

Ethical Leadership Is Not Optional: How LPPs can Help

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ABSTRACT

The pressures that educational leaders face from many quarters do not diminish the importance of their exercising ethical leadership. It is the contention of the author that Leadership Preparation Programs are uniquely positioned to train prospective leaders to develop an ethical template to make decisions. Such a focus will aid leaders to confront the most acrimonious issues and make the decisions that best serve the needs of students and the community without making moral compromises.

Introduction

The Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards developed by the erudite National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2002) recognize the need for school leaders to manifest a professional code of ethics and values. In defining ethical behavior we hearken to Phenix (1986) who pronounced that essentially ethical behavior is the right and deliberate action that a person should take voluntarily. Ethical behavior is of paramount importance during the zenith of school accountability as portrayed by the *No Child Left Behind* Act (NCLB). This act may be particularly troubling for school leaders in urban public schools in that these schools experience greater difficulty in demonstrating satisfactory academic progress from year to year. According to the Council for Great City Schools (2003), preliminary indicators reveal that as of 2003, as many as 85% of schools that receive federal funds were not meeting the stringent federal standards. Urban schools are most susceptible to negative sanctions in accordance with NCLB requirements.

Challenges Requiring Ethical Leadership

It is not coincidental that the number of incidents of fraud among school leaders appears to be proliferating. For example, there seems to be growing accounts of educators attempting to secure test documents beforehand to give their students an advantage, and as many accounts of administrators misreporting academic and attendance statistics. The pressure to succeed is driving some leaders to explore ways to short-circuit the system, but the temporary gains of such deception generally are outweighed by the long-lasting damage done to an already fractious educational establishment. Recently, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 2005) generated twenty-one legislative recommendations to address weaknesses in NCLB's implementation and expectation. One of these recommendations is that Academic Year Progress should be based on multiple assessments and multiple opportunities for students to be assessed. Such recommendations, if adopted, would reduce the pressure on school leaders to compromise. However, we cannot hope to lead as true moral agents if our ethical conduct is dependent on favorable conditions.

The point here is that, more than ever, leaders must exercise ethical leadership. They must, in deference to Quick and Normore (2004), transform the school into a moral community. After all, today's students will constitute the generation that participates as active citizens in tomorrow's global economy (Starratt, 2005). Goodlad and his colleagues at the Center for Educational Renewal posit that the purpose of schools is to "equip young people to live and work in a democracy" (Goodlad, Soder and Sirotnik, 1985). As such school leaders should possess valuable beliefs about what is right and wrong and translate those beliefs into action. In Starratt's (2005) language, the leader must have "a moral vision of what is required of them and of the whole community; a moral vision of taking proactive responsibility for making [the appropriate] kind of learning a reality."

The Role of Leadership Preparation Programs

Despite reports such as Levine's (2005) critique of traditional Leadership Preparation Programs (LPPs), these programs are still best positioned to address successfully the issue of ethical educational leadership. LPPs still are the conduit through which a vast majority of today's educational leaders pass, and as such LPPs ought to fashion learning experiences that highlight ethical leadership practices. The degree of success that LPPs will have is based in part on what they teach in their programs and whom they teach.

In terms of the content of LPP, most, if not all such programs have courses that explore morality and ethics and encourage students to define their own ethics. Such content reflects Blanchard and Peale's (1988) thesis about the power of ethical management. In their discussion, Blanchard and Peale proposed three questions that

leaders should ask to ensure that they are making ethical decisions. The first question is whether the activity, response or expectation is legal. That is, does the action, reaction or expectation of the leader conform to legal or community standards of behavior? The second question is whether the leader's action, response, or expectation is balanced. In effect, does the action severely or unfairly advance or disadvantage one person or group. The third question is how will the action, response or expectation make one feel about oneself? That is, will the leader feel good about telling the whole world about your action? The content of many LPPs' ethics discussions incorporates Blanchard and Peal's ideas in some fashion.

