Ethical Leadership: Promoting Equity and Justice

Rebecca Smith

University of Portland

Standard 5 Anchor Assignment

An educational leader integrates principles of cultural competency and equitable practice and promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

Dr. Linda Owens
Ethical Leadership: Promoting Equity and Justice

Perhaps the most important of all five of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards for principal leadership is Standard 5: The Ethics Standard. This standard calls for equitable practice on the part of the principal that will lead to a more just school, and thus a more just society. The standard calls for principals to serve as models of justice in their school communities, especially in regards to budgetary choices. Principals are called to serve with integrity, fairness, and consistency. They must maintain a focus on the mission and vision on their school in order to advocate and allocate funds for high-needs students. Principals must uphold strong moral principals that can inspire faculty, staff, students, and community members to behave similarly, building a whole community of social justice.

**Accountability: Ensure a system of accountability for every student’s academic and social success.**

In the current age of accountability, responsibility for student success falls on all school leaders but especially on administrators. Principals have a particular responsibility to serve as the ethical model of accountability for the school in decision-making, policy implementation, and in speech and actions. This behavior is especially important in managing finances and financial decisions, making sure the resources are allocated in an equitable manner that promotes justice. Principal leaders also act as researchers in their collection of data and use of it to guide decision-making and policy. The research and reporting aspect of leadership requires ethical behavior and reflection. Creswell (2013) encourages sensitivity “to vulnerable populations, imbalanced power relationships, and placing participants at risk” (p. 56). Principals need to always consider the risks and benefits that research will have on students and continually focus on protecting students in the promotion of academic and social success. The process of reviewing data should also
consider “respectful relationships without stereotyping and using labels that participants do not embrace” (p. 56). A reflective practitioner promotes student growth by maintaining an awareness of the needs of students and staff when implementing polices that impact all community participants.

**Model principles:** *Model principles of self-awareness, reflective practice, transparency, and ethical behavior.*

A principal’s success is dependent on many factors, one of which is trust. An authentic leader who practices honesty and transparency will gain the trust and respect of her community. A principal must be consistent in modeling ethical behavior, teaching students and staff the behaviors that are expected by serving as a living example of those behaviors. As a leader, one needs to be aware of the culture of the school and respond to the needs of the community through budgetary allocations that value diversity. “Culturally responsive teachers accept all students as they are, but they also accept responsibility for helping all students learn” (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2013). Both teachers and administrators must engage in reflective dialogue that will create an environment of acceptance and appreciation of our diverse world. Principals may need to allocate funding for professional development that teaches sensitivity and promotes courageous conversations. Singleton and Linton’s (2006) text *Courageous Conversations about Race* states, “If a vision for equity and anti-racism is only embraced in selected classrooms, departments, or schools, those educators who are disengaged will simply move to places in the district where fear, resistance, inequity, and racism remain unaddressed” (p. 231). It is the responsibility of school administrators to model ethical behavior and make it an integrated aspect of the culture of a school. Administrators can prove their value of equality through resource allocation such as trainings that promote equity.
**Safeguard values:** Safeguard the values of democracy, equity and diversity.

The principal must achieve and maintain an understanding of the diverse school community. With this understanding comes knowledge of the needs of various members of the community and the resources needed to promote equity among various groups. Singleton and Linton (2006) claim, “The principal is the guiding force behind equity efforts in a school. Without the principal’s full and complete commitment, closing the racial achievement gap will be difficult” (p. 235). The principal must demonstrate her commitment to the success of all students through the policies and procedures she promotes. The principal can model fairness by being “free from bias, dishonesty, or injustice” (Sorenson, 2013, p. 47). It is important to recognize that fairness does not mean everyone receives the same amount of what is needed to reach a goal, but rather “when everyone receives what is needed in order to successfully accomplish his or her goal” (p. 48). This distinction is crucial for safeguarding values of democracy in a school. The principal may have to encourage teachers, parents, and community members to allocate more time and resources for underprivileged students who are starting behind. This belief system put into practice can help to value diversity and encourage equity in a tangible and meaningful manner.

