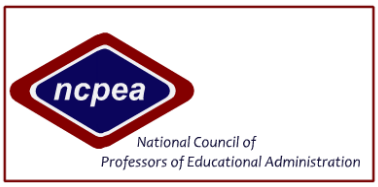
Separating Wheat from Chaff: How Secondary School Principals' Core Values and Beliefs Influence Decision-Making Related to Mandates

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



Donald E. Larsen
Western Washington University

Joseph E. Hunter
Western Washington University

Research conducted by Larsen and Hunter (2013, February) identified a clear pattern in secondary school principals' decision-making related to mandated change: more than half of participants' decisions were based on core values and beliefs, requiring value judgments. Analysis of themes revealed that more than half of administrative decisions require secondary principals to make value-based judgments by filtering issues through their core values and beliefs. This ethics-based decision-making is evident in both black and white issues, and in more complex and nuanced circumstances. The research presented in this article extends the initial examination (Larsen & Hunter, 2013, February), confirming that decision-making must consider non-rational variables, and that political and structural variables complicate what may at first look like a straightforward decision. The research questions that guided this study were:

- *How are principals' core values and beliefs manifested in their descriptions of thought processes that attend decision-making?*
- *To what extent, or in what circumstances, may those espoused values be modified or displaced by mandates that emanate from the district, state, or federal level?*
- *How, if at all, do principals resolve the cognitive disequilibrium that a mandate creates when it conflicts with their espoused core values?*

The current study documents how secondary principals weigh mandates, compare those against their core values, and then consider how to meet the prescribed requirement while maintaining their commitment to their core values.

Introduction

Past research has documented how reform cycles occur and that change has certain organizational characteristics, both in the rational and non-rational areas (Bowditch & Buono, 1997; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Callahan, 1962; Grogan, 1996; Murphy & Hallinger, 1993; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Yukl, 1998; Zaltman, Florio, & Sikorski, 1977). There has been some exploration of the pressures and constraints that administrators face in balancing change and the status quo (Collins, 2007; Fullan, 1991; Fullan, 2001; Murphy, 2013; Sergiovanni, 1999). This considerable body of literature describes actions that principals should take in leading various change initiatives, and further describes effective school leadership from a variety of perspectives. Past research has addressed school change and the range of issues that a principal might encounter organizationally. However, there is little research that describes or explains the thought processes behind what school leaders do as they lead change initiatives, and, particularly, what they do to lead mandated change that may be in conflict with their core values and beliefs (Hallinger, Leithwood, & Murphy, 1993; Schlecty, 2007).

For a school principal, the security of clearly articulated mandates is often challenged by the reality of values-laden questions as to whether externally imposed requirements are congruent with the administrator's fundamental beliefs. The primary purpose of the current study is to explore how secondary school principals form decisions relevant to mandated change and school improvement that are simultaneously balanced against their core values and espoused beliefs.

Through surveys and focused interviews with secondary school administrators in the Pacific Northwest, this study explores the sparsely mapped terrain an administrator must traverse using her/his core values as a guiding compass when confronted with the challenges of daily decision-making. Many of the principal's most challenging decisions lead to an "either-or" outcome. By probing the landscape of mandated change and accountability demands, this study explores how secondary school administrators balance implementing externally-imposed requirements against the need to maintain cognitive equilibrium through actions that reflect their core values and beliefs.

Past research has shown that this cognitive balancing is neither a simple nor rational process, either mentally or in terms of daily organizational logistics (Blumer, 1969; Fullan, 2001). When decision-making variables create internal disequilibrium for leaders, where their core values and beliefs are in conflict with mandates, they often experience a need to balance competing ethical demands. On one side of the balance scale, leaders are employees who are required to comply with organizational requirements; on the other side, they are moral agents, relying on their internal values and expertise to guide the organization. This highlights what researchers have known for a long time: "Ethical situations often require that hard choices be made under complex and ambiguous circumstances" (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1998, p. 3). This study examines and describes how principals manage conflicting demands, where they must meet moral obligations to implement mandated change, and yet remain true to their core values and beliefs when mandates create internal disequilibrium.

Informed by relevant literature, the following research questions guided the investigation:

- How are principals' professional core values manifested in their descriptions of thought processes that attend decision-making?
- To what extent, or in what circumstances, may those espoused values be modified or displaced by mandates that emanate from the district, state, or federal level?
- How, if at all, do principals resolve the cognitive disequilibrium that a mandate creates when it conflicts with their espoused core values?

Review of the Literature

Introduction

This study examines leaders who are managing mandates. We proposed to describe the thinking and core beliefs behind administrators' decisions and actions. Therefore, a basic grounding in administrative behavior and cognition is important as a guide to understanding the connections between reasoning and acting. Toward this end, the literature review is divided into three sections: (a) educational and organizational change, (b) school leadership and administrative behavior, and (c) administrator cognition and symbolic interactionism.

