

Professional Ethics for Educational Administrators

School principals, business managers, college presidents, vice-presidents and deans, and other educational administrators all face ethical challenges on a regular basis. When those challenges have well-resolved precedents, fit current policy, and are handled by people with good motives, dilemmas can be easily resolved. Unfortunately, issues vary, the right policy often does not exist, and people are fallible . . . so this type of task becomes rather difficult.

Solving ethical issues takes planning. And the best solutions occur only when arrangements, such as a code of ethics, policies, and a conscious awareness of risks, are in place *before* problems arise.

How to Develop Professional Ethics

According to Pack-Brown and Williams,¹ there are four mainstream schools of philosophical ethics—Absolutism, Relativism, Intentionalism, and Consequentialism. Absolutism claims that all ethical principles are given to us by a higher authority. Relativism, on the contrary, asserts that there is no such a thing as immutable ethical standards, that they will vary depending on time, context, or convention. Intentionalists look at ethics and morality as dependent on a person's motivation and intention

(e.g., an act is right as long as the actor means well). Consequentialism looks at the results of behaviors in order to determine their ethical acceptability.

By Julian Melgosa

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None of the above is compatible with a Christian perspective. Taking the absolutist view would not allow for discussion or alteration. With relativism, we would conclude that “There is no point in discussing ethics since ‘everything is relative.’”² Intentionalism would consider unacceptable acts to be right if performed with good intentions (as Christians, we can feel sympathy for the person's motives; however, the act remains unacceptable). And as for Consequentialism, an immoral act cannot become moral even if it produces apparently good results.

Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions must choose a middle ground between the extremes of dogmatic absolutism and radical relativism to establish coherent ethical standards for employees and students. The “absolutes” would contain the fundamental Adventist beliefs and principles founded in Scriptures—the non-negotiables. The “relatives” would permit ethical standards valid in specific contexts (time, place, and culture).

The matter of context and culture deserves consideration. Ethical codes regarded as vital in one context may be judged inadequate in another. Take, for example, the Code of Ethics for School

Administrators from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA).³ Statement No. 4 reads: “Obey local, state, and national laws.” In some countries, for a Christian to obey certain local or state laws would be in flagrant opposition to basic human rights and biblical principles. Or statement No. 8: “Accepts academic degrees or professional certification only from duly accredited institutions.” Accreditation, as defined in North America, does not exist in the majority of European countries. We must, therefore, be sensitive when applying existing ethical codes to new settings.

A Tentative List of Principles

From this centrist position, which allows for fundamental principles as well as flexibility, Seventh-day Adventist educators and administrators need to engage in serious discussion in order to craft a code of ethics that deals adequately with the issues and satisfies the majority of employees and constituents. This product needs to be constantly reviewed and modified with the input of those in the profession. The following list of ethical principles for educational administrators represents an attempt to initiate such discussion.

Integrity

Integrity is foundational to ethics and morality. If it were to be consistently implemented, few other guidelines would be needed. Having integrity means that one’s beliefs and behavior adhere to a code of ethics and are acted upon consistently. For example, a school principal cannot demand thrift of his staff and then go on an expensive or unnecessary business trip.

People of integrity are trustworthy. They are truthful and predictable in their behavior.

But how does the administrator know which choices are morally right? A helpful rule of thumb is to ask, “What would Jesus do?”

Many contemporary ethicists

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make a distinction between global and local integrity. Albert Musschenga⁴ asks whether integrity requires internal coherence and consistency between beliefs and behavior *in all (global) roles of life*, or only *in one particular role (local)*—say, the professional role. The local concept holds that a politician has integrity if he or she displays coherence and consistency between judgment/beliefs and behavior *only while performing public duties*.⁵ However, Christian principles demand a higher standard of morality, as believers are answerable to God at all times, in or out of the public eye.

Lack of integrity can also occur through passive behavior. An educational administrator sitting in a board meeting hears accusations about a colleague. He knows the statements

are untrue. Should he speak up? Integrity demands that he correct the misstatement if it will affect the colleague’s reputation or the committee’s decision-making, even though intervening may make the administrator unpopular or create extra work for him.

