

Today's Challenges and Dilemmas for Ethical School Leaders

Clifford E. Tyler, Ed. D.
Professor Educational Administration Department
School of Education
National University
San Jose, California, USA

Abstract

School leaders have been ethically challenged to make difficult decisions while coping with high stakes pressures from political leaders and the public, along with school accountability legislation. More recently, leaders' traditional high codes of ethics are found to compete with conflicting state and federal standards, legislation signed into laws, landmark state and federal supreme court cases, community/ student interests, and special interests groups for decision-making. The objective of this paper will be to will define and summarize standards, leadership ethics, and nature of pressures creating leaders' dilemmas of making the best decisions that balance these conflicting elements. Following this discussion, the audience will be involved in real life decision-making situational scenarios emphasizing ethics.

CURRENT ETHICAL CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Introduction

Over the years, by far the majority school leaders have strived to maintain the highest ethical behavior as advocates for student, teachers and parents, and have been committed to providing the highest quality education for students. Much of their efforts have been based on their highest moral and ethical conscious and commitment. Despite their ethical efforts, school leadership and administration have become more daunting challenges for the most talented school leaders, who have become under increased pressure to achieve much higher expectation for improved student academic improvement regardless of circumstances. Add this increased pressure to substantial decreases in school funding to provide the necessary human and material resources to maintain the thrust of school reforms to meet these increased expectations.

According to Maxcy, high leadership standards are available in history books from historic icons such as Napoleon, Gandhi, Thoreau, etc., but seemed to have eluded the standard bearers of educational administration. Where in the United States do these expectations and high stake pressures come from? Traditionally, high expectations have come from the local school community and district, depending on the nature of the community, i.e. socio-economic wealth,

level of education in the community, etc. i.e. parents and community members, etc. Everyone agrees that the higher the community wealth and education attainment, value of their homes, etc., the higher the expectations.

However, in recent years, federal and state academic benchmark standards achievement have replaced the local community for the highest and most relentless pressure for increase student academic achievement, landmark supreme court cases, i.e. “No Child Left Behind” legislation at the federal level, and along with trailer legislation, and similar state mandates in states like California, i.e. Annual Performance Index (API), teacher evaluation, formation of charter schools in case of conventional school failure, tying student test scores to school performance and teacher/principal evaluations, and job retention. Publication of student test scores in all newspapers heightens parent and community awareness placing additional pressure on principals and teachers. Furthermore, schools and districts’ student academic test results are compared with comparable schools and districts across the United States.

While these standards and guidelines may have improved the academic performance for thousands of student at hundreds of schools, these standards may also become outdated because administrators will concentrate their leadership efforts to meet average performance and qualities, as opposed for striving for greatness and innovation to educate the total child. (Maxcy, p. 28)

There is no shortage of standards for school leaders in the United States. Several professional associations have created them to measure leadership behaviors by holding school leaders accountable to their performance standards. The most well known of all of them is the “ISLLC (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium) standards formulated and adopted by the Chief State School Officers, usually state superintendents or commissioners, in 1996. These standards, in turn, have served as the national foundation for standards prescribing the competencies future administrators should have in a great many states in the United States. The ISLLC Standards, for example, are the foundation for the competencies currently required of new California school administrators. The main thrust of these standards is on instructional leadership with an emphasis on assessment and accountability. This reflects a change from earlier standards that focused more on management competencies such as knowledge and application of school law and finance.” (National University, 2007). Below are the ISLLC Standards:

Standard 1: Setting a widely shared vision for learning

An education leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders.

Standard 2: Developing a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth

An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

Standard 3: Ensuring effective management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment

An education leader promotes the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.

Standard 4: Collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources

An education leader promotes the success of every student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

Standard 6: Understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, legal, and cultural contexts

An education leader promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

In addition to promoting consistent leadership behavioral standards for school leaders, the goal of the Council of Chief State School Officers was to promote effective leadership instead of school managers. While widely accepted by educational administrator professors, these Standards were widely ignored by sitting school administrators out in the field. In hopes of using these standards for the purpose of teaching school leader's leadership skills and promote quality education, professors had them published.

The ISSLC Standards emphasize three major areas for school leader accountability: knowledge, dispositions, and performances a leader would utilize in professional practice. Out of the six straight forward ISSLC Standards, Standard 5, the ethics standard, was composed differently. It was spelled out that a "school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner. (<http://www.ccsso.org/standards.html>).

According to Marshall, there is a tendency for standards to ignore or push aside root problems in schools, leading to a naïve assumption that standards have solved all of the issues and controversies and that no new ones can arise. It appears that this phenomenon is leading to a

reduced scope of school administrator decisions-making. School leaders should be diligent to critique and handle problems and controversies, which will improve standards via critical thinking and innovation. Without these leadership efforts, standards become obsolete and ineffective, new school and student problems and controversies remain unsolved, and the changing needs of students are not addressed.

