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Personal and Professional Belief Systems: The Ethicist

Reconciling one's own value system with that of a school organization requires an understanding of the differences between expectations and beliefs. Schools are responsible for transmitting and reinforcing ethical belief systems that reflect different points of view with equal representation. The balance or imbalance between these perspectives represents the school culture. It is not uncommon for these ethical orientations to be different from community to community. When these ethical considerations are in conflict, leaders must decide whether the dissonance created is manageable and acceptable to them personally or professionally. What is acceptable for a school culture may not be consistent with the ethical perspective of a school leader. The focus of this chapter centers on the ethics involved in leadership decisions.

Themes addressed in this chapter:

- Testing and assessment
- District policy and oversight
- Educational philosophy
- Ethics reflected in society, school, and individual
- Ethical hiring and faculty retention policies

Profile of the Ethicist

Principal: male

Age: 50+

Ethnicity: Caucasian

Experience: 1 year as principal; 3 years as assistant principal; 4 years as elementary school teacher

School: elementary; student population: 850

Well, the issues themselves are overwhelming . . . they're overwhelming in this district. For me, what has changed is that [the district] has put its foot in the door as to what is going on in the classrooms. It's affected the control that we have, how we handle teachers and everything . . . trying to get the scores up in our district. Well, the scores went up a little bit in elementary but went down in middle school and down in high school. So the district is all over us. What's happening in elementary school is that they're telling us when to teach, what to teach, and how to teach it. For me that's unacceptable, but I'm living with it because I'm working here. Basically, it's the experience. I understand where things are coming from and how to do things. The times I've gotten hammered I've gotten up and not done it again or done it differently. It's experience. It's experience. I'm not like a deer in the headlights anymore. . . . Well, I think it's part of being a human being. There are teachers who have been in the classrooms for 10 years and still can't teach. I don't know how to explain it. Perhaps it's innate. It's part of being in the world and growing and changing. It's not being afraid of taking a position. It's not being afraid of trying to see how it happens and making the school work.

For new people coming in, you need to build up a network of those people you trust, who you can work with. You need to be as reflective as possible, well-versed in all aspects of the school. You simply can't walk in and take over a school and expect things to happen. You need to have resources and sources and a lot of patience and an attitude that you're going to work hard.

School Context

A basic tenet of leadership is to know oneself. Every school advocates for a principal who can articulate his vision and apply it in a meaningful and well-coordinated manner. When competing forces prohibit principals from applying their visions to students, significant problems can arise.

The principal in this elementary school had a very clear sense of self and school vision. He was personally vested in the education of children and had a definite sense of what was right. While feeling highly committed to

providing a strong educational program, he recognized obstacles that prevented him from achieving his goals. The school was very challenging, a highly at-risk population that stretched him as an instructional leader and tested him as to his ethical sense of meaningful education for his students.

School Characteristics

The school consisted largely of African Americans and Latinos. Many of the students were second-language learners.

School Climate

The administrator tried to involve the faculty in decision making, although there was limited administrative support available to him. He was very concerned about the teaching competence of his faculty. He also felt that “downtown,” the district office, had been a constraining weight against which decisions were made, so the sense of continued poor decisions regarding curriculum reform and personnel was ever present.

School Organization

The school had a principal and one assistant principal.

Interview

The following interview was conducted during the 1st month of the school year.

Dubin:

Tell me a little about your background, experience, and training in administration.

Principal:

I first started as an elementary school teacher for 4 years. I’ve been a high-school vice principal, a middle-school vice principal, and an elementary principal and vice principal. I also teach graduate courses on the university level in the teacher education program.

Dubin:

With respect to your current school, could you tell me a little about its makeup, student population, and so on?

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Principal:

Sure. It's a Title I school: 65% Latino; 25% African American students; the difference being Asian and Caucasian children. The population has been changing: 10 years ago it was mostly White, then African American, and within the last 2 or 3 years or so, Latino children.

Dubin:

Tell me, what does Title I mean? You referred to this term earlier on when you were defining your school.

Principal:

Yes. Title I refers to our being a low economic population. All our children receive free lunches.

Dubin:

Does it have to do with low reading test scores?

Principal:

No. It's solely based on socioeconomics.

Dubin:

We are in the 2nd week of the school year. Could you tell me a little bit about your priorities for the school year?