Professional Competence

Professional competence refers to the duty of educational administrators to improve their own personal and professional competence and that of

those under their care. This requires careful planning and budgetary provision for continuing education and/or research activities.

In certain instances, a lack of competence may become a sensitive issue. Suppose a high school principal lacks financial expertise and would benefit from taking a graduate-level finance course. She is morally obligated to become competent in this area, but may feel embarrassed for others to know about this weakness. To avoid losing face (which is quite important in certain cultures), she could take the course online or acquire the knowledge through tutoring.

Respect

The principle of respect requires

that educational administrators recognize the dignity of subordinates and colleagues, as well as their own. They should seize every opportunity to show regard for others and appreciation of their work. Their attitudes and actions can enhance the self-esteem and productivity of their employees. Conversely, a critical, overbearing demeanor tends to discourage the staff and impair their performance.

Administrators should refrain from all forms of unethical behavior in this area, such as demeaning remarks about various cultural groups and sexual misconduct. Like their public counterparts, Seventh-day Adventist administrators have faced allegations of sexual harassment, which is defined as the use of sexual language, unwanted touching, or requests for sexual favors, usually coming from a male having authority over a female. This may occur in a variety of interpersonal contexts—teacher to student, school principal to teacher, president to employee, chief accountant to junior accountant, etc. Schools need to have in place and publicize ethical statements and targeted policy that provide specific guidance on how to protect the victim, assure a fair process for the accused, and specify suitable disciplinary actions.

Conflict of Interest

The *Church Policy Manual* defines conflict of interest as follows: “Conflict of interest shall mean any circumstance under which an employee or volunteer by virtue of financial or other personal interest, present or potential, directly or indirectly, may be influenced or appear to be influenced by any motive or desire for personal advantage, tangible or intangible, other than the success and well-being of the denomination” (E 85). Conflict of interest occurs when the administrator’s private actions and interests are, or appear to be, incompatible with his or her professional obligation to the school. Conflicts of interest occur in many forms. For ex-

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ample:

- A college of technology dean who owns a computer firm uses his influence to get the school to buy equipment from his company;
 - A college president accepts bribes or gratuities from a company seeking to bid on construction of a new dormitory in exchange for recommending the firm to the board.
 - After hearing that the school will be purchasing property to expand its facilities, the institution’s financial officer and several friends purchase a piece of land and sell it to the school at an inflated price.
 - A department of education chairperson accepts money in exchange for providing the names and addresses of students to a company seeking to market educational computer games.
 - A college administrator sells insurance to coworkers during office hours.
- Accepting gifts in exchange for favors is also a problem in certain Adventist schools, especially in cultures where merchandise or services are purchased from providers that are extremely generous to administrators or purchasing managers. This creates a sense of institutional indebtedness to purchase from that provider.
- Appropriate policy/practice is needed to avoid situations where the administrator reaps personal gain or power from these types of behavior.

Nepotism is another area that affects Seventh-day Adventists educational centers. This happens when administrators use their position to grant favors for their family and friends or to expand their influence in matters of hiring, salary reviews, promotions, improvement of working conditions, policymaking, etc. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has traditionally upheld the concept of a couple or a family as a “team.” Often times, it is in the best interest of the organization to have more than one member of the family working for the same educational institution. Yet, policy and practice must be established to avoid situations where school administrators intervene, directly or indirectly, in matters that affect a family member’s financial or professional interest.

Confidentiality

A great deal of the power of school principals, superintendents, and college/university officers stems from their access to information. Personal data on individuals (i.e., students, colleagues, church leaders) should not be shared with anyone without the specific authorization of the individual involved (or parent/guardian if a minor). Policies based on the church handbook and local and national laws should spell out how to maintain confidentiality and how to determine who can access data. The school should implement appropriate security measures for storing paper documents and set up firewalls and other deterrents to unauthorized access to computer data. Examples:

- Roy has a medical condition that will require him to be out of the classroom for several months. He has asked his principal to keep the information confidential. Even when there is pressure from other teachers to know the reason for Roy’s absence, the principal should not disclose any information about his condition.
- A research university wants to study the health habits of Adventist

students. The administrator should study the proposal carefully to make sure that the researchers obtain informed consent from the students and parents (for minors) before administering the survey.

