



# THE SCHOOL Administrator

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Features

Moral Rudders and Superintendent Values

## **The hardest choices arise when both sides are right. How do good leaders make these tough calls?**

*By Rushworth M. Kidder*

As Ellen recalls it, the case was remarkably complex. It had exploded dramatically in a midsize metropolitan school district, where a principal was arrested and let out of his schools one morning on a sex-abuse charge.

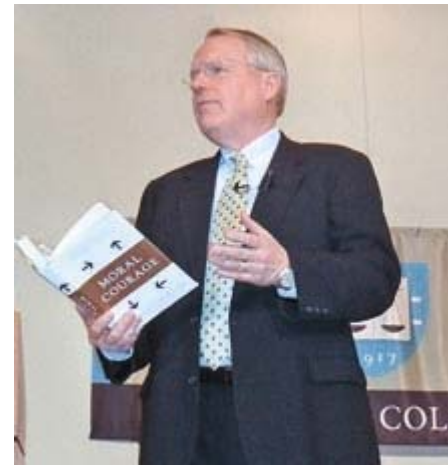
Five years later, when Ellen became superintendent in that district, the case was still wending its way through the courts with a final appeal yet to be heard. The charge came from a woman who accused the principal of molesting her decades earlier when she was a student in his primary school classroom.

Ellen, who asked not to be named due to local sensitivities, found the case had sharply divided her Pacific Northwest community. Many colleagues of the principal strongly supported his innocence. But others in the community felt that, as Ellen put it, "it was just a matter of time before he was convicted."

That latter view was held by some on the school board. "I found myself having to address an assumption among some board members that this man was indeed guilty," says Ellen. This view, she recalls, was likely to pre-empt the decision of the courts as the board considered "termination of his employment" prior to his appeal being heard.

On this point, certain board members were well dug in. They had read transcripts of the earlier trials. What's more, Ellen says, some were being called by prominent citizens saying, "If you bring this guy back into work, don't you plan to return to the board again!"

On one hand, Ellen knew she had to confront the board. "There was a point where I had to raise critical questions," she says. "There was an assumption that, notwithstanding the outcome of his trial, we wouldn't be obligated to bring him back into the district. And I had to



Rushworth Kidder speaks and writes about ethical decision making by leaders in a range of fields.

say, 'I believe we *are* obligated, morally and legally.'

On the other hand, she recalls, "there were moments when I had to say to myself, 'Who do I think I am? What if, in fact, he committed these acts?'" Knowing that judicial systems occasionally do misfire, she recognized that bringing him back to work might put others at risk. What's more, she was a newly appointed superintendent with no experience in that role, needing to maintain good relations with her board. Summarizing her feelings, she puts it simply: "It was awful."

### Common Scenarios

To anyone in the superintendent's chair, Ellen's dilemma sounds eerily familiar. While the issues vary, the core challenge is the same — a tough ethical decision, where values are in play and both sides have powerful moral arguments in their favor. What should superintendents do when

- Pressure is mounting from the board of education to award a contract to a firm that, while highly regarded for its quality work, is well-known for getting several board members elected?
- A subordinate, when questioned about a glowing letter of reference he wrote for a notably problematic employee, claims he wanted to be candid but observes that honest references are no longer possible in today's litigious climate?
- Faculty members insist on remaining in the teachers' lounge rather than in their classrooms before school begins — even though, during a sudden cold and rainy spell, kids have no place to stay warm and dry when parents drop them off early?
- A school board insists on appointing a principal with strong political ties to the community, although the superintendent's selection committee didn't even rank the candidate in the top five?
- An influential parent living close to an all-white neighborhood wants her son assigned to its school, despite a district policy permitting such adjustments only in rare circumstances.

Like Ellen's dilemma, each of these issues — all of them raised by superintendents interviewed for this article — has some degree of moral rightness on both sides. (For a framework for addressing right-versus-right dilemmas, see related story, page 15.) And while neither side involves outright illegality, one side may intuitively seem more "right" than the other. Yet superintendents who argue for that side may find themselves wondering whether their values are up to date. Am I living, they may ask themselves, in a moral universe that no longer exists, clinging to old-fashioned principles when the community has moved on?

What is a superintendent to do when his or her values come into conflict with accepted community norms?

