

FOUNDATIONS OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION— Urmila Devi Dasi

An effective school administrator must start with a clear conception of the goals and purpose of the institution. Based on sound theories of learning and teaching, those goals have to exist not only on a mission statement, but also pervade the policies of the school. Dealings with teachers, subjects, students, and other administrators should flow naturally from the overall school vision. The administrator has to then continually be aware of whether or not the goals are being met, having the flexibility to intervene and adjust elements of the educational program in various ways until the goals are achieved.

Working within the above, the administrator has duties in the following general areas: goals and planning; students, other administrators, staff, parents, and community; and physical facility. And the administrator is most effective when consistently demonstrating inspiring leadership.

Within goals and planning, an administrator may him or herself develop the school's vision, come into a school where the vision is already articulated and be expected to be instrumental in its realization, or be part of team that develops it. In any case, the vision or "mission statement" of the school should be clearly understood and realistic. Faculty, students, parents, and the community in general should know the school's vision both through dissemination of it in written materials, and, most importantly, because of the obvious fulfillment of the mission in the students themselves.

All aspects of the school—from the structure and contents of the library to the textbooks to the discipline program—should be instrumental in fulfilling the school's vision. Ideally, every academic lesson, every school function, every parent-teacher conference, should be furthering the achievement of the overall goals. It is the mission statement that provides the criteria against which each member of the school, and especially the administrator, can measure any part of the school from the most sweeping to the most minute.

Of course, some parts of a school's vision can only be measured over long periods of time. Some must be implemented in stages, depending on the difference between the school's current situation and its goals, as well as external impediments that may sometimes need to be eliminated or overcome first. Therefore, the administrator needs to formulate short and long term plans in all areas of his or her responsibility. These plans translate the mission into immediate, observable benchmarks that allow all members to know both progress and needs.

And, the mission of a school is centered on its students, especially their curriculum. The best administrators are closely involved in developing, implementing, evaluating, and improving all aspects of students' instruction. Of course, administrative situations in schools of varying size will affect which members of the administration decide which aspects of curriculum development and implementation. The scope and sequence of the curriculum has to match that of grades and schools below and above it, be commensurate with the overall plan, and realistic for the hours, facility, and staff available. An

administrator has to approve all textbooks and educational materials, approve teaching plans, observe classrooms, assist teachers to develop their particular areas of instruction, and conduct or arrange for in-service training. He or she should be able to share various teaching strategies with the teachers, modeling and encouraging retention of effective policies and materials as well as welcoming innovative change. The administrator must have sufficient knowledge to evaluate curricular materials and suggested improvements in each academic area of the school.

The administrator should know about available instructional resources and be adept and creative at procuring them for the school. These resources include the classroom organization and furniture, equipment, core or supplemental materials such as video and software, placement of staff so as to maximize strengths, and scheduling of classes and events. Scheduling needs to take into account which days and times students and teachers are most likely to be productive in various areas and subjects, as well as staff and room availability. For example, as more students are absent on Mondays and Fridays, crucial classes and events shouldn't be planned for those days. Students are also most alert earlier in the day, better able to concentrate on the most difficult academics, while in the afternoon classes such as art and music can be taught. In a large secondary school, it may not be possible for each student to have an ideal schedule, but at least such can be the aim, achieved as far as possible. Teachers also need scheduling that maximizes their energy and efficiency. For example, students in middle and secondary school can only be given thorough writing assignments if teachers have time to read and correct all of them.

Deciding what extracurricular subjects and activities are offered is an important administrative function. Indeed, defining "extra" is crucial. For example, is teaching art and music an essential part of the academic program, or extra? What about drama and athletics? To some extent the mission statement will define what is integral and what is frill. But while many varieties of activities and clubs, both during school and after hours, generally enrich a school—especially at the secondary level—administrators have to beware of stretching their staff and budget so thin that the basics are no longer adequately covered. Sometimes what is offered will vary over the years according to the staff and resources available.

