

## **Ethical Leadership and Decision Making: A Study of a Skunk, a Woman, and a Gun**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**This case provides a vivid view of the complexities of rural education and how social perceptions color decision making in these environments. It focuses on clashing legal issues and societal norms as they impact the public school setting and the decision making process used by a novice elementary school principal in order to strike a balance between the two. This case offers a look into reality with a strong ethical research base to support decision-making.**

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### **Case Narrative**

Jennifer Marcus was born and raised in a town of about 100,000. She attended one of the two local high schools in the town, graduated, and attended a mid-sized state university to obtain her teaching credentials. Upon her graduation, she returned to her hometown to teach. Six years later, she graduated with her Master's in Educational Administration from a local university and was placed in her first assistant principal position in the same school district. After serving four years as an assistant principal, Mrs. Marcus began to look for her first job as campus principal.

Jennifer Marcus was fortunate to find a job with a small, rural school district that had also hired a new superintendent six months prior. The position was roughly 500 miles away from the school district where she had been working, but she felt the change would be good. She thought the small town atmosphere combined with a smaller school population would be the perfect way to begin her career as a principal. It would be a nice

contrast to the urban feel that her current district was beginning to take on. Gang violence had been on the rise, while drugs and alcohol were becoming the norm for her student body of about 700 students. The small rural school of under 300 students seemed perfect!

Apple Arbor CISD was located in the rolling, bluebonnet-laced hills of Southeast Texas. An hour drive in two directions would lead to “civilization,” but most folks in this small community were perfectly happy to stay hidden in their rural area. Apple Arbor was entrenched with families who had settled the land four generations prior and had no intention of leaving. The elementary school had a student body of roughly 250 children, and the building housed kindergarten through sixth grades. There were not enough qualifying students in the school to offer pre-school services or bilingual education. Over seventy percent of the students were White, about twenty percent were African-American, and roughly seven percent were Hispanic. One of the most pervasive fears of the local people was the fear that the students’ small, safe rural environment would begin to mirror the societal norms of the large urban cities about an hour away to the south and the west. As a result, the locals did not take kindly to outsiders or anyone who hadn’t lived in the community for at least two generations.

The superintendent was a young, dynamic leader named Howard Burnish who also happened to be new to the district. This was his first superintendency. Dr. Burnish, having worked in the area prior to accepting this position, was somewhat familiar with the geographic region. While he had never worked in a district this small, he knew that he had to start somewhere. Superintendents are rarely given positions in 4-A or 5-A school districts without experience. His goal was to get some experience under his belt and then quickly move up the ranks. In order to make that happen, he had to impress his staff, school board members, and community partners with his decision-making and planning.

Almost immediately upon Mrs. Marcus’s arrival, Dr. Burnish informed her that she would need to replace the elementary school counselor who was being moved to the high school campus. Mrs. Marcus interviewed many counselor candidates, all of whom were immediately eliminated for a variety of reasons. Mrs. Marcus shared her dismay regarding the quality of counselor candidates with Dr. Burnish. He suggested that there might be a way to have some administrative assistance at the elementary school without hiring a “counselor.” It just so happened that there was an employee at the high school with a mid-management certification. He informed Mrs. Marcus that Kim Davis had 19 years of experience in public schools and might be just the person for the newly created administrative position. He asked that Mrs. Marcus talk with Ms. Davis and decide if perhaps moving her to the elementary school as an assistant principal would be a good solution to the staffing issue. Mrs. Marcus agreed.

Ms. Davis, unaware that she would be vying for a job that day, entered Mrs. Marcus’s office in her boots and jeans. She immediately apologized for her appearance and indicated that she also had her truck and trailer parked out back because she needed to take some cows to the sale barn. As was the norm in this small community, she lived on and operated a ranch. After further inquiry, Ms. Davis told Mrs. Marcus that the ranch was about 600 acres and was home to over 150 head of cattle.

Mrs. Marcus was impressed with Ms. Davis’s outgoing personality and her knowledge of the community, of which she and the new superintendent had little. Mrs. Marcus also liked the fact that Ms. Davis had been the teacher in the

In-School-Suspension lab for many years and was a very stern disciplinarian. She immediately phoned the superintendent and informed him that she thought Ms. Davis would work out well on the campus.

Ms. Davis was pleased to learn that she was being offered an administrative position on the elementary campus. However, she had some reservations about accepting the position. There were issues in her personal life that she feared might interfere with her ability to perform the job. She scheduled an appointment with Dr. Burnish to discuss her concerns.

At the meeting, Ms. Davis informed Dr. Burnish that she was going through an ugly divorce and she was worried that the impression left by this might not be well received by everyone. This was a small, tight-knit community and her husband, the game warden, was well-known in the community. She explained that people in these parts did not take kindly to single women, and especially successful single women. She also stated that the divorce proceedings had really taken their toll on her emotionally. Dr. Burnish assured Ms. Davis that he did not foresee any issues with her personal life and knew she would do a great job.

Ms. Davis was the model assistant principal for the entire first semester. However, on January 11<sup>th</sup>, Ms. Davis demonstrated a lack of judgment. A wild skunk had continually stalked the elementary school children since returning from Christmas break. Everyone feared that it was only a matter of time before a student was sprayed or bitten. The pest control experts had been contacted in addition to the sheriff's department. By the time help arrived, each time, the skunk would disappear.

