



## **Universal and Local Virtues in the *Ethical Framework for Education Leadership***

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# ***Universal and Local Virtues in the 'Ethical Framework for Education Leadership'***

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The *Commission for Ethical Leadership* is completing 15 months' work in England on the desirable virtues of school leaders with the launch of its *Ethical Framework* in January 2019. Offering a framework for ethical decision-making in England's schools has not been attempted before.

Education should change the world. But what virtues build a better world, and who decides?

## **1. Introduction**

Schools are where society looks after its young until they are old enough to take on the mantle of adult citizenship. School leaders simultaneously act as diligent public servants and as role models for the children in their schools; the next generation of citizens. The focus of the relationship between the school and the child is education, a proxy for citizen-readiness. Our school structures, therefore, should support this work on behalf of the state. A stable, reliable and professional education system might reasonably be considered a *sine qua non* of an advanced liberal democracy.

English education, however, is turbulent and compromised. Our universal state system attracts opprobrium and suspicion quite unlike the national sentiment directed towards that other universal service, the NHS. As part of the public sector at a time of enforced political 'austerity', it is dangerously underfunded and therefore unattractive as a career-destination. Professional formation and discourse is functional, with no thought given to the underlying ethical structure needed to ensure good decision-making and right action in a deregulated system. It is symptomatic of poor-quality thinking about the future of English education that 'autonomy' is pressed into service as a public good.

I have spent the last two years working with opinion-formers devising a way of explaining and supporting ethical leadership. Using the 'local or universal' theme of this conference, I will explain our work and what we hope it will achieve.

## **2. The local and universal in the English education system**

English schools have been largely left to their own devices to set a good example to children. When Local Education Authorities were staffed to support schools, they focused on practicalities: buildings, employment contracts, curriculum development and performance management. As decision-making at local level grew over 25 years, leaders have developed their own ways of explaining what they are doing

according to the priorities of the time. These focus on test and examination results as a proxy for quality schooling.

Imagine a local school in Albeck. It presents itself locally with a typical school slogan: 'Achieving through Caring'. A neighbourhood school, it carries out its aims by the daily lived example within its walls: kindness, inclusion and scholarship. Albeck is reliably a safe and happy place with model community values, deeply valued by the parents of the neighbourhood and beyond. It might achieve well in published outcomes and inspection scrutiny – or it might not. If it doesn't, the strength of its community or the trust in which Albeck locals hold its leader might counter criticism and help it improve.

Albeck school's values include an intense and sharply-focused commitment to children and their futures as a way of building-up society. Children learn the knowledge, skills and attitudes that tend to the common good; valued and expected social norms are built up. The best ambitions of the state are reinforced and the confidence in state education is high. Such a school; diligent, principled, striving, embodies a local good. It has value of itself.

Imagine a school in Bescar, the next town. It uses a similar slogan and is rated as successful but the parents aren't at all sure about it. Its community fundamentals are under-thought and inconsistent. Its adults and children behave inconsistently and unpredictably. The community in Bescar worry for their children's happiness, safety and learning. Bescar's Head sets an example of weakness, self-obsession or bad judgement: the community doubt his sincerity. Such a school might achieve well in published outcomes and inspection scrutiny – or it might not. Either way, this school - confused, short-cutting, arrogant - embodies a public weakness. It detracts from the security of the local community and undermines the common good.

Schools like Bescar do not scale up into a model society. Worthy aims are missed and lesser ambitions substituted: instead of a national education service benefitting all children, leaders serve only a particular group of children. Instead of the child being at the centre of the enterprise and its aims, Bescar's success as a school is might be measured by the status of its leader. Instead of good outcomes arising naturally from good provision, outcomes are forced.

The English school system is currently in a state of what may politely be called redevelopment. As local independence has been encouraged, some assumed benefits of a national system have been lost. The intense pressures on the system make it too risky to hope that good values will naturally emerge from it. Many school leaders do not consider themselves to have leisure for ethical consideration. They await instruction from the regulators.

The Ethical leadership Commission's work is designed to mitigate this risk emerging inevitably from a poor understanding of the interplay of values and virtues at local and universal level. I hope this sketch might help illuminate what we hope to improve. For readers viewing in colour, we want to move from the red, through the yellow and into the green.

	Local	Universal
+	Good decisions based on value-driven, virtuous professional practice benefits children and the development of a good and just society	The Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education promotes and reinforces value-driven, virtuous professional practice
-	Fear of failing to meet inflexible accountability measures leads to bad decision-making, deprofessionalised practice and a functionalist response to children.	The counterproductive pressure of high-stakes accountability provides perverse incentives and undermines professional behaviour

**3. Bad universal decisions: counterproductive pressure and unintelligent accountability**

School leaders in the English education system labour under intense pressures. Briefly, these have been the inspection and examination outcomes published by the Office for Standards in Education and the Department for Education. Fair accountability is itself a public good but it needs to strengthen good universal values at a local level, not just terrify school leaders into compliance at any cost.

