

Today's Challenges and Dilemmas for Ethical School Leaders

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Abstract

- School leaders ethically challenged to make difficult decisions while coping with high stakes pressures from political leaders and the public, along with school accountability legislation.
- Leaders' traditional high codes of ethics 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.
- The objective of this paper will define and summarize standards, leadership ethics, and nature of pressures creating leaders' dilemmas of the best decision-making that balance these conflicting elements.



Current Ethical Challenges for School Leaders

- School leaders have strived to maintain the highest ethical behavior as advocates for student, teachers and parents, and committed to providing the highest quality education for students.
- 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.
- Increased pressure from substantial decreases in school funding for necessary human and material resources to maintain the thrust of school reforms to meet these increased expectations.

The Origin of High Expectations and Standards

- 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.
- 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.

Impact of Federal and State Academic Benchmark Standards on Local Schools

- In recent years, federal and state academic benchmark standards achievement have replaced the local community for the highest and most relentless pressure for increased student academic achievement
 - “No Child Left Behind” legislation at the federal level, and along with trailer legislation
 - Multi-state mandates, i.e. Common Core Standards
 - Individual states like California, i.e. Academic 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
 - Landmark U.S. Supreme Court and state court cases.

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.



Standards for School Leadership Performance

- 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.
- ISLLC (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium) standards formulated and adopted by the Chief State School Officers 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 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).

ISLLC Standards: An education leader promotes the success of every student by:

Standard 1: Setting a widely shared vision for learning

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***

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***

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

ISLLC Standards (continued): An education leader promotes the success of every student by:

- **Standard 4: Collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources**
collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
- **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>).
- **Standard 6: Understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, legal, and cultural contexts**
understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

Goals of Promoting Consistent Leadership Standards

- 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.

ISSLC Standards and Impact on School Leadership

- The ISSLC Standards emphasize three major areas for school leader accountability: knowledge, dispositions, and performances a leader would utilize in professional practice.
- 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. (Marshall,)

Combining Moral Character and Standards Based Leadership Decisions

- 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 half of the student population is inadequate because their scores are below the top half of the students.



School Leader Moral and Ethical Decision-Making Responsibilities

- 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.

Dishonest and Deceptive vs. Moral and Ethical Leadership

- 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.

Visionary Leadership and Strategic Planning

- 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

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.

Consequences of Moral and Ethical Decision-Making (Continued)

- 2.) Consider the 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)

How Districts Are Influence by High Stakes Decision-Making

- 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.