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# Protecting the Profession — Professional Ethics in the Classroom

ARTICLES

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# Contents

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Introduction.....	3
Professional Ethics and the Classroom.....	4
What Professional Ethics Mean .....	5
Teaching as a High-Risk Profession .....	6
Navigating the Gray Areas of Teacher Behavior .....	8
Would You Know an Ethical Dilemma If You Saw One? .....	9
Peers and Professional Ethics .....	10
Breaking the Silence.....	12
Professional Ethics and Professionalizing Education.....	13

# Introduction

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Make no mistake about it, “ethics” is a loaded word.

The mere mention of ethics, whether in political debates or casual conversations among friends, often results in a value-laden discussion of what is considered “right” or “wrong.”

When placed within the context of a profession, however, ethics acknowledges the complexities inherent within a practitioner’s work and is meant to serve as a guide in navigating a broad range of nuanced situations. Professionals are prepared to not only think about critical decision points, but also to discuss them with each other by applying a common framework of understanding. For that very reason, codes of ethics have been at the core of most professions for decades. That makes sense.

This does not hold true for educators, who by the nature of their jobs, face a series of gray areas with only their personal experiences and values as a guide. Research indicates that few educators have been prepared at the preservice or inservice levels in professional ethics, and the profession as a whole has not adopted a unified code of ethics to guide practitioner decision making. Yet, educators are expected to address the academic, personal and social needs of society’s most vulnerable population in a setting that allows for little distance between the practitioner and those they serve.

In the fall of 2016, a series of articles was published on [RealClearEducation.com](http://RealClearEducation.com) with the goal of generating awareness among our educational leaders and policymakers about the importance of this topic. Navigating through the competing tensions of our profession goes far beyond just knowing right from wrong, and my hope is that these articles illustrate the complexity, risks and vulnerabilities inherent in the profession.

As an experienced teacher, I can assure you that most daily decisions in our profession are not about right or wrong, but rather about how to best operate within the gray. It’s time we stop tiptoeing around “ethics.” It’s time we give our profession permission to have the difficult conversations.

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## About the Author

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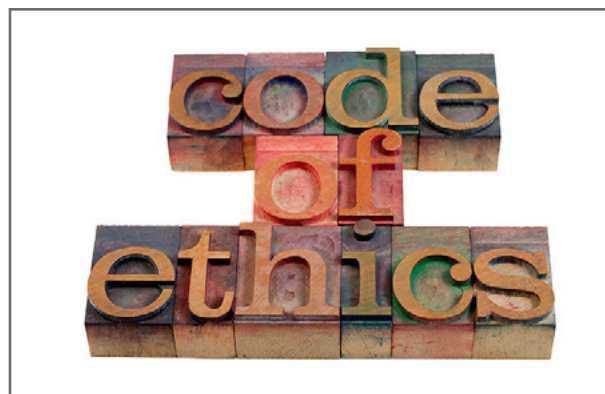


# Professional Ethics and the Classroom

By Troy Hutchings, ETS | September 1, 2016

To understand the importance of professional ethics in the classroom, look back to the election season of 1964.

As Barry Goldwater rose to prominence, a magazine surveyed more than 1,000 psychiatrists to assess his state of mind, most of whom were happy to oblige. The responses outraged Goldwater, who successfully sued the magazine for libel. Equally important, the comments damaged the credibility of the field. "Psychobabble reported by the media undermines psychiatry as science," former American Psychiatric Association President Herbert Sacks wrote in an [article discussing the incident](#).



As a result, psychiatry, as a profession, agreed to stop publicly diagnosing public figures without personally examining them. The so-called "Goldwater rule" is an example of how professionals can look at the ethical issues that impact their field and collectively come to consensus on how to address them. It also serves as a guideline for individual psychiatrists who may be prompted to offer their own verdicts about individuals they know — or don't know — in social or public settings.

Now think how a similar situation might play out for a teacher in a school setting — for example, if I suspect that a student may have an inappropriate crush on another teacher. I know the teacher hasn't encouraged this interest, but nonetheless this is a potential blind spot he or she needs to be made aware of. But how do I address this? If I talk to the teacher, chances are it will sound like a personal judgment about the way he or she relates to students. If I bring it up with an administrator, chances are it will be construed as a failing on the teacher's part that could impact his or her career. And what if I'm wrong? So chances are I'll stay silent, even if the situation ultimately winds up damaging the credibility of the teacher, the school and the profession as a whole.