### Mounting Complexity

Many educators agree that such conflicts come with the turf and that worrying about them is part of what it means to be a superintendent. "How to make those decisions and to be ethical — that's the most difficult part of the job" says Betsy Webb, assistant superintendent in Bangor, Maine. "It's the part that keeps me up at night, but it's also the most rewarding part."

"That's why for me the role [of superintendent] exists," says Chris Kelly, superintendent in Vancouver, British Columbia. "The reason you would be in that role is to address that tension, to recognize it as an essential tension that characterizes how life proceeds, how

meaning is found, how tragedy is understood and hopefully avoided at times, but at least embraced."

Kelly likes to talk about the need to "draw meaning at the locus of uncertainty," a phrase he credits to Canadian management theorist Henry Mintzberg. That willingness to confront uncertainty also features in a recent research report by the Institute for Global Ethics® titled "Tell Me What You Really Think: A Report on the Schools of Integrity Project." Conducted in independent schools but with broad application for public education, the report identifies highly ethical school cultures as defined by 10 hallmarks, one of which is described as "tolerance for ambiguity." Educators in such cultures who encounter murky situations, according to this research, tend to engage rather than recoil.

Today's superintendents also sense that the values-driven issues themselves are growing increasingly complex. Asked why, some cite the expansion of new technologies and media structures. Others point to a growing culture of legalism, where administrative decisions are more open to civil rights challenges from students, parents and lawyers.

Reflecting on his years as superintendent in Louisville and later as superintendent of the Los Angeles County Office of Education, Donald W. Ingwerson observes that "it tended to get extremely more difficult as time went on." For Ingwerson, who was named 1992 National Superintendent of the Year, one key reason was the challenge to every sort of authority.

"When I first started, it was very simple how a school is run and who was in charge," he recalls. "Then there came a time in the '60s when the rules were tested and broken, and nothing was done about them."

Ingwerson doesn't so much lament the loss of a culture of authority as the loss of what he calls "a sense, a rudder of what's right," an inner ethical compass that he feels is being lost.

### **Willing to Question**

Given these two points — that ethical issues come with the territory and that they're growing more complex — it's not surprising that Ingwerson's call for a moral rudder finds strong resonance among educators today. While they recognize the difficulty of values-based navigation, they also recognize its importance.

"Sometimes it's tough being very moral and ethical," says Terry W. Despres, superintendent in a small rural district in Livermore Falls, Maine. "There's always the quick decision that gets you off the plate. But to really make [things] work requires an ethical thinking process."

For many superintendents, the notion of being a real leader without such an ethical process seems almost an oxymoron. Among the ethical values most frequently mentioned in conversations for this article were fairness, honesty, trust, respect, caring and responsibility. Supplementing them are such tangible, school-based attributes as inclusion, equality, justice, open communication and (from the Schools of Integrity research) "open feedback," "authentic student input" and "growth, not punishment." And crucial to a values perspective is a readiness to question rather than to moralize.

"What is fair?" muses Joseph Mattos, who heads a school district centered in Unity, Maine. "How do you see 'fair'? Fair to whom?" For him, ethics is not always "having the right answer [but] asking the right questions to get people to reflect."

What happens when a superintendent's strongly held set of values comes up against a different set within the community? John W. Porter, who became the nation's first African-American state superintendent of schools when he took up that post in Michigan and who then served for a decade as president of Eastern Michigan State University and later for two years as superintendent of the Detroit Public Schools, has encountered that challenge so

often that he's developed a rubric for dealing with it.

"The most important ability of a school superintendent," he says, "is to be able to separate, in terms of ethics, one's personal preferences from the organizational objectives." His shorthand version, which he says has "guided me enormously," is a simple imperative: "Don't allow your PPs (personal preferences) to influence your OOs (organizational objectives)."

Porter sees serious problems, however, arising from a more dangerous separation — that between one's private life and one's public ethics. "We often say, 'What you do privately is your business,'" Porter observes. But for public officials, he counters, ethics "doesn't come in two parts — a professional part and a private part. Ethics is ethics. What you do privately has got to be able to stand the test publicly."

### **Uncomfortable Support**

The need for a clear separation of the personal from the organizational, the PPs from the OOs, is a critical point for Darline Robles. Before coming to her present position as superintendent of the Los Angeles County Office of Education, she encountered a situation in which a school board took a conservative stand on a hot social issue. Robles argued strongly for a more expansive policy but recognized that "for this community, for the majority," her position was more than they could accept.

