

1990

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Recommended Citation

Koenen, Gary L., "A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay" (1990).
Graduate Research Papers. 2712.
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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

Abstract

Current educational literature on effective schools has cited the critical role of the principal in establishing an outstanding school. Ernest Boyer (1984) has stated that "in schools where achievement was high and where there was a clear sense of community, we invariably found that the principal made the difference" (p. 22). Such a statement encourages me to consider my own personal attitudes guiding my professional career as a secondary principal.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Gary L. Koenen
May, 1990

This Research Paper by: Gary L. Koenen

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING
SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper
requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in
Education.

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Current educational literature on effective schools has cited the critical role of the principal in establishing an outstanding school. Ernest Boyer (1984) has stated that "in schools where achievement was high and where there was a clear sense of community, we invariably found that the principal made the difference" (p. 22). Such a statement encourages me to consider my own personal attitudes guiding my professional career as a secondary principal.

Entering the education administration program provoked me to reflect on my own educational beliefs. Certainly, I discovered some concerns and apprehensions regarding my ability to be a successful secondary school principal. Questions such as, "Is there a set of behaviors and beliefs essential for a principal, will I have the savvy to make the tough decisions required of principals, and will I be able to influence a change within a school?" were at the forefront of my doubts. Although I possessed concerns, due to my lack of knowledge and exposure to administration, I entered the administration program with a desire to make a positive difference in the lives of students.

Originally, as a classroom teacher, I felt this desire and need to affect students' lives in a positive

manner. However, I became increasingly aware of the parameters and limitations of classroom teachers to create and influence such positive changes in schools. Although my experiences as a teacher were rewarding, I see the role of a principal as providing and creating an even greater difference in the educational process. I believe that as a principal, I can make a positive difference in the lives of students and in the schools they attend. In the role of the principal, one can make a difference by providing and allowing students to experience success.

As an administrative assistant at the Price Laboratory School I was able to see how a principal makes that positive difference and allows for the success of students. One such example of this educational leadership is the ongoing support for the student production, Needles, Threads, and Patches. Certainly, the students were able to expand their knowledge and increase their awareness on a current social issue. The principal played a vital role in this success story by providing students the time, the support, and the encouragement to prepare and perform this production. Also, by allowing the teacher the freedom and flexibility to research, develop, and

initiate this innovative idea, the principal's support and leadership nurtured this successful project.

My concerns and doubts of entering the education administration field are dissipating as my knowledge of the beliefs, attitudes, and skills of effective principals increases. Examining educational literature related to the role of principals and practical administrative experience have allowed me to form my own personal administrative philosophy which is essential for educational leaders aspiring to create a positive difference in today's schools. I would hope, as Boyer has stated, that as a principal I could provide that "difference" as an educational leader by defining a clear mission for the school, establishing a positive school culture, and encouraging teachers to become involved in the educational decision-making process.

An effective administrator has been defined as one who causes the organization to work in desirable ways. Because the role of the school is to help all youngsters learn something of value, the effective administrator will ensure that the organization functions in desirable ways by providing for such events to happen. Therefore, a principal who helps the

organization to work in desirable ways must be an educational leader instead of a myopic instructional leader. I believe that to make a difference, and to enable the school organization to run effectively, a principal must be an educational leader who is in tune with other variables within the culture of a school.

I was able to experience some of these variables within the school culture during my administrative practicum. At the Price Laboratory School teachers are treated as experts and professionals, and students are treated with respect and genuine concern for their educational growth. Also, administrators are willing to discuss concerns with parents and relate the successes of their sons and daughters to them. This positive ethos is facilitated by the principal, the educational leader. On the other hand, such behaviors are not found in the narrow focus of some instructional leaders. Obviously, the principal as a true educational leader deals with more than curriculum and instruction.

As an educational leader, the principal plays a vital role in defining and gaining support for the mission of the school. Developing this mission involves a broad and reasoned perspective concerning

the role of schools in which articulating the school's function, identifying who the schools are serving, and deciding what the schools are obligated to teach are fundamental.

As a future administrator, I feel it is essential that principals be able to establish their own sense of purpose for what schools are about - or risk being told what that mission is. Through my practical experiences, I am aware how teachers try to promote their personal agendas and influence administrative decision-making. In becoming so focused on pursuing their own special interests, many teachers forget the overall mission of the school. Therefore, it is important that this mission, promoted by the principal, be held in common by all people (parents, teachers, administrators) in the school, so all are proceeding in the same direction and have the same sense of purpose for the school. Such a mission or covenant is the guiding force for the effective principal in determining what is important and appropriate in the smooth running of the organization. This adherence to a thoughtful mission allows the principal to be a skeptic on educational issues by not allowing oneself to jump on the latest educational bandwagon. This

mission serves as a rudder to guide the principal in his leadership role of directing the school.

The evolution of my personal vision for the mission of schools has caused me to look differently at the educational process. It has forced me to decide the true purpose of schooling. As a teacher, I believed school provided students with the academic knowledge and skills to ensure their future success as contributing members of society. In the schools where I taught, emphasis was placed on academic achievement in which some students succeeded and others did not. While I feel academic achievement is important, I now believe that the mission of schools should be much broader and more encompassing in nature.