How does bad policy making and rhetoric at the universal level, or at least at national policy level, set the climate for local bad behaviour; my red arrow?

The following ten points set out the febrile context of English education with its facile and inaccurate measurement of outcomes, its cultural and geographical inequality, its politicisation and the doctrinaire faith in market-type forces to resolve underperformance.

- I. **We mistake our proxies for our goals.** All the measurements we take of schools are of honourable intent: to promote a good national system in an advanced democracy. However, we are compromised. Examination results are the easiest output to measure cheaply. They are necessary but not sufficient to judge quality of education.
- II. **We use the same measurements for children’s progress and school effectiveness.** In order for a school to be successful using examination outputs as a proxy it has to have individually

- successful children. Therefore low-achieving or slow-acquiring children are a high-stakes problem, but both must be fixed inside the time window that allows an average child to make average progress. Delilah may not grasp trigonometry before she's 16 so her Headteacher may be tempted to force her progress unsustainably, or record her progress untruthfully.
- III. **Progress measures work well at national level, less well at school level and badly at child level.** Generally speaking, academically-inclined children make better progress than slower-acquirers. Well-off children find schooling easier than poorer children. School leaders despair of calibrations by which they can never succeed.
  - IV. **Britain's unequal society makes state educators suspicious of the motives and competence of politicians.** They suspect that cabinet members declaring soundbite-ready policies for schools may not be fully conversant with state education, or personally committed to it. This is compounded when politicians seek to intervene based on personal experience in fee-paying or selective schools.
  - V. **School performance language and discourse becomes overheated and generates a destructive lexicon.** Struggling schools have been castigated as 'failing'. Heads who question feverish political aims are 'enemies of promise'. University education departments are 'the blob'. Excitable reporting feeds an expectation of precipitate action so a school's overseers may congratulate themselves on 'zero tolerance' of failure and their commitment to 'sky-high aspirations'. Heads live in fear of losing their jobs. They may therefore act to save themselves - or become incapable of rational action.
  - VI. **Because 'leadership' is set as central to a school's success the Head may find herself victim.** In the common parlance this is 'football manager syndrome', or 'one poor Ofsted away from a P45'. This has been exacerbated by politicians and regulators using unhelpful analogies for the desired attributes of headteachers: 'battle axes and bruisers', 'Lone Rangers'. A Head struggling to raise results is described as 'weak', to be 'rooted out'. But these public servants have mortgages and children to support: they cannot afford to be sacked so they may take desperate action or not accept the most difficult jobs.
  - VII. **Some kinds of public accountability set schools against one another.** In an area of declining population poor results may spell closure for a school which loses a publicity battle with its neighbour whether the schools are comparable or not. School leaders become divided by anger or envy and are unlikely to combine for the greater good of the system. Heads may be tempted to be untruthful about their schools.
  - VIII. **The British system is geographically divergent.** Some areas are overpopulated and need as many school places as can be generated. Others are underpopulated so provision needs careful management. Heads may lose confidence that reliable provision is valued. They may feel compelled to innovate or emulate, to deleterious effect.
  - IX. **In order to solve problems within the life of a single parliament an unreasonable amount of weight is placed on superficial answers.** Headline-grabbing initiatives become bona fide solutions before any evidence is available of sustainability or success. Longitudinal studies into pet projects are rare. Heads may adopt superficial and unsuccessful solutions to difficult problems.

- X. **Monitoring, direction and regulation is done cheaply by governments determined to use marketplace principles to reduce public sector spending while claiming to know the strengths and weaknesses of every institution.** As the democratic Local Authority system was dismantled, a weak regional structure has developed quickly without adequate planning or investment. Looking deeply at schools takes time and wisdom. Solving local problems may take years. Training inspectors to be able to do this is expensive and paying them accordingly would cost more. Heads themselves are at the mercy of inadequate leadership.

These universal level behaviours create a climate in which professionals are mistrusted and weak national service structures. This causes locally poor practice such as

- Unrestrained behaviour in the pursuit of legitimised extrinsic pay-related goals
- Simplistic and polarised battle-lines
- Disregarding of the vulnerable
- Self-aggrandisement under than label of 'strong leadership'
- System unreliability
- Collusion in cynical practice.

These behaviours at the universal level produce an education system made up of vulnerable institutions rather than places of community strength, focus and pride. Because local measurement using such blunt universal proxies can have career-ending implications for school leaders, weak professional practice develops. Younger leaders know no other way to be so the universal system becomes weaker with each generation of leader.

