

What Principals Need to Know About Ethics

Prin cipals are faced with hundreds of decisions each day. Many of those decisions are based on fairness, equity, and the success of students. As a retired principal and a professor of instructional leadership, I train aspiring principals to recognize that many of their decisions are based on their personal code of ethics. I also teach an ethics class for teachers and administrators who have been charged with ethics violations by the Kentucky Professional Standards Board. The purpose of this article is to make principals aware of the need for ongoing ethics discussions with faculty and staff in order to develop an awareness of the importance of their decisions 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I offer the following tips to guide your decision-making process.

Be a role model for fairness. Make a conscious effort to be fair to personnel and students. Faculty, staff, and students need to know that they will be treated fairly when you make a decision.

Be consistent. Parents and teachers need to trust that your decisions will be consistent and that you will not make exceptions, for example, when a particular parent happens to be a school board member.

Train teachers to be responsible for their actions. Many teachers have had little ethics training, so you must provide them with opportunities to discuss ethical dilemmas. Teachers need to understand that they are responsible for all of their actions, especially in providing lessons that meet the needs of all students. They must also fairly assess students only on material that was taught in class.

Teachers are also responsible for classroom discipline, and they should have the opportunity to discuss moral dilemmas that could arise. For example, is there a policy addressing cheating on a test? Grade-level or department groupings should discuss acceptable punishments for cheating so that new teachers understand what to do when it happens in their classrooms.

Know the mores of your school community. What is acceptable in some communities is not acceptable in others. Sometimes the values in urban schools are different from the values in suburban or rural schools. For example, one community may accept a principal who works as a bartender at night, while in another community this activity may be considered unacceptable. It is important that new teachers and administrators understand the values of the community where they work.

Understand that you and your teachers are accountable for your actions 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Because educators are held to a higher standard than other professionals, many teachers and principals have lost their jobs because of their actions outside of school. For example, an argument with a neighbor can result in police action and negative press.

Provide adequate supervision of students at all times. Someone must be respon-



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sible for students from the time that the first one enters your building until the last one leaves. Make sure that this issue is discussed before the school year begins so that everyone knows their assigned roles. Develop a policy for teachers to find a replacement for times when they can't be in their assigned areas. Many lawsuits have resulted from instances when a child was injured or bullied because there was no adult supervision.

A frequent supervision dilemma occurs during after-school tutoring, field trips, and night activities, when the teacher in charge needs to go home but there still are one or two students left. Can students wait for their parents alone outside the school? Can teachers leave students with the custodian until their rides arrive? Who is responsible if something happens to a child who is waiting alone for a ride? If you have these conversations regularly, everyone will know their role and what to do when such a dilemma arises.

Make sure that your teachers avoid being

alone with students. If a teacher needs to tutor a student, he or she should go to the library or some other area where other adults are in sight. There have been many accusations of inappropriate action when there were no witnesses to defend the teacher.


Don't ignore situations. Don't avoid situations in your school that require your intervention. For example, immediately confront a teacher who bullies or ridicules students. If a teacher flirts with students or tells inappropriate jokes, others will perceive that you find this behavior acceptable if you don't say anything.

Require proper use of the Internet. Make sure that your teachers understand that e-mail is a form of school communication and that messages should be written professionally—avoiding slang and familiarities. Principals should remind teachers that school computers are not for personal use.

Remember that school equipment is school property. Principals and teachers should not use school property for

personal benefit. Many principals have faced dilemmas when teachers used school equipment to photocopy church bulletins or political materials. One principal reported a stolen laptop to the police only to find that his assistant principal had loaned the computer to a school board member.

Avoid inappropriate relationships with students. Principals and teachers face ethical dilemmas when they call children at home or meet them outside of school without a good professional reason. There is really no good reason for a student to visit the home of a teacher or principal.

Discussions about ethics will result in more informed teachers. In turn, you will have fewer headaches about ethical dilemmas. 

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