Transparency

Transparency refers to the use of administrative policies and procedures that are known to colleagues and open for inspection by constituents. This could seem to conflict with confidentiality—one hides, the other reveals. But confidential information is different from data subject to transparency. The first relates to persons, the second to data, procedures, and practices. Examples:

- When Carmen, a school principal, prepares to search for candidates to fill teaching vacancies for next year, she first reviews the process of selection, step by step, to ensure that she abides by established procedure. When reporting to the board, she takes some time to explain the process. She also makes herself available to answer questions from the local pastor, parents, and students.
- Sue, the school treasurer, prepares monthly reports on school finance as well as year-end reports. These are based on standard accounting procedures, and are made available to interested individuals who want to know how tuition and subsidy monies are being spent. The administrator has nothing to lose and much to gain by being open and transparent about such matters.

Justice (or Fairness)

This principle ensures equal opportunity for those under the care of the educational administrator. He or she needs to be scrupulously fair and avoid even the appearance of deception, partiality, or uneven application of policy. Examples:

- Solly, a college academic dean, congratulates one of the teachers for her recent publication and reminds her to apply for a higher ranking. To be fair, the dean should also remind

other professors in the same category to apply for ranking.

- Two students are caught smoking on campus. Sam, the dean's son, is suspended for three days; while Alvin, who is accused a few months later of the same offense but whose parents are common laborers, is expelled.

Truthfulness

Truthfulness refers to the administrator's commitment to tell the truth and to scrupulously avoid deception, especially in cases where such behavior produces benefits for the individual and his or her friends. Example:

- Lucy is a junior high school teacher. Her request was extensively debated by the school administrative committee and voted down, 6 votes to 5. After the meeting, the principal and committee chair, Ms. Klein, tells Lucy that her request had been denied. Disappointed, Lucy asks about the vote. The committee rules do not allow Ms. Klein to reveal names, but they do permit her to tell how many people voted yes and no. So she tells Lucy the scores, though she knows Lucy will probably appeal and this will cause additional headaches.

The principle of truthfulness touches many areas of school life—plagiarism in research and writing by students and teachers, copyright violations, cheating on exams, deception in research (such as faking data to get a research study published), disguising personal items in an expense report, shading the truth to convince board members to vote for the administrator's pet project, and so on. We do not have space to discuss all of these areas, but they demand scrupulous attention.

A Word of Caution

Today's world is interconnected and interacts on many different levels at the same time. It's difficult to even imagine the ripple effect of decision making and the consequences of seemingly mundane choices. The busy administrator is forced to function in many capacities, making it dif-

ficult to identify the ethical dimensions of his or her various roles. In our postmodern society, there are fewer sources of moral authority for guidance and a feeling that all choices are relative.⁶

These trends highlight the complexity of developing a global code of ethics. However, attempts have been made to simplify the task. For example, the concept of *local integrity* is emerging in an attempt to separate personal and professional roles. Christians see human beings wholistically and reject any attempt to separate one's private and public lives. Christian educators must advocate *total integrity* and define professional ethical principles that apply to everything they do.

Conclusion

Adventist educational administrators need to develop and adopt a code of ethics founded upon Christian principles and tailored to the specifics of their culture and local situation. This will allow them to be accountable to their constituencies and free from public suspicion and criticism. In addition, this will bring peace to their conscience, glory to God, and honor to themselves—"Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."⁷

But adapting a biblically based conventional code of ethics is not enough. An ethical culture must be created at the school and in the community. Educational leaders need to make public statements about these principles, include them in committee agendas; debate them at board meetings; share them with parents, members of the community and church leaders; and encourage faculty and staff to review them in the context of Christian ethics and practice. Policies should grow out of these principles, with appropriate disciplinary measures established for policy violations.