Principal:

Yes. Based upon their test scores in reading and math, we're working on a new reading series so our focus will be on literacy and math. With our changing populations, our scores went up a little bit, but we're still low on the API (academic performance index). We're 1 and 1, which means socio-economically we're Level 1 on our testing, which is about the lowest on the scale. We're working on those two areas to bring the scores up.

Dubin:

You referred to API. What does that designate?

Principal:

It's the state-assigned value as to their rating of the schools.

Dubin:

With respect to administration, how would you say you allocate most of your time? Let me suggest a few categories that you could consider when you

respond to this question. It could refer to working on reports, that is, bureaucracy duties and functions or school facility and plant issues, that is, room allocation, safety, personnel, instruction, community relations, budget, politics. If you could, identify what areas you spend your administrative time and focus.

Principal:

This year the focus will be on the classroom. I've been in most of the classrooms. We're trying to get the teachers set up to do a better job. We're working on more small-group instruction with them. I've done several in-services on that, so most of my time lately has been in the classroom.

Budget is obviously a very important part of my work as well as community relations. We have several faculty and community meetings coming up, for example, the SSC (student site council), but the focus for the beginning of the year, because we have this new reading and math series, has been in the classroom to get the teachers to be more ready to teach effectively.

Dubin:

You mentioned several committees you identified with initials. Could you tell me what they mean?

Principal:

These are our community groups: The SSC is the student site council. Basically because of our Latino population, we're starting these committees next week to get parents involved. Essentially, these different committees run the school and are charged to get parents involved. What we have found out is that the more parent involvement we have in the school and the more effective our relationship is with the community, the better off the kids are and the better the school is. It makes a big difference.

Dubin:

I'm sure it does. How about some of the other areas you mentioned? Obviously, the school-community relationship is important. You mentioned instruction and a different reading series. You alluded to budget. Could you tell me a little more about any of these areas? Could you also tell me more about your perceptions about the politics of either the school or the district?

Principal:

The budgets are extremely important. We have about \$1 million, which needs to be specifically placed. We have a lot of programs, and each funding calls upon a different set of teachers to do different things, which require

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specific parameters. It is a constant battle with downtown to figure these things out. Often the language of the budget areas is not clearly defined.

As far as the school goes, that is, politics, our school population is changing. Unfortunately, we have two schools in one now. We've got our AL, alternative-language school kids and our regular kids and we've got two sets of teachers: those who teach only in Spanish and those who teach only in English. What's happening is that we have two different communities. We've two different sets of books and different teachers, and it's a constant battle in terms of funding to make sure that our AL students are funded as well as our EO students (English-only).

The politics have certainly popped its head up this year. We're having political problems because parents are upset that various things aren't getting into the program. We're short books in the AL program because it hasn't been done properly. So it's become a real political problem.

Dubin:

You mentioned AL and EO. What do these terms mean?

Principal:

Alternative language and English-only. You see, not all parents want their children in bilingual programs, they want them in the alternative-language program or strictly taught in Spanish and then English added, whereas the bilingual program is more English than Spanish. It does, though, raise another problem. We don't have teachers who are qualified to teach and, in this school, we usually have 1st- and 2nd-year teachers who are just starting because we're an inner-city school. We have problems with delivery; we have problems with preparation. It's a struggle. It's a struggle.

Dubin:

Would you say these are typical administrative issues in inner-city schools?

Principal:

In many ways, yes. The changing student populations, community involvement, teacher preparation, budgets are important issues in inner-city schools. They're important issues for any school.

The critical problem here does deal with teachers. We've had three teachers here who were placed from other schools. They had tenure but were terrible teachers, according to feedback I've received from the other schools, but were never bumped out. That's a problem.

Also, another problem is dealing with parents and downtown, with the district, because you never get any support. So I've learned that you need to spend time with someone in the district to find out who you talk to and how to handle certain issues if something comes up. If you don't know the politics, you get your head handed to you around here. If you don't know who to call and how to handle the problem, it will always be a problem.

Dubin:

Would you impress upon a young administrator that it is very important to understand the politics? Should they anticipate some of the problems you mentioned about teachers and issues about preparation and supervision?

Principal:

Yes. Let me go on. How to supervise, how to run your parent meetings, how to handle problems with parents, are some of the areas to understand. What's the best way to do this and how to have a system set up to handle these kinds of parents . . . who to go to downtown.