What's the difference? Psychiatrists, like doctors, lawyers, and their counterparts in a variety of other fields, deal with highly nuanced relationships that can create the same kinds of gray areas that often arise in a school setting. But these professions have established codes of professional ethics to guide practitioners as they navigate a broad range of gray areas. Just as importantly, these professionals are trained to think about these ambiguous situations and to discuss them with each other as part of their preparation to enter their respective fields. Neither of these things is true for educators, who by the very nature of their jobs face a constant series of gray areas with only their personal experience and values as a guide. The isolation that so many of us love when we close our classroom doors to teach, works against us when we have to face challenging ethical issues where there is no collective understanding of how to address them.

The lack of a code of ethics in education obviously impacts individual teachers who face difficult decisions and don't have an outlet to discuss them with peers. But it's also shaped how the profession — and education is by far one of the largest professions in the country — has evolved.

A key element of any profession — and the one I argue that actually makes it a profession — is the extent to which the field has created a way to regulate itself in these ways. The absence of this self-regulating function has contributed to the many ways in which educators are undervalued as professionals. It's also led to a vicious cycle that has impacted the profession for the worse. In the absence of a clearly articulated code of ethics, policymakers feel obliged to spell out the requirements for teacher behavior in highly specific laws and policies. These rules, which often don't acknowledge the highly variable nature of teachers, schools, and students, over time limit teachers' ability to make decisions on their own, which in turn, creates a need for additional, ever more specific teacher guidance. If you've ever wondered why some school districts have spelled out in writing that parent gifts worth \$24.99 are acceptable and those worth \$25 are a violation of policy, that's why.

Codes of ethics evolved in other professions as a result of similar difficult questions. The American Medical Association's code of ethics, for example, were largely created to help physicians reconcile the conflicting needs of serving patients at a time when infectious diseases were difficult for medical professionals to avoid contracting. In many states, the bar exam and other licensing requirements for lawyers focus extensively on ethics. Ethics also are an integral part of the discussions law school students are required to have with professors and their peers — conversations that provide models for how they can continue addressing ethical dilemmas once they are practicing law.

That's not to say these fields don't have their own challenges — professionals in any field make mistakes, sometimes out of ignorance, and sometimes out of intent. But professionals in these fields have ways of addressing them with each other — and at times, preventing each other from unwittingly making serious mistakes — that we as educators simply do not.

As a former teacher devoted to introducing educators and the field as a whole to the importance of professional ethics, I often say that ethics should be one leg of a three-legged stool — as important to being a teacher as mastery of content and pedagogy. While that's clearly not been the case to date, professional ethics is now emerging as an important component of education policy and practice. In this series of articles, we'll explore the challenges of instilling professional ethics in education and discuss promising changes that could help transform the field — and make it a profession on par with medicine, law and other fields that have empowered their members to regulate themselves in important ways.

## What Professional Ethics Mean

By Troy Hutchings, ETS | September 9, 2016

When we hear the word “ethics,” we think we understand what the term means. And as educators, when we're confronted with ethical issues, we generally try our best to act ... well, ethically. But the difference between being an “ethical” person and following a code of ethics can be very different.

Consider a scenario familiar to many educators: An exemplary teacher in your building is having a bad year — in large part because of personal issues. What do you do?

- Do you confront the teacher about his or her performance, knowing it ultimately impacts the students he or she cares so much about?
- Do you, knowing the severity of the teacher's personal issues, recognize that even the best educators cannot be at the top of their game at all times, and assume that he or she will go back to being a great educator once the out-of-school problem is resolved?
- Do you think it's presumptuous to bring the issue up with the teacher at all, given that the principal is more likely to hold the teacher to task in ways that will improve his or her performance?



Chances are, most teachers will say “it depends.” And the best response does, in fact, depend on a variety of factors — the teacher, the situation, the students and the school. But in any given scenario, each of these courses of action could conceivably be seen as “ethical” by a teacher — and probably for good reasons. More importantly, we as a field haven't created an environment that allows us to have conversations that acknowledge these kinds of problems in the first place and discuss collectively what I like to call the “least worst option.” After all, if a solution to a situation was clear cut, it wouldn't be an ethical dilemma.

The misperceptions blurring the lines between personal and professional ethics become even more difficult to address when we think about the ethics of education. I personally believe the reasons why these misperceptions exist go back to the roots of public education in this country. We've long thought of teaching as being an extension of parenting — a moral good that has

seemingly obvious guidelines for what should be done in any situation. As a result, teachers, like parents, are expected — and expect themselves — to follow their own personal morality and life experience as they make decisions. We're often expected to innately know the best way to address to any problem that involves the children we serve.