Educational and Organizational Change

For decades, research, literature, and empirical evidence have reinforced that a purely rational-linear approach to change, especially state and federally-centralized mandated change, is not effective. Diane Ravitch (2010) speaks to the failures of a federally-centralized set of mandates with which public schools are currently grappling. Ravitch's commentary is easily summarized: it's a disaster. However, Ravitch's observations and assertions are only contemporary iterations of what research and empirical evidence have revealed for many years. For instance, the RAND change agent studies in the 1970s showed that change initiatives must be adapted to fit the organizational context, and that non-rational aspects of change impact outcomes (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975). The RAND studies helped develop a deeper recognition that change is systemic, involves a continuous improvement process, and is molded by many contextual variables (Fullan, 2007).

Furthermore, research by Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) indicates that high schools have resisted wave after wave of change, pulling back to traditional high school realities after navigating reform pressures. This recognition of persistent resistance by secondary schools to change is not new. The RAND studies indicated this tendency; Berman and McLaughlin (1975) summarized the data from the RAND research, noting that the receptiveness of the institution was a variable in the change process. "An implementation strategy that promotes mutual adaptation is critical" (p. x). Mutual adaptation refers to the need of the individuals in the organization to adapt to the change, and the need for the change to adapt to the needs and realities of the individuals in the

organization. In other words, successful change was possible when the organization influenced the innovation and when the innovation influenced the organization.

More recent literature reinforces this need for mutual adaptation in relationship to professional learning communities. When local actors—teachers and principals—are involved in and have influence over change initiatives, sustainable change is more likely to occur (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Leonard & Leonard, 2005). However, in the absence of this dynamic, research indicates that there are few successful initial forays and even fewer long-term successful implementations of mandated change (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975; Fullan, 2007; McLaughlin, 1984; McLaughlin, 1989).

Sashkin and Egermeier (1992) reviewed 30 years of educational change and identified the differing perspectives, strategies, and principles. They note that:

> Three perspectives that have been most influential in educational change are: (1) the rational-scientific perspective which posits that change is created by the dissemination of innovative techniques, (2) the political perspective (the "top-down" approach) which brings about change through legislation and other external directives, and (3) the cultural perspective (the "bottom-up" approach) which seeks to influence change by encouraging value changes within organizations. The strategies used for change in schools are just as varied as the perspectives that propel them: the aims are to (1) fix the parts (curricula, teaching methods), (2) fix the people, (3) fix the schools, and (4) fix the system. (p. 1)

The authors aver that the fourth strategy, fixing the system, is the most apt approach to effective educational change. They explain that a comprehensive "restructuring" approach combines the strategies of fixing the parts, people, and the school, incorporating both the rational-scientific and the political perspectives (Sashkin & Egermeier, 1992).

Sashkin and Egermeier's assertions about effective management of change are echoed by others who have written specifically and generally about transformational leadership (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1990; Burns, 1978; Senge, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1999). Cummings and Worley (2014) focus mainly on the business world; however, their perspectives on transformational change are applicable to educational organizations. They state that, when organizations attempt more than minor adjustments, the process requires change leaders to consider the dynamics of transformational change:

> Organization transformation implies radical changes in how members perceive, think, and behave at work. These changes go far beyond making the existing organization better or fine-tuning the status quo. They are concerned with fundamentally altering the prevailing assumptions about how the organization functions and relates to its environment. Changing these assumptions entails significant shifts in corporate values and norms and in the structures and organizational arrangements that shape members' behaviors. Not only is the magnitude of change greater, but it can fundamentally alter the qualitative nature of the organization. (p. 530)

Zaltman, Florio, and Sikorski (1977) underline the importance of considering both the rational and the non-rational aspects of change. “The success of a rational strategy depends very much on getting the user to accept change for itself rather than for some other reason. Thus, the change must be tied clearly and directly to perceived needs” (p. 318). This research highlights a core concept in the literature: voluntary change often connects to perceived needs more easily than mandated change, which is often perceived as unneeded. Johnson (1996) supports this idea as well, explaining that locale and context influence educational change.

School Leadership and Administrative Behavior

That a principal's leadership is critical to the success of a school is reflected in much of the work that discusses principals as instructional leaders (Joyce, Wolf, & Calhoun, 1993; Lieberman, 1995; Marzano, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1987, 1999; Tschannen-Moran, 2013). Lashway (1997) synthesized an extensive body of research on leadership. He found that three broad strategies appear in most discussions of leadership: hierarchical, transformational, and facilitative. He concluded that different problems require different approaches. Joyce and Calhoun (1996) corroborate Lashway’s work: a single system or way of doing things is not necessarily effective. Much of the research on traits, behaviors, and skills has contributed to our understanding that effective leadership is highly contextual (Barth, 1990; Bass & Avolio, 1990; Bowers & Seashore, 1966; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; House & Mitchell, 1974; Mintzberg, 1973; Morse & Wagner, 1978; Page, 1985; Senge, 1990; Wilson, O'Hare, & Shipper, 1990; Yukl, Wall, & Lepsinger, 1990).

Transformational leadership was conceptualized by Burns (1978) from research conducted on political leadership. He described transforming leadership as a process by which "leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation" (p. 20). Transformational leadership appeals to, “an existing need or demand of a potential follower. . . . The result of transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents” (p. 4).