Another concern: books. . . We don't have all our books in, so it would be important to discuss what the process is for books. . . Who do you go to?

Maintenance and operations are other areas. We've got bathrooms out, toilets not working . . . all the day-to-day problems. You need to know who to go to . . . when to scream, when not to scream, where to scream.

Dubin:

Yes. I understand. In light of all these issues a new administrator has to encounter, would you set up weekly meetings or opportunities to ventilate and help clarify some of the confusion?

Principal:

Yes. What we've started this year is a breakfast for new administrators. So once a month they come in and have an opportunity to talk about the issues and problems, what's ongoing and what can be handled immediately. Everyone gets up and has a chance to talk and discuss these things.

Dubin:

How do you find them to be?

Principal:

Well, the issues themselves are overwhelming . . . they're overwhelming in this district. For me what has changed in this district is that it has put its foot

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in the door as to what is going on in the classrooms. It's affected the control that we have, how we handle teachers and everything . . . trying to get the scores up. Well, the scores went up a little bit in elementary but went down in middle school and down in high school. So the district is all over us. What's happening in elementary school is that they're telling us when to teach, what to teach, and how to teach it. For me that's unacceptable, but I'm living with it because I'm working here.

Dubin:

I certainly understand your frustration. Is the district moving into a different kind of program that is more generalized, more uniform?

Principal:

To the minute degree. . . . They are telling you what page to be on and what day to be on it!

Dubin:

Really?

Principal:

Yes. It's terrible. It's terrible. For me, the art of teaching, well it goes against everything I believe in. It has taken effect particularly in the elementary school. They're in the classrooms. You have to do this on a certain day, you have to do this on a certain day . . . this is what you're going to teach the kids today. . . . Well, it's almost obstruction, not instruction, not really teaching anymore.

Dubin:

How are the teachers reacting?

Principal:

Well, it's like anything else. Everyone complains, but they all go along because they're worried about their jobs and lives. You do what you can within the requirements. But there's no art, no music, no science, no creativity.

Dubin:

You say that there's no art, no music, no creativity. Is that because they're putting this aside to focus on improving test scores?

Principal:

You've got 2½ hours of literacy and 1½ of math mandated by the district. It does not leave you time to do anything else.

Dubin:

So to understate it you would say that it's imbalanced?

Principal:

That would be understating it.

Dubin:

With respect to veteran and newly appointed administrators, what would you say to them about things that you've learned? How would that conversation go?

Principal:

With newly appointed administrators, they need to focus on how they get things done . . . how do you implement this? With veterans it's more of a creative venture . . . how do you get this into a school, how do you handle this, not so much nuts and bolts. You see, it's more philosophical with veteran administrators in the sense that they understand these problems and all know that they exist. How do you add luster to the school? How do you bring parents into the school that I haven't tried? . . . This hasn't worked. How would I do this differently?

Dubin:

If you were asked, what makes you better today that you were 5 years ago?

Principal:

I weathered the storms. Basically, it's the experience. I understand where things are coming from and how to do things. The times I've gotten hammered I've gotten up and not done it again or done it differently. It's experience. It's experience. I'm not like a deer in the headlights anymore.

Dubin:

What makes you not like a deer in the headlights? There are many administrators with years of experience that are like deer in the headlights. They are still paralyzed under these circumstances.

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Principal:

Well, I think it's part of being a human being. There are teachers who have been in the classrooms for 10 years and still can't teach. I don't know how to explain it. Perhaps it's innate. It's part of being in the world and growing and changing. It's not being afraid of taking a position. It's not being afraid of trying to see how it happens and making the school work.

Dubin:

Earlier on you mentioned that the position was a political position. Could you touch upon that a bit more? What makes it political?

Principal:

Especially with the different populations that we have in school today, it is extremely political and you have to be aware. Last year we had a battle between our African American parents and our Latino parents. We had some funding that was to come to the school and they both wanted it. So we had a principal positioned in-between these two groups and the district. When he asked for advice from downtown, they said that they didn't know.

You see, you must make decisions about how to run the school in light of all these contending cultures. It's a battle now. You have the bilingual program, the English-only kids who just speak English, kids who barely speak English, and kids who want to speak their primary language and slowly. You've got many groups contending for the same bucket of money.

