REFLECTION PAPER: SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS*

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Abstract

In Summer 2007, a Virginia Tech Doctoral cohort completed EDAE 6924, School Community Partnerships. Here is a personal reflection authored by Eric Bond.

After completing the two surveys that Dr. Coleman suggested we complete on this assignment, I realized that I may need to improve on my communication and listening skills. Some of my thoughts and reflections on communication, participation, and governance are in the paragraphs to follow.

When communicating with my colleagues, parents, and community, I never really realized the amount of thought that should go into it and the actual process itself. Coleman suggests that there are a series of steps involved in communication. They include developing an idea, encoding, transmitting, receiving, decoding, and acting. After looking at my rating on the Communication Style Survey, I'm not sure how well I completed these communication steps. I rated out as a "Battler". I must say that this was a surprise to me. Although some of the characteristics listed under Battler, are positive, I was surprised how others may perceive my communication. For instance, according to the survey, I may be perceived as being arrogant, ruthless, controlling, and dictatorial. This shocked me. I always pride myself in being extremely professional, respectful, and one with an open door policy. I realize that my communication skills may not always be decoded as dictatorial. This is just one of many characteristics that are considered to be "risks" of the battler. However, it has made me keenly aware of perception and how the receiver of my communications may be decoding me. I wonder if my change in job placement had anything to do with my rating on this survey. I have recently been promoted to the roll of Assistant Superintendent from the roll of High School Principal. One thing that I have learned as a member of the Central Office, we are perceived and interpreted much differently than building level principals. The higher you go in this business; do you need to be more authoritative?

I think that participation by parent and community members in schools is paramount to the success of public schools. Parents should participate in varied activities in school and should not limited to volunteer to do bulletin boards. As school leaders, our roll is to actively involve our parents in every aspect of our schools. The key to getting parent participation is communication. So many times, I have had discussions with parents about their unwillingness to participate in our parent organizations. For what ever reasons, especially on the high school level, they feel intimidated by the administrators. They are concerned that they really will not have a say or opinion in the decision making process. I think a large part of the reluctantness is the lack of communication skills between the principals and parents. I do not think, as principals, we work hard enough to break down those barriers and make our parents feel as if they do matter and are vitally

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important. We as administrators are so extremely busy with our job responsibilities and family obligations, we prioritize what we feel is important.

Sometimes parent participation in the day to day operations gets put on the back burner.

This is how governance comes in the equation. It is much easier to go ahead and make decisions as principal, then to spend a tremendous amount of time breaking down communication barriers, organizing parent meetings, actively debating issues, and then making decisions. Effective principals will take to time to make these steps a priority, and not view them as a hindrance. I know during my tenure as principal, this was an extremely difficult task. I did my best to break down some of those barriers and encourage parents to participate. I truly valued the opinions of my parents and encouraged them to be apart of the decision making process. However, in my high school, I had limited parent participation. Maybe I did not do a very good job of breaking down those barriers. Maybe what I thought was "good communication" skills was being perceived as a "battler". I also realized that the communication and parent participation is a two way street. Not to make excuses, but I have found that the parent involvement on the high school level is much more difficult verses the elementary and middle school grades. Here are a couple of observations that I discovered in my school. First, parents were extremely involved in their child's education in the elementary and middle school years. In my efforts to get parents involved, I heard time and time again, "thanks, but no thanks, I did my time in middle school". Secondly, I have found that through the years of public education, we as administrators are constantly asking the same kids and the same parents to be the "active" ones in our respective organization. Are we burning out the best candidates for parent participation? In the high school setting, students are much more involved in sports, drama, work, etc. Parents do not feel they have the time to be involved in parent organizations. Their family schedules are just as hectic as our administrative schedules. They are constantly picking up their child from soccer or baseball practice or they are running their child to dance or music lessons. In dealing with parent participation, time is a key factor for all parties involved.

Again, parent involvement is a two way street. We as administrators must be inviting, but parents must be willing. But again, this should not deter us from continuing to engage parents in being actively envolved. We should not just throw up our hands and give up. In order for a school to be effective, it must have a strong instructional leader that provides a safe and nurturing environment. This leader must have excellent communication skills and a willingness to work on home/school/community relations. This leader will provide avenues for parents and community organizations to be actively involved with decisions being made with participation from all stakeholders.