An Ethical Approach to Building a Positive School Climate

Roger Wiemers
Tammy Shutt
Jody Piro
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Roger W. Wiemers
Lipscomb University
Nashville, TN

Tammy R. Shutt
Austin Peay State University
Clarksville, TN

Jody S. Piro
Texas Woman’s University
Denton, TX

Abstract
School leaders need to learn an approach to ethical decision-making. This article reviews the literature on ethical decision making in schools and provides a four staged framework—the Ethical Decision-Making Model (EDM)—that promotes positive school climate. Additionally, we offer a case study for applying the EDM.

Introduction
Perceptions drive any movement or organization in social sciences. What is perceived becomes what is believed and held as truth. This is true in negative forms in what are known as stereotypes and biases, and in positive forms as optimistic reality and hope. Organizations, and schools, more specifically, live and die based on the perceptions of those who experience and interact within the school. These perceptions, which make up the school climate (Hoy & Miskel, 2001), are developed and transmitted in part from a broader element, school culture (Owens, 2001). The culture takes years in its development and is a result of tradition, past heroes and villains, symbolism, rituals, and the overall history of the school; whereas, the school climate may change somewhat from year to year based on the perceptions of the participants as they learn the culture and interact with other participants. In fact, the climate perceptions are impacted by the physical buildings, the social interactions, and the leaders, as well as the long-standing culture of the school (Marion, 2002). These perceptions cannot be turned on and off like a faucet; they are constant. Yet school leaders have the ability to influence the climate through a multitude of approaches.

Several major educational works have been published which focus on the importance of ethical leadership. Rebore (2001) placed standards at the center of ethical leadership in schools. Leaders influence a school through their efforts to meet local, state, federal, and association standards. Holding the school and its participants to a standards-based level is an ethical approach to school leadership. It demands that these levels must be met for the school to proceed toward its goal of participant learning. Missing these marks then becomes unethical because the participants are not given the opportunity to learn at the level set by the standards.
The force of love was emphasized by Hoyle (2002) when discussing the concept of school ethics. He stated that:

Caring for others is paramount for organizations to reach their potential. For centuries, writers have inspired us to lead with the heart, soul, integrity, kindness, vision, and equity, but only a few have focused on love as a leadership force and the implications for love in the leadership act. (p. 101)

Schools need love more than they need some other concepts that increase stress among the participants. High stakes testing, competition, and an over-emphasis on standards can result in the opposite of love. In addition, school leaders may place too much emphasis on themselves which will produce self-aggrandizement, fear from others, and a lost sense of community. Love is selfless, seeking the good of others without thought or concern for oneself. When love is set forth as the primary force in a leader’s ethical approach, then the climate of a school has the opportunity to be positive.

Strike (2007) purported that ethical school leadership worked toward the creation of a sense of community among participants. The ethics of leadership involves the concept of living well together rather than mere morality, which is primarily concerned with individual conduct in the realm of right and wrong. Though there are general rights and wrongs” held within a community, morality tends to be more individualistic. An ethical school leader is interested in the school community as a whole, wanting to produce good education for its participants. The development of the school community must be a primary focus. Out of this community development, a positive school climate is produced.

Combining the concepts of the three authors, ethical leadership involves striving to meet standards through the development of school community out of the force of love. The school leader’s motivation will be love that seeks to produce a community that lives well together as they meet and exceed the educational standards that confront them. School leaders need to learn an approach to ethical decision-making that will incorporate all three goals of ethics. What we present in this article is a framework for ethical decision making that promotes positive school climate. Additionally, a case study for applying the staged frames for ethical decision making in schools is provided. In the next section of this paper, we summarize the related literature dealing with ethical decision making for school leaders.