Following the vote, she said, her role required her to support publicly the school board's decision. When she did so, she recalls, "somebody said to me, 'How could you do that? It's against your being!' I said, 'Their reasons were their values, and I respected that.'"

Three years later, Robles says, the board reversed its decision and left her with an important lesson. "We could have different opinions, and disagreements about them," she says. "But we both agreed that we would do it in a humane way and explain why and be there and talk to the kids" about the reasons.

Now, as she talks with the 80 superintendents in her county, she emphasizes the importance of building clear, respectful relationships with boards that permit "that kind of honest conversation." A superintendent's priority, she says, is to "have that relationship where the board knows what you stand for, and you know what they stand for and why they're there."

Robles' experience points to another important element of the leadership-values equation: the need to let resolutions develop over time. That may sometimes appear to be indecision, says J. Duke Albanese, a former education commissioner of Maine who was a long-serving superintendent and president of the Maine School Superintendents Association. So he likes to remind superintendents that "it's not going to be seen as indecisive to take some time and cogitate on things, not just by yourself but with others."

When an ethics issue arises, he advises, "let it percolate a little and have conversations about it. You don't do that by yourself, but you set the tone for how to do it."

### **Thoughtful Navigation**

How then does reflection differ from compromise? Must superintendents, navigating in today's world, be prepared to compromise their values?



Darline Robles is the superintendent of the Los Angeles County Office of Education.

"Compromise, in my work, has normally meant negotiation," says Ingwerson. He defines it as "coming up with something that you can live with in your core beliefs, and that lets someone else exist within their core beliefs, on the public item being considered."

Ingwerson admits that "negotiating" often is viewed as "flip-flopping." But that, for him, is all the more reason to steer by a set of core values. While "the implementation of values will change," he says, the values remain intact.

His rule of thumb: "Don't go outside of what you know is right or basically ethical. Never commit to something you can't implement or make sense of to your audience." When you violate that tenet, he says, "you soon have the reputation of double-talk: 'He's all over the ballpark,' or 'You can't count on him — make sure you get it in writing.'"

Pamela Fisher, a former superintendent and former director of the Great Schools Partnership in Portland, Maine, agrees. "I don't think values become outmoded," she says. What happens instead is that "some of the practices" have not kept up with changing times. What was right during the industrial revolution, she explains, when "we knew some kids were going to be mill workers and some kids were going to college — that's all gone. It was right at the time, and we're still doing it, but it's no longer right." For her, the demand is to "redefine the practice, not the value."

On one point, however, there is wide agreement. While superintendents need to articulate values, they are not appointed to dictate values. Yet the temptation to become the values guru — especially for long-term superintendents — is always present.

"Having been in this community for nine years," says Patricia M. Hopkins, superintendent in Camden, Maine, "I find people looking to me to tell them what to do. And it's a very fine line because I believe that would not be ethical. *They* need the information. *They* need to make the decision."

Ingwerson agrees. "The superintendent is not God," he says with a chuckle. Instead, the task is to "try to move the district" toward its stated goals.

### **Personal Truth**

This is exactly what Ellen, the superintendent in the Pacific Northwest, sought to do in defending her colleague's right to fair treatment. To their credit, she says, her school board members "took the cue" from her insistence on justice and dropped the effort to terminate the principal. In the final trial, the judge acquitted him of all charges. The man remains today doing excellent work in the school district.

Given all the pressures Ellen faced, what kept her from being more protective of her own position? Why put out so much energy on behalf of a colleague?

Pondering that point for a moment, she reframes the query. "If the question is, 'What stops you from looking after yourself?' it comes down to 'Where does this moral imperative come from in the first place?' You come down to that sense of what you think truth is, what you think is the most durable principle."

In their search for that "durable principle," what's the most important support superintendents can have?

"Fellowship," says Chris Kelly, superintendent in Vancouver, British Columbia, meaning "those one, maybe two, if you're lucky three people you find in the course of your career who are ready to go with you far beyond the normal confines of professional dialogue into deep, abiding, trusting, critical dialogue." Your most valuable resource, he says, is having "somebody who will pose an opposite question and listen really carefully to what you're

thinking.”

And the biggest obstacle? With a knowing smile and typical Yankee economy, Thomas Farrell, superintendent in Kennebunkport, Maine, puts it in six words: “Finding time to have these conversations.”

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