The Importance of Ethical Leadership
Perspectives in the School Superintendency

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Mini Bio

Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership within the School of Education at The University of Mississippi.

Over a decade of successful experience in the PreK-12 educational setting in the U.S. as a teacher, coach, technology coordinator, athletic director, and principal.

Over six years of successful experience in the Higher Education setting at The Ohio State University, Bowling Green State University, and University of West Florida.

Spoke on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. in order to advocate for Education and School Leadership.

Received Congressional Recognition by the U.S. House of Representatives.

Nominated for the 2015 National Assistant Principal of the Year in the United States.

Named the 2015 State Assistant Principal of the Year in the State of Ohio.

My research interests include: Ethics, Leadership, Research on the Superintendency, and Educational Technology.
Ethical Leader Perspectives: Ethical Leadership Perspectives are defined as to how individuals perceive or view their own ethical leadership as well as what they consider to be ethical conduct versus what is not.

Essentially, it is what individuals theoretically believe is ethical leadership and normatively appropriate behavior (Brown, Harrison, & Trevino, 2005).
Ethical Leadership: Ethical Leadership refers to the observable behavior rather than a theoretical perception of what ethical leadership is (Brown, Harrison, & Trevino, 2005).

Essentially, it is the act of what is right versus what is wrong. It is the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct.
Research Title: An Investigation of Ethical Leadership Perspectives among Ohio Public School District Superintendents

Questions guiding this study were:

What are the ethical leadership perspectives of public school superintendents in the State of Ohio?

To what extent do the ethical leadership perspectives of Ohio public school superintendents vary according to school district characteristics?

To what extent do the ethical leadership perspectives of Ohio public school superintendents vary according to school leader demographics?
Even though ethical scandals continue to occur today, researchers know “little about the ethical dimension of leadership” (Brown, Harrison, & Trevino, 2005, p. 117).

Ciulla (2004) wrote “it’s remarkable that there has been little in the way of sustained and systematic treatment of the subject of ethical leadership by scholars” (p. 3).

Although some literature does exist regarding ethical leadership, much of it is written from a philosophical and theoretical perspectives, proposing how leaders should lead.
It is evident that “a more descriptive and predictive social scientific approach to ethics and leadership has remained underdeveloped and fragmented, leaving both scholars and practitioners with few answers to even the most fundamental questions such as “What is ethical leadership?” (Brown & Trevino, 2006, p. 395).

If ethics are truly “the heart of leadership” (Ciulla, 2004), then interventions are warranted for this group but not the traditional ones.
Climate in State of Ohio and U.S. During Study

Over a dozen public school district superintendents were under investigation for data scrubbing.

Ohio was in the process of naming their third state superintendent in less than a year. The previous two superintendents were fired or resigned amidst ethical scandals.

Atlanta superintendent was under investigation for an ethical scandal.

Many leadership ethical scandals existed elsewhere, some outside of the education sector (i.e., Penn State, BP Oil Spill, Enron, Financial Sector, etc.)
Study by the Numbers

- **Pilot Study**
  - 30 Superintendents (Surveyed)

- **Study**
  - 606 Superintendents (Surveyed)
  - 15 Interviewed (Face to Face)

- **Response Rate**
  - 45%
School Leader Demographics

- Gender
- Age
- Highest Educational Degree
- Ethical Leadership Coursework Completed
- Sup. License Mentoring Program Completed
- Sup. License Ethics Training Completed
- Years of Experience as a Superintendent
- Years of Experience as a School Administrator
- Institution where Sup. License was Completed
- Professional Organizations Actively Involved
- Subject & Grade Level(s) Licensed to Teach
School District Characteristics

- Total Student Enrollment
- Total Number of Administrators
- Total Annual Budget
- Student Achievement Data (from past 3 years)
  - Performance Index Scores
- State Designation (from past 3 years)
  - Overall Student Achievement
- District Locale (Urban, Rural, Suburban)
Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS)

- 10 item scale
- Likert scale response
- Score Range 0-5
- Administered in Surveys and Interviews
- Originally designed and validated by Brown, Harrison & Trevino (2005) [48 items to 10 items]

Note:
- Individuals responded to each statement on the scale indicating the degree to which the statement reflected their own ethical leadership perspectives.
- Example Statement:
  "Defines success not just by results, but also the way they are obtained."
Social Desirability Scale (SDS)

- 10 item scale
- True or False keyed response
- Score Range 0-10
- Administered in Surveys and Interviews
- Originally designed and validated by Crowne & Marlowe (1960) – 33 items, reduced to 10 item scale by Gerbasi & Strahan (1972)

Short version used in this study designed and validated by

Note:
- Individuals responded True or False to each statement as it pertained to their own personality.
- Example Statement:

  “I’m always willing to admit when I make a mistake.”
Results

Q1. What are the ethical leadership perspectives of public school superintendents in the State of Ohio?

