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Considering the Community: How One Rural Superintendent Perceives Community Values and Their Effect on Decision-Making

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In rural Oklahoma, the role of the superintendent is often vastly different than that of superintendents in large cities. The superintendent is the leader of the school district, which is typically the community's largest employer. There are a few examples of superintendents who embrace this sometimes overwhelming responsibility and who are often seen as pillars of ethics, leadership and morality in the community. Dale Carter is one example of this type of superintendent. Mr. Carter has been employed by Kenawee Public Schools since 1969. During his tenure he has been a teacher, coach, principal and superintendent. This case study will examine how Carter has considered community values when making decisions and how the integration of those values along with his personal and professional values have allowed him to lead a rural school district.

Introduction

Dale Carter is an imposing man. The 6'3" former college football player can appear intimidating to many people; however, those who know him can attest to his caring and sympathetic side. Carter is an anomaly in the realm of education: He has been continuously employed by Kenawee Public Schools since 1969. When Carter decides to retire, he most likely will have worked for Kenawee for over forty years. This type of service and commitment is unique in the school business. Carter has done it all for Kenawee. The traditional image of the rural superintendent is that of a person with many hats. Unlike the superintendents from large city districts, many rural superintendents may be asked to perform duties such as teaching, coaching, or driving a bus. It is not unheard of to see a rural superintendent pitching in to mop a gym or help out in the cafeteria. Carter has performed just about every job in the district and as recently as 1998, he even coached the 7th grade football team. This type of work ethic may seem like an inordinate amount of commitment; however, Carter sees it all as part of the job. In essence, Carter *is* the school district. Combine that assertion with his lengthy tenure; one could easily say that Carter *is* Kenawee. When one man has taught and/or coached over half the citizens in the town, it is easy to justify such an assertion. This unscientific assessment of Carter's reach is surely an underestimate of his true effect on the people of Kenawee.

In many urban school districts, the superintendent may be a faceless person who is often associated with major policy announcements or a figurehead who is rarely seen on a daily basis by the people within the district. This is not the case in a rural school district. Kenawee is a town of 2000 people. The school district has approximately 800 students and is located over 60 miles from the nearest urban center. Kenawee is very isolated and a significant portion of the working population may drive 20-30 miles to work, to buy groceries and to visit healthcare facilities. Many of the people who live and work there have grown up in the community and there are multiple generations of Kenawee graduates in each family. Kenawee is also the home of the Kenawee nation—a local tribe that is the town's second

biggest employer. The school, as is the case in most rural settings, is Kenawee's largest employer. Due to this fact, the superintendent of the school is an important figure in the town. The only people in Kenawee who compare to Carter's status may be the president of the local bank, the mayor, the most prominent physician and the chief of the Kenawee tribe. Carter, however, has a more extensive influence on the community as a whole because of the fact that the majority of the townspeople and their children have gone through the Kenawee school system. This fact places Carter at the top of the list of influential citizens in the community. In fact, Carter taught and coached two members of the five-member board. With such an enormous responsibility and such a far-reaching influence, it is obvious that Carter must approach his job as more than just a day-to-day manager of the schools. Carter guides the community in ways that may go unseen to the public eye and his decisions can affect many people and entities in the community. The job of superintendent can be very difficult. Starratt (2004) stated: "Superintendents function in an environment of nearly continuous turbulence challenged by concerns and pressures that compete for their attention and resolution. The turbulence is inescapable (p.29)." While a small town may seem like a place where less "turbulence" may occur, the rural superintendent is the sole decision-maker in the district; therefore, he or she must always take complete ownership of any problem that arises. In large school districts, various assistant superintendents and directors of different school programs usually surround most superintendents. That is not the case in Kenawee—Mr. Carter is it.

This study was informed by the concept of community values and how they affect the decision-making process of a rural school superintendent. The particular foci are ethics and values in decision-making and how Carter's personal feelings and experience guide and inform his decisions. Starratt (2004) spoke of a leadership challenge facing superintendents in his allegory of school leaders being "captains of the ship" and accepting the moral challenges that they face in decision-making. Carter, as a metaphorical captain, has faced multiple challenges as a superintendent. I seek to examine how he has navigated through his role as a

rural superintendent by integrating the values of the community with his personal and professional values.

Methodology

This is a case study in which one single superintendent is examined. This particular case was selected because of the uniqueness of the subject. It is very rare to find any individual who has been continuously employed by the same school district for almost forty years. This type of tenure demonstrates the inherent nature of the subject's link to the community. To better understand the relationship between a community and a superintendent, it is beneficial to study a person like Carter who is embedded within the community because of relationships he has developed during his lengthy tenure.