Training the students goes beyond academics and extracurricular to the formation of their character and values. In fact, character training is the true heart of education. Of course, much of that training is done, or can be done, within the context of academics, both as part of the content and indirectly through instructional methods that include or model ideal values and behavior. Students' character is also shaped through the way they see staff interact with each other, the way their textbooks, video, and reading material portray people and ideals, guest speakers, and the general emphasis and mood of the school.

How discipline and order are maintained directly affects student character as well as does the general learning atmosphere. Administrators work with teachers and staff to formulate, implement, and evaluate systems that are both based on and encourage mutual respect and consideration, as well as traits such as honesty, loyalty, responsibility, cleanliness, and so forth. Some administrators will develop general guidelines and leave

it to individual teachers to have their own discipline programs, whereas others will have consistent school-wide systems. The best administrators will have programs that have equal or greater emphasis on reward as on punishment. Students should perceive discipline as fair, consistent, and predictable. It is best to have a few rules that all can remember, with both good and bad consequences that are commensurate with behavior and likely to be followed through. For example, having after school detention as a punishment is only practical if there are staff members willing to supervise errant students after school.

What the administration chooses to reward, and how and when they do so, greatly influences student behavior and the general school atmosphere. Are trophies displayed for sports victories but not for debate? Do students get opportunities to participate in interscholastic academic contests? Are those who win, publicly acknowledged? Is student work on display? Whatever receives public display, rewards, and acknowledgement will be the goals most students strive for and is one of the most tangible ways the students understand the school's mission.

Who can be admitted to the school and the admission process, while more a concern of private schools that can choose their student body, is part of every administrator's portfolio. If there is a choice about who can be admitted, the criteria for that choice should support the school's goals. Certainly the makeup of the student body will affect what a school can achieve, though inspired and creative administrators and teachers, working with unlikely groups of students, have created or restructured schools that achieved impressive academic, behavioral, or practical results.

A program of student counseling is also a concern of administration. Some students have difficulties with their studies that the academic teacher cannot address due to lack of time, expertise, or the nature of their individual relationship. Sometimes these problems stem from factors outside the classroom. What kind of services each school offers for learning disabilities, what help is given to students with family or psychological problems, tutoring programs available, facilities for gifted students, and so on, are dependent to some extent on space and financial considerations, but also on the administration's goals and priorities.

Certainly secondary school students need help choosing and planning their current course of study and their goals after high school. How many students attend college after graduation has a lot to do with course choices, counselor-student ratio, and the counselors' expertise in guiding students toward college. But the percentage that attends college also is a reflection of the expectations in the school's greater community. Still, administrative decisions about courses and counseling will have a direct and measurable effect on student choices.

Perhaps the greatest effect an administrator has upon student success is his or her attitude about students as individuals. An administrator who firmly believes and acts as if every student can excel and do good in the world is more likely to get such a result. A student's

problems can be seen as evidence of “bad” character, or misdirected good qualities. The latter view of students leads to a general atmosphere of encouragement.

It is important to maintain accurate and complete records of student achievement, disciplinary action, immunization records, and other relevant data. Requesting records from previous schools and sending records to schools to which students transfer is an essential school service. Some schools defer deciding on admission until reviewing records from previous institutions.

The next general area of administration is the managing of the school faculty and staff. Careful hiring of staff is crucial, and should involve background checks, thorough interviews, and consultation. The administrator should make sure that staff is compensated fairly, and knows thoroughly, in writing, what their salary, job description, benefits, and so forth will be. An on-going evaluation of all teachers is essential, accomplished through classroom visits (of both administration and peers) and follow-up conferences that should focus on encouragement and positive direction. Administrators should arrange for regular in-service training, and encourage professional advancement, if possible through financial assistance and time allowances.

For teachers to be satisfied long term they need not only reasonable pay and benefits, but also a sense of significant accomplishment and appreciation. They should receive commendation for tasks well done, participation in decisions that directly affect them, opportunities for professional growth, and an atmosphere of courtesy and honesty. It is also important that teachers be placed in an area of strength. Unfortunately, today there’s many middle and secondary teachers who are teaching out of their area of expertise. One should consider that a teacher may have strength not only in a particular subject but also with certain types or ages of students, or with particular extracurricular programs.