This particular day, Ms. Davis had reached her limit, personally and professionally. The skunk had trapped a P.E. class in the gymnasium. Ms. Davis went to her truck, retrieved her pasture rifle, which she frequently used to eliminate coyotes and feral hogs that were a threat on her ranch, and shot the skunk. Not ten seconds later, Dr. Burnish and Mrs. Marcus emerged from the building in disbelief.

Dr. Burnish immediately phoned authorities. The sheriff's deputy arrived about thirty minutes later and commented on what a good job Ms. Davis had done. He routinely took all the information regarding the incident in order to file a report. The sheriff phoned later, jokingly, to ask if he could deputize Ms. Davis. It appeared no one was overly concerned. When the case was brought before the Grand Jury, it was quickly dismissed, and Ms. Davis was cleared of all charges.

Dr. Burnish, however, was very concerned! He even considered non-renewing Ms. Davis. He no longer believed Ms. Davis could be counted on to act in the best interest of the school district and the students. The conflict existed in the very differing perceptions held by Dr. Burnish and Ms. Davis. Mrs. Marcus was somewhat caught in the middle of the whole affair, as she could see both sides.

### **Teaching Notes**

This case provides a vivid view of the complexities of rural education and how social perceptions color decision making in these environments. It focuses on clashing legal issues and societal norms as they impact the public school setting and the decision

making process used by novice administrators in order to strike a balance between the two.

Hudson (1997) contended that, “ethical virtues are reflected in the way we see ourselves as well as the way we see others, and are culminated in our relation to those others in the community in which we live” (p. 514). Ethics are based on personal value systems, which are the foundation for making decisions. All parties in this case study believe they are correct in their thinking.

Current research in this field focuses on the notion of ethics as relative and absolute (Campbell, 1997; Greenfield, 1999; Lang, 1999; McKerrow, 1997; Smith, 1988). These two very simple philosophies have deeper fundamental definitions. Absolute ethics are referred to as deontological, and relative ethics are referred to as teleological.

Pojman (2002) defined teleological ethics as acting to produce the best consequences either for the individual or society. This is often referred to as utilitarianism. “Do whatever produces the greatest good for the greatest number. It demands of us a kind of cost-benefit analysis, determining who will be hurt and who helped and measuring the intensity of that help” (Kidder, 1995, p. 24).

Deontological ethics, on the other hand, are more grounded in rules and duty (Pojman, 2002). This is often referred to as the Kantian Principle after the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. “Simply put, that means, ‘Follow only the principle that you want everyone else to follow.’ In other words, act in such a way that your actions could become a universal standard that others ought to obey” (Kidder, 1995, p. 24).

Campbell (1997) contended that ethics in administration have become complicated by the pervasive contemporary belief that values are relative. To further exemplify this notion, McKerrow (1997) indicated that how one thinks and what one believes regarding the concept of educational leadership are translated into the values and practices of the school. So, individuals’ values drive their educational leadership style, but all individuals’ values are relative.

Objects of our value system can be material or immaterial; whatever is ‘valuable’ is so simply because someone ascribes to value it. This is of utmost importance in the valuing process because it ensures – and forces – individual responsibility for what the person values. (Lang, 1999, p.170)

When considering right versus wrong issues, this incident in this case study does not even come close to passing the “legal test”. There are numerous laws that were broken when Ms. Davis discharged her firearm on campus. The biggest violation occurred in reference to the Gun-Free Schools Act. While the majority of references in the act apply specifically to students, the act was a third-degree felony punishable by up to ten years in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

The Code of Ethics for Texas Educators makes clear reference to the fact that educators should comply with all policies and laws. There is no doubt Ms. Davis violated this code. The National Educators Association Code of Ethics is a little more ambiguous. It requires educators to make a reasonable effort to protect from harmful conditions. The conflict arises when attempting to define the word reasonable in this context.

Oddly enough, when the “front page test” was conducted, Ms. Davis passed with flying colors. Many local newspapers and a nationally recognized gun magazine all supported Ms. Davis and her courage to make this decision. One newspaper even went as far as to print the story next to an article on rabies.

In some communities, the illegal act committed in this case study would not pass the “stench test”, but this community was supportive. A total of three community complaints were logged with the district.

Calabrese (1988) described ethical leadership at the campus level as including respect for all members of society and tolerance for alternative opinions and cultures.

When looking at the “Mom Test,” the evidence suggested that more mothers were relieved to see the skunk dead. This was voiced over and over again in the months that followed the incident.

## Key Questions

### Issues of Decision Making in Education

1. Understanding the situation, the person, the community, and the outcome, did Dr. Burnish and Mrs. Marcus make the right decision?
2. How could Dr. Burnish and Mrs. Marcus determine the intent and the state of mind of Ms. Davis at the onset of the incident?
3. What tactics might Dr. Burnish and Mrs. Marcus employ to resolve this conflict?
4. What would be the most important questions to ask when considering the resolution of this conflict?
5. Would a third party help or hinder the resolution process?

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