This qualitative study was conducted through multiple informal conversational interviews, multiple observations within the school setting and one lengthy formal interview. The data were collected over a period of two years. In order to protect the integrity of the study and to provide anonymity, pseudonyms are used for the subject as well as the school/town.

The Rural Community

The biggest difference between the rural superintendent and the urban superintendent is the transparency in the leadership and the visibility of the superintendent in the community. Carter states:

Small school superintendents are exposed to the public more than large school superintendents. Pig shows, parades, pow wows, and community meals are a way of life in rural Oklahoma. Most patrons in the larger districts couldn't pick their superintendent out of a five-man lineup. In our community, 90% of the people can tell you which church I attend and some can tell you how often I attend and how much I tithe. Ninety-percent of the people can identify the vehicle I drive. At least 80% of the people can tell you my favorite shirt color and 95% of the people can tell you where I live.

This type of environment can give one the feeling of living in a fishbowl and many rural superintendents are not capable of handling this type of visibility on a day-to-day basis. Carter has accepted it and seems to embrace it. He strives to present himself in the way that he wants people to perceive him.

It is often said that it is lonely at the top and Carter echoes this sentiment. He often keeps to himself and does not socialize with many of the townspeople outside of community events. Carter finds himself constantly under the threat of criticism due to the fact that he knows that people are watching every move he makes. His visibility, while contributing to a positive school culture, is also a detriment at times. Fiore (2000) stated: "Educational leaders receive a great deal of criticism due to the precariousness of their

positions atop the hierarchical structure of many American schools (p. 11)." Fiore went on to present research that confirms that the visibility of a school leader in the school is a positive contributor to school culture. Dale Carter demonstrates his belief in this assertion by his philosophy of being continually visible to the community. Carter takes careful measure of his appearance. Carter never appears without a tie in public in his capacity as superintendent. Carter can be seen at most school events as well as community and tribal events. Carter also attends many funerals due to his affiliation with most of the population of Kenawee. In Carter's eyes—his job is his life.

Community Values

Begley (2004) stated: "Any school administrator who attempts to lead and manage without reference to the broader environmental context will quickly encounter difficulty (p. 8-9)." He adds, "Within the last decade, school administrators have learned that it is necessary to pay a lot more attention to the community as a relevant administrative arena and source of influence on school leadership" (p. 10). Dale Carter would attest to these statements as an example of not only how a superintendent must consider community influences in decision-making—but also specifically how a *rural* superintendent must consider these forces. The rural superintendent who does not give serious consideration to the community's reaction when making a decision, is a superintendent who is destined for a short term. Carter does not compromise principles because of community influence; however, Carter is very aware of the values of Kenawee's citizens and what those citizens expect from him as a superintendent and leader of the community. When Carter was hired as superintendent some of those values were communicated to him when he was told not to drink in public and to always dress in a manner that best represented the school.

While Carter maintains that he has his own personal values that are unique to him, one cannot help but think that through his longevity in the community of Kenawee that he has acquired some of the values unique to it. Begley (2001) pointed out that "although some values may potentially be acquired through biology as well as existential processes, values are perhaps predominantly acquired from more collective sources" and one of these sources is the community (p. 363). This theory concerning the community's influence on one's personal values is reinforced by Richmon (2004) who stated: "Values do not 'live' in people, but people live inside a world of values. We do not 'possess' values, rather, they possess us (p. 345)." Campbell, Gold, and Lunt (2003), in a study of school leaders, found that the needs of the local community were a predominant factor that influenced decision-making. These school leaders also suggested "that the ethnic, religious and socio-economic characteristics of the local communities

influence processes and practices within the school (p. 215).”

Rural towns in the United States, and especially Oklahoma, have distinct religious and socio-economic characteristics and Kenawee is prime example of that. Like many rural Oklahoma towns, Kenawee is highly religious and not particularly wealthy. The socio-economic status of many students is very low as evidenced by the high level of students who are on the free and reduced lunch program. Many of the Native American students are very poor and live in substandard housing conditions. Carter, who is also Native American, understands the stereotypes that continually afflict Native American populations and works with the local tribe to ensure that those students are getting a proper education. Carter has to be very diplomatic at times in his relations with the local tribe. He stated: “The tribe realizes that the school affects their children’s lives more than any other source. They accept the things we are trying to do. Sometimes they don’t like it, but they accept it.” Carter has become adept at maneuvering between the white population, the Native American population and the African-American population of his school district. Each of these groups has their own specific needs and it can be very difficult to obtain a balance. There is also a strong agricultural influence in the community that requires consideration.