**Evaluate potential ethical and legal consequences:** Evaluate the potential ethical and legal consequences of decision-making.

There is great pressure on school leaders to maintain high-performing schools as measured by standardized testing results. One does not have to look far to read stories about school leaders prosecuted for unethical and illegal behavior surrounding altering test scores or pocketing money that does not belong to them. Temptations are high when leaders have significant power and also significant stress. However, an ethical leader must evaluate the
consequences of all decisions and surround herself with competent and ethical support that will help the school live its mission in a legal and moral manner. Singleton (2013) argues that “integrity alone will not allow a school leader to meet with success…[Principals] must have a command of the school’s vision and its budget” (p. 48). It is a challenge for principals to balance the relationship between the vision and the budget, but understanding all facets of the needs of the school and the students will help leaders prioritize with integrity. “The principal must help craft and share a school vision that not only provides all of our students with the opportunity to meet with success but also a vision that is truly shared by all the stakeholders” (p. 49). The principal must recognize how decisions will impact all those invested in the school community and make decisions that lead to the most desirable consequences for all.

**Promote social justice:** *Promote social justice and ensure that individual student needs inform all aspects of schooling.*

The Standard 5 indicator that is the most meaningful to me as a future administrator is *promote social justice*. I have a deep-seeded passion for justice and service to the underprivileged. My own experiences teaching special education, the homeless population, and high school religion have all helped to shape my perspectives on the complex and diverse country in which we live. Additionally, living in Latin America opened my eyes to the benefits that monetary wealth and my own white privilege have provided in my life. I believe I can make a great difference in the lives of those I serve by creating a school environment that promotes social justice.

One aspect of promoting social justice is in providing support, resources, and services to counteract racism. *Courageous Conversations* argues that, “When only a few people in a school system are examining race, sustainable changes that impact overall results will not occur”
(Singleton & Linton, p. 230). As a future principal, I want to be sure that my school community has a conscious and continual awareness of the barriers to student success surrounding racism and prejudice. The principal must be aware of the emotional and physical needs of the student population. This awareness may come by creating an Equity Team that can help the community understand the student body. It is also important for the Parent Teacher Organization to reflect the population of students, not just one race.

An additional method of incorporating justice into the learning community at a school involves integrating the mission statement with the budget. Sorenson and Goldsmith (2013) claim: “Budgeting and vision must be considered simultaneously if schools are to reach their goal of 100% student success” (p. 50). I agree that the vision of a school must be a key driving force when making budgetary decisions. If a principal loses sight of the vision of the school, funding allocations can easily ignore underprivileged students with the highest needs who do not have verbal advocates to fight for monetary resources. Just leadership can help to fight societal injustices that are mirrored within the walls of a school. Glickman and colleagues point out that, “By being just with students, educators can to some extent counter the injustice that students may face in society” (p. 335). Looking at leadership through a social justice lens can help principals focus on equity when measuring accountability and student learning. Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon’s definition of justice entails accountability for teachers and students in regards to instruction and learning. Principals who model justice for their staff will help create a community that values and lives social justice values and teaches them to their students.

Another aspect of promoting justice is highlighted by Sorenson’s (2013) examination of the Golden Rule from each of the five major world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism). The consistency of the value of equal opportunity and fair treatment
towards others illustrates the embedded similarities in humanity that are present despite of our diversity. The social justice indicator of Standard 5 embodies all other indicators in its promotion of success for all students. A leader who values social justice models it, reflects upon it, safeguards it, and integrates justice into decision-making. A social justice leader anticipates the consequences budgetary decisions and holds her community accountable for ensuring justice for all.

There are abundant implications implicit in principal Ethical Leadership as defined by Standard 5. Leaders who are able to uphold the values present in each of the indicators will create a school that promotes democracy and equity for all students. Principals who model integrity, fairness, and ethics will provide a living example for their students and staff of the citizen they hope to create in each student. A school led by ethical leaders will be free from scandal and maintain a reputation that others look to for guidance and inspiration. An ethical principal can be proud of leading a school whose finances, policies, procedures, and members reflect the values of integrity and justice.
References