Of course, teaching, like parenting, is rarely so clear-cut. And that's why professional ethics — as opposed to a personal sense of morality — is so necessary. Consider the kinds of issues that codes of ethics in other fields largely focus on, such as conflicts of interest and the idea of "multiple relationships"— the idea that a professional, like a doctor, must avoid relationships with patients that stray from his or her professional role in order to protect the doctor and the patient.

Most professions address these situations by imposing social distance. As an extension of their code of ethics governing multiple relationships, psychologists generally don't socialize with their clients outside of therapy sessions and doctors don't offer medical opinions during social gatherings, for example. That kind of strict separation doesn't exist in education, where instead of seeing a patient for an hour a week, we're major parts of our students' lives for 180 days each year. In this setting, emotional bonds with students and parents are expected — and largely unavoidable. Nor would imposing rules requiring strict separation be desirable. In fact, it goes against our job descriptions and a century's worth of expectations about teachers and teaching.

That's why we, as a profession, need to shift away from the idea that our personal sense of ethics — driven in large part by our upbringing and our life experiences — is enough to help us navigate all the situations we face in the classroom. Even the expectations and norms that evolve in each school vary so much that they alone can't serve as the sole guide to our decisions. And along with the need for collective understanding of the challenges we face as professionals, we need to acknowledge the inherent risks — ethical, practical and often legal — teachers face on a daily basis, which we'll explore in more detail in our next column.

## Teaching as a High-Risk Profession

By Troy Hutchings, ETS | September 15, 2016

Teaching is a highly challenging and highly rewarding profession. It's also a high-risk one.

Think of the attributes we most admire in teachers: a caring demeanor, willingness to go above and beyond time spent in the classroom to help students, an ability to reach children who are disconnected, and the personal knowledge of their students that can help each one find his or her passion.

It turns out these same attributes are also commonly found in teachers whose behaviors cross a line — whether in a legal sense, or through the kinds of unintended consequences that wind up damaging the trust that connects students, families, teachers and schools. These kinds of situations don't usually make headlines, but unintended consequences happen every day, creating risks for educators and students that are unlike those confronted by professionals in other fields. Consider these key differences:

- Other professionals typically provide a narrow service to address a singular problem — a legal challenge or an illness, for example. As a society, we expect teachers to address not just learning, but also a broad range of societal issues, including extreme poverty, discrimination and the negative consequences of relationships that exist outside of the classroom.
- In professions like law and medicine, the practitioner typically interprets knowledge to help the person he or she is serving. In education, teachers help students meet, and at times exceed, their own knowledge base, typically by becoming active partners in learning.



- Doctors and attorneys aren't expected to develop personal relationships with clients as part of fulfilling their duties — in fact, it's discouraged. From the beginning of their training, educators are taught that strong interpersonal relationships are at the heart of effective teaching and learning.
- Other professionals typically provide services to one client at a time. Educators do so for entire classrooms of children at once, each with different academic, social and emotional needs that must be addressed simultaneously for learning to take place.

Other professions work through these kinds of issues by creating a culture of social distance — which is why you don't invite your therapist to a birthday party or ask your dermatologist to look at a rash in the grocery line. But teachers don't hold weekly sessions with students — they're integral parts of their daily lives for the entire school year. Unlike doctors and counselors, we also expect teachers to spend time with students outside of the classroom as coaches and club sponsors, as mentors, as counselors and, often, as the adult they can come to with the problems they're struggling with in and out of school. Teachers who take on these additional roles are often the ones who find themselves in the most vulnerable spaces.

Time and proximity aren't the only reasons the role of educator is a risky one. As every educator knows, the relationship between teachers and students becomes a shared space very quickly. Think of a coach who pushes a student-athlete to dig in and find the untapped strength needed to break a record or win a game, or an English teacher who draws highly personal writing out of a reluctant student. Most of us can think back to our own time in school to an educator that reached us on a much deeper level than the subject he or she taught. There's an intimate connection in all teaching relationships that's highly nuanced, highly dependent on the individuals involved and very powerful. The shift from a student passively receiving knowledge to becoming actively engaged can blur these boundaries even further. That can be dangerous. The irony is clear. Those educators whom we have long considered as being most influential in our own development may have faced the greatest danger.

That's not to say that educators should step back from extracurricular activities or caring for students. Few committed teachers would be willing to do so, and as a society we value the teachers who go above and beyond the classroom the most. But what we, both individually and as a profession, need to do is to acknowledge the vulnerabilities we face as educators. The uncomfortable truth is that we are in a high-risk position where seemingly insignificant missteps can, over time, cause irreparable damage to our students, our careers, our schools and communities, and the integrity of the profession — whether we break laws or school policies, or not.