The current educational mindset, fueled by A Nation at Risk (1984), views students as interchangeable parts where all students could be successful if they just tried harder. This view is inaccurate since it concerns itself with only the intellectual part of the student and fails to recognize the student's social, emotional, and creative components. As John Goodlad (1983) states, "We eat, play, work, and react with others as total persons - everywhere except in the classroom" (p. 17). This

back-to-basics fixation in which schools are regarded as academic goal-oriented factories provides too narrow a mission for education. I agree with Goodlad (1983) who states that, "the most important thing about school for the children and youth who go there is the living out of their daily personal and social lives" (p. 9). The current focus on content clouds our ability to seek and achieve the larger goals that I believe schools are all about.

I also find it essential that the mission of schools includes the education of all the children of all the people. I find it disheartening that many schools today have in place curriculums which serve to separate the good and bad students. Such an approach pushes kids through a rigid mold and pushes other kids out of schools. The mission of schools should reflect all human sides of the student and be able to identify, as well as, accomodate an array of student abilities. Finally, it is essential that instead of setting students up for failure, the school's mission allow students the opportunity to succeed.

In A Study of Schooling, John Goodlad (1983) noted that the "school climate" may be the single most important qualitative factor in determining whether a

school is perceived as effective. The principal as educational leader is responsible for nurturing this positive quality of life that Goodlad finds in schools considered excellent. I believe that such climate building is an essential behavior of the effective principal.

A positive school climate allows people to feel that they are important and that what they are doing is special. There is an expectation that learning is taking place and that good things will happen in this school. This climate requires that the principal have interpersonal skills and the ability to foster a sense of pride, purpose, and commitment among members of the school. Such climate building can be done by catching people within the school doing positive things.

At the Laboratory School I was able to see climate building in action. Through daily staff announcements, school newsletters, and staff meetings, teachers are formally recognized for their positive contributions. Through everyday contact with administrators and co-workers, teachers are informally recognized. Such communication helps to build a sense of loyalty, commitment, and collegiality. This suggests that by providing for the idiographic aspect

of the organization (the needs of people), the principal can further the nomothetic aspects of the organization (the goals or mission of the school) (Getzels & Guba, 1955).

One of my responsibilities at Price Laboratory School involved administering the school's hot lunch program and supervising the lunch room staff. To show appreciation for their efforts throughout the year, flowers and a thank you letter were sent. I was surprised at how this small gesture of appreciation positively affected the staff. By validating their efforts, morale and motivation to do a better job were increased. As trivial as this example may be, it proved to me how the idiographic aspects enhanced the nomothetic aspects of the organization.

To me, the ultimate quality of life for schools is reflected in a statement by Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot. In her book, The Good High School (1983), she states that "in the best high schools, the weakest members of the school are held in high regard" (p.349).

The principal, as educational leader, must work to cultivate this quality of life by promoting the values of the school and protecting them. Such promotion includes clarifying and communicating over

and over what behaviors and attitudes are a part of such a special school. This also includes persuading kids and staff that their school is a special place made up of special people where expectations for students and teachers are in place. The principal can protect and enhance this climate by serving as a role model and by maintaining a consistent vision for the school.

Disciplining students provided me an opportunity to impress on them the high expectations and uniqueness of the Laboratory School. I wanted students to know that at this school inappropriate behavior is not acceptable and that students will be held responsible for their actions. It is essential to communicate that we are proud of our school and that we expect students to strive to reach their potential.

Finally, school members must take the time to celebrate their success and excellence, which further enhances the special nature of the school. This allows members to take pride in their contributions to the organization and validate their achievements.

I believe it is important for principals to be aware of their school's culture, especially for the bright young teachers entering that environment. Since

the school's culture is usually determined by teachers with the longest tenure, it is important that principals provide support and protection for young innovative teachers who may otherwise feel trapped into accepting the traditional patterns within the school. The principal's goal should be the enhancement of the school climate by elevating and broadening the experiences and goals of teachers. This type of climate building also strengthens and gains support for the mission of the school.

The final belief I find essential for principals is the use of site-based management, which states that decisions are best made at the location where they will be delivered and carried out. Such a philosophy requires that schools allow teachers, in partnership with principals, the freedom to decide their own curriculums, the freedom to decide how funds should be spent, and the independence to try new and innovative teaching strategies. Such a philosophy also respects the professionalism of individual teachers and allows them the freedom to fully unlock their true potential.

Teachers often find it frustrating and confining when they have no input on decisions that affect them. At the Laboratory School I witnessed the appreciation

teachers felt when participating in such decision-making areas as development of curriculum, allocation of resources, and strategic planning for the school. By being involved in the decision-making process teachers felt that they could affect a positive change. Site-based management provides members of the organization ownership in the ultimate mission of the school, which further enhances the school's climate.

In order to expand his/her role as an educational leader, a principal's administrative philosophy will include: a belief in site-based management, a clear definition of the school's mission, and a commitment to creating a positive school culture. I believe such leadership is necessary if one is to make a difference in today's schools. I agree with Ernest Boyer (1984) who states that "what we seek are high schools in which the school community - students, teachers, and principals - sees learning as the primary goal. In such a community, the principal becomes not just the top authority but the key educator, too" (p.22).

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