**Recent Literature**

The School Ethical Climate Index (SECI) was created to measure “a school’s sense of community by assessing student and teacher interactions and relationship through the application of five ethical principles: respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity” (Schulte et al., 2002, p. 117). The five principles are understood as: **respect for autonomy** is

allowing others to have their independence; **nonmaleficence** is doing no harm; **beneficence** is benefiting others; **justice** is treating others fairly; and **fidelity** is acting with integrity and
honesty. As a result of using the SECI with teachers and administrators, it was determined that it was a valid and reliable instrument for measuring the ethical climate of middle and high schools. Teachers and administrators perceive that ethical climate is a very important factor in schools. The development of the SECI came out of a general concern for safe school environments in the midst of recent violence in American schools. School leaders can use the SECI to measure the ethical climate in their schools in order to meet the needs of their participants (2002).

The first thing a visitor notices when entering an elementary school is its atmosphere or general demeanor, also known as climate (Keiser & Schulte, 2007). The Elementary School Ethical Climate Index (ESECI) was developed to measure the ethical climate in elementary schools. It also measures the same five ethical principles as the SECI. It measures the interactions and relationships between students and teachers, “specifically teacher to student (i.e., how teachers interact with and relate to students), student to teacher/learning environment (i.e., how students interact with and relate to teachers), and student to student (i.e. how students interact with and relate to other students)” (p. 74). Elementary schools could use the ESECI to understand areas that need improvement for building a sense of community.

Schulte, Shanahan, Anderson, and Sides (2003) found that there was a positive relationship between students’ perception of school community and their overall attendance and academic achievement. Teachers perceived their relationships with students in a more positive light than did students. In addition, middle school students and teachers rated their school’s sense of community as significantly more positive than what high school students and teachers perceived. The researchers used the SECI as a primary instrument in this study.

In a study examining ethical school climate in both urban and suburban schools (Keiser & Schulte, 2009), students and teachers had dissimilar perceptions. Urban students rated the school’s climate higher than teachers in every subscale. In contrast, suburban students’ perceptions of school climate were lower than their teachers in all subscales. In addition, urban teachers were significantly less positive about their school climate than were suburban teachers.

Rosenblatt and Peled (2002) discovered that a school climate characterized by rules and a professional code was more significantly related to parental involvement than a caring climate. This would tend to fit more with Rebore’s (2001) concept of standard-based ethics, rather than Hoyle’s (2002) force of love. They also found that high SES parents were less involved than low SES parents when they perceived that the school climate was ethical. Parental involvement was considered in two contexts: cooperation-wise (when parents choose to participate) and conflict-wise (when parents must become involved to face a tension).

Shapira-Lishchinsky and Rosenblatt (2010) examined the relationship between school ethical climate (both caring and formal) and voluntary teacher absence. They found that both caring and formal climates are negatively related to teacher absence – when the perception of an ethical school climate increased, teacher absences decreased. As a result, they proposed that “school
principals may reduce voluntary teacher absence by creating an ethical climate focused on caring and clear and just rules and procedures” (p. 164).

In theorizing about the need for greater student engagement, McMahon (2003) proposed that adopting critical pedagogy and an antiracist multiculturalism would create classroom climates that would foster significant engagement. Creating educational environments that are more responsive to everyone’s human and social rights is the ethical need of today’s schools. When these classroom and school climates are produced where students feel free to fully engage without loss of safety or esteem, the potential for meaningful engagement increases. This sounds strongly related to Strike’s (2007) concept of a community that lives well together.

Narvaez and Lapsley (2008) proposed an Integrative Ethical Education model to train teachers to develop positive character formation in students. In the model, the authors believed that there are five steps needed for moral character development: fostering a supportive climate, cultivating ethical skills, apprenticing approach to instruction, nurturing self-regulation skills, and building support structures in the school community. This model has elements that have similar tones as Hoyle’s (2002) force of love and Strike’s (2007) community that lives well together.

Through a qualitative case study approach, Parker, Grenville, and Flessa (2011) described success stories of students in challenging socioeconomic situations as a result of positive school and community climate. Several themes were drawn from the study: the importance of ethical leadership, the need for a commitment to high-quality collaboration, purposeful community building, and parent and community partnerships. Poverty does not need to decide the outcome of students, if leaders and schools will work to develop learning communities that produce a climate that is conducive to student engagement.