Since the passage of No Child Left Behind legislation, there has become a national obsession with measurement and testing, in the form of standardized testing. Peter Sacks states that “standardized testing has led to standardized minds.” Under this assessment, students are compared with other students in a bell-shaped curve, which has led to ability groupings (Sacks, 2001). Average performances are created, spreading doubt about children who fall below that average, along with their teachers and the school principal. The result is that standardized tests have bred accountability raising questions as to why have of the student population is inadequate because there scores are below the top half of the students.

Combining Moral Character and Standards Based Leadership Decisions

While there are strong arguments on basing decisions on standards to maintain consistency for all students and staff, school leaders should exercise their moral and ethical character, be aware of all circumstances, and should be free to choose from options including standards to make the most fair and ethical decision that is in the best interest of students. Eventually each decision-making attitude toward moral and ethical decision-making establishes a school leader’s character and generates their respect, integrity, and reputation among all stakeholders in the school community.

There is no question that teachers, counselors, school board members, or school leaders who lie, cheat, steal, show dishonesty, deception or theft, as well as those who show excessive cultural, ethnic, religious, or gender bias are ill-suited to be school leaders or have any direct contact with students. These people would have been prepared for decent moral and ethical leadership if they had learned the virtues of good moral and ethical living. (Maxcy, p.36)

In earlier years, principals’ leadership was considered adequate by being a school site manager, i.e. budget maintenance, scheduling, student discipline, etc. Principals today for effective moral and ethical leadership must have a vision for the school, which determines the direction that the school should move. The vision can belong solely to the principal, but typically will have much more support if developed by a group of people.

Typically a successful vision is the result of a strategic plan either at the district level, site level or both, which is a democratic way of involving all stakeholders, i.e. teachers, classified staff, parents, board members, community members and students. The strategic plan is a process

that includes a mission, set of beliefs, goals, strategies, implementation and evaluations or assessment of results. Regardless of the origin of a vision, it should be based on school data, facts, and student needs. Most importantly it should be clearly communicated to the school community. If supported by the school community, it provides the basis support from the community for solid moral and ethical decision making. To determine the effectiveness of vision, an assessment of evaluative criteria needs to be developed. These assessments may include staff and community surveys, community and school demographic, socio-economic, ethnicity information, i.e. California Basic Educational Data Systems (CBEDS), and *yes*, standardized test scores for measurement of overall student academic progress.

Shared Decision-Making

Similar to a vision for moral and ethical leadership is shared decision-making. In this manner, the principal or superintendent identifies a leadership team, which is composed of lower level administrators and/or teachers who are able to communicate with each other to see the “big picture” for school/district improvement. The principal finds a way to formulate a leadership team for regular and on-going communications for school improvement and other operations. There is no question that principal or superintendent is the ultimate decision-maker at the school/district and assumes responsibility for these decisions. However, his/her shared decision-making efforts generate much more support for his/her leadership and decision making that is based on local student and school community needs, than solely based on federal and state standards.

Consequences of Moral and Ethical Decision-Making

There are two types of consequences for moral and ethical school leader decision making: 1.) make sound decisions regarding students and staff that exercise good and rationale judgment, and 2.) consider the anticipated and real consequences for their decision-making. On the first type, school leader decisions should focus on individual cases testing both established standards, board policies and procedures, and may be made on what is most fair for the individual student or staff member, or may be made on what expectations are for collective interest of all students. This practical decision-making must consider both standards from their profession and the likely outcomes for their standards based choices.

Philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, refer to deontology as driving standards, policies, laws, and rules for school leader decision-making. Kant introduces abstract principles in his Universal Standard in his book on Groundwork, such as The Ten Commandments, etc. to regulate daily affairs. These high-minded principles may be taken for granted, but provide leaders to think on how their actions will influence others in similar situations. Is the decision morally acceptable to the community? Is it perceived fair to the subject student or teacher and to

all other students and teachers? Is it consistent? Does it conform to the mission of the school/district? How will the outcomes of the decision influence the future behavior of students and staff in the organization if a similar problem arises?

The second type of moral and ethical decision-making asks school leaders to look at anticipated and real consequences for their decision-making. Utilitarian philosophers fastened act and rule consequences of this approach as to whether the decision is a good one or not. In the case of a principal disciplining a child for bringing a knife as a weapon to school, act disciplinary consequences effect and individual child, while rule consequences effect all students of the entire school regarding bring a knife to school. The rule consequences will be seen as a rule for the future. (Hoban, Tyler, Salice, p. 93)

Case Scenario #1 (Audience Participation Exercise):

The superintendent of a 10,000 student school district has just learned that the state will deficit-fund the district approximately 10% for the following year due to a poor economy resulting in a significant shortfall of tax revenue. This revenue shortfall amounts to a huge financial hit on basic district operations. In order to balance the district budget and maintain the state mandated budget reserve, the superintendent will need to either reduce both classified and certificated staff or reduce their salaries and benefits. Both alternatives are subject to collective bargaining with the classified and certificated employees union. Yet, earlier that year, there was a provision in the newly developed strategic plan that class size will be maintained at a maximum of 28 students per class, and employee salaries and benefits will remain competitive with surrounding school districts. The class size is also consistent with regional accrediting agency requirements. Which alternative should the superintendent recommend to the school board?