There will be times when policies

are insufficient. A new ethical dilemma emerges, and the question arises: "Is this right for me to do?" Ethics experts Marcia Whicker and Jennie Kronenfeld say: "If in doubt, do not do it."⁸ When pressured to do something immediately, if the administrator thinks the action may be unethical, he or she should say: "I am sorry; I cannot make this decision right away. I am unsure of how to proceed. I need time to review our policies, to reflect and pray about it, and to consult with trusted advisors."

Paul Wagner, the executive secretary of the Philosophy of Education Society,⁹ summarizes professional educational ethics into what he calls the "rule of thumb"—"Be other-regarding." This brings to mind the Golden Rule, a supreme piece of professional advice, given by Jesus two millennia ago: "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12, NIV). ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Sherlon P. Pack-Brown and Carmen B. Williams, *Ethics in a Multicultural Context* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003).
2. P. Lance Ternasky, "Coping With Relativism and Absolutism." In Kenneth A. Strike and P. Lance Ternasky (eds.), *Ethics for Professionals in Education* (Columbia University, N.Y.: Teachers College Press, 1993).
3. American Association of School Administrators, *Code of Ethics for School Administrators*. CSEP Library. Retrieved November 19, 2003, from <http://www.aasa.org/>.
4. Albert W. Musschenga, "Education for Moral Integrity." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 35:2 (May 2001), pp. 219-235.
5. Musschenga illustrates this concept by saying that most everybody would assess Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as an exemplary man of integrity, even though he was known to have extramarital affairs.
6. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 1993).
7. Matthew 25:21 (KJV).
8. Marcia L. Whicker and Jennie J. Kronenfeld, *Dealing With Ethical Dilemmas on Campus* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1994).
9. Paul A. Wagner, *Understanding Professional Ethics* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1996), p. 27.

For Additional Reading

Many institutions/organizations have posted ethical guidelines, which can serve as basis for administrators to develop a code of ethics. They should carefully examine any statement before adopting it, and suffice the chosen guidelines with a biblical perspective. Examples:

- <http://www.iit.edu/departments/csep/PublicWWW/codes/>
- <http://www.aasa.org/about/ethics.htm>
- <http://www.umanitoba.ca/admin/governance/policies/>
- <http://www.aaup.org/statements/Redbook/Rbethics.htm>
- <http://www.iit.edu/departments/csep/PublicWWW/codes/coe/acec.html>
- <http://www.hslc.org/~bmacgibeny/580AASACodeOfEthics.htm>
- <http://www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=27>
- http://www.principals.org/advocacy/stmnt_ethics.cfm



An AVLN Supported Initiative: Adventist Dual Enrollment

- Do you have academically gifted and/or very focused, hard-working students enrolled in your academy?
- Does your college want to increase its enrollment?
- Have you looked around at what public education is doing lately with early enrollment programs for college?
- Do teenage students and their parents ask if there is a way for juniors and seniors to earn college credits while they are still in academy?

If you answered Yes to any of these questions, you will be interested in a new initiative for Adventist education. The North American Division Office of Education, Walla Walla College, North Pacific Union Conference, the NAD Technology and Distance Education Committee (TDEC), the NAD college/university distance education consortium (ADEC), and AVLN are interested in implementing a program that will enable academically gifted students to simultaneously take classes and receive credit for college and high school courses..

Visit the AVLN Web site at <http://www.avln.org/jae> to read about this initiative. You can also participate with AVLN board members and the person spearheading this initiative in a bulletin board discussion about how this would work, as well as the possible merits or drawbacks of this idea.

While you are at the AVLN Web site, check out the current and future AVLN course offerings, which are endorsed by the North American Division's Technology and Distance Education Committee for recertification of NAD K-12 teachers. "Active Online Teaching" began March 15. "Technology in the Early Elementary Classroom" and "Integrating Technology in the Curriculum" both begin June 14.

AVLN also presents a conference each summer. This year, it will be held at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California, and will feature Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt, authors of *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace*, *Lessons From the Cyberspace Classroom*, and *The Virtual Student*. Plan now to attend these excellent meetings June 30- July 2. For additional information or to register for the conference, visit the AVLN Web site (<http://www.avln.org/>) or contact Bob Paulson (E-mail: bpaulson@puc.edu or (phone): (706) 629-7951, Ext. 306.