Yukl (1998) and Leithwood (2007) contrast this picture of leadership with "transactional" leadership. Yukl (1998) explains that transactional leadership "motivates followers by appealing to their self-interest" (p. 325). Leithwood (2007) adds, “[Transactional] approaches relied heavily on extrinsic forms of motivation, an exchange of extrinsic rewards such as salary, social status, and perks of various sorts for employees’ work on behalf of the organization” (p. 185). Transformational leaders, by contrast, attempt to get followers to follow by winning their trust, admiration, mutual respect, and willingness to work hard to accomplish more.

Administrator Cognition

How administrators cognitively frame reality, or how they make sense of organizational variables, is central to this study. Leaders both consciously and unconsciously process (i.e., perceive, categorize, and interpret) situations as they define reality and design plans

of action. Because schools are complex organizations, leaders are often faced with ambiguous or conflicting situations that must be mentally processed to develop plans of action. Successful school leaders have learned to use cognitive schemata that weigh the most critical organizational factors in the social, structural, political, and symbolic arenas (Bolman & Deal, 1993).

Glidewell (1993) described research into the cognition of 69 CEOs between 1969 and 1983. The research sought to describe the factors that influenced CEOs to change their minds. The results from this longitudinal study reveal that the subjects in the study were significantly influenced by cognitive constructions: value conflicts, their beliefs about what was effective, what they perceived as their social networks' opinions, and social pressures. In a similar vein, Raun and Leithwood (1993) reviewed the relevant literature about the impact a leader's values have on decision-making and concluded that, for the leader, the influence of values is an inseparable element of decision-making. "Values" is a construct, a set of core internal beliefs that define an ideal reality; these values are used by leaders to develop action plans for aligning actual reality with their "ideal" reality. "What principals do depends on what they think" (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1993, p. 106).

Symbolic Interactionism: Creating Meaning Leads to Actions

Blumer (1969) dismisses the underlying behavioristic view that humans create action based on stimulus-response interpretations of problems and objects, where there is a causal line drawn between the object, event, or problem and the action taken to address it. Actions are a result of meaning-making that people accomplish during a process of interpretation that is built on a long history of social interaction with others and with the self (Blumer, 1969).

> First, the actor indicates to himself the things toward which he is acting; he has to point out to himself the things that have meaning. . . . Second, by virtue of this process of communicating with himself, interpretation becomes a matter of handling meanings . . . . (p. 5)

Whereas a behavioristic view of decision-making sees a direct causal link between an object, problem, or event and the action taken to address it, symbolic interactionism sees a link between the object, problem, or event and the meaning that a person assigns to it. After an interpretive process that assigns meaning, a causal link is created between the meaning of the object, problem, or event and the action that is taken by the person.

All actions are intentional. People internally account for things they perceive and then act based on their perceptions. However, the link is not between the thing and the action, but between the internally-created meaning and the action (Blumer, 1969).

Change Themes

It is well established that change creates cultural resistance (Fullan, 1996, 2001; Joyce, 1990). The research of both Fullan and Joyce shows that change initiatives often fail due

to managers' failure to recognize and deal with the cultural norms and needs that shape the organization. In organizations, observable activities and processes are driven by a huge, largely hidden, mass of interrelated cultural norms and issues. ". . . A school's culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal can ever have" (Barth, 2007, p. 159). To manage mandated change effectively, a leader must consider how the initiative affects the culture of the organization. Since change frequently elicits resistance, the administrator must anticipate it, knowing that it will be more intense when change comes as a mandate, especially if the mandate does not clearly connect to teachers' core values and beliefs. When educators do not see the connection between state mandates and what they think they are supposed to do, an environment of resistance may well ensue (Goldman & Conley, 1997).

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-method approach (Creswell, 2014; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010). Since the researchers focused on core values and external mandates as experienced by administrators at the secondary level, participants identified for the current study were chosen based on their experiences as assistant principals and principals in middle schools and high schools. The population for the study was determined purposefully through criterion sampling (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010), based on the belief that participants selected have particular knowledge or experience related to the study's focus. The researchers asked school superintendents and other upper-level district administrators to nominate principals and assistant principals whom they considered to provide a benchmark for ethical, well-reasoned decisions. Balance and variety were priorities that guided the nomination process (Stake, 1995).

These reputational nominations identified sixteen administrators currently serving as secondary principals or assistant principals. Of these, nine agreed to participate: one middle school assistant principal, one middle school principal, one high school assistant principal, and six high school principals. Of these, two were female—one a middle-school assistant principal and one a high school principal. All nine participants identified themselves as between 35 and 45 years of age, with a median experience in education of 16.5 years. They have served in school administration an average of 6.9 years.

Survey Data

Initial data for the study were collected using a survey instrument that was emailed to participants. In addition to seeking information about each participant's age, gender, number of years of experience in education, years in education administration, title of current position, and college or university where the participant completed her or his principal preparation, the survey posed 10 questions. These included yes/no queries: Two of the key questions used were: "Do you ever feel compelled to set aside your personal/professional values in decision making?" and, "Do you ever feel compelled to

set aside your personal/professional core beliefs and values because of mandates emanating from district, state, or federal policies?"