The administration also has to hire and supervise the non-instructional staff, who is essential to the proper running of the school. These staff members need to be screened and compensated fairly. Their general attitude toward their duties and the students has much to do with the atmosphere in the school.

Personnel problems should be handled with a view toward encouragement of the positive and solving of the difficulty. Incompetence and/or a mentality of non-cooperation cannot be tolerated. It is important to keep records of meetings with staff, and to outline clearly what the problems are and suggested remedies. If not rectified, the person should be given the option of resigning, but in no case should disciplinary action be a surprise.

There also must be a mechanism for personnel to deal with their grievances with administration and other staff members. This mechanism should be clearly spelled out in the policy booklets and allow for a fair hearing of both sides.

The larger the school, the greater the number of people in administrative positions and the more complex their relationship. Most schools, however, have at least a board and a chief administrator who reports to it. Their relationship is essential to the smooth running

of the school. School policies based on overall philosophy and goals are decided on the board level, with the administrator (whatever his or her role in the formation of those) responsible to translate those into everyday practical action. Similarly, the budget is usually decided on the board level, with the administrator overseeing the money within that budget.

Often it is the administrator who brings a problem to the board, along with his or her proposed solution. Ultimately, however, once a board decision is reached, the administrator needs to carry it out regardless of his or her personal opinion.

The board is responsible for evaluating the administrator and should do so in a formal way at least annually. The evaluation should be based on the job description; those who do the evaluation should have a sufficient background in teaching and school administration to be able to ascertain the administrator's strengths and weaknesses.

Public relations are a major part of an administrator's responsibility. Good public relation informs others about the work of the school, establishes confidence in it, gets support for the school's maintenance, integrates the home, school and community, improves the partnership between them, and corrects misunderstandings.

One of the most important aspects of good public relations is the way the non-instructional staff deals with the general public—how a secretary answers a phone or a bus driver handles a rowdy child, for example. How the students and former students behave in public and what they say about the school has a huge influence on the public's perception. Of equal importance are the parents' viewpoints and how well they understand the school's basic mission.

Attitudes and perceptions about the school, good or bad, are communicated during athletic events, musical and dramatic performances, field trips, and at ceremonies such as graduations. Administrators can also intentionally relate to the public through newsletters, orientation meetings and open house, parent-teacher activities, and school handbooks.

Perhaps one of the most overlooked values of good public relations is that it encourages school improvement as much as having guests encourages one to clean the house. When the public is invited to examine the school, those who work in it want to have something wonderful for them to see.

A final area of interpersonal relations for a school administrator is with the government. There are rules about attendance, immunizations, achievement testing, teacher requirements, reporting, building codes, and the academic content. The administrator has to be up-to-date with local and state requirements, have good relations with relevant government officials, and make sure the school is in compliance. Additionally, there are many government resources available for various programs, and the administrator should be knowledgeable and adept at procuring those for his or her school.

Of course, the administrator is responsible for the upkeep of the building, grounds, and vehicles. In this respect, there is little difference between the administration of a school and any other institution or business. If one is fortunate enough to be able to design a facility or alter an existing one, then one can have the size and structure of buildings and rooms reflect and support the school's basic philosophy.

Even with a previously existing structure, choices about size and type of desk, seating arrangements, displays, contents of the library, and so on, affect the general mood and student performance. For example, there are some schools that set up individual student "workstations" along the walls where each student has a desk and a computer, with a wall separating the desks. There are also centrally located tables and chairs for group work. Such a configuration supports their individualized and group approach, but not a whole-class lecture format. It's often best if the physical arrangements allow for as much flexibility as possible, such as having movable desks and room dividers, so that a variety of teaching styles can be accommodated.

Beyond being an expert manager, a school administrator should demonstrate leadership abilities. He or she should be able to provide all needed educational resources, both tangible and intangible. He or she should be an instructional resource directly—a source of information and ideas and a model of teaching and relationships. An expert communicator who builds teamwork and enthusiasm in the school, and a visible presence throughout the school, the administrator as leader inspires confidence and high expectations.

Thus his or her responsibilities for students, curriculum, staff, other administration, parents and the public, and the physical school, culminate in a place where students love to learn and teachers strive for excellence in their profession.