All these influences can lead one to assume that self-interest and personal preferences are rarely factors in decision-making and in Carter’s case that is true. Begley (2001) pointed out that there is weak influence of personal preferences on administrative practices. Begley saw school leaders as “agents of society” and “accountable to the society for their actions” (p. 361). In Carter’s case, this is a very appropriate assertion.

Ethics, Values, Morals and the Rural Superintendent

According to Begley (2001) “authentic leadership may be thought of as a metaphor for professionally effective, ethically sound, and consciously reflective practices in educational administration. This is leadership that is knowledge based, values informed, and skillfully executed (p. 353).” I believe that Carter is an authentic leader. He is solidly grounded in his values and his experience has given him wisdom that allows him to skillfully execute decisions. Begley (2001) wrote of “the artistry of leadership,” a term that he reserves for leaders whose skills extend beyond management. What Carter does on a daily basis is an example of this type of leadership.

Carter claims to have an inner voice that reminds him that regardless of what he is doing, someone may be watching. This type of pressure that Carter puts on himself allows him to be guided by his internal moral compass when making a tough decision. Carter views his morals as a combination of his own and that of his community.

Carter also sees himself as a role model. He stated: “All of us serve as role models, regardless of what the students may say. The image we project will have an effect on them later in life as they choose a career.” Carter believes that superintendents must take responsibility for providing professional leadership in the school and community because a superintendent’s actions will be judged by the community, staff and students.

Carter uses his ethics in his decision-making process. According to Langlois (2004), ethics revolve around values and their relationship to our actions. Carter has little tolerance for superintendents who do not act ethically. He is fond of saying, “Some people say power corrupts people, but I say it exposes them.” Carter finds nothing more appalling than picking up a newspaper and reading about a superintendent that has committed a malfeasance. He believes it makes all superintendents look bad. In Carter’s opinion, these types of instances have led many state departments of education and legislatures to enforce more accountability from school districts and their respective superintendents.

Carter believes that being a school leader exposes his character on a daily basis. He also believes that small-town superintendents have a certain amount of power, but over the years he has learned not to abuse what little power he thinks he has.

According to Rude, Paolucci-Whitcomb, and Comerford (2005), rural educators face unique challenges and opportunities for using ethical leadership to support human rights within their local communities. Carter has strong feelings on human rights:

I believe in human rights and I hate poverty. I often tell our students that if they will get an education that they will never see another poor day unless they choose to be poor. My fight against poverty is seeing that every student that wants an education gets one.

Carter’s values play an important role in his decision-making process and in shaping the ethical standards to which he adheres. Administrators often acknowledge the importance of values to leadership situations. Like Carter, they see that their role is to act as agents for the values of society. These administrators also tend to opt for employing consensus-grounded values as guides to action and decision-making whenever possible (Begley, 2001).

Ethical Dilemmas

Many school administrators face difficult decisions and increasingly encounter value conflict situations in which consensus cannot be achieved. In Carter’s case, there can only really be a consensus of one when it comes to the final decision. Some of the most difficult dilemmas occur when one ethic literally trumps another (Begley, 2004).

Cranston, Ehrich, and Kimber (2003) defined an ethical dilemma as “one that necessitates a choice between competing sets of principles (p. 137).” Carter has faced

many ethical dilemmas during his tenure. The one important thing that Carter has done each time he has faced an ethical dilemma has been to consider the reactions from various entities in his community that might be affected by his decisions. Langlois (2004), alluding to this consideration, stated: "When superintendents become aware of a difficult situation, they pay careful attention to their reactions and responses (p. 88)."

Carter can cite an extensive list of ethical dilemmas. Sometimes he has no problem resisting assaults to his integrity, such as when he has received offers for kickbacks on services. In all of those cases, he declined the offer and ended his association with the vendor.

There have been other times when, despite the pressure from various interests groups, Carter has remained steady in his resolve. He has faced pressure from community members and even a school board member to change a student's grade, yet he did not make the change.

There was an instance when he dismissed a Native American aide for failing to disclose an arrest on drug-related charges. The aide was the past president of the Indian Nation and a local news station covered the story. Despite the intense interest of many parties, Carter was able to convince the aide, the tribe, and the community that it was in everyone's best interest for her not to work at the school.

Carter has found himself in conflict with members of the community on a few occasions. He remarked about the two instances that stood out in his mind:

One occurrence was when someone in the community thought a faculty member's companion after school was grounds to terminate. It was not, but my decision was not accepted by 100% of the people. The other time was when a prominent person's daughter was not allowed to be a cheerleader because of grades. The parent sent out a 22-page diatribe blasting me. My only recourse was to stand behind my integrity.