Other questions asked the participant to identify a ratio that represented the percentage of daily decisions that would be considered black/white, or right/wrong, versus the percentage of situations that called for the participant to exercise her or his judgment based on personal or professional core beliefs. The survey also allowed the participant to provide open-ended examples of circumstances that she or he deemed black/white or right/wrong, as well as examples of nuanced decisions for which no clearly prescribed policy might serve as a guide.

The researchers aggregated the survey responses, including the narrative reflections offered by participants. Discipline of students and evaluation of teachers were among categories identified by some respondents as representing black/white or right/wrong examples; however, other respondents identified these same examples as requiring a nuanced approach. These divergent perspectives, and others like it, led the researchers to conduct a focused interview with participants in an effort to probe the thinking of secondary school administrators.

Focused-Interview Data

In order to tease out the meaning behind some of the narrative data, four of the nine participants took part in an hour-long conversation with the researchers, responding to open-ended questions (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010; Stake, 1995), providing detailed descriptions and explanations concerning ideas advanced by participants in the survey instrument. As Stake (1995) explains, "The purpose [of the focused interview strategy] for the most part is not to get simple yes and no answers but description of an episode, a linkage, an explanation" (p. 65). With the permission of the participants, the conversation was recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Both the survey data and the transcript of the focused interview were analyzed using standard qualitative research strategies of constant-comparison and coding (Creswell, 2014; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010; Strauss, 1987). The researchers combed the survey data for evidence of themes; similarly, the transcript from the focused interviews invited a systematic examination of recurrent topics. Initial open coding guided axial coding (Strauss, 1987). The examination of data from the focused interviews allowed the researchers to triangulate the data from the survey responses with perceptions shared by the focused-interview participants (Creswell, 2014; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010; Stake, 1995).

Discussion

The researchers first considered the data that emerged from the survey that participants completed. On the survey, respondents reported that a mean of 36% of the decisions they face are black or white, right or wrong. One outlier reported only 5% of her/his decisions permitted a black-and-white approach, while two respondents said 70% of their decisions had unambiguous dimensions. Kidder (1995) helps provide perspective on these polar positions by explaining that, when a leader holds an apparently hard-edged perspective

like this, it is unlikely to demand that the leader examine her or his most fundamental values: "If you've already defined one side [of a decision] as flat-out, unmitigated 'wrong,' you don't usually consider it seriously" (p. 17).

On the survey, several themes emerged as examples of decisions offering the administrator black-and-white clarity: evaluation of teachers; discipline of students; school budget; the requirement to report suspected child abuse; parent custody issues; issues related to employee contracts; teacher assignments based on certification/qualifications; administering the annual state assessment; and athletic code issues. A bright line between black-and-white and "nuanced" decisions might be inferred from these themes. However, when asked to identify decisions or circumstances that would require one to use her or his own personal/professional values in lieu of relying on law, policy, or procedure—which might lead to simple black/white decisions—respondents stated that some of the very decisions in the preceding list were, in fact, tinged with ambiguity.

Teacher Evaluation

Evaluation and discipline of staff were recurring themes among examples that require one's thinking to be grounded in her or his values. In the survey one respondent wrote about staff discipline: "Very seldom are two [situations] the same. Most are not cut and dried. You have to really think through what is the appropriate response for each situation." Another participant asked, "How do you handle a below-average employee who wants to transfer to another school in the district?" Participants in the focused interview similarly identified evaluation of teachers as grounded in their personal and professional core beliefs and values. For instance, while state law may clearly dictate steps the evaluator must follow in staff evaluations, application of those steps may be less well defined. One participant noted,

> You have to do the process. You have to do the evaluation. But then it becomes more of a gray issue in terms of how you actually evaluate, how you choose to use the framework. There is a lot of subjectivity within that, so that comes back to your personal values and core values.

State-prescribed rubrics used in post-observation conferences might seem to offer a degree of objectivity that would tend to standardize how an evaluator frames her or his feedback to the teacher. However, participants in the focused interview shared the perspective that inter-rater reliability may call into question how a particular evaluator assesses a teacher's classroom skills. The female high school principal explained: "At [my school], we had a situation where we had rumors going around about staff members hearing each other's [evaluation] scores, and wondering if we have certain evaluators that are, I guess, being more subjective than other ones." The solution for her administrative team was to confer with each other and other administrators in the school district "so we can try to be on the same page." Another participant in the focused interview added, "There's going to be subjectivity from person to person because people are going to interpret [the same set of observation data] differently."

Participants also noted that the student population in a teacher's classroom may require that the principal apply a discriminating lens to the process. A female high school principal said,

> I have a special education teacher who has very low students; so I go in with a different point of view than I would in an Advanced Placement classroom. I consider the students and also the curriculum that's being taught. I try to be as objective as possible, but those variables ultimately play into my decision and where I score a particular teacher on the rubric.

To this, a male high school principal added,

> I think you can try and build in objectivity, but I don't think you can get away from the subjective component. We have our own experiences as educators, and things we look for, things that we value as being successful teachers. I don't think we leave that at the door when we walk in. I don't think that's possible.

