



*Original Research Article*

# Examining perceptions of three elementary principals regarding their ethical preparedness

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This study examined the three principals' perceptions on the continuous ethical trainings the school district provides administrators. Principals are held to standards of behavioral expectations which are summarized in the Florida's Statutes and State Board of Education Rules. Regrettably, ethical misconduct occurs and affects many neighborhoods as well as educational settings throughout the nation. History shows that the Code of Ethics of the Education Profession in Florida was implemented on March 24, 1965. The Code of Ethics was later revised in 1981 as well as on July 6, 1982. On July 6, 1982 the Principles of Professional Conduct for the Education Profession in Florida was enacted and put into effect. The school district in this study is not providing the three elementary principals with the tools to be agents of ethical behavior. Ethical behavior and principals must become synonymous if a dramatic drop in misconduct is to come to fruition.

**Key words:** Code of Ethics, educational leader, ethical misconduct, ethics, leadership summit

## INTRODUCTION

### Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of the ethical preparedness received by three elementary school principals in a South Florida school district.

### Statement of the problem

A school district in Florida has seen the number of ethical misconducts by principals' increase within the last five years. If this trend continues the school district in this study may see itself spending more time with unethical principals and less time preparing students in the classroom.

### Background

All Florida certified educational leaders are bound by the Code of Ethics which are outlined in the Florida Statutes

and State Board of Education Rules. The Code of Ethics and Principles of Professional Conduct are the guiding philosophies that direct educational leaders (FLDOE, 2015). Members of the community can expect these principles to be adhered from educational leaders at all times when decisions must be made in an ethical manner.

From 2009-2015 there were 64 allegations made against principals in a top-performing urban school district in Florida (FLDOE, 2015). The 64 allegations were made against 54 different principals. The data showed that some principals have been investigated more than once during this time period. Twenty-nine percent of the principals in the school district had allegations made against them (FLDOE, 2015). Of the 64 ethical misconduct reprimands, the outcomes of the principal investigations concluded are as follows:

- Twenty-eight were turned over to the various Area Superintendents for them to counsel the principals on

appropriate behavior.

- Fifteen cases were closed without cause for disciplinary action- the allegations could not be substantiated.
- Eight times the principal received some type of formal reprimand.
- Seven times the principal resigned or retired during the investigation.
- Four were administratively closed with no action.
- Two were closed by Board Action- there was one demotion and one termination (FLDOE, 2015).

Incidents of misconduct do not always merit discipline against an educational leader's license. Occasionally a violation of the standards was merely a workplace concern and fittingly handled by the district. Severe ethical violations may require more significant action. The Code of Ethics and Principles of Professional Conduct Standards symbolizes the highest ethics of the education profession. Principals found guilty of ethical violations may cause students harm. Principal misconduct shames the community and defames the profession.

### Definitions of Terms

Specific terms have been defined for this study. These terms are utilized throughout this action research article.

**Ethics** are the moral principles that govern an individual's way of thinking and acting (Mitchell, 2012).

**Educational leader** is a person (or a group of people) who dramatically affect the thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors of a significant number of individuals (Gardner & Laskin, 2011).

**Educator misconduct** is allegations of direct harm to students and acting detrimentally to the education profession (FLDOE, 2015).

### Research questions

Noted below are the research questions.

1. What ethical preparedness did the district provide when you became principal?
2. How has the ethical preparedness you received from the school district guided your ethical and moral endeavors?

### Literature review

Ethics encompasses many of the factors an administrator takes into account when making a decision regarding his or her school. The history of ethics showed that the Code of Ethics of the Education Profession in Florida was implemented on March 24, 1965 (FLDOE, 2015). It was then amended in 1969 and republished in 1974 (FLDOE, 2015). The Code of Ethics was later revised in 1981 as well as on July 6, 1982. On July 6, 1982 the Principles of Professional Conduct for the Education Profession in Florida was enacted and put into effect (FLDOE, 2015). It was later amended in 1983, 1992, as well as in 1998 to

include self-reporting of a violation by the educational leader.

Forty years after the Florida's Code of Ethics was implemented, a set of standards was put in place on May 24, 2005. The new codes were specifically for principals to have a positive effect on the school. These standards are known as the Florida Principal Leadership Standards. There are ten standards that are classified under several categories: Student Achievement, Student Learning as a Priority, Instructional Plan Implementation, Faculty Development, Learning Environment, Decision Making, Leadership Development, School Management, Communication and Professional and Ethical Behaviors (FLDOE, 2015).

An educational institution, for example the local school district, influences what students know and how they contemplate based on the curriculum and instruction (Cuellar and Giles, 2012). The profession of education requires change agents to endorse education as an ethical movement; thus, leaders must remember the importance of practicing ethical principles with the intent of having a positive impact on students in K-12 education (Fullan, 2008; Kaser and Halbert, 2009). Educational leaders are looked upon to provide answers when tough decisions have to be made regarding the students and the community he or she serves (Epstein, 1995). According to Eyal et al. (2011), educational leaders remain ethical and professional when dealing with members of the community.

The educational leader depends on the support of the community because a majority of ethical decisions are based on the community's beliefs (Stefkovich and O'Brien, 2004). Eyal et al. (2011) contend that the responsibility of the educational leader focuses on the students as well as members of his or her school's internal and external community. Stefkovich (2006), and Stefkovich and Begley (2007) agreed "the profession must mainly focus on students' best interest" In addition educational leaders "should recognize children's rights, acknowledge children's diversity and respect while making responsible choices" (Eyal et al., 2011).