Dubin:

Would you say it's a budgetary environment as much as a social environment that an administrator has to contend with?

Principal:

Absolutely. And the administrator can only be spread in a limited number of places. The administrator has to deal with this group and with another group and yet another group. In each case, you must spend an equal amount of time with each competing group. You have three different sets of books to manage. Basically, you have different sets of teachers and in some cases in my district, many bilingual teachers who barely speak English coming from Spain, and that's a different group with a different program.

Dubin:

Are these teachers credentialed?

Principal:

Yes.

Dubin:

I'm sure you're aware of a federal mandate that requires teachers to be credentialed and not teach with emergency credentials.

Principal:

Yes. It's been crazy around here. We've had teachers here who we had to fire because they were teaching under emergency credentials.

Dubin:

And you had to fire them.

Principal:

Yes. Unless they were in a specific program, they couldn't stay in school.

Dubin:

I see. That's an extremely difficult situation.

Principal:

I had a person with a doctorate in chemistry. Because she had the doctorate, she assumed she didn't need to worry about the credentialing program. Well, we had to let her go. She was a great teacher.

Dubin:

That must have been very frustrating in light of how difficult it is to recruit teachers in general.

I don't know that I've asked you, but in this elementary school, how many students are there?

Principal:

850 students.

Dubin:

How is that usually broken down in terms of administrative appointments and support?

Principal:

Well, [if you have] over 600 kids, the district allows you a vice principal.

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Dubin:

OK. I just wanted to clarify that.

If I could ask you a different question: if you were to consider a particularly tough issue you had to face in your career, for example, it could be about a student, a teacher, a parent, a district matter, what comes to mind?

Principal:

The biggest issues for me are issues that focus on the classroom, that is, quality of teaching, tenure, for example. It's mediocrity which upsets me, and I find unfortunately that the district supports this. It's getting people to budge off of what they do, to consider best practices and teach better. If the teachers were operating with this attitude, I can take care of the rest of it. The school has programs that work well. I've got money, but what goes on in the classroom is where it falls apart for me.

Dubin:

Would you say then, if you were to restructure, you would provide more time for training administrators who understand instruction and pedagogy, to have the time to work with teachers?

Principal:

Absolutely. That is so important. Yes, and again, the teachers that are coming from these institutions are ill-prepared to go into the classroom. They are simply not prepared.

Dubin:

Would you consider changing the entire credentialing process?

Principal:

Absolutely: We've got teachers who are part of internship programs and basically are thrown into the classrooms first and taught afterwards. I've got six or seven new teachers now I'm spending time with, and they have no idea. They don't know how to teach to the intellectual spread of the kid, the small-group instruction, academic foundations. I don't understand it. They get into the classroom and most of them teach to the entire class. They don't break them up into groups. They don't individualize the instruction, differentiate questioning. I don't see any of that going on. It's extremely frustrating.

Dubin:

I see.

Principal:

And it's endemic.

Dubin:

Are districts prepared to take on some of that responsibility if the schools of education are not responding to the need or preparing teachers adequately?

Principal:

I wouldn't do it districtwide. As far as I'm concerned, I feel that this district is ineffectual. For example, in response to the struggles in the classrooms, they are not attempting to better prepare the teachers. This is what they are not doing. Rather, they are approaching it by telling the teachers how and what to teach. So their answer is less theory and more practicality, in a sense taking away all of the art of teaching. They don't allow teachers to be creative, to try anything. You do it this way or you get out.

Dubin:

It sounds as though what they're doing is restricting teachers who might have promise to limit what and how they deliver.

Principal:

And they're doing the same thing with the kids. They're restricting the creative and intellectual kids who can really stretch if they're given a chance because what's being dictated to the teachers is, in turn, being dictated to the children.

Dubin:

Are you seeing a reaction from the kids in terms of their responsiveness to this type of curriculum?

Principal:

No, I haven't. The kids are not aware. And this school, over the past 3 or 4 years, well, has really settled down. I don't have the problems I had before. I've had one referral and I haven't had a single suspension. The school runs well, but there's no qualitative change in the classroom. It is all superficial as far as I'm concerned.

Dubin:

What would you say has changed in the kids that has reduced the disciplinary issues?