Research tells us that educators make more than a thousand decisions a day, the vast majority of which involve interactions with individual students that are often made reflexively. We rarely have time to step back and think through the potential long-term implications of our actions and reactions to student behavior. And most teachers aren't trained to do so, as they study to become educators or are mentored in their first years in the profession.

This is why teaching — like law, medicine and counseling — needs a framework that recognizes the challenging situations in which educators often find themselves. A professional code of ethics and related training can help educators recognize these difficult gray areas when they arise. More importantly, such a framework can provide a collective understanding of the challenging situations teachers face, and a mechanism that allows teachers to articulate and make decisions about those challenges individually, through conversations with peers and as a profession.

As I've written before, too often these kinds of difficult issues go without discussion because we don't have a way to separate them from our personal beliefs and biases. A professional code of ethics can not only give educators the framework to guide us through the thousands of routine interactions that make up our days, but also the permission to discuss sensitive issues with each other in a professional context.

This brings me to perhaps the most important reason teaching is such a high-risk profession:

As educators, we're trained to value and even relish the idea of professional autonomy ... that once school starts and the classroom door is closed, we're on our own. That may work well in terms of pedagogy, but it also puts us in a position where we are even more vulnerable when serious problems arise. As we will explore in subsequent articles, professional ethics connect us to each other as educators, and as professionals, in ways that shatter that isolation when it matters the most.

# Navigating the Gray Areas of Teacher Behavior

By Troy Hutchings, ETS | September 23, 2016

When we think of educator misconduct, we usually think of sexual misconduct — and rightfully so. Few things are more damaging to students, schools, communities and the integrity of the relationship between teachers and students.

We can't talk about professional ethics and education without thinking about the worst-case scenarios. When stories of educator misconduct appear in the media, it's striking how often you hear the same things: It's the teacher no one suspected, the one who spent years going above and beyond to help students, the club sponsor, the coach, the beloved face of the school in the community. With alarming frequency, these same teachers have been publicly recognized for their work with students. They often are first-time offenders without a criminal record.



In large part, that's why well-intentioned laws and policies intended to stop teacher misconduct, including fingerprinting and background checks, only can do so much. There's limited research in this area, but as part of my work studying ethics and education, I've interviewed teachers who have been convicted and sent to prison for sexual misconduct, and their stories are remarkably similar.

What I've learned is that too often we think of misconduct as an event — a line that gets crossed. In reality, it's a process so gradual that people don't always notice it. I've heard repeatedly about the dangers of the "slippery slope," where expectations placed on educators to be a caring adult in a child's life, when combined with personal issues in their own lives, can contribute to the development of blind spots allowing them to misunderstand how their actions may be construed. Those who receive public recognition can become alienated from peers, losing another opportunity for intervention. That's not to excuse their actions in any way — those who break the law and our trust as educators can and should be prosecuted. But it's also too late to protect the child at this point, and the uncomfortable reality is that teachers can encounter a broad range of situations well before they cross a legal line that are just as inappropriate and damaging to the students they teach. As I've written in previous articles, it's important for us as educators to be aware of how vulnerable all of us — we as educators and our students — can be, even if our behavior never crosses a line or breaks the law.

That's because even with the expansive role teachers play in students' lives — as educators, coaches, counselors and mentors — there's a lack of clearly defined boundaries for teacher behavior. Practitioners in other professions characterized by intimate relationships, including counseling and psychology, receive training that helps them recognize the personal impact of these relationships and react accordingly. By contrast, teachers are expected to navigate these complex relationships, while caring deeply for students, with no training in how to define boundaries and identify when the emotions that arise from the shared space of teaching and learning are putting them and their students at risk. The gray areas left untouched by law and policy are vast, complex and highly dependent on the school, student, teacher and situation, and almost impossible for teachers to resolve correctly on their own every single time.

Ethical standards can help govern teacher behavior in these gray areas. They can hold teachers accountable to a higher level of responsibility than narrowly focused laws and regulations, and they can provide an avenue for teachers to discuss challenging issues and alert each other to the misperceptions we all can harbor. In their absence, we're often left to fumble through the gray areas alone and vulnerable to our own blind spots, biases and personal triggers.