Ethics demands self-control and the ability to handle situations that are presented in a moral and ethical manner. "Ethics are the reflective capacity that precedes action and enables us to better determine the impact and the consequences of future decisions" (Langlois and Lapointe, 2010). Ethical leadership cannot be sufficiently captured in any laws, codes, regulations and policies (Wagner, 2012). Blackmore (2010) contends that educational leaders must not be stagnant because leadership is a moral, ethical and rational practice. A 21st century educational leader faces the daunting task of remaining ethical while continuing on a voyage that combines the leader's personal and professional beliefs (Cuellar and Giles, 2012).

Ethics are the moral principles that govern an individual's way of thinking and acting (Mitchell, 2012). Ethical leadership develops over time and the experiences have a tremendous impact on leadership style (Eddy, 2010). An educational leader needs to act in accordance

**Table 1.** Demographics of three Elementary Schools in the Study

Elementary school	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Multiracial	White
School A	0%	7%	38%	4%	51%
School B	4%	9%	22%	3%	62%
School C	3%	8%	76%	1%	12%

with “ethical values, being a role model, having an intellectual influence on people, and providing individualized support” (Cezmi and Toprak, 2014). Research has demonstrated a link between an individual’s ethical perspective and leadership style (Preskill and Brookfield, 2009).

## METHODOLOGY

### Setting/Participant Information

This study looked at three elementary school principals and the perceptions of the ethical training they received prior to becoming administrators. The elementary schools were part of a top-performing urban school district in Florida and one of the largest in the nation which consisted of over 180 schools, with more than 183,000 students who speak 150 languages and dialects (FLDOE, 2014).

Principal A was a male in his 11th year as principal and worked in a school where 62% of the students qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch. Principal of School A’s philosophy was to create a nurturing environment where students feel safe. The principal stated that the school was an “extension of the home”. According to the principal of School A students needed to feel safe first and foremost before any learning or academic growth takes place.

Principal B was a female from an affluent elementary school where 29% of the students qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch. The principal was in her fourth year at the school and 14th year overall as a principal. The principal from School B stated that she was committed to providing highly trained professional educators, partnering with parents and community to offer a world class education; together ensuring that each student had the opportunity to reach their highest potential, developing the skills and ethics to become responsible citizens.

Principal C was a female who worked at an elementary school where 86% of the students qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch. The principal envisioned a school where all students were granted the opportunity to a quality education. The principal considered herself to be an advocate and the voice to those students and parents who felt the system was not always looking out for their best interests. Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the three elementary schools in this study.

### Data collection

Data for this study were obtained by conducting interviews. The interview questions included:

1. What ethical preparedness did the district provide when you became principal?
2. How has the ethical preparedness you received from the school district guided your ethical and moral endeavors?

### Data analysis

When analyzing the data from the principal interviews, a pattern was identified. The three elementary principals all considered themselves to be ethical because they always did the right thing when confronted with an array of ethical decisions. Through the interviews discrepancies were also revealed. Principal A and Principal C discussed how they attended an annual leadership summit and this was the ethical stepping stone for the two principals. The leadership summit covered a variety of topics (ethical/moral character, budget, community leadership, school leader) by the district’s superintendent as well as guest speakers. The primary goal of the leadership summit was for the principals to acquire ethical principles and apply them in the educational setting.

## FINDINGS

During the interview with the three elementary school principals the following information was gathered.

- Principal A stated his ethics have changed over the past decade in regard to how he feels that he and his staff need to do a better job of supporting the parents/guardians so they can do a better job of supporting their children when they are home with them.
- Principal A stated additional ethical support was provided when public figures were not seen in a positive manner due to unethical behavior.
- Principal B stated her view of ethics have changed because the diversity and socioeconomic status of her current students are much different than in her previous schools.
- Principal B’s philosophy changed because the challenges she faced now are more political orientated

than student orientated.

- The three principals expressed an assumption that all educational leaders were ethical based on their former educational course work.
- All three elementary principals concluded the school district did not have a proper ethical program or training currently in place.

## Conclusions

Based on the perceptions of the three elementary principals in this study, they believed the school district had no ethical program or training currently in place. The primary goal of the Florida Code of Ethics was to decrease principal misbehaviors while increasing his or her awareness of the law, professional responsibilities and potential penalties (FLDOE, 2015). Based on these notions, educational leaders were obligated to reexamine and challenge society's status quo, organizations and individuals who may hurt and repress those individuals who do not have the opportunity to defend themselves. Thus, ethics played an instrumental role in establishing a responsible culturally responsive leader and preparing them for the many challenges when leading an educational setting. An implication for education is institutions of higher education must provide future educational leaders with opportunities to demonstrate and practice ethical behaviors.

One recommendation is the school district in this study needs to create an ethical task force comprised of individuals who represent ethical behavior to its core value. The two must work in conjunction if we are to see the number of ethical misconduct violations decrease while seeing the number of ethical educational leaders increase.

In conclusion, by examining ethical trainings, 21st century educational leaders will be cognizant and prepared to deal with a vast array of educational issues centered on topics and or dilemmas which require ethical decision making that impact members of their internal and external community.

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