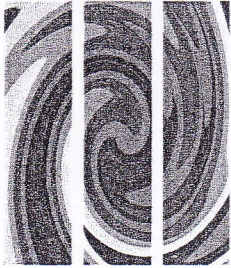


## CASE 6



# *School Property Is Missing*

## *An Employee Is Caught Stealing*

### BACKGROUND

A school administrator's actions and decisions are under constant scrutiny. Solving problems at school is difficult enough, but decisions made in the best interests of children sometimes have unanticipated consequences. Leaders in all organizations must learn to "live in a fishbowl" and contend with organizational politics.

School leaders must have basic competencies if they intend to become successful. As important as those competencies are, they are technical skills that may be acquired through mentoring and practice. The challenges of leadership test a principal's ethical beliefs and standards. As Gorton and Schneider (1991) remind us, "every administrator should attempt to maintain high professional ethical standards to make a more positive contribution to the improvement of education in the school" (p. 584).

The behavior of administrators is so important that a task force representing the National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of Elementary School Principals, American Association of School Administrators, American Association of School Personnel Administrators, and National Council of Administrative Women in Education revised their *Statement of Ethics* in 1991 to affirm that "an educational administrator's professional behavior must conform to an ethical code" that is "idealistic and at the same time practical" (Gorton and Schneider, p. 585).

An educational administrator is expected to

1. Make the well-being of students the fundamental value in all decision making and actions
2. Fulfill professional responsibilities with honesty and integrity
3. Support the principle of due process and protect the civil and human rights of all individuals
4. Obey local, state, and national laws
5. Implement the governing board of education's policies and administrative rules and regulations
6. Pursue appropriate measures to correct those laws, policies, and regulations that are not consistent with sound educational goals
7. Avoid using positions for personal gain through political, social, religious, economic, or other influence
8. Accept academic degrees or professional certification only from duly accredited institutions
9. Maintain the standards and seek to improve the effectiveness of the profession through research and continuing professional development
10. Honor all contracts until fulfillment, release, or dissolution mutually agreed on by all parties to a contract

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Skills acquired in graduate course work and during clinical experiences will help prospective administrators to understand leadership's technical competencies, but subscribing to a code of ethical standards is equally important.

#### FACTORS TO CONSIDER

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- Supervision of subordinates
- School compliance with district, state, and federal requirements
- Ethical standards and behavior
- Interpersonal relationship skills

#### THE CASE

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Bob Tunnell's first semester as principal at Weston Elementary School went well. He visited classrooms frequently and displayed a keen interest in curriculum that his 22 teachers appreciated. The PTA supported school programs,

and parents were pleased with the principal's willingness to talk with them, a courtesy his predecessor had considered a nuisance.

As Bob thought about areas in the school needing improvement, school lunches warranted consideration because they were unpopular with students. He had heard children use the term *mystery meat* on more than one occasion to describe what they had received in the serving line. He had received nearly 20 letters and phone calls from parents who complained about cafeteria workers' rudeness and the frequency with which deep-fried foods were served.

Mrs. Collinwood, the Child Nutrition Program (CNP) manager, lived in the community and had worked at Weston for almost 25 years. When Tunnell discussed parents' complaints about food quality with her, she gave them little credence. She made small concessions regarding menu items, but lunches continued to have high-fat content and low nutritional value.

Bob talked with Denise Roman, the district CNP supervisor, and learned that she had been working closely with Mrs. Collinwood to improve food quality at Weston, but without much success. The manager changed menus until complaints subsided but soon returned to using menus she preferred.

Tunnell was surprised several weeks later when Mrs. Cole, a member of the school's CNP staff, stopped by his office after she finished work. She had impressed him with her friendly, outgoing manner with children and the way in which she managed to smile during hectic times on the serving line.

"May I see you for a few minutes?" she asked. "I have a problem that I think you should know about." Her co-verbal behavior betrayed anxiety.