What if I, as a high school English teacher, receive a love letter from a student? I'd likely be hesitant to discuss it with my peers, because I'd wonder if they would judge me personally for encouraging the student's behavior. I'd also be unlikely to share it with my principal, because he or she would focus first on the potential risk to the student and the school, and scrutinize my actions in and out of the classroom. And if other teachers happened to know the student, they'd be reluctant to warn me for all the same reasons. And in any case, gossip and innuendo would inevitably follow, and it might spread beyond the school into the community.

The way teachers are currently prepared and expected to work with each other doesn't allow us to address our personal challenges with the help of our peers and professional advice. In many places, even the clearly defined legal boundaries aren't discussed in teacher preparation programs or licensure requirements, much less the gray areas that can cause problems well within the letter of the law.

Professional ethics can help regulate teacher conduct, but not in the ways you'd expect. Unlike the law or school policies, ethical decision making isn't absolute — it doesn't say you can or cannot do this or that. It starts with the gray areas that exist in the countless interactions and decisions that make up teachers' day-to-day work. It acknowledges that in these cases, there often aren't easy answers. It challenges us to consider the consequences of our actions and to balance the competing tensions we face on a daily basis. And, it gives us permission to discuss them with each other in a nonjudgmental way, informed by standards the profession as a whole has defined.

Teaching has countless gray areas, but all professions do — otherwise they wouldn't rely on their practitioners to make the "right" decisions. Embracing these gray areas with ethical decision making is good for students, teachers, schools, communities and the profession as a whole. It places the responsibility in teachers' hands where it belongs, but it also provides the tools we need to successfully navigate the complexity of the profession, with the support of peers and an agreed-upon code of behavior. That's a big part of what makes any profession a profession, and improving teachers' understanding of professional ethics can improve education for the better.

## Would You Know an Ethical Dilemma If You Saw One?

By Troy Hutchings, ETS | October 3, 2016

Teachers generally enter the profession with an innate desire to do what's best for students. So it stands to reason that when they encounter situations where they're in danger of doing just the opposite, they'd know.

The reality is far more complicated. Even the most experienced and committed educators may not always be aware when their decisions, no matter how well-intentioned, could put them on a path that can jeopardize their relationships with students, peers and the reputation of the school in the community.

Consider a high school track coach who notices that one of his student athletes doesn't have running shoes — and doesn't have the money to buy them. Chances are that coach wouldn't think twice about paying for the shoes out of his own pocket. Then, after noticing the same student walking home through a rough part of town after practice, the coach may offer to give him a ride. That's when the coach discovers the student's family is being evicted, so he helps the student get a job working for a friend so he can help support his family.

All of this is well-intentioned, and it may well benefit the student and his family immeasurably, but the coach may have violated one or more school policies in the process. If the student is undocumented or too young to work, he may also have put his friend into legal jeopardy as an employer. And that's just the beginning — the student's teammates may tell their parents about the special treatment he is receiving without being aware of the hardships he faces. This, in turn, could lead to gossip and insinuations, which could spread via social media — which, in turn, could get back to the principal and lead him or her to investigate accusations of preferential treatment. So we wind up in a situation where a well-intentioned educator, doing exactly what we expect our best educators to do, ends up damaging his reputation and, quite possibly, valued relationships with students and parents.

We believe — and demand — that our schools should treat all students fairly. But the reality is that just as surgeons treat patients differently based on their diagnosis, the patient history and other underlying conditions, teachers also treat students differently, based on their learning styles and needs in and out of the classroom.



“Fair isn’t equal” is a phrase that is used — and often overused — in education circles, but it truly reflects the delicate balance teachers face when trying to meet the needs of all their students — something that teachers do almost reflexively. And as in the example of the track coach above, it’s easy to miss the long-term implications of small actions that have the potential to snowball over time and damage the credibility of individual teachers, the school and the profession as a whole.

As I’ve written earlier in this series, this tension is at the heart of why teaching is a high-risk profession. And it creates countless ethical dilemmas that teachers must navigate — often alone, and without the kind of training that can help them recognize these situations early enough to think through the potential implications. Teachers are only rarely trained on the specific laws and regulations governing educator behavior in their state or district. At best, they may be asked to sign a document acknowledging they have read and understand district policy. Almost never do they receive training on education law or licensure issues. As a result, on a day-to-day basis, they are guided by their own personal sense of what’s right and our societal expectations that excellent teachers go above and beyond to help all students. But there’s a massive chasm between those two guideposts of the law and personal morality. And when situations arise where neither provides a clear answer, teachers may find themselves facing an ethical dilemma without even knowing it — or knowing what to do.

