Principles for Principals: Using the Realms of Meaning to Practice Ethical Leadership – National Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

As accountability standards, litigation, and societal challenges confront school leaders, commitment to core values is essential. Effective principals communicate and share critical decision making with their communities. Each decision can accelerate or hinder academic achievement. Being able to make sound decisions is a key quality of a successful leader. This paper will share ten ethical principles for principals grounded in *The Ways of Knowing through the Realms of Meaning* (2007) by William Allan Kritsonis, PhD.

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Introduction

The six realms of meaning cover the range of possible meanings and comprise the basic competencies that general education should develop in every person. A complete person should be skilled in the use of speech, symbol, and gesture (symbolics), factually well informed (empirics), capable of creating and appreciating objects of esthetic significance (esthetics), endowed with a rich and disciplined life in relation to self and others (synnoetics), able to make wise decisions and to judge between right and wrong (ethics), and possessed of an integral outlook (synoptics). These are the aims of general education for the development of complete persons.

Purpose of Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss six philosophical strategies for implementing the realms of meaning as a process for selecting curriculum for the development of the complete person. It will specifically explore principal readiness for decision making. With the proper training, ample consideration is given to ethical decisions and the proper course of action. Having a method for ethical decision making with continuous training for accurate application is absolutely essential.

Provided in practical language are six principles that school leaders can stand firmly on when implementing an ethical decision making process on their campus. These principles should appear in continual staff development and principal preparation programs. They involve: 1) recognizing ethical issues and creating possible solutions utilizing the inquiry approach (empirics); 2) committing to a moral code (ethics); 3) understanding and using ethics vocabulary to communicate (symbolics) with stakeholders; 4) creating a visual representation of the process to aid in understanding (esthetics); 5) involving and empathizing with the team (synnoetics); and 6) applying, monitoring, and reflecting on equal and fair approaches (synoptics).

Using Inquiry to Recognize and Create Solutions Based on the Facts

School leaders must recognize when an ethical issue exists and use "think-time" before reacting. Daily, administrators are greeted with ethical issues such as a parent's concern about choice of teacher, providing the least restrictive environment for a special education student, implementing a zero tolerance policy for behavior issues, and teacher evaluations. The Josephson Institute of Ethics (2006) purports one of the most important steps to better decisions is the oldest advice in the world: think ahead. To do so it's necessary to first stop the momentum of events long enough to permit calm analysis. This may require discipline, but it is a powerful tonic against poor choices. Stopping to think provides several benefits. It prevents rash decisions. It prepares us for more thoughtful discernment. And it can allow us to mobilize our discipline.

Decision makers must utilize the inquiry approach to create solutions based on facts (empirics). Facts tell us what is and leads us to what ought to be. Using facts to drive conversations about decisions promotes a positive disposition in all who are concerned. In order to clearly use facts, there must be a concise system for recording what they are. Documentation of "what is" guides the decision to create outcomes that are positive and fits the specific situation. When the inquiry approach is applied, the cookie-cutter approach is discarded and decisions are based solely on the ethical guidelines developed by stakeholders for stakeholders. Using inquiry is not only a vital part of the decision making process, but should also be incorporated into every aspect of the school's plan from teaching to learning to extracurricular and strategic planning activities.

It is important for school leadership to be able to discern who and what to believe when collecting facts. The Josephson Institute of Ethics (2006) suggests following the following guidelines:

- Consider the reliability and credibility of the people providing the facts.
- Consider the basis of the supposed fact. If the person giving you the information says he or she personally heard someone say something, evaluate that person in terms of honesty, accuracy, and memory.
- Remember that assumptions, gossip and hearsay are not the same as facts.
- Consider all perspectives, but be careful to consider whether the source of the information has values different than yours or has a personal interest that could affect perception of the facts.
- Where possible seek out the opinions of people whose judgment and character you respect, but be careful to distinguish the well-grounded opinions of well-informed people from casual speculation, conjecture and guesswork.
- Finally evaluate the information you have in terms of completeness and reliability so you have a sense of the certainty and fallibility of your decision.