Student Discipline

Another area of surface-level contradiction can be found in the survey data, where participants identified student discipline among the administrative decisions that offer the clarity of black/white; yet, upon deeper analysis of the data, the vagaries and challenges of student discipline also bespeak the need for a nuanced approach.

Focusing on one aspect of student discipline, one survey respondent said:

> I have to set aside my own personal beliefs and values, especially when working with choices students are making. Drug use is an example. I disagree with this lifestyle, but sometimes parents do not stand in the way of their son's or daughter's actions. I must focus on what happens at school only and not [try to] control what they do when they are at home.

Concerning discipline of students, another survey respondent noted, "[There are] many gray areas that don't fit the mold. Harassment issues between middle school girls come to mind." Highlighting an ongoing concern about students vandalizing school property, one respondent asked, "Should we shut down a school bathroom that is regularly being vandalized?" Yet another noted,

> Harassment, intimidation, and bullying is one [sic] concern that comes to mind right away. We have a clear school and district policy, as well as state law, surrounding this. It is complicated, especially with social media and students remaining connected outside of school. We have to investigate each allegation and look at both sides of the issue before deciding what action to take. It is complicated, and not a black-and-white issue.

Without specifying that discipline was an underlying concern, one participant said enforcement of the school's athletic code might require a deft touch, especially where, for one student, "special circumstances" may have to be considered.

The focused interview reinforced the nuanced nature of student discipline. School administrators may develop matrices or other strategies to help ensure that, from one manifestation of student misconduct to the next similar episode, consistency guides the consequence assigned. However, one participant explained the difference between the ideal and the reality:

> Typically there is a range of consequences you could have, and there's a black-and-white rule against a certain action a kid, the student, does. And your reaction could fall within a range. You get to decide within that range. I think just about every situation is somewhat nuanced. You try to be consistent from student to student, but then there's a difference in just about every situation.

Another participant in the focused interview framed each disciplinary situation as a "learning opportunity" for the student. For each instance of student misconduct, school policy or the student handbook may prescribe a range of possible consequences. "You're treating these [circumstances] as opportunities for growth for your kids. These are learning opportunities, too." He added, "That's where the nuanced part comes in. What's the school's response, and . . . and how do you keep the dignity of the student in putting the response in place?"

Considerations arising from a student having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) may further complicate a secondary school administrator's decision as to the consequence appropriate for misconduct. Whereas another student discipline scenario where the violator has no IEP might suggest a consequence with little ambiguity, the presence of the IEP poses additional challenges. One participant in the interview said,

> You get a student on an IEP [who] has already reached 10 days [of suspension]. So the next step on the discipline matrix would be a 10-day suspension, but you've already reached 10 days. So, how do you adjust it? What do you do there? Here's a situation where there's a lot of nuances in how you deal with something that is a black-and-white situation for just about any other student.

A middle school assistant principal reflected on the possibility of a legal challenge of a student discipline issue. She noted that "I love boobies" bracelets, more often worn by middle-level boys than girls, appear likely to require the attention of the courts as students and their supporters explore the range of appropriate student speech. "I know my meter on inappropriateness can sometimes jump pretty high," she said. Recognizing the potential for a legal challenge, she asked, "Seeing that [this could] go all the way to the Supreme Court, is this really what I want to do with my career?" Thus, though her moral compass may direct her to take a stand against what she considers offensive student expression, she may be inclined not to choose this particular battle.

School Budget and Other Issues

Budget issues surfaced in survey responses as examples of black-and-white decisions. Yet some participants also identified budget as requiring one to rely on one's personal or professional values. One respondent noted that, even with the school budget established, the school administrator must decide what to give priority within the constraints of that budget. Even though the school's site council may provide input, "what to prioritize is a yearly, monthly, and daily decision [for me]." Another noted that deciding "when to spend building budget money and when not to" to purchase items for the school requires the principal to consider more than stark numbers on a spreadsheet. A hint of the ambiguity that may attend budget-related questions arose from another response: "Should we allow a team that is playing a state regional game four hours from the school to stay overnight?" Finally, one participant lamented that, in placing budget-related issues in the hierarchy of mandates, "it's auditors first, kids second."

Other topics appeared among participants' reflections on circumstances that require the school administrator to consult her or his moral compass. Among these are: working with facilities maintenance on project timelines and considering how the schedule will affect academics or athletics; developing the master schedule for the coming school year; counseling students; unfunded mandates from the state and federal levels; using data from state assessments; and collective bargaining agreements and their impact on quality education.

One participant noted that, to date, the state where the study was conducted has not aligned curriculum with Common Core Standards; thus, the respondent noted, the administrator has no clarity of direction. Another participant said that, while the necessity to administer the state assessment is unquestioned, the resulting data are "nebulous and impossible to garner any conclusions from data analysis that would inform decision making." Regarding the master schedule, one commented that "building the schedule and how teachers are placed into it is a reflection of my priorities." One response seemed particularly poignant: "[There are] hundreds of other issues that could arise on a daily basis—upset parents, lunchroom issues, staff concerns, office procedures, safety procedures, testing schedules, etc."