Along with acknowledging the risks they face in the thousands of decisions and interactions they make on a daily basis, educators must also be aware of how easy it is to not realize that they’re facing these kinds of potentially dangerous dilemmas until after policies have been broken and trust eroded. And since it’s so easy to develop blind spots that prevent us from seeing the long-term implications of seemingly benign actions, teachers need ways to help each other identify these situations that don’t smack of personal judgment, finger-pointing, or bias.

This, in particular, is where grounding teachers in a framework of professional ethics — in pre-service training and in ongoing professional learning with their peers — can be the most powerful. A large part of the power of professional ethics comes from how they can help guide teachers as they navigate the complexities of their role. But as in the case of the track coach described above, it’s difficult to always be aware of the implications of these complexities as teachers are right in the middle of them, trying to do what’s best for students facing difficult, and sometimes seemingly insurmountable, challenges. As we’ll discuss in forthcoming columns, the real power comes from no longer having to go it alone.

## Peers and Professional Ethics

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By *Troy Hutchings, ETS* | October 10, 2016

As an educator, I first realized the power of professionals supporting each other as they navigate tricky interpersonal situations not in the classroom or a faculty lounge, but in a doctor’s office. And I wasn’t the professional — I was the patient.

As part of a routine examination, the doctor made an offhand — and completely harmless — comment. I wasn’t offended or threatened. In fact, we both laughed. I left the appointment and went about my business without thinking anything of it until the doctor called me later in the day.

It turns out that offhand comment bothered the doctor enough that he went to the head of the department — his supervisor — to discuss it. And that supervisor didn’t tell him whether what he said was right or wrong. Instead, he asked the doctor how he felt about his behavior. And that was enough for him to realize he had crossed a line that — importantly — I wasn’t even aware of as the patient.

As with teachers and students, there’s a clear power imbalance in the relationship between doctors and patients — which is why physicians are trained to be hypersensitive to situations where they may be putting that relationship in jeopardy.



More importantly, they're trained to discuss these situations, uncomfortable as they may be, with peers and supervisors in a nonjudgmental fashion that focuses first on the obligations of the profession, not the personalities at play.

Now consider a similarly awkward situation in a school setting — for example, the not uncommon scenario where a high school teacher receives a love note from a student we've touched on in previous columns. The teacher would be unlikely to approach his or her principal about the note — the principal would almost certainly respond by investigating the teacher out of an abundance of caution. The teacher may not feel comfortable going to his or her peers for advice — the risk of judgment and gossip would be too great, particularly if word got around, jumped to social media, and spread beyond the walls of the school into the community. But just as importantly — and possibly more so — would colleagues feel comfortable taking the teacher aside before the letter was written and warning him or her to be careful about how students might respond to the passion and personal interest he or she exhibits in the classroom?

That silence reinforces the isolation that makes our profession so challenging. As educators, it's too easy to fall into an "us and them" mindset — believing that the teachers who exhibit poor judgment, violate trust, or worse, are somehow different from the rest of us. But that mindset creates a situation where it simply doesn't feel safe to ask for professional advice — or to offer it when we see a peer unaware of how well-intentioned actions might snowball into more serious situations over time.

To me, that's the greatest of the many challenges we face in introducing professional ethics to education. As we've discussed before, we will need to acknowledge just how vulnerable our role as educators really is. We will need to dispel misperceptions about what professional ethics are — not a code of conduct or fixed rules that limit teacher decision making, but guidelines that empower them to think through the ramifications of the countless small decisions they make. We will have to identify ways to immerse educators in a framework of professional ethics, both before and once they are teaching, so they become just as internalized in their day-to-day thinking as pedagogy and instruction. But above all, we as a profession will have to become comfortable with the idea of sharing our challenges with each other — and responding to those challenges in a way that's not judgmental or based on our personal opinions, but as an agreed-upon part of our professional obligations to each other.

Despite these challenges — not the least of which is cutting against the grain of the culture of the lone educator working in solitude once the classroom door is closed — I am optimistic that we can move the profession in this direction. When I speak with educators about professional ethics and how they can help address these kinds of dilemmas, it often feels like a weight has been lifted from them — the discussions can, and often do, last hours. I think that's in large part because these educators are realizing for the first time how little they've shared with their peers about their own struggles in navigating the complexities of their profession, and how powerful a shared concept of doing so could be.