What makes some schools outperform other schools that are demographically similar in students and community? Wilcox and Angelis (2011) found that there are four practices that distinguished the higher performing schools.

These practices are a well-defined and enacted focus on rigor, capacities to innovate, open and transparent communication within the school and with the broader community, and the willingness and capability to use a variety of evidence to make strategic decisions. (p. 138)

The identified practices are similar in many ways to the primary authors’ central concepts on ethical school leadership, mentioned in the introduction. A focus on rigor agrees with Rebore’s (2001) emphasis on meeting and exceeding standards. The open and transparent communication is what love would do (Hoyle, 2002) and it would be necessary for a community that lives well together (Strike, 2007). A capacity to innovate is part of the culture of an ethical school – to meet the needs of all and to meet the challenges that would try to undo that aim. The final practice as found by Wilcox and Angelis (2011) was the openness and the ability to use a variety of evidence to make key decisions.
In the subsequent section, we present a four-staged framework, the Ethical Decision-Making Model (EDM). This ethical decision-making model aims to demonstrate how leaders use multiple realms of evidence to make strategic decisions for the students and the learning community. Attempting to provide clarity and render application of the case study more tangible, the reader is addressed in second person.

The Ethical Decision-Making Model (EDM)

For leaders, decision-making can be an endless task. So many decisions need to be made that leaders find that they have little time outside of that realm. Today’s school leaders, more than ever, need ethical decision-making. Corruption, violence, standards driven curricula, diversity, and a shrinking teacher pool demand that ethics be a primary focus of today’s school leader. The Ethical Decision-Making Model (EDM) was discovered as a simple tool or process that can be utilized by elementary to higher education leaders (Wiemers & Shutt, 2008). It was discovered rather than created because facets of this model have been used for centuries and it is not the authors’ model to own.

There are four basic stages to the EDM which, when followed, will allow the educational leader to make ethical decisions. The stages are perspective consciousness, collegial dialogue, critical assessment, and reflective thought. There is no set length to each stage, and the stages may not be equal in duration. However, the purposeful utilization of each stage is necessary for the entire model to be efficacious.

**Perspective Consciousness**

Who am I? What experiences and relationships have made me into the person I am today? Why do I think the way that I do? What biases, stereotypes, and prejudices have been developed in me over the years that I need to control, and try to eliminate? What is my honest worldview? These are all important questions for the school leader to ask as he/she seeks to make ethical decisions. Self-awareness is a key quality of any good leader, especially one who directs the future of children. A leader must honestly look inside his/her life, mind, heart, and soul to discover self’s perspective. People do not all see actions, words, and relations in the same way, so becoming conscious of one’s worldview is a starting point to making any ethical decision. Begley (2006) called this self-knowledge. One needs to have it to make any key decisions. Millions of decisions are made daily at the world, national, state, and local levels that are not based upon a conscious understanding of one’s own perspective. Those decisions affect others and the leader is not even aware that he/she is so influenced by self’s worldview. Hoyle (2002) would not classify this as being moved by a force of love.

At the same time, the leader needs to have a conscious awareness of the perspectives of those in the school community. Understanding the way others view the world will help the leader to make caring decisions, ones that will help the community to live well together (Strike, 2007). This will guide him/her to choose terms carefully, to approach others in certain manners, to include or exclude others from various activities, and to ethically consider the learning needs of all in the school community.

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(students, teachers, parents, etc.). When self-conscious understanding is coupled with school community awareness, ethical decisions are possible. This first stage is not easy. It demands cutting honesty about oneself, and the integrity and perseverance to learn about others. The highest qualities of a good educator are genuineness—knowing and being true to self and knowing those you serve—school community awareness.