"Certainly. Please sit down," Tunnell replied, motioning her to a chair. He stood and walked around his desk to sit close to Mrs. Cole. "What problem do you think I should know about?"

"Well," she began, "it's Mrs. Collinwood. I think she's stealing milk from the cafeteria every day."

Bob was surprised. "Why do you think she's stealing milk?"

"Because she leaves here every day with at least two crates full of milk the children didn't drink with their lunch," she replied.

Further discussion revealed that Mrs. Collinwood had instructed her staff to remove unopened milk cartons from students' trays when they were returned for washing. The half-pint cartons were stored in a refrigerator until the CNP staff left for the day. The manager loaded the cartons into the trunk of her car before leaving campus and had been taking unopened milk home for several years.

"Please don't tell Mrs. Collinwood that I told you about the milk," Mrs. Cole said, tears streaming from her eyes. "She'll give me the worst jobs in the kitchen every day to force me to quit."

Mr. Tunnell assured Mrs. Cole that he would not betray her confidence and waited until she left before calling Mrs. Roman to relate what Mrs. Cole had



said. He learned that federal food service regulations specify that unopened milk must be discarded; it cannot be used after being served.

Since Tunnell had promised Mrs. Cole that he would not reveal her as the information source, he would have to prove Mrs. Collinwood was stealing milk before taking corrective action. He asked one of the school's custodians to cut the lawn the next day near the cafeteria's loading dock at the time the manager usually left and to tell him if Mrs. Collinwood put anything into her car.

After being informed that she had placed two large containers of milk cartons inside her car's trunk, Tunnell called the central office immediately, only to discover that the superintendent was attending a conference out of town. He phoned Mrs. Roman, who told him that she would handle the matter. Bob left for the day believing that he had behaved ethically, although regretting the hardship Mrs. Collinwood would undoubtedly experience.

He arrived at school early the next morning and found Mrs. Collinwood waiting for him, so he invited her into his office.

"I wish you had talked to me about the milk before you called the superintendent and Mrs. Roman," she began.

"Why? You knew you weren't supposed to take milk home with you."

"I wasn't stealing, but now I've been suspended until the board of education holds a hearing," she said, tears welling in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Collinwood, but I was told that you've been taking milk for quite some time. It's my job to investigate reports like that. I'm curious, though. What could you possibly do with that much milk every day?"

She returned his gaze through moist eyes. "These kids won't drink low-fat milk and that's all I took. I gave it to my husband's hunting dogs. I hated to throw it out!"

### Questions

1. Were Mr. Tunnell's actions and decisions ethical? Why or why not?
2. What would you have done with the information Mrs. Cole brought to you?
3. As a school administrator, what responsibilities do you have for the school breakfast and lunch programs?
4. What do you think should happen to Mrs. Collinwood? Why?
5. What will you say to parents who ask about the incident? Should you tell your faculty about it?

**Activities**

1. The superintendent decided that Mrs. Collinwood should receive a written reprimand and asks you to draft that document for his review. Write the letter. What elements must you include?
2. Role-play the conference between Mr. Tunnell and Mrs. Collinwood. What point of view do you think each participant has at the outset of the meeting?
3. Make a list of ethical values you believe a school administrator must have as an effective leader. Compare your list with the lists of others in your class. Which values appear most frequently?

**ISLLC Standards**

**STANDARD 5**—A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

*Knowledge*

*The administrator has knowledge and understanding of:*

- Various ethical frameworks and perspectives on ethics
- Professional codes of ethics

*Dispositions*

*The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to:*

- Bringing ethical principles to the decision-making process
- Subordinating one's own interest to the good of the school and community

*Performances*

*The administrator:*

- Demonstrates values, beliefs, and attitudes that inspire others to higher levels of performance
- Considers the impact of one's administrative practice on others

**REFERENCE**

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- Gorton, R., & Schneider, G. (1991). *School-based leadership: Challenges and opportunities* (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.