These kinds of conversations have power. In other professions, they've driven real change. For example, when the American Psychological Association (APA) developed its first code of ethics in the 1950s, it went to the field, asking practitioners to describe different scenarios for which there were no easy answers. More than 2,000 psychologists [wrote in with ethical dilemmas that became the framework of the APA's guiding principles](#). More importantly, these dilemmas established the APA's principles as ways for practitioners to resolve problems of practice and they created a precedent that has served that profession well as it has collaboratively addressed new challenges in the years that followed. In small steps, these same kinds of conversations are shaping an emerging focus on professional ethics in education, which we'll explore in more detail in the columns that follow.

# Breaking the Silence

By Troy Hutchings, ETS | October 14, 2016

It's a situation too many teachers face: after an all-day event like a debate tournament, the activities bus returns to school in the evening. All the students are picked up except one, who tells the debate team sponsor that he doesn't have a ride home. The district's policy specifically prohibits teachers from transporting students in their personal vehicles, but it's getting late and no one in his family is answering their phones.

So this teacher breaks policy, and not for the first time in this same situation. Every time she's driven a student home after a tournament, she's worried a little about what might happen if she was caught — would she receive a letter in her personnel file? Be fired? Would her peers wonder if she had other motives for driving students around? But ultimately, she knows that she has a moral obligation to ensure her students' safety, and not leaving a student alone in an empty school parking lot late at night trumps whatever ramifications might come out of violating the district's rules.

All too often, teachers are put in situations like this where they feel like they have no choice but to break policy. So, more often than not, they do so quietly — often without telling their coworkers and peers. And this can be as problematic as the policy itself.

If this particular teacher talked with her peers about this situation, she'd realize she wasn't alone. She would learn that the sports coaches and band director at her school do the same thing all the time, and are just as concerned about what could happen to them and their students. She might also learn that a teacher who transferred to another school a few years before was moved because a student took a selfie of the two of them on a similar ride home and posted it on Facebook®, prompting a complaint to the school board by her parents.

More importantly, if all the coaches and club sponsors at this school were aware of their common problem and comfortable with talking about it, they could acknowledge the collective risk they — not just the one teacher unfortunate enough to wind up on Facebook — all face. And they could come up with a solution that would keep teachers from being put in this situation in the first place.

In this series of columns, we've revisited many times the isolation teachers face as they navigate the complexities of their multiple and overlapping roles — as a teacher, club sponsor, mentor and role model. Introducing a structure through which teachers can safely discuss these complexities and the thousands of interactions they have with students, parents, peers and others is one of the true strengths of introducing professional ethics to education. But even more powerful is this idea that these conversations can bring about lasting change that improves the environment in which teaching and learning takes place for everyone.

We've talked about the challenges of introducing professional ethics to the classroom, but progress is being made. Developed by and for educators, the [Model Code of Ethics for Educators](#) identifies five core principles to guide the profession: responsibility to the profession, responsibility for professional competence, responsibility to students, responsibility to the school community, and responsible and ethical use of technology. Just as importantly, the Model Code builds on these principles by distilling them into 86 discrete standards. These standards, which provide added depth to each of the core principles, are the key to connecting the aspirations of professional ethics with the day-to-day realities of the profession.

The Model Code, which holds educators to a higher standard of professional conduct and responsibility than existing laws and regulations, also can help policymakers create similar expectations that can be embedded in their own licensure and certification programs in ways that reflect the needs of their own states. In this way, codes of conduct can be replaced with broader — yet more demanding of individual educators — professional expectations. But that's just the beginning.



Establishing a professional code of ethics is one thing. Ensuring that all teachers are immersed in it so it can ultimately become second nature and a regular part of how teachers go about their many duties is another thing altogether. Already we're seeing incoming teachers being exposed to professional ethics in several states. Georgia has made them a key part of its pre-service training on professional conduct, using a training and assessment program called the [Georgia Ethics Assessment](#). Delaware also has incorporated training into its induction and mentoring processes using [ProEthica™](#) online ethics training. Both states have made a commitment to introducing new teachers to professional ethics during a formative point in their careers, at the same time they are learning to master content and pedagogy, so they can become an equally integral — and engrained — part of their practice.

Doing so more broadly will require states, individual districts and schools, and teacher preparation programs to provide focused, intentional training that supports educators at all stages of their careers. This training can't be a simple "one-and-done" PD session — it must immerse educators in the kinds of ethical challenges they face and how they connect to the core principles of professional ethics. We've seen firsthand how this training — and the discussions among teachers that come out of it — can help educators understand the complexities of teaching and approach decision making with a solid understanding of the principles of professional ethics. Once training on professional ethics becomes widely incorporated into teacher preparation, licensure and ongoing professional learning, we'll see teaching become a much less isolated, much more aware, and much more empowered occupation — by which I mean a profession in the true sense of the word.