1. Reduce staff salaries and benefits for all staff through furlough days, or 2.) increase the class size to 30 students, resulting in the layoff of 24 teachers?
2. How would you assess either recommendation made by this superintendent will have an enormous impact on the perceptions of fairness of his/her leadership with the teachers, parents and community? (Hoban, Tyler, Salice, p. 94)

Case Scenario #2: (Audience Participation Exercise):

You are the high school principal of a large high school in an urban school district in lower socio-economic area. The basketball team at your school is currently locked in a two way tie for first place, and is scheduled to play a rival basketball team across town next Friday evening. The local media, students, and fan base are really excited about this game. Unexpectedly, your athletic director, basketball coach, and athletic booster club president

telephone you requesting an immediate meeting with you. You meet with them and hear about the center's current academic problems that he is received an unsatisfactory progress report in his English class. He is performing satisfactorily in all of his other classes. They are asking you to talk with the English teacher to see if anything can be done about reversing this problem so he can play that all-important game this coming Friday night. They are deeply concerned that the team may not win without his playing in that game. State interscholastic regulations prohibit academically ineligible athletes from playing. However, you are concerned that the booster club, fan base, students, and community will not understand denying this star center from playing because of a correctable academic problem.

- 1.) Should you contact the English teacher to see what can be done about this student?
- 2.) What should you do if the English teacher tells you that the earliest the student can resume satisfactory progress in his class is not until after Friday's football game?
- 3.) Should you overrule the English teacher with the understanding that the quarterback can restore his satisfactory progress before the end of the grading period?
- 4.) What will you say to the football coach, athletic director and booster club president?
(Hoban, Tyler, Salice, pp. 151-152)

How District and School Images Are Influenced by High Stakes Decision-Making

There is no question that a school district and school exert a major influence on the communities that they serve, and provide a positive or negative image as to how they are perceived by their communities. Fair or not, these images include overall appearance of the school campus and grounds, student academic achievement, behavior and conduct of students, athletic and academic competitive events and results, and overall learning environment for the students. Much of these images are the result of educational leadership from school boards, superintendents and deputy administrators at the district office, and school principals at the school site level. The school leadership often creates accurate perceptions among the students, teachers, staff, parents, and tax-paying community members, as reported by word of mouth school communications, and the local press.

Conclusion:

The perceptions that school leaders create are based on the results of their decision-making practices for students, staff and the community. All of these stakeholders hold school leaders ultimately accountable for the results of the moral and ethical nature of their decisions. They hold their school leaders in the highest esteem to be role models for the students, teachers, staff, parents and the community. Wrong or right decisions by these leaders will shape the school and district environment toward a "good school" or a "bad school" that is not easily changed unless there is a leadership change.

School leaders have a built-in opportunity of enhancing a positive district and school image because local communities generally support their district and schools, according to annual Phi Delta Kappa polls. It is their effective, professional, and creative decision making skills that will maintain this “good” school image and reputation, or create a “bad” image with the students, staff, parents, and community.

References:

ACSA.Org “Principles, Code of Ethics

Fish, S. *The Trouble With Principle*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

Hoban, Gary, Tyler, Clifford, Salice, Barbara. *Ethics for Today’s School Leaders: Setting Your Ethical Compass*. Kendall Hunt Publishing Company. 2012

ISLLC (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium) standards formulated and adopted by the Chief State School Officers, usually state superintendents or commissioners, 1996. California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL): Adopted from Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), and adapted by California School Leadership Academy at WestEd, Association of California School Administrators, California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, California Department of Education, and various California universities and colleges.

Kant's Moral Philosophy, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Feb 23, 2004; substantive revision Sun Apr 6, 2008*. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral>

Maxcy, Spencer J. *Ethical School Leadership*, 2002. Lanham, Boulder., New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Education

National University, EDA 650 Online Course Shell

Sacks, P. *Standardized Minds: The High Price of America’s Testing Culture and What We Can Do To Change It*. New York: Perseus Books.

” (Siegel 2004, as cited in Smith, L and Ruhl-Smith (2006). *Examining Ethics in Educational Leadership: some Basic Thought for Professorial; Analysis*. AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice, Vol. 3, No. 2. Summer, 2006.)

Troy, Brenda, "Elementary school assistant principals' decision making analyzed through four ethical frameworks of justice, critique, care, and the profession" (2009). *Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 55. <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/55>