Standing Firm on Morals and Values

All stakeholders must commit to a moral code (ethics). What is right and wrong? Which values will become the norm? These norms may vary from campus to campus.   Virtues are attitudes or character traits that enable us to be and to act in ways that develop our highest potential. They enable us to pursue the ideals we have adopted. Honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, fidelity, integrity, fairness, self-control, and prudence are all examples of virtues. Virtues are like habits; that is, once acquired, they become characteristic of a person. Moreover, a person who has developed virtues will be naturally disposed to act in ways consistent with moral principles. The virtuous person is the ethical person. (Santa Clara University, Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, 2006).

The campus' moral code should answer the questions: What benefits and what harms will each course of action produce, and which alternative will lead to the best overall consequences? What moral rights do the affected parties have, and which course of action best respects those rights? Which course of action treats everyone the same, except where there is a morally justifiable reason not to, and does not show favoritism or discrimination? Which course of action advances the common good? And which course of action develops moral virtues? (Santa Clara University, Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, 2006)

Once the moral standards are set, all stakeholders should model and reinforce expectations for ethical conduct, makes decisions equitably and with honesty, compassion, and empathy, act in a manner consistent with his/her words and takes

responsibility for his/her own actions, treat each member of the school community fairly and with respect, and effectively address unethical behavior.

Communicate with Stakeholders

School staff must understand and use technical ethics vocabulary to communicate (symbolics) with all stakeholders. Stakeholders are considered to be any individual or group who has a stake in the decision. It appears that moral and ethical issues, including character education are slowly becoming part of the teacher education programs. Overwhelmingly, deans and administrators of teacher education programs agree that core values can and should be taught in our schools. It's now up to the profession to ensure broader and deeper implementation (Benninga, 2003). It is crucial to identify who the stakeholders are and how decisions are likely to affect them. Consider your choices from the point of view of the major stakeholders. Identify who the decision will help and hurt. When good decisions are made they take into account how actions and words will affect those who are involved.

Some vocabulary that shows up quite frequently when talking about ethics are: trustworthiness: meeting obligations, to believe in someone and to hold in high esteem; honesty: expressing the truth as best known, including truthfulness, sincerity, and candor; integrity: undivided and complete, consistent acts according to beliefs; reliability: making all reasonable efforts to fulfill commitments; loyalty: an expectation of allegiance, fidelity, and devotion; respect: treat with dignity; responsibility: being in charge and accountable for choices; fairness: equality, impartiality, proportionality, openness, and due process; caring: concerned with others welfare; and citizenship: knows the law and abides by them. The Josephson Institute of Ethics (2006) embodies these concepts as pillars of character. All stakeholders in the school system should be familiar with these as a part of the school's plan.

A visual representation of the process (esthetics) should be included. Differing representations become powerful when the individuals of concern are visual learners, not fluent in the dominant language, or need additional assistance understanding the ethical decision making process. Ethical guidelines are becoming increasingly necessary in the current "age of openness." Educator's perceptions and interpretations of their rights as human beings sometimes cause conflict with morals and values established in the educational environment. The use of visual representations, such as video clips of scenarios, demonstrates how important making the right decision impacts individuals as well as the school. Flowcharts and rubrics are other visuals that can assist in making the right decisions.

Understand and Involve School Community

Campus leaders should share the responsibility of making ethical decisions by giving all stakeholders a voice. It is important to start taking parent concerns seriously and inviting them into the decision making process, which effects the schooling of their children (Carney-Dalton, 2000). The more involved parents, business, and community become decisions that are made are more responsive to the needs of humans.