A tension between universal and local values characterises each of the ten problems. Behaving with integrity under scrutiny in these circumstances requires strong intrinsic motivation and self-understanding. If we want Headteachers to build local communities that model universal virtues for our young, they must be given the space to do the job thoughtfully and effectively, to behave like real professionals for their community

#### **4. *Bad local decisions***

How does universal (national level) compromise affect local practice? This intense climate of unhelpful pressure systems creates poor local decision-making. The oscillation between dirigiste and autonomous system rhetoric makes it difficult for school leaders to understand themselves as respected and professional local leaders within a trusted and stable national system. The specific direction of a universal regulator seems so powerful that local professional judgement leading to right action and good service to the community atrophies.

Confused leaders make poor-quality decisions. It is hard for them to concentrate on the building the base unit of the system, the quality education of the individual child. So, we find

- I. **Unfaithfulness towards children:** individual children and their needs are at the mercy of inflexible system pressures. For example, a school may seek to remove children from its roll if they are likely to underperform.
- II. **Short cuts:** outcomes are sought without proper input. For example, a school may rely on teaching to the test or use examination tricks without developing a thorough, robust and thoughtful curriculum.
- III. **Bullying:** leaders and teachers have to be driven to achieve outcomes no matter what. This leads to workload stress, poor employment practice, recruitment and retention crises.
- IV. **Injustice:** able and compliant children with supportive parents help schools achieve their published aims, so schools may resort to covert selection in admission or behaviour methods which excise the most difficult or at risk children.
- V. **Grandiosity:** successful leaders are individually lauded and may then consider themselves beyond restraint. Irregular remuneration practices are regularly reported in the press.
- VI. **Cowardice:** leaders are frightened of career-ending failure and may take extreme steps to avoid it, such as examination malpractice.
- VII. **Pessimism:** leaders believe education is purely functionalist. This way the experience of childhood and the child are disregarded and many children will be characterised as 'failing'. This will include 170,000 16-year olds who did not get a so-called 'standard pass' at GCSE in 2018.

Humans being as they are, individuals locally could have adopted bad habits by themselves; but to see this whole set, so often suggests systemic weakness. One could be forgiven for thinking that parents are being wilfully discouraged about what the state can achieve.

## 5. *Good universal decisions*

Worried by the apparent links between universal policy approaches and locally compromised professionalism, we set up the **Ethical Leadership Commission**. Its *Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education* is devised to help local leaders engage with universal values. We hope that by articulating a universal language of common ethical expectation and offering opportunities to talk through practice and dilemmas, school leaders will be emboldened to act well locally and build up a good system.

We are not the only people to have noticed the problems in education. There have been recent changes in accountability measures.

- The tone of the inspectorate has begun to show green shoots of reasonable judgement about what it can reasonably prove within its budget.
- While examination outcomes are still tragically zero-sum, schools are now judged on pupil progress rather than their threshold attainment. This theoretically could value the progress of more children.
- There is to be a focus on the curriculum as a vehicle for sharing powerful knowledge with children, rather than a set of examination hoops through which to jump. Content-based curriculum design has been reintroduced into some schools.
- Regulators have sought to distance themselves from brutal hiring-and-firing practices enacted upon school leaders at local level.

The Ethical Leadership Commission is not the only group trying to guide universal right behaviour in public services. Since 1995 England has had a set of *Principles for Public Life*<sup>i</sup> which have applied to all leaders of public service since 2013. These were originally designed to deter, prevent and respond to the kind of behaviour that used to bring down a government: corruption, nepotism, fraud, lies and a general untrustworthiness referred to at the time as 'sleaze'. Insofar as we have a British standard for leading public institutions, this is it. These *Nolan Principles* – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership - are the foundation of our *Framework*.<sup>ii</sup>

## **6. The Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education**

The *Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education* is based upon the seven principles of public life.

1. **Selflessness** School and college leaders should act solely in the interest of children and young people.
2. **Integrity** School and college leaders must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. Before acting and taking decisions, they must declare and resolve openly any perceived conflict of interest and relationships.
3. **Objectivity** School and college leaders must act and take decisions impartially and fairly, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias. Leaders should be dispassionate, exercising judgement and analysis for the good of children and young people.
4. **Accountability** School and college leaders are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.
5. **Openness** School and college leaders should expect to act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from scrutiny unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.
6. **Honesty** School and college leaders should be truthful.
7. **Leadership** School and college leaders should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles, and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs. Leaders include both those who are paid to lead schools and colleges and those who volunteer to govern them.