Although this work is just beginning, one surprise has been an early ally in the cause of professional ethics and training. The insurance companies that cover schools and districts were among the first to recognize that empowering teachers in this way has a far greater impact than adding additional layers of regulations and monitoring. That's because professional ethics and training put responsibility back in the hands of the individual — but with an important twist. By encouraging teachers to discuss issues in an atmosphere of collective understanding, that individual teacher is no longer alone. The silence has been broken.

## Professional Ethics and Professionalizing Education

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By *Troy Hutchings, ETS* | October 21, 2016

Throughout this series, we've discussed what professional ethics mean for education. But what would happen if they became a way of life and a regular part of the working lives of teachers, the largest professional field in the United States?

At first, the changes would largely be structural — teachers would receive training on professional ethics in preparation programs, have discussions involving ethical issues with mentors as they navigate the early years of their careers, and ideally, continue to get refreshers in the form of regular professional development in which teams of teachers revisit the principles of professional ethics and are encouraged to discuss with each other how they apply to their own challenges in the classroom.



All of this would go a long way toward helping individual teachers navigate the complexities of their role and become more aware of the potential unintended consequences of the thousands of decisions they make on a daily basis. But over time, once the idea of professional ethics has become ingrained in the field as a whole — and as important to teaching and learning as content and pedagogy — the impact could be transformative.

Educators would avoid falling into the trap of assuming that misconduct is a discrete event and something that only happens to teachers who somehow lose sight of their personal moral compass. Instead, they would acknowledge the collective risk that all teachers face as a result of the demands of their overlapping roles and the intensely personal relationships they are expected to foster, and recognize the value of professional ethics as a governing principle to help them navigate these competing and highly nuanced tensions.

In turn, this understanding would give teachers permission to approach each other in candid, professional discussions about uncomfortable subjects — including how their actions might be misconstrued by students. Just as doctors and counselors are trained to discuss ethical dilemmas and their impact with one another, the framework that professional ethics provides can allow teachers to approach each other and acknowledge blind spots in a way that's focused on professional obligations, not personal judgment.

This kind of professional environment would allow teachers to self-regulate as a field, much as codes of ethics guide doctors, lawyers and other professionals. And the collective awareness of professional obligations fostered by this environment would allow many situations to be addressed before damage is done and teachers' reputations — and students' lives — face irrevocable harm. But that's just the beginning.

In light of professional standards that help educators govern themselves and their peers, district policies and education law could ultimately become far less complex and overly prescriptive. To revisit one example, there would be no need to explain in voluminous HR manuals why a \$25 gift is unacceptable and a \$24.99 one is perfectly fine if educators are trained to recognize the ethical challenges that receiving any gift present and address them in ways that reflect the unique nature of every situation. And where policies impact large numbers of teachers, the ability to collectively discuss them could help change them for the better.

If these kinds of conversations are brought to light in transparent ways, parents and the community as a whole also could understand the challenges teachers face in a richer way. In the short term, that could mean a parent wouldn't be offended when a teacher declines an invitation to a family event, but over time, this understanding could lead to a much deeper respect for teachers — and the profession as a whole.

And the profession itself could be strengthened in another way, by helping reduce the large numbers of teachers who leave the field, often early in their careers.

While there are many reasons that teachers leave the classroom, one of the most important ones is the sense of agency — the idea they often aren't trusted to draw on their training and experience to make decisions that are best for their students. Instead of being straightjacketed by the inflexible policies and procedures that have been put into place in the absence of established professional ethics, teachers could become far more empowered — and empowerment is one of the things that make people less likely to leave a job. The conversations that professional ethics help engender also could help shatter the sense of isolation that many new teachers feel as they navigate the beginnings of their careers.

I've written before about how education in this country evolved in ways that, unlike professions like medicine and the law, made assumptions rooted in our cultural expectations about parenting about how teachers should rely on their own engrained sense of personal values to guide them. Not only has that assumption left too many educators unprepared for the complexity of their role and the challenges of navigating their relationships with students and colleagues, I would argue that it also has ultimately diminished the profession. Now we have an opportunity to reconcile our expectations of teachers with a framework that holds them to a higher standard than policy or the law, while creating a collective network of support that protects individual educators, children and the profession. Perhaps more than anything, that's what professional ethics can bring to the field — a rethinking of teaching as a true profession, in the eyes of policymakers, the public, and most importantly, in the eyes of teachers themselves.

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a light blue cardigan over a white top, holds several grey folders. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression.

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