EDAD 707: The Principalship Reflection Paper

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EDAD 707: The Principalship

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The job of the principal at a school seems fairly straightforward on the surface—handle discipline of students, evaluate teachers to make sure they remain effective, and in general keep the school running smoothly. The last part—keep the school running smoothly—is where the depth of the job of a principal comes into play. Keeping a school running smoothly takes a lot of behind the scenes work that does not always make its way to the public, but is integral to the effectiveness of the school. The depth of the job of a principal and what it all takes to keep a school running smoothly was my biggest takeaway from EDAD 707: The Principalship.

**Variety of Content**

The thing I enjoyed most about EDAD 707 was the variety of content sources we used to learn about the principal’s job. From journal articles to multiple textbooks to research papers to practicums, I pulled a lot of information and viewpoints from a variety of places to help build my foundation of knowledge on the job a principal does. This in and of itself was an important lesson to be learned—as a principal you have to be knowledgeable about the job, and one of the most important ways to do this is by doing research into effective practices and using your resources. This class has given me a variety of information from a variety of sources that will be helpful both now as I learn what it takes to become a principal and in the future when I am doing my job and looking for effective methods of teaching and leadership.

**Vision**

One of the key points of being an effective principal that was discussed time and again in our class was the vision of a school. It is impossible (or near impossible) to find a school that does not have a vision, mission, goals, or some combination of these. Ubben, Hughes, and Norris (2011) explained, “The sense of direction can be developed through the creation of a statement of beliefs (vision), a set of goals (mission), and specific objectives to be achieved (outcomes)”
As a principal it is important to know what all this means, and even more important is knowing how to help your school develop an effective vision of what the school should look like. Schools need purpose and direction, and it is up to the principal to provide that direction. The vision, mission, goals, and beliefs of the school set the tone for the entire school, and a principal needs to be a leader in setting high standards if the school is to achieve at a high level.

Orozco (2012) researched and analyzed the mission statements from Chicana/o schools and compared them to predominantly white schools, finding that Chicana/o schools had vaguer mission statements with lower goals. While an achievement gap does exist between whites and minorities and needs to be worked on to be closed, there is absolutely no reason why a vision/goal gap exists between whites and minorities. Students who are told through the school to aim low will achieve low. It is important that all schools—regardless of the students they educate—set high goals and believe in high standards for their students. One of the principal’s primary jobs is working to set these high goals and standards and then living them through word and action. The principal needs to ensure that the school works towards the high goals and standards set, and that students are striving to achieve them.

**The Culture of the School**

Along the same lines as setting high goals and visions for the school, the principal needs to act as the figurehead in instilling the culture and climate of the school. Without a positive learning climate where students feel safe and secure, it is unreasonable to expect learning to take place. Schools need to be established as a place where students go to learn, and it is the principal’s job to ensure that such a climate exists in his/her school.

Ensuring a positive learning climate exists in a school is not one single step, but rather a variety of measures that the principal needs to work to build and achieve. The climate of the
school is driven largely by the curriculum of the school. Ubben et al. (2011) say it clearly: “The school principal must be an instructional leader” (p. 101). Without having the leader of the school heavily involved in the planning of the curriculum, there can be no direction for the learning that is to take place and thus there can be no learning. Principals need to ensure that a challenging, meaningful, and unbiased curriculum is in place, and need to work with teachers to ensure that the teachers are working towards meeting the goals of the curriculum.

**Care for the Individual**

One of the most important things a principal must do to guarantee a positive learning climate is care for the individual. This means caring about each individual teacher and student. When it comes to teachers, principals need to be guiding but not overbearing. Principals need to empower teachers so that teachers feel in control of their own classroom and their own destiny. Teachers need to be given the ability to take chances and make decisions that impact their job. A teacher who is not empowered will not have the desire to put forth full effort in the classroom.

On top of empowerment, teachers need real guidance from principals. Perhaps the most important guidance for teachers comes through evaluations. When evaluating teachers, principals need to be honest so that teachers can work to improve their effectiveness. Marking all teachers as satisfactory helps no one—staff or students. Teachers need real feedback so they can make adjustments that will lead to real improvements. Alongside guiding teachers through evaluations, principals need to use staff development to help teachers improve in their profession. Staff development needs to be relevant to teachers to be effective. Principals need to understand the needs of the staff and find development opportunities that align to the needs of the staff.

Along with caring for the individual teacher, principals must care for the individual student. Just as teachers need to be empowered to feel in control of their own destiny, students
need to be empowered as well. Students need to feel like the choices and decisions they make affect the outcomes they achieve, otherwise they will externalize all their failures. To help students achieve, principals need to ensure that students have the necessary resources available to aid in achievement. This includes, but is not limited to, building class sections, setting the class schedule to allow for student freedom in elective selection, hiring highly qualified staff members, retaining effective teachers and dismissing ineffective teachers, providing support and special education services, and so much more. Without the proper resources in place to aid student learning, students cannot be expected to achieve at a high level.

Involving the Community and Collaboration in the Learning Process

While the principal is the head of the school and is in charge of making a lot of decisions regarding the school, those decisions do not have to be made alone. One of the most important aspects of a principal’s job is connecting with the community to involve all stakeholders in the school and in the learning process.

A principal should never go about making important decisions on his/her own. The principal should look to get more people involved to get more opinions into play, and then he/she can gauge the desires of others when making decisions. For example, when developing the school budget the principal should hold budget hearings in which the public can attend and listen to the budget plans on where money will be spent. The principal should also consult with staff members to determine what they think the needs of the students are so money can be used to match those needs. While the principal has the final say, he/she should involve as many people as possible before making a decision on something vital to the school, like the school budget.

On top of collaborating with teachers and outside community members, the principal needs to allow for collaboration between staff members. The entire school should be set up as a
learning community where staff members are able to communicate with other teachers. Ubben et al. explained “the opportunities for faculty members to interact with other faculty members in shared responsibilities are important to the growth and development of the school as a learning community” (p. 204). The principal cannot just tell teachers to form a learning community. Rather, the principal needs to head the learning community to foster its growth, allow time in schedules for collaboration, and work with teachers to grow the learning community.

Conclusion

The behind the scenes work of principals is deep and varied. Principals are asked to be managers of schedules and students, facilitators of learning processes and budgets, motivators of staff and students, and so much more. Principals also must make a lot of important decisions that will guide the direction of the school. Ultimately, though, everything revolves around the learners. When principals make a decision, the guiding question should be “What will be best for the students?” (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 10). Although principals are the leaders of the staff, the learners need to be at the heart of every decision. Staff members need to be developed and evaluated so they can improve their teaching to help students, and staff members should be motivated in such a way that their guiding motivation is the intrinsic reward they get from helping students grow (Sergiovanni, 1992). The principal is asked to wear a lot of hats—from motivator to manager to facilitator to leader and everything in between—and all those hats are geared towards helping improve student learning. The job of the principal runs much deeper than it appears on the surface, and thanks to EDAD 707: The Principalship, I now have a better understanding of what the job of the principal truly entails.
References