It is easier to make a decision when options exist. Stakeholders can contribute to this bank of options by engaging in conversations that serve to improve academic achievement. "An open exchange through dialogue allows community members to participate in the creative process of shaping future directions and moving forward with important work" (Ghere, G. S., Montie, J., Sommers, W. A. & York-Barr, J., 2006, p. 252).

School leaders must do everything possible to promote a collaborative/shared effort to resolving conflict. Special attention must be given to individual needs, growth, and self-development.

Empathizing with the team (synnoetics) is a leadership quality that proves extremely valuable to school leaders. Sometimes empathy can serve multiple purposes. Most times when decisions are made with empathy, all parties involved are calmer and more willing to adhere to the consequences of the decision.

Successful leaders recognize the power of being able to communicate while viewing situations through the eyes of others. When school leaders empathize with stakeholders, it is in an effort to examine others beliefs and circumstances. The goal is to understand and appreciate others and their input. Sharing different experiences with individuals or groups from different backgrounds enriches the lives of all those involved and improve the entire decision making process.

Fair and Consistent Practices: Vision and Reflection

Any person that serves in a leadership capacity much be able to apply equal and fair approaches. It is important for the principal and other decision makers to be just, fair, equitable, and humane. Consideration must be given to every aspect of the situation in question. There are certain duties and obligations that exist between the principal and the stakeholders. One obligation is to have an honest and trusting relationship. They must also choose approaches that are ethical and effective.

Other things that must be considered when decisions are made are: the rights of each person and whether or not those rights were abridged; were duties and responsibilities met; were professional relationships, efficacy, confidentiality, and impartiality maintained; does the decision minimize actual and potential harm; and were policies, professional codes of ethics or the golden rule broken.

Each time a decision has to be made, school leaders should ask themselves: Is it legal? How will it be viewed by the public? Does it meet core values of the organization?

Eventually, **a decision has to be made and its results must be monitored.** There is such a wide array of ethical issues that a school, educator, student, or parent can face at any given time and just as many possible approaches to ethical decision making.

The process that is needed to ultimately come to the best decision may be long and cumbersome. The more that the process is used, the better leaders can become at creating solutions with a team. There are numerous options that the team can attempt in order to end up at the best one for any particular situation. Taking the time to review decisions with an ethical perspective is critical to making the right choices.

Before school leaders finalize any resolution they should ask themselves four questions that help to identify important decisions: Could you or someone else suffer physical harm? Could you or someone else suffer serious emotional pain? Could the decision hurt your reputation, undermine your credibility, or damage important relationships? Could the decision impede the achievement of any important goal? (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2006).

The Josephson Institute (2006) also provides knowledge on the two critical aspects to ethically sound decisions: knowing what to do and doing it. The first requirement of good decisions is discernment. …It's also not always clear how to respond most effectively. Discernment requires knowledge and judgment. Good decisions also require discipline, the strength of character to do what should be done even when it is costly or uncomfortable. It's not enough that we discern the ethical and effective course; we must follow it. This often takes will power or moral courage: the willingness to do the right thing even when it is inconvenient, scary, difficult or costly.

Even after the decision is made, the process must continue. Keeping a close eye on the outcome of the decision will help with future decisions. The monitoring piece can make the difference between a quick transitional phase for the individual or group in question depending on the direction of the decision or intervention that the decision making team has deemed necessary. Included in the monitoring stage is a support system that sometimes is needed. Whenever a consequence is given, the leader must be willing to support the person in moving past that particular stage of the process.