Mandates

Of those who responded to the survey, only one said that she or he never feels compelled to set aside her or his personal or professional values in making decisions. The other participants not only affirmed that they *do* feel compelled to set aside their fundamental beliefs but also provided examples of these situations. For instance, they explained that they have felt pressure to make decisions that others might consider to be professionally, politically, or socially correct; but those "correct" decisions would be in conflict with what they hold as essential to *their* personal or professional values. As one participant noted, "I may not always agree personally with how some things have to happen, but politically that is what I have to do." Another participant said, "Unless you want to be sued or fired, you shouldn't put your personal opinions on anything—which may be counter-productive to quality leadership."

Regarding curriculum and staffing, another participant lamented, "When I have to approve putting student number 34 in a social studies class that already has 13 IEP students in it, that is not good for student achievement." Respondents suggested that today's secondary school principals and assistant principals must be willing to advocate for what seems right for the student, even though a parent may protest that her or his rights are trammeled as a result.

Participants expressed similar angst when they considered circumstances in which they felt compelled to set aside their core values because of mandates arising from district, state, or federal policy. One said, "Mandates are what drives this profession. Education is less of an art [and] more prescribed than 10 years ago." Another averred, "Depending on the week and what is going on at the school, I definitely feel my own beliefs and values are in conflict with mandates." Most of the participants fretted over the impact of externally imposed mandates on their perspective as educators. One noted,

> [It] seems like all we talk about in meetings are new mandates that seem to make our job more difficult. I'm worried that new [mandated] practices are going to take me away from what I have a passion to do—and that is to educate students.

Others offered circumstances in which their personal or professional priorities might take a back seat to what they feel is required of them. One participant in the focused interview highlighted the effect on his time necessitated by a state mandated evaluation process. Acknowledging that new procedures employed in observation and post-observation of teachers are designed to improve teachers' practices, this high school principal asked, "How do we do that day-in and day-out when we don't have time? For me, it's a loss of family time. You work longer *outside* of the school day. So it comes out of your hide." Another survey respondent expressed disagreement with the new evaluation requirements, but added, "I don't have a choice because of state policy." Some survey respondents said that policies that drive teacher evaluation and transfer are ineluctable realities of their work. One lamented having to "take a teacher that everyone knows is a lemon from another school because there is no other place for that teacher to go—and I have an open position."

A disconnect between the mandates of school-improvement policies and the practical challenge of policy implementation can be seen in one survey response:

> I believe my time should be spent working with students and staff. Due to federal [and] state policy, I find myself spending a lot of time revising school improvement plans (completed three in the past eight months and need to complete the fourth in three months), and working with school improvement coaches. I have had four different school improvement coaches in five years, none of whom has had experience or success with our type of school.

This theme of managing mandates surfaced frequently. Echoing that theme, one participant in the focused interview said, "Oftentimes what I feel is best for students is not what is prescribed for them. Various policies, mandates, and constant assessment

accountability have limited the scope of good teaching [in deference to] test achievement strategies." Another survey respondent said:

> The less politically-driven mandates the better. Kids should be safe, and schools should educate every child with fidelity. These are the two mandates that are indeed important. Funding should not be legislatively tied to mandates. Kids should be first, not mandates tied to whatever is the whim of the legislature.

Another secondary administrator reflected, "Mandates drive education; unfortunately, they are driven by politicians and not by educators."

Student assessment mandates were a source of concern for several participants. One respondent focused on testing of students with disabilities, noting that, under current assessment requirements, even students with profound impairments—including high-school-age students functioning at the first-grade level or below—are included in a school's assessment profile. A school that may be struggling to show improvement on state-mandated assessments may find that including the test results for *all* students further tarnishes an already grim picture of student proficiency.

Emerging Themes

The research questions that guided this study focused on identifying and describing principals' core beliefs, and how their decision-making is impacted by balancing the moral dilemma of leading mandates while maintaining their core beliefs. When the data from the study are compared to the research questions, the conceptual framework, and the existing literature, the picture that emerges is that secondary principals spend a significant amount of their mental capacity looking deeply into decisions and weighing them in relation to their core values and beliefs. Specifically, they are looking at the surface variables of mandates while comparing these prescriptions against their core values; simultaneously they are considering how to meet the mandates and maintain their commitment to their core values.

The first research question guiding the study was concerned with how beliefs and values were manifested as principals talked about their decision-making. The principals are attempting to maintain their sense of equilibrium: they want to balance their moral obligation as a public servant—tasked to lead mandate implementation—with their obligation to provide moral leadership, guiding the organization using their core professional values and beliefs that are primarily aimed at keeping kids, relationships, flexibility, and variability as priorities. This thinking is seen in their vocalized perspectives, in which they expressed their internal conflicts with mandates that do not always mesh with their core values. The core values of the administrators in this study are summarized below.

Core Values and Beliefs

In the responses of the participants, we see three major core values expressed: (1) students' needs should be first; the expectations of mandates should be second; (2) the

organization must maintain flexibility to meet the demands of variability; and (3) relationships are of primary importance. Though much could be said about the first value, that students' needs should be first, that concept seems to be fairly transparent, in light of participants' responses. However, the concepts of flexibility and relationships warrant some explanation.