A. Strongly Positive

ELS survey scores ranged from 3.5-5.0 with a mean score of 4.57

ELS interview scores ranged from 4.2-5.0 with a mean score of 4.57
Results Cont’d

Results from the Social Desirability Scale (SDS)

- SDS scores from the survey ranged from 0-10 with a mean score of 6.2
- SDS scores from the interviews ranged from 3-10 with a mean score of 6.0
- The SDS was not significantly correlated with the ELS
Analysis – Surveys & Interviews

Surveys:
After collecting the ELS scores, SDS scores, School District Characteristics (SDC), and School Leader Demographics (SLD), I completed the following for regression models:

- **Model 1**
  - SDC

- **Model 2**
  - SLD

- **Model 3**
  - SDC & SLD
  - Ethical Leadership Perspectives

- **Model 4**
  - 4 Strongest Predictors

Interviews:
The digital recordings were professional transcribed in order to identify emerging trends and common themes more efficiently.
Results Cont’d

Q2. To what extent do the ethical leadership perspectives of Ohio public school superintendents vary according to school district characteristics?

A. State Designation was statistically significant in predicting the Ethical Leadership Perspectives.

State Designation = Overall Student Achievement in the State of Ohio
The higher the state designation of a school district, the more strongly positive the ethical leadership perspectives were of the superintendent leading that respective school district.

State Designation

- Excellent with Distinction
- Excellent
- Continuous Improvement
- Academic Watch

In the interviews, superintendents did not believe that school district characteristics affected their ethical leadership perspectives.
Results Cont’d

Q3. To what extent do the ethical leadership perspectives of Ohio public school superintendents vary according to school leader demographics?

A. Age, Highest Educational Degree, and Gender were statistically significant in predicting the Ethical Leadership Perspectives.

Only four variables (of over 20 tested) were statistically significant in predicting the ethical leadership perspectives of Superintendents in the Study:

- Student Achievement
- Age
- Highest Educational Degree
- Gender
In the interviews, superintendents did believe that age did in fact affect their ethical leadership perspectives.
Superintendents with doctorate degrees had stronger ethical leadership perspectives than that of superintendents who held a Masters degree and/or Bachelor’s degree.

In the interviews, superintendents did not believe that their highest educational degree affected their ethical leadership perspectives.
Female superintendents had stronger ethical leadership perspectives than Male superintendents.

In the interviews, superintendents did not believe that gender affected their ethical leadership perspectives.
- **Gender**: Gender outcome disappeared when the female superintendents of the three largest school districts in the State of Ohio were removed from the regression.

- **District Locale**: There was a significant difference between *rural* and *suburban* school districts (i.e., district locale) when the regressions were run separately. That is, superintendents of suburban school districts had a higher mean score on the ELS than that of superintendents who served rural school districts.

- **Experience**: Although *Years of Experience* was not statistically significant in predicting the ELS mean scores, there was a correlation between *Age* and *Years of Experience* in the survey results. That is, what *Age* could be explaining in the regression results might also be accounted for by *Years of Experience*. 
Age (and Years of Experience) may make a difference. School boards should be cognizant that school leaders need many years of experience (sit in many seats) to develop their ethical leadership perspectives before moving into a district level leadership position (i.e., superintendent). Thus, they should hire school leaders who have the necessary practical experience.
Implications for Practice – Highest Educational Degree

Ethics for administrators should be a course of topic in all degree programs, and perhaps especially re-emphasized in the superintendent licensure, Masters, and doctoral programs in educational leadership.

Educational leadership faculty who are preparing future superintendents should pay closer attention to the standards (i.e., ELCC and ISLLC) that address ethics/ethical leadership and how they are taught, reinforced, and cultivated within existing courses.
Gender may or may not be associated with more strongly positive ethical leadership perspectives. Due to the low number of female respondents in my study (17% of the survey respondents and only 1% of the interviewees), more research is needed to determine if in fact, female school leaders have stronger ethical leadership perspectives than male school leaders.
Superintendents possessing a high degree of ethical leadership perspectives may be the ones who can impact student achievement more significantly.

Superintendents need to be cognizant and constantly self-reflect on their ethical leadership perspectives.

This is vital since student achievement is often the best indicator of a school districts success or failure, and the results of this study pointed to a correlation between strong ethical leadership perspectives and greater student achievement.
Projected Future & Current Research

- Currently replicating study in State of Mississippi
- Replicate study in other U.S. states and countries around the globe
- Include private, charter, joint vocational schools and educational service centers
- Replicate study with all state superintendents in the U.S.
- Future studies focus specifically on outcomes of this study:
  - Ethical Leadership and Student Achievement
  - Ethical Leadership and Gender
  - Ethical Leadership and District Locale
School leaders must understand the importance and impact of their ethical leadership perspectives in school leadership. Student achievement proved to be correlated with the ethical leadership perspectives of school leaders and student achievement is more often than not, considered to be the strongest indicator of a school's success or failure.
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