**Collegial Dialogue**

When leaders truly have this perspective consciousness, they can turn to colleagues for support in the decision-making process. Their worldviews will not be distorted, so they can genuinely hear what their educator peers have to share. These peers can be found within the school community, at other schools, or at some distance, wherever a trusted relationship has been developed that openly seeks ethical practices. Most specifically, collegial dialogue needs to occur in the school community. In this case, school leaders should not only rely on those who agree with them, but they must open the dialogue with their challengers. Good leaders are not fearful of challenge. They realize it as a sharpening stone that will result in ethical decisions that will allow the community to live well together (Strike, 2007).

There is a simple concept of dialogue that will help immensely in any decision-making process that we have termed *dialogic resolution*. Hufford (2003) presented this conception of dialogue as he spoke at a conference in Nashville, Tennessee. He suggested that dialogic resolution involves two straightforward principles: speak to be understood—not to hide, and listen to understand—not to respond. Be honest. People hold back some key ammunition when speaking with others and do not want others to fully perceive viewpoints for fear that they will abuse that knowledge. Words and sentences are used cautiously to craft a statement that expresses but does not reveal. Conversely, people may listen while stockpiling ammunition for the next volley with challengers rather than fully listening to their point of view and trying to understand it from the way they see the world.

In this negative mode of listening, truths may be missed. What could be gained by opening minds to words and the perspectives of others? Collegial dialogue seems easy with trusted friends and it can be valuable, but it becomes priceless when used as this concept of *dialogic resolution* with those who are challengers. New realms open for ethical decision-making when meaningful dialogue is communicated with all in the school community.

**Critical Assessment**

When leaders have perspective consciousness and are willing to openly dialogue with others in the school community, they can move to the stage where they use a critical approach to assessment of the situation that needs a decision. *Critical* can have two meanings: using logic and insight to examine an issue with scrutiny, and from a multicultural point of view, allowing all sides to be expressed, especially those of the suppressed and forgotten [as used by McMahon, (2003) with the term, *critical pedagogy*].

The use of logic and insight to scrutinize an issue can take on some simple forms. A leader could perform a thorough review of laws, codes, and standards to make sure that any decision
fits within those legal realms. They could follow a basic process of listing pros and cons to the see benefits and losses that would be sustained with any decision. In addition, they could use an analysis where they subject the potential decision to an examination of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). Of course, the leader’s experience and wisdom should never be overlooked. The past may provide the perfect insight to the present and future. Whatever approach is taken here, it needs to involve deep examination of the issue, the potential decisions, and the possible outcomes.

With logic and scrutiny utilized, consider the importance of the other aspect of critical – the value of keeping the conditions and needs of the oppressed before our eyes as leaders. Too often decisions are made because politically strong bosses or

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stakeholders will benefit and roles will remain secure. Love is renounced and self-preservation prevails. However, true critical assessment always examines the needs of those who often benefit the least from education, those who are marginalized in the educational process. In order to make truly ethical decisions, leaders need to be courageous enough to seek the opinions of formally silenced stakeholders. A focus on love is required for a thorough critical assessment.

Reflective Thought

Reflective thought represents the final stage of the EDM. Reflective thought is final because it comes after the first three stages and it involves both pre and post decision reflection. Reflection may be the most important tool of a school leader. Without it, he/she may be adrift in a sea of problems and successes, issues and decisions, politics and standards, students and teachers, careers and the future of the children, without knowing where to turn. Reflection is the rudder to the ship that sails through these vast seas.

Reflection will guide the ethical decision. Prior to reflection, one needs to understand his/her own perspective. One needs to perceive viewpoints of the school community. Voices of colleagues must be heard. The situation’s potential decisions and outcomes must be critically assessed. The final stage requires reflection to guide the ethical decision making process. The leader now has all the resources. To move to reflection, the next step may require isolation to review all elements of the EDM process. Some guiding questions might be: What did you learn? Where is the greatest need? What decision will serve students best? A more thorough presentation of guiding questions is provided after the case study.