Schools and colleges serve children and young people and help them grow into fulfilled and valued citizens. As role models for the young, how we behave as leaders is as important as what we do. Leaders should show leadership through the following personal characteristics or virtues:

- a. **Trust:** *leaders are trustworthy and reliable*  
We hold trust on behalf of children and should be beyond reproach. We are honest about our motivations.
- b. **Wisdom:** *leaders use experience, knowledge and insight*  
We demonstrate moderation and self-awareness. We act calmly and rationally. We serve our schools and colleges with propriety and good sense.



- c. **Kindness:** *leaders demonstrate respect, generosity of spirit, understanding and good temper*  
We give difficult messages humanely where conflict is unavoidable.
- d. **Justice:** *leaders are fair and work for the good of all children*  
We seek to enable all young people to lead useful, happy and fulfilling lives.
- e. **Service:** *leaders are conscientious and dutiful*  
We demonstrate humility and self-control, supporting the structures, conventions and rules which safeguard quality. Our actions protect high-quality education.
- f. **Courage:** *leaders work courageously in the best interests of children and young people*  
We protect their safety and their right to a broad, effective and creative education. We hold one another to account courageously.
- g. **Optimism:** *leaders are positive and encouraging*  
Despite difficulties and pressures, we are developing excellent education to change the world for the better.

This is our universal statement of ethics for the profession of headteachers. We have tried to respond to professional practice at a local level: picking up on best professional behaviours and finding in local unprofessionalism indicators of values and virtues that need encouraging. Here is how we want to take this universal grammar of ethics into local professional practice.

## **7. The FELE's Three Strands**

The Ethical *Framework* will be realised through three strands of work.

- I. The first is the dissemination and promulgation of the words of the *Framework* in education discourse and through the Ethical Leadership Pathfinder Project<sup>iii</sup> led by the National Governance Association<sup>iv</sup>. We want school leaders (governors and professional staff) to adopt the Framework, committing themselves to a thorough consideration of the values and the virtues in their schools, developing and maintaining structures to safeguard them. There are no tick-boxes but a series of questions to help governing boards approach what can be a tricky or abstract area.
- II. The second strand is in career development, seeking to embed ethical practice from the point of entry to teaching. This will be led by the Chartered College of Teaching.<sup>v</sup> Development and formation are particularly important in the present context where dominant school-based models prioritise the (crucial) skills of subject knowledge and classroom practice. This is consistent with audit-facing education but, while necessary, it is not sufficient for the formation of teachers.
- III. The Commission's third strand of action is the establishing of an Ethics Forum hosted by the Chartered College of Teaching. This fulfils several important tasks.
  - as a forum where dilemmas, developments and problems within school leadership will be discussed and profession-led guidance developed,
  - as a forum where the likely effect on leaders' behaviour of regulators' proposals are considered.

- as a group to develop ethics-related materials for training.
- as the home base for ethical ‘pathfinder’ schools.

### **8. Good local decisions**

Given the *Ethical Framework* alongside an opportunity to re-focus on quality learning for every child, school leaders should be able to return to considered and inclusive practices. They can think about the care of the child and the content of her learning. They can match all other decisions against these needs, not direction from above. The ground is fertile for these green shoots to grow into sheltering canopies of professionalism to protect our young.

This should mean that children are protected from education focused on system needs, not their needs. Leaders will be able to be honest and honourable thinking professionals making reliable decisions which model good behaviour. Using the veil of ignorance to build and support the system, every child will matter and every professional gladly take full responsibility for her actions. We can stop hiding behind ‘rules’ or the requirements of a shadowy superstructure distant from individual children, families and communities and do the job that the nation needs us to do.

Further, school leaders will remember that schools are where society looks after its young until they are old enough to take on the mantle of adult citizenship. We can act as diligent public servants and role models for the next generation. We will recommit ourselves to a stable, reliable, professional and just education system that builds up our common life.

I present this paper weeks before the launch of the *Ethical Leadership Commissions* work. If we inspire school leaders to adopt our *Framework* we will have played a significant part in rebuilding local action based on universal virtues.

Accountability is not enough. We have to do good.

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<sup>i</sup> Nolan M (1994) *First Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life* London: TSO

<sup>ii</sup> I attach the interim report of the Commission from February 2018. The Commission will launch its next stage of work on 25.1.19, when the Final Report will be published. The work will also be covered in more detail in my forthcoming *Ethical Leadership for a Better Education System* (Routledge, 2019)

<sup>iii</sup> The Ethical Leadership Commission’s ‘pathfinder project’ is an opt-in programme starting in November 2018 for school leaders to test-drive the *Framework* in their leadership

<sup>iv</sup> The National Governance Association serves governing and trust boards of state-funded schools

<sup>v</sup> The Chartered College of Teaching serves teachers at all levels, offering professional development and support.