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Principal:

After-school programs. We really work with the kids. We've brought in outside groups to work with the teachers to do classroom management. Also, the population is stable. We've settled the teachers down so that we don't get such a big turnover anymore. The school population we had begun in second and third grades are now in the fourth and fifth grades. They have had the same process, how to deal with things, expectations, and so forth. So they've settled down. They know when they come to school what they have to do. It makes a big difference and it takes time. It takes time working with the kids.

Dubin:

There are many factors. You have the program. You have money, student stability, and consistent faculty. You have a curriculum that is pretty locked in where they are following things, one step at a time.

Principal:

Lockstep. Basically, lockstep.

Dubin:

Another principal I interviewed mentioned about how isolating the position was. Is there a feeling of isolation as principal, that is, being in a leadership position?

Principal:

Middle management . . . we have everyone beating up on us. We have upper management screaming and yelling at us, for example, timelines to do this and that . . . teachers pulling at you from the other side. You have parent groups. Isolation? Absolutely, and especially in elementary school. If you don't have a vice principal, you've got no one to talk to. Everyone is the enemy . . . not in a formal sense, but you have to watch your back at all times because everyone is watching. In education, when it hits the fan no one is around. You do have to watch yourself.

Dubin:

How do you deal with that?

Principal:

Well, again, the only thing I can do here is reflect enough to think about how it is going to work out. Again, I think that because of my experience, I keep myself out of trouble by doing things that are, in a way, not going to

get me “out there.” When I do make decisions, they are based upon a lot of conversations with other people and what I think is best for the school, much process and reflection.

Let me give you another example of recent parent activism. The district was sued last year by the NAACP. So what’s happened now is that for most of the kids who are in trouble and, unfortunately, African Americans, parents come in with a different attitude. Now that it’s hit the paper that the NAACP is suing the district, I, as the administrator, become the target. I’m stupid . . . and I’m this and that. They do not realize that these are things I cannot control. I have to learn to deal with that too. It’s made a difference because the parents are much more proactive in terms of their kids. They’re downtown a lot more, so it’s a different world.

Dubin:

Well, this has its plusses and minuses. They’re more involved with their kids, which is what you want them to be, but it also raises issues of encroachment, where they’re coming on too strong, too much.

Principal:

Yes. Absolutely. And the problem is, when it comes to the individual child, we’ve lost perspective. It’s become the school’s fault. The school’s not doing this, and I’m not doing that. So for those parents who have kids in trouble, basically the responsibility has been taken away from them. It’s different.

Dubin:

Final question. Is there anything you’d like to add? Doing research on decision making and educational issues, new administrators and those who have been actively involved, as they read some of your thoughts, are there any final ideas or insights, philosophically, educationally, or otherwise you’d like to communicate?

Principal:

For new people coming in, you need to build up a network of those people you trust who you can work with. You need to be as reflective as possible; well-versed in all aspects of the school. You simply can’t walk in and take over a school and expect things to happen. You need to have resources and sources and a lot of patience and an attitude that you’re going to work hard.

Dubin:

Would you say it’s important to have an opportunity to exchange ideas in the field?

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Principal:

I would like time to talk informally; roundtable discussions with principals and teachers to discuss these kinds of day-to-day problems in the school, which essentially are glossed over.

Dubin:

In other words, emphasis on people in the field, speakers coming and talking about programs that have worked or otherwise, or just an exchange of what goes on and having a chance to talk about it with practicing administrators.

Principal:

That would be a tremendous help for everybody, not just veterans but beginners too.

Analysis

This experienced and seasoned principal was responsible for organizing the activities of an under-performing school based on a curriculum reading and behavioral model to which he was opposed. While he recognized the need to improve the academic skill levels for his students, he felt that the approach being mandated by the district was antithetical to his belief system. He felt ethically conflicted between his own sense of what the essence of teaching was compared with the practical pressures exerted by the district.

He also felt that the district and, consequently, the schools were victims of outside community pressures that would force schools to respond to educational initiatives that he felt were counterproductive to effective education. He viewed schools and curriculum with a more progressive and holistic approach and spoke to the needs of the whole child. While identifying problem teachers who were ineffectual with students, he also recognized the frustration of many of his teachers who also saw their roles in a more creative way and were extremely limited by a structured curriculum. Nonetheless, they followed the edicts of the district.