Reflection will also fortify the ethical decision. The leader needs to feel confident about the decision. A decision is not always about what is right or wrong, but about what is alright or better. Too often a decision is judged by its outcomes, when it should be

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judged by whether right (or best) actions were chosen. A review of the decision making process is accomplished through reflection, and it will allow the leader to be at peace with the decision. This can best be performed by going through the stages of the EDM process. The outcome of the dilemma may not be as significant as the process of fully employing the EDM stages. Reflection will allow one to look back over the process and remain secure in the resulting
decision. Guiding questions included: Did you remain legal in the process? Were you looking out for self or did you seek the good of others? Were there voices you failed to hear? Were student needs your number one priority? Were you courageous? A more thorough compilation of guiding inquiry follows the case study.

In the section that follows, we provide a case study to help you apply the EDM to make ethical decisions. Follow the four stage process: perspective consciousness, collegial dialogue, critical assessment, and reflective thought to guide you through the process. Remember that the route may be linear or may be iterative. Analyses at one stage may result in divergent responses at an earlier level. Conversely, the stages may stand alone and be linear. Use the four-staged ethical decision making process to promote a positive school climate in a school setting.

A Case Study

You have been a principal at a middle school for five years. Your school has been active in the middle school movement and as a result, grade level teams with teachers of varying content areas have been functional and effective for over twenty years. All three grade level teams (6th, 7th & 8th grades) work independently and yet collaboratively with you, including being active in human resource decisions, such as the interviewing process. Most recently, the seventh grade team presented at the National Middle School conference on The Culture and Benefits of Teaming at The Middle School Level. Your school has won awards from Wiemers, Shutt, & Piro both state and national organizations for successfully implementing middle level practices.

Grade level 7 team includes five members: a social studies teacher who acts as the team leader and has taught at the school for eighteen years; an English teacher who has taught at the school for seven years; a third year science teacher; a twenty-five year veteran special education teacher; and a first year math teacher. Each member of the team was part of the interviewing and selection of the first year math teacher in the previous spring.

During the previous year, the state legislature passed a new law mandating that student achievement measures be a component of teacher evaluations. The language of the statute specifically requires that student achievement should constitute up to 50% of the states’ teachers evaluations, as measured by value added scores collected by the state and your own district. There is a considerable movement among policy makers within the state to include a teacher’s impact on student achievement in his/her evaluation at a higher percentage in future years, but at the moment, the exact amount of student achievement measures have remained a district-wide decision, following the state statute requiring up to 50% of the evaluation be comprised of student achievement data. In addition, the superintendent of your district has made it clear that starting with this current school year, student achievement measures must be included in your evaluation of your teachers. In your weekly leadership team meeting, you superintendent laid out a plan that will be presented to the Board of Education later in the year that will mandate a minimum of 50% of future teacher evaluations will be comprised of student achievement scores for the following school years. You expect the Board to pass the plan this year.
The first year math teacher started the school year well, becoming involved in his grade level team meetings and teaching his general math and also an advanced algebra course for students who qualified because of high math scores on state and district assessments. He continues to attend every meeting and to teach, according to your own observations, in an exemplary fashion. However as the year progressed, he began to have personality conflicts with the seventh grade team members. His attitude is negative when they suggest interdisciplinary units of study, which have become a model for other grade level teams in the past, and he states that math does not fit in well with the suggested interdisciplinary unit. He states that he prefers not to take part in this IUD. In addition, advisory—which is an established middle school practice for all of your grade level teams and for all members of the staff (you even have your own advisory group along with the vice principal, librarian, and band leader)—seems to hold no value for the seventh grade math teacher. Seventh grade team members have reported to you that they have heard from students that the math teacher does not regularly hold advisory meetings, but allows the students to have a study hall and talk.

As the year progresses, the seventh grade teacher leader approaches you about discussing the option of dismissing the math teacher based upon his lack of participation at the team level, a cultural expectation of the exemplary middle school. The team does not wish to proceed another year with a non-functioning team member. At the same time, you have just received district-wide assessment results. The data suggest that the students of the seventh grade math teacher have performed exceptionally well. In fact, his general math students are performing better on district wide tests than any previous year. His algebra students have systematically passed the district entrance exam for taking Algebra II, a feat no other Algebra teacher at the middle school level has been able to accomplish in the past.