The manner in which ethics is explored in LPPs takes many guises, but ultimately encourages each prospective school leader to form a template for making all decisions. Leaders can use such a template to address the most vexing problems or issues they face. For example, the discussion about the distribution of condoms in high schools is an issue that many leaders need to address, which an ethical template may help to clarify. Likewise many communities grapple with whether to use public funds to educate illegal immigrants. In other quarters, the discussion rages on about the value of vouchers and the government's role in subsidizing private education. Finally, many communities contend with curricular issues such as evolution vs. intelligent design. The issues are endless, but perhaps if leaders develop and use an ethical algorithm to address these issues, we will see more ethical decisions and behaviors in our students as well.

This is not to say that decisions will be easier to make or will be better accepted by a majority of the constituency. For example, a leader (usually a superintendent) who refuses to gerrymander attendance boundaries to satisfy affluent, and often vocal and influential community members, may experience an erosion of support from board members. Or even more taxing, for many issues, the ethical stand is not absolute. For example, a leader, in applying an ethical template for addressing the issue of teaching about homosexuality in sex education classes can arrive at equally ethical but conflicting opinions. Having an ethical template, nevertheless, is just and fair, whereas not having one may lead to arbitrary and capricious decisions.

We also cannot continue to ignore the ethics of the selection and placement process of our LPP participants. As Starratt (2005) reminds us, educational leaders ought to be familiar with the most recent advances in the various academic disciplines and scaffold learning activities in developmentally appropriate ways to meet the needs of students. In essence, the leaders must be cognizant of the organizational structures and processes that advance the learning of all students. This translates into leaders utilizing appropriate mechanisms to select, evaluate and provide professional development activities for teachers to best enhance student learning.

Nowhere is this more relevant than in many urban centers. In a number of such schools, principals have to settle for teachers who are ill prepared or mentally unequipped to meet the challenges of inner-city schools. And they are forced to use curricula and instructional strategies that reward bright or compliant students and punish those that have not successfully learned to play by the rules that the school system sets.

It is reasonable to expect that LPPs can help to transform low performing schools if they were to develop a method of identifying educators from urban centers who display resiliency, the aptitude to cope successfully amidst threatening or adverse environments

(Greene, 2002). And what if LPPs were to continue to identify ways in which resiliency behaviors can be taught and inform LPP participants about these so that they can then transport these strategies to their schools? Then what would happen if these leaders could be trained to recognize and hire teachers who show a capacity to be resilient? Would these not help in corralling those schools that are stampeding towards obsolescence?

My contention here is that it is ethical and reasonable to select, train and place leaders in schools where they can do the most good. Anything less is immoral. There are myriad accounts of leaders who are successful in schools with high disadvantaged populations. But there are still many more that require immediate attention. Perhaps a focus on this ethical perspective would lead to solution for these schools.

Benefits and Limitations of Ethical Leadership

Refocusing on ethical leadership is no doubt a two-edged sword. It is this same ethical framework that may force leaders to challenge prevailing paradigms that are virtually impossible to subvert. For example, I can visualize an ethical leader and perhaps a very effective one, challenge the authenticity of NCLB and even exit the profession if she believes that carrying out the mandate is antagonistic to her ethics. In urban centers, where the need for transformational leadership is greatest, leaders and teachers are likely to struggle to accommodate NCLB and related legal provisions that they consider counterproductive to their students. The irony here is that NCLB was intended to help school leaders “obtain information they need to strengthen their schools’ weaknesses and put into practice methods and strategies backed by sound scientific research” (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Yet many see the mandate itself as intrusive and antagonistic to learning.

As Hermond (2005) prognosticated, the forces that affect the practice of education are unlikely to abate in the near future. It is imperative that leaders continue to lead the society by promoting ethical standards for learning to occur in schools and to lead ethically, regardless of the pressures to do otherwise. Too much is at stake if we compromise.

A gentle reminder about the efficacy of ethical leadership is warranted here. Providing ethical leadership is just and compassionate, and has many salient benefits. Student who see democracy in action and benefit from such actions, as in obtaining a quality education, are likely to promote safe, orderly and just communities. Ethical leadership is neither easy nor cheap. It requires sacrifice and commitment, but in the final analysis it is the most frugal way for us to advance democracy.

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