During the interview, he addressed many of the general leadership areas involved in administration, for example, school goals and priorities, personnel, budgetary decisions, participatory management strategies, politics, ethics, personal goals, as well as a host of other leadership considerations specific to his educational philosophy.

The issue of what role ethics plays in developing school policy and making appropriate decisions at the school site is one that administrators grapple

with every day. How do we define ethics, and can it be categorized or formalized to accommodate every situation? When we consider the decisions that school leaders make regarding special education, testing and assessment, disciplinary policies, resource allocation, recruitment, and a host of other issues, the value system of our administrators frequently factors subtly, yet dramatically, into these decisions.

Ethics can be defined as value-laden screens reflecting the particular points of view of different segments of the school and community in general. To offer a framework or ethical roadmap, we then can identify several areas that might be differentiated, representing several vantage points in which ethical decisions can be reviewed. For example, personal ethics involves one's own particular view of right and wrong. This orientation comes from one's personal history and experiences. There are organizational ethical screens which, in schools, address those policies that reflect that particular district's philosophy that is made operational at the school site. There are professional ethics that reflect the standards of the profession, that is, for administrators, teachers, counselors, and so on. Of course, there is the greater society, which imposes its general view of ethics through the media and the broader political arena. Finally, there are the means, or pragmatic ethical screens which constitute the practical reality of decision making. When all these ethical considerations are interwoven, the ethical "recipe" from which a decision is determined is complete. In the context of the principalship, this process is most often undertaken subtly, often unconsciously, as the decision is made. In this particular case, the principal had a very definite educational perspective and clearly assigned a personal judgment to the curriculum and pedagogical application mandated by his school district on his student population. His ethics were in direct conflict with those of the district.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the key issues this administrator raises in this interview?
2. What is the tone of this interview?
3. How does he identify the new role of parents in this community?
4. What is his perception of the district's educational philosophy and what drives that perception?
5. Could you explain this principal's philosophy regarding curriculum?
6. What is his political view of the principalship?
7. What changes would this administrator recommend that would significantly change the effectiveness of teachers?
8. Do you find his comments consistent with other schools or districts you've experienced?

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9. If you were appointed principal in this school, what would some of your first-year objectives be?

Student Activities

1. Write a letter to the superintendent requesting a review of the mandated curriculum.
2. Write a letter of introduction to the community indicating your philosophy, background, and goals for the upcoming school year.
3. Write a letter of introduction to the staff regarding your philosophy, background, and goals for the upcoming school year.
4. Write an agenda for your first faculty meeting at the beginning of the school year.
5. Identify funding sources you would pursue to support your school program that would represent an alternative to the current curriculum. Indicate a rationale for this new curriculum.

Interview Question

What additional interview questions would you direct to this administrator?

Simulations

Role-play the employment interview of the principal that was conducted by the community of parents, teachers, and district personnel. Develop a series of questions that each role-playing member would ask that address the following areas:

1. What would you expect his objectives to be, short- and long-term?
2. What would you expect his leadership style to be?
3. In what area of leadership would you expect him to be most expert?
4. How would he handle conflict?

Role-play a back-to-school night where you need to explain the testing results from your third- and fourth-grade classes to the parents. Included in your presentation should be information about

Curriculum, textbooks, and instructional approaches

Test comparisons with other schools

School patterns and trends for the past 3 years

Identified learning gaps per grade level

- Class-size impact on test scores
- Home support strategies
- Report-card design and information source
- Federal expectations regarding the No Child Left Behind Act

The Ethical Balance

The principal reflected upon many school factors that were very difficult for him. He indicated that the teachers were not prepared to work with children whose needs escaped the training these teachers brought into the classroom. He indicated that policy and credentialing mandates adversely affected the hiring and retention of teachers who were very successful with the students. In light of these issues, consider the following:

1. What alternative strategies would you recommend to employ more effective teachers?
2. How can he better manage his feelings regarding his ethical dilemma regarding curriculum?
3. What other tact could he employ to address the district regarding the curriculum?

Questions Related to ISLLC Standards

See Appendix for ISLLC Standards.

1. How did this principal address Standard 1? Based upon the interview, cite at least one example that demonstrated that this standard was met.
2. Did you find that he also responded to other ISLLC standards? If so, which ones would you identify he addressed and please cite specific examples.

Readings and Resources

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