Administrators in this study believe that they should have the flexibility, or more pointedly, the authority, to decide what parts of mandates match their context, and what parts do not. They hold variability as the rule, and standardization as the exception. Mandates—and, indeed, all decisions—should not be rigid. Participants felt that that they should have the flexibility to make decisions guided by context. In the words of one participant, an administrator needs the flexibility to consider "special circumstances."

Administrators in the study described how they develop internal priorities, which are organically connected to their core value that relationships are important. They explained how they consciously compare all mandates and outside pressures against their internal commitment to keep relationships as a primary focus. Furthermore, this process of cognitively considering mandate requirements against their internal commitments and values seemed universally applicable to all three core priorities: students, flexibility, and relationships.

The second guiding question for the study sought to explore whether the impact of mandates might displace core values in decision-making. The data suggest that secondary administrators broadly define the "political" realities in mandates as that which most often causes them to experience conflict with their core values in day-to-day decision-making. Participants offered several descriptions of what "political" implies, but this area still presents an opportunity for further research. One key conclusion seems supported from the data: secondary administrators think about and consider their core values related to students and relationships as they navigate the "political" issues in mandates. This reveals the deep cognitive process of a principal attempting to internally create meaningful decisions that balance a commitment to core values, while managing the pressure to respond to mandates. Secondary principals weigh how students and relationships will be impacted in their final decision choices. Furthermore, they consider the potential backlash that may ensue if their decisions prioritize students and relationships at the expense of the requirements of mandates.

The final guiding question for the study seems to present the greatest challenge for further research. Just because secondary-school principals' decision-making seems to be informed by commonly held core values and beliefs, it does not follow that all participants used similar strategies to resolve cognitive dissonance related to implementing mandates. This seems to be related to their belief that leaders must consider local context while managing mandates; that organizational variability is expected; and that rigid adherence to mandates is unrealistic. This is not a new revelation for educators or researchers. Both Moore-Johnson (1996) and Fullan (1993, 1996, 1999, 2001) aver that context and variability are key leadership issues in managing change and school organizations. However, in the current study secondary administrators identified "political" influences as particular challenges in decision-making because of the often public arena in which mandates are promulgated. Though a mandate may present a conflict with the principal's core values, "politically that is what I have to do." Although

this seems to be a common experience, responses from participants did not provide a compendium of common strategies to resolve the cognitive disequilibrium that a mandate, which has "political" aspects, creates when it conflicts with their espoused core values. This may reinforce that context and variability are key factors to consider in a leader's thinking about mandates as she or he designs actions that balance mandate demands and deeply-held values and beliefs.

Future research aimed at defining this "political" concept may help us to better understand this dimension of leadership. However, we anticipate that a key finding from past research will also be reinforced, which we see in the RAND studies. We began the literature review by noting the RAND studies, and it is fitting to end by revisiting two key findings from that research. The RAND change agent studies in the 1970s showed that change initiatives must be adapted to fit the organizational context, and that non-rational aspects of change impact outcomes (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975). The secondary principals and assistant principals in this study think deeply about the non-rational aspects of the organization, and they consider context and the need for variability in decision-making. This study gives us a glimpse of administrator cognition related to mandate leadership. However, it also reveals that more research is needed to better understand how administrators balance moral leadership in an age of centralized mandates.

References

Barth, R. (1990). *Improving schools from within*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Barth, R. (2007). Culture in question. In *The Jossey-Bass reader on educational leadership* (2nd ed.), pp. 159-168. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1990). Developing transformational leadership: 1992 and beyond. *Journal of European Industrial Training, 14*(5), 21-27.

Berman, P., & McLaughlin, M. W. (1975). *Federal programs supporting educational change: Vol. 4. The findings in review*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (1993). Everyday epistemology in school leadership: Patterns and prospects. In P. Hallinger, K. Leithwood, & J. Murphy (Eds.), *Cognitive perspectives on educational leadership,* pp. 21-33. New York: Teachers College Press.

Bowditch, J. L., & Buono, A. F. (1997). *A primer on organizational behavior*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Bowers, D. G., & Seashore, S. E. (1966). Predicting organizational effectiveness with a four-factor theory of leadership. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 11*, 238-263.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Burns, G. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row.

Callahan, R. E. (1962). *Education and the cult of efficiency*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Collins, J. (2007). Good to great. In *The Jossey-Bass reader on educational leadership* (2nd ed.), pp. 27-50. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (4th ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cummings, T. G. & Worley, C.G. (2014). *Organization development and change* (10th ed). Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning.

Fullan, M. (1991). *The new meaning of educational change*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Fullan, M. (1993). *Change forces*. Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

Fullan, M. (1996, February). Turning systemic thinking on its head. *Phi Delta Kappan, 77*(6), 420-423.

Fullan, M. (1999). *Change forces: The sequel*. Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Fullan, M. (2007). Understanding change. In *The Jossey-Bass reader on educational leadership* (2nd ed.), pp. 169-181. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gall, J., Gall, M., & Borg, W. (2010). *Applying educational research* (6th ed.). Boston: Pearson.

Glidewell, J. C. (1993). How CEOs change their minds. In P. Hallinger, K. Leithwood, & J. Murphy (Eds.), *Cognitive perspectives on educational leadership,* pp. 34-53. New York: Teachers College Press.