Additionally, in order to continue to make good decisions that improve academic achievement, the school and all of its stakeholders must engage in **school-wide reflective practices (synoptics)**. The saying "hindsight is 20/20" is appropriate when describing the power of reflective practice. When looking back on a situation, better decisions can be made. In the book, "Reflective Practice to Improve Schools" (Ghere, G. S., Montie, J., Sommers, W. A. & York-Barr, J., 2006, p. 251), the authors developed a R-E-F-L-E-C-T-I-O-N mnemonic. The reflection mnemonic captures the essence of lessons learned about reflective practice: **R**elationships are first, **E**xpand options through dialogue, **F**ocus on learning, **L**eadership accelerates reflective practice, **E**nergy is required for any system to grow, **C**ourage is needed to reflect and act, **T**rust takes time, **I**nside-out, **O**utside-in, and **N**urture people and ideas. Although the book talks specifically about reflective practices and its impact on school improvement and student achievement, these same phrases are an ideal description of reflection as it relates to ethical decision making.

Forming relationships allows communication within any system. When relationships are formed, a school leader can guide the establishment of what the schools beliefs are and how stakeholders may act when confronted with different situations. Relationships are essential to academic achievement and should be based on ethical guidelines. These relationships exist between parents and students, parent and teachers, teachers and students, administrators and parents, students, and teachers, colleagues, etc.

When learning becomes the focus, individuals must acknowledge that they don't know everything. Reflection on best practices causes everyone in the school to look at the decisions that are made, to learn from them, and to make better decisions in the future.

The vision of the school and its moral code of conduct depend heavily on the actions of the principal and other school leaders. The administrators must create an environment where all stakeholders are willing and interested in continual improvement of making the right decisions.

Reflection creates energy by leading to new discoveries and insights about practice. "Reflection with others creates even more energy as discoveries and insights are shared and channeled through relationships among educators throughout the school. Without positive energy that is productively channeled, systems die" (Ghere, G. S., Montie, J., Sommers, W. A. & York-Barr, J., 2006, p. 253). School leaders must encourage activities that promote increases in energy. As mentioned earlier in this paper, applying the inquiry approach to situations to arrive at a creative solution will also energize the people involved in the decision-making process.

Courage is the internal capacity that supports taking action, despite knowing the inherent risks. "Making a commitment to reflective practice on a personal basis is a courageous act because it means opening ourselves up to considering multiple perspectives and ways of doing things" (Ghere, G. S., Montie, J., Sommers, W. A. & York-Barr, J., 2006, p. 253). It means critically examining our assumptions and our behaviors. All who are involved in school decision making teams must be able to put aside perceptions and assumptions and become open to doing things in different ways.

When leaders attempt to create trusting relationships, they must be willing to put all their cards on the table. Reflection on past experiences, can lead individuals to become risk takers. In this process, people become more willing to participate when they can be open and honest without fear of being penalized.

Becoming a reflective educator is a process of inside-out change. Reflection is an internal capacity that is tapped by a genuine desire to learn and grow, not by external mandates. "Becoming a reflective educator also requires being open to outside influences, such as colleagues with different views, findings from research, experiences of other schools and systems, and concerns expressed by the public and policymakers" (Ghere, G. S., Montie, J., Sommers, W. A. & York-Barr, J., 2006, p. 254).

During the reflection process, it becomes obvious that the majority of educators want to learn, grow, and contribute to the processes and system on a campus. Leaders must be inclusive and caring in their attempts to attract people into their decision making teams. Effective educators vary greatly in their ways of doing things. These differences give rise to meaningful decision making.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the six recommendations that are made in this document can be used as a guideline for campuses when they engage in the principal and stakeholder's ethical decision making processes in general and more specifically concerning academic achievement. The recommendations include: communicating with stakeholders through speech, symbol, and gesture (symbolics); using inquiry to recognize and create solutions based on facts (empirics); creating and appreciating objects of esthetic significance (esthetics); understanding, involving, and empathizing with the team - endowed with a rich and disciplined life in relation to self and others (synnoetics); committing to a moral code and set of values - able to make wise decisions and to judge between right and wrong (ethics); and monitoring and reflecting on all decision making that promote an integral outlook (synoptics). These are the aims of general education for the development of complete persons who are fair and ethical. If each of these recommendations is considered as a collective process by school stakeholders, student academic achievement and school improvement can be ensured.

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