You are faced with a dilemma. You need a teacher who functions well on a middle school team and collaborates with fellow team leaders for those practices they value, including cooperating with interdisciplinary units of study and conducting advisory for middle school students. Your teachers have requested that you consider the math teacher’s dismissal for his lack of display of middle school values commonly held at the school. At the same time, the math teacher’s impact on student learning seems to be positive. At the state level and certainly, at the district level as well, student achievement measures are considered to be prima facia evidence of effective teaching. In the current year, the state mandates that student achievement measures may be reflected up to 50% of a teacher’s evaluation, but that the district would problematize exactly how those measures will be included in teacher evaluations. Your superintendent seems to favor student achievement as an indicator of teacher effectiveness. How will the seventh grade team react if you suggest that the math teacher’s impact on his students’ learning outweighs the value your school has placed on collaboration, specifically and on middle school practices in general? How will the superintendent react if you dismiss the high scoring math teacher at the very time when school policy is moving toward student achievement measures as valid measures of teacher effectiveness? Ethically, what must guide your decision making (Wiemers & Shutt, 2008)?
Applying the EDM

Below are some guiding questions to help you apply the EDM process. It is not our intent to answer the problems associated with this case study. The questions are provided to focus on the most important elements of the case as you follow the EDM process.

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**Perspective Consciousness**
1) How do you really feel about the situation? 2) Have you accepted the new evaluation measures? 3) Do you value student scores, teacher collaboration, or both? 4) Are you genuinely aware of how the whole department (and faculty) feels – about the situation, the new evaluation system, the students’ scores? 5) Do you have a broader sense of the school community’s values on this issue (the parents, the community, leader colleagues)?

**Collegial Dialogue**
1) What opportunities do you have to increase dialogue on this matter in the department? In the school? 2) Have you sought out your trusted peers for their opinions? 3) Have you sought out your challengers for their opinions? 4) Does the dialogue need to include those in upper administration? How would this be approached? 5) Have you truly expressed yourself openly to others without hiding your feelings? 6) Have you truly listened to others without thinking about your response?

**Critical Assessment**
1) What laws or policies need to govern your choices/decisions? 2) Who has authority in this matter? 3) What are the pros and cons of your potential decisions, or what possible strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats arise out of them? 4) Have you thought about the needs of the forgotten and suppressed? Are all considered? 5) What ultimate criteria should be used to make your final decision?

**Reflective Thought**
1) Based on PC, CD, and CA question outcomes (above), is there a solution that will serve all parties? 2) If not, what is going to best provide for student needs? 3) And after you decision, what was your purpose and motivation for making the decision? Why did you decide what you did? 4) Did you affect the climate of your school positively with the decision?

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**Conclusion**

The answers to the questions provided above will determine the pattern of your ethical decision-making. Attempt to judge your answers not by the outcomes, but by the literature grounded ethical decision making framework. Did you follow a standards-based approach, wanting to
meet and exceed those preset goals (Rebore, 2001)? Did you act out of love, supporting the improvement of others, without thought of yourself (Hoyle, 2002)? Did you seek an avenue for the school community to live well together (Strike, 2007)?

We do not want to belittle ethical decision making in school leadership. Making ethical decisions is not an easy task. It takes great focus, much effort, and courage to take meaningful positions for the good of the students and others in need. The EDM model is an intentional, straightforward process that will allow you, as a leader, to develop an approach to making decisions that will guide you through a successful career. The result – positive school climates. How did this result occur? When you are being genuine, you will be positive – satisfied with yourself. When you are seeking awareness of others’ perspectives and listening to their voices, the school community will be positive – they will feel valued and wanted. When you are critically examining all possible avenues for success, legal and authoritative realms will be positive about the school – stakeholders will view school decisions as being made with fidelity. Finally, when you reflect over issues and decisions made, you will feel confident in the integrity of the EDM process.

References


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