Goldman, P., & Conley, D. T. (1997, March 24-28). *Persistence, disillusionment, and compliance in educator reactions to state school reform*. Paper presented at the

annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 405 649)

Grogan, M. (1996, October). *Interview with a superintendent: A feminist poststructuralist account*. Paper presented at the UCEA Conference, Louisville, KY.

Hallinger, P., Leithwood, K., & Murphy, J. (Eds.) (1993). *Cognitive perspectives on educational leadership*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (1998). *What's worth fighting for out there?* New York: Teachers College Press.

Hargreaves, A. & Goodson, I. (2006, Feb.). Educational change over time? The sustainability and nonsustainability of three decades of secondary school change and continuity. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(1), February 3-41.

House, R. J., & Mitchell, T. R. (1974, Fall). Path-goal theory of leadership. *Contemporary Business, 3*, 81-98.

Johnson, S. M. (1996). *Leading to change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Joyce, B. (Ed.) (1990). *Changing school culture through staff development*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Joyce, B., & Calhoun, E. (Eds.) (1996). *Learning experiences in school renewal: An exploration of five successful programs.* Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 401 600)

Joyce, B., Wolf, J., & Calhoun, E. (1993). *The self-renewing school*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Kidder, R. (1995). *How good people make tough choices: Resolving the dilemmas of ethical living.* New York: Fireside.

Larsen, D. E. & Hunter, J. E. (2013, February). *Separating wheat from chaff: How secondary school principals view mandates through an ethics-based lens.* Paper presented at the meeting of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Ignite 2013, Washington D.C.

Lashway, L. (1997). Leadership styles and strategies. In S. C. Smith & P. K. Piele (Eds.), *School leadership: Handbook for excellence* (3rd ed.), pp. 39-71. Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management.

Leithwood, K. A. (2007). Transformation school leadership in a transactional policy world. In *The Jossey-Bass reader on educational leadership* (2nd ed.), pp. 183-196. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Leithwood, K., & Steinbach, R. (1993). The relationship between variations in patterns of school leadership and group problem-solving processes. In P. Hallinger, K. Leithwood, & J. Murphy (Eds.), *Cognitive perspectives on educational leadership,* pp. 103-129. New York: Teachers College Press.

Lieberman, A. (1995). *The work of restructuring schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Marzano, R. (1992). *A different kind of classroom.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

McLaughlin, M. W. (1984, November). *The limits of policies to promote teaching excellence*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 273 571)

McLaughlin, M. W. (1989, March 27-30). *The RAND change agent study ten years later: Macro perspectives and micro realities*. Paper based on address given at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 342 085)

Mintzberg, H. (1973). *The nature of managerial work*. New York: Harper and Row.

Morse, J. J., & Wagner, F. R. (1978). Measuring the process of managerial effectiveness. *Academy of Management Journal, 21*, 23-35.

Murphy, J. T. (2013). The unheroic side of leadership: Notes from the swamp. In M. Grogan (Ed.), *The Jossey-Bass reader on educational leadership* (3rd ed.), pp. 28-39. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Murphy, J., & Hallinger, P. (Eds.) (1993). *Restructuring schooling*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press.

Page, R. (1985). *The position description questionnaire*. Unpublished paper, Minneapolis: Control Data Business Advisors.

Raun, T., & Leithwood, K. (1993). Pragmatism, participation, and duty: Value themes in superintendents' problem-solving. In P. Hallinger, K. Leithwood, & J. Murphy (Eds.), *Cognitive perspectives on educational leadership,* pp. 54-70. New York: Teachers College Press.

Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education.* New York: Basic Books.

Sashkin, M., & Egermeier, J. (1992, April). *School change models, and processes: A review of research and practice*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

Schlecty (2007). Understanding the normative system. In *The Jossey-Bass Reader on educational leadership* (2nd ed.), pp. 221-237. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline*. New York: Doubleday Currency.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1987). *The principalship*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1999). *Rethinking leadership*. Arlington Heights, IL: SkyLight Training and Publishing, Inc.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Strike, K.A., Haller, E.J. & Soltis, J.F. (1998). *The ethics of school administration*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Tschannen-Moran, M. (2013). Becoming a trustworthy leader. In Grogan, M. (Ed.), *The Jossey-Bass reader on educational leadership* (3rd ed.), pp. 40-54. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Tyack, D., & Cuban L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tyack, D., & Hansot, E. (1982). *Managers of virtue*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Wilson, C. L., O'Hare, D., & Shipper, F. (1990). Task cycle theory: The processes of influence. In K. E. Clark & M. B. Clark (Eds.), *Measures of leadership,* pp. 185-204. West Orange, NJ: Leadership Library of America.

Yukl, G. (1998). *Leadership in organizations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Yukl, G., Wall, S., & Lepsinger, R. (1990). Preliminary report on validation of the managerial practices survey. In K. E. Clark & M. B. Clark (Eds.), *Measures of leadership,* pp. 223-238. West Orange, NJ: Leadership Library of America.

Zaltman, G., Florio, D. H., & Sikorski, L. A. (1977). *Dynamic educational change*. New York: The Free Press.