Carter has obviously found himself in the middle of many ethical dilemmas throughout the years. Pardini (2004) stated that "school leaders have long confronted and continue to confront dozens of big issues teeming with ethical and moral implications (p. 10)." This seems to be the case for Carter and most school leaders in America.

There are times in which value conflicts can occur that demonstrate how personal values of an individual might conflict with those of the community or organizational values (Begley 2001). Carter shared an incident that seems to be one of the toughest decisions that he ever made.

Carter spoke of a former faculty member that had cancer. She had exhausted all available forms of leave. Carter made the decision to keep her on the payroll and he covered for her. Carter sees this as an ethical decision that he made that contradicted school policy and most likely, state policy; however, Carter took full responsibility for the decision. Carter admitted that he still looks back at that decision and wonders if it was an ethical lapse or if he

should have handled it differently. This is a perfect example of a decision made by a rural superintendent that took rural community values into consideration. A superintendent in a big district would most likely have never made the decision that Carter made. There are too many people in large districts that will hold a superintendent accountable for such a transgression; however, the values of a rural community and the sympathy that they share for one of their own, can sometimes dictate decisions that go outside the lines or break the rules.

Carter takes full responsibility for all of his decisions. He is proud of the fact that he has maintained high standards in the area of school finance. He claims that any misuse of funds will always be his responsibility and is happy to point out that his district received one of the only four awards presented by the state department of education for exceptional financial accounting for 2005. When asked about what ethical standard to which the community holds him, he replied, "Our community expects me to be at least as ethical as the local preachers."

Managing Community Relations and the Media

Every superintendent is aware of the power of the media or the "power of the pen." Most superintendents try to use the media to communicate good things about the school district, but oftentimes, superintendents find themselves conducting damage control in volatile situations. All good superintendents are aware of the need to maintain good relations with the community through clear and constant communications as well as the need to develop strong, positive working relationships with the local media.

Carter has a particularly unique aspect of the media to deal with—the local paper. While small, local papers may not generate as much publicity and circulation as the newspapers and television stations of the big cities, they are still a force to be reckoned with. In fact, one will often find that just about everybody in a rural community reads the local paper, whereas, the large cities have multiple sources of media that people can choose from.

Carter sees himself as an agent of the school. He meets with the editor of the local paper every Tuesday morning to discuss the business and upcoming events of the district. Carter does this because he wants to have a good relationship with the newspaper so that the school will always be portrayed in a positive light. Langlois (2004) pointed out that "superintendents are watchful for leaks to the press which might distort information for the simple purpose of demolishing the reputation of their organization" (p. 86). Carter is especially watchful for any leaks of this type; however he remains quite jaded about the media in general. He stated:

News is a problem that hits small town schools harder than larger school districts. Larger schools sometimes make the news in the larger papers, but in rural Oklahoma, *we are the news*. It is necessary that a school superintendent has a good

relationship with the local paper to insure that most of the information printed about us is positive. Newspapers sometimes embellish the facts and add erroneous details. Unfortunately, when a patron reads it in the local paper they perceive it to be true and if they disagree, they write a letter to the editor and it may be the topic of the coffee shops for weeks.

Carter has become very adept at communicating with school patrons. On two occasions, one in which a student tested positive for tuberculosis and another in which there was a bomb threat, Carter crafted very intelligent memos alerting the community to the issues and to what he and the school district had done about them. It is this type of quick response and clear thinking that Carter feels is his responsibility to demonstrate in times of crisis.

Implications and Conclusions

Experienced school administrators know that there are no guarantees when it comes to making the hard decisions. These administrators must have a capacity for making judgments because it is an important ethical skill that allows individuals to act in accordance with their values. Sometimes it is difficult to justify one's actions according to organizational standards when they conflict with personal and professional values (Langlois, 2004). Campbell, Gold, and Lint (2003) demonstrated that school leaders remain committed to personal, professional and educational values, despite the concerns about shifts in education policy towards market forces and managerialism.

Dale Carter is an example of one remarkable superintendent who has navigated many obstacles by using sound, ethical decision-making based on his values and the values of his community.

Superintendents and other educators can gain valuable insight from people like Carter. He remains grounded and steadfast in his commitment to educate the children of Kenawee. Carter demonstrates his leadership every day by integrating his personal values, his professional values and the values of the community into his decision-making. While rural school superintendents should not look to the community for guidance on every decision, they would be wise to consider community values when making an ethical decision. The good rural school superintendent is aware of this paradigm that exists in small rural communities. Future rural school leaders should locate mentors such as Carter, who can help them understand the nuances of school governing in a rural community.

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