland that mocks adult pieties and nurtures nihilism" (p. 5).

The development of school/community partnerships is imperative in combatting the problem of violence. An awareness of potential problems and the special services available may enable effective intervention to take place more rapidly with less serious consequences.

"Violence in the classroom is a symptom of violence in America. In the schools, it is a reflection of a society struggling with drugs, poverty, a decline of the sense of family, and an entertainment industry that glorifies blood and gore" (Grover, 1993, p. 33).

Grover (1993) goes on to say that before we can stop violence in our schools, we must grapple with its root causes. We have to deal with poverty, unemployment, child labor, child abuse, and a lack of adequate services to support children and families.

The influx of minorities in my own community has created new and immediate challenges that the schools and community must embrace together. Illiteracy in their native language makes learning English difficult and any written communication nearly impossible.

The challenge of dealing with poverty, unemployment, child abuse and lack of support for many of our families and students can be addressed by the schools and their leaders. Learning is difficult enough for some children. It becomes impossible when the foremost thing on the child's mind is what is or is not happening at home.

Hungry and abused children do not learn. It is our responsibility to give each and every child the opportunity for something better and the chance to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy.

Ethical Management

If we can see our purpose as a professional, it will be easier to see and achieve the expected

standards of conduct. The ethics of any profession are a natural part of understanding that purpose.

"There is no right way to do a wrong thing" (Blanchard & Peale, 1988, p. 9). This statement stresses sorting out each situation to better understand the ethical dilemma. Many people use the huge gray area between right and wrong as their excuse for unethical behavior. They charge ahead without thinking and then must rationalize their behavior.

Blanchard and Peale (1988) list three questions one must ask oneself when confronted with an ethical problem, to help clarify the issues. The first of these is "Is it legal?" Every person is responsible for "both the integrity and consequences of his or her own action. The highest standards of honesty, integrity, and fairness must be followed by each and every employee" in their dealings with others (p. 11).

The second question, "Is it balanced?" deals with the fairness of the decision and whether it will benefit or favor one party over another. Peale says that lopsided win-lose decisions invariably end up as lose-lose situations.

"How will it make me feel about myself?" is perhaps the most important as it affects self esteem. It focuses on one's own standard of morality and on emotions relating to that standard. John Wooden (cited in Blanchard & Peale, 1988), former UCLA basketball coach, said it well when he said, "There is no pillow as soft as a clear conscience" (p. 18).

My professional conscience will be a very valuable tool in my leadership role. As a leader, I will ask for the best from myself as well as everyone involved in the educational process. Settling for mediocrity is unethical. The conscience of craft is evident in all we do as educational leaders. Green (1987) states that "the conscience of craft is present and evident whenever people practicing the profession are dissatisfied with slovenly, inept work and are driven to reject it even when it occurs in themselves" (p. 111).

I know that I can reach my career objectives and still do what is right. I realize that many times the biggest opportunities for growth and character building are provided by the toughest ethical problems.

Conclusion

The word is out! There is an elementary school in Iowa that is setting the pace in education. Teachers and administrators, parents and business leaders are eager to visit and experience this innovative, yet solid educational environment.

As one enters this school, the physical atmosphere is striking. Although not a new building, it is immaculate and impeccably kept. The warm colors are enhanced by plants, and students' work is displayed tastefully throughout the school.

However, this physical atmosphere quickly becomes the backdrop for what is really happening in this school. Visitors are warmly welcomed and encouraged to experience this educational experience where kids and staff are in a situation where everyone can only win.

Learning and teaching are taking place in every nook and cranny. Teachers are teaching teachers, teachers are teaching kids, kids are teaching kids and kids are learning along side their teachers.

The library seems to be the hub of activities in this school. It is not silent, but is alive with activity as numerous groups work on projects,

activities and research. In one corner is a sofa where one frequently sees the principal reading to small groups of children or listening to children read.

Visitors are more than curious about the size of the staff. Where does the school get the money for this number of teachers? The principal boasts that there are more volunteers working in the building than staff. This volunteer corps is made up of retired citizens, parents, business and professional people on their lunch hour, local college students and peer helpers from the city high school.

This school was restructured following a "communitarian" rather than a bureaucratic model to make it a better place for making connections between adults and young people (Lugg & Boyd, 1993).

This school is truly a success! It has been built on a foundation of trust and communication. The principal believes that catching people doing things right should be practiced up, down and sideways thus enhancing people's self esteem. The staff has pride in their organization and is respected for their sound, ethical decision-making behavior.

This family-like atmosphere is always striving to meet the needs of its members. The partnership developed with other social service agencies, to meet the needs of its students, has been used as a model for other school districts. Diversity is celebrated. Success is celebrated. Kids are loved more than the school!

Cremin (1990) talks about the aim of education as being not merely to make parents, or citizens, or workers, or indeed to surpass the Russians or Japanese. The ultimate goal is to make human beings who will live life to the fullest, who will continually add to the quality and meaning of their experience and who will participate actively with their fellow human beings in the building of a good society. This, too, is the vision of this school.

You may wonder how I know so much about this progressive and successful elementary school. This is my school. I am one member of this focused team of players. I am proud of the staff members and students in this school and what they stand for. This is the school of my dreams!

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