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# 2025-2026 Middle School Ethics Bowl Case Set

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## Case 1: The Face of the Future

Selina is a rising sophomore in Blue Ridge High School. Two years ago, fifty percent of the student body and faculty came down with the flu which resulted in a significant and negative impact on students' education. In response, the school invested in a facial recognition system, "Face First," which allows those scanned to unlock classroom doors and purchase lunch. By reducing the number of times students physically touch doors and other points of contact in the school environment, Face First reduced the number of flu cases by eighty percent in the first year it was employed.

However, Selina often has trouble getting Face First to recognize her. Curious, she starts watching as other students scan their faces when entering a classroom, and she notices a pattern: the doors do not open as often for students with darker complexions, such as herself, or for students with braces or glasses. Taken together, these students make up about five percent of the student population.

Selina asks the school's computer science teacher why Face First has difficulty recognizing certain students and not others. Ms. McKinny explains that some AI and computer programs have an "algorithmic bias." This means that the data that was used to train the system was not representative of the whole population. Face First was most likely developed to recognize people who have light complexions and do not wear glasses.

Ms. McKinny raises Selina's concerns about Face First with the school board which, in turn, questions the creators of Face First about these apparent flaws in the system. The company says that they cannot change the system until two full school years are over – which is when the contract between the school district and company will expire – because they do not have the resources to create new testing data. School board members, therefore, must decide what to do with the facial recognition system given that they have already made a significant financial investment in Face First.

The school board president invites Selina to attend the public meeting when the board will discuss the issue. Some members vote to keep Face First through the two-year contract, arguing that it has reduced the spread of the flu, which benefits all students. Other members vote for removing the system immediately, arguing that this will help all students feel more included and comfortable. The meeting ends with many feeling frustrated and without resolution.

### Match Questions

1. What should Selina do next since the school board could not reach a resolution?
2. Are there other options the school board could consider and if so, what options?

### Study Questions

1. How should the values of health and inclusion be weighed in this decision?
2. What obligations do schools have before introducing new technology to their students?
3. What weight should be given to students' views about using new technology before it is put in place?
4. Is it worth adopting a system that benefits a majority of students at the expense of the minority?

## Case 2: Philharmonic or Fun?

Stevenson High School's students come from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds. This year, the school will include a new orchestra as part of its music program. The orchestra will be the only opportunity for students to play an instrument in an ensemble at the school. The new program has broad support at the school, yet a disagreement arises about how orchestra members should be chosen.

The school principal, Mr. Rooney, wants to require that students pass an audition to join the orchestra. This, he argues, will ensure that the orchestra will be composed of students who are the best musicians. Given the school's string of losses on the athletic fields, Mr. Rooney hopes that a skilled orchestra may win competitions and enhance the school's prestige. The music teacher spearheading this new program, Mr. Murphy, disagrees. He sees the orchestra as a way to build community around a shared appreciation for music. He wants to open orchestra seats to any student interested in music. To bolster his argument, he cites several studies showing that students who study music and learn an instrument get better grades in school and develop better social skills.

Parents and students are evenly divided about which approach to take. Some want the process to be competitive so that students with musical ability will be able to play at a higher level. This, they hope, will provide a valuable experience for orchestra members, and perhaps enable them to secure scholarships. Tryouts for school sports teams are the norm, they argue, and a musical group should use the same process. Others want an orchestra that welcomes interested beginners. This is particularly important, they argue, for students whose families have not been able to afford private lessons. If only those who are already skilled can join the orchestra, it would highlight the socio-economic differences in the school community rather than unite it.

In the spirit of compromise, a group of parents petitions the school to create two orchestras: one for advanced students that requires auditions and one for beginners. Budget and scheduling constraints, however, will not permit Stevenson to support more than one orchestra. The school board must decide how to proceed given these financial realities.

### Match Questions

1. You are a member of Stevenson's school board. How will you vote on whether to create an orchestra requiring auditions? What factors influence your vote?
2. If the school board votes for requiring auditions, what factors should Mr. Murphey consider when inviting students to join the orchestra? What circumstances should determine his decision?

### Study Questions

1. Is it for the greater good of the student body to focus on excellence or inclusivity?
2. How should we weigh the prestige of a school and the benefits it brings to a whole community against the opportunities extended to individual students?
3. Should we think about athletic teams and musical ensembles differently when it comes to competition?
4. Can auditions ever be truly fair?

### Case 3: AI, Friend or Foe?

Cecile is 26 years old and works in digital marketing. She and her colleagues frequently use AI to keep up with changes in their field and to facilitate their work. Cecile's parents are employed by the U.S. State Department and travel a lot for work. When her parents are sent to Rio de Janeiro for a month, Cecile—who loves Latin American culture—gets permission from her boss to work remotely so that she can travel with her parents and teenage sister, Mellie, in Brazil.

Cecile, who hasn't lived at home since graduating from college, hoped that spending time with her sister would help them reconnect. She knew that in recent years, Mellie had a hard time making friends since her parents' jobs caused them to move every couple of years. From what Cecile can tell, Mellie has no close friends and no interest in making new ones in Brazil. She spends a lot of time in her room and only goes outside when she needs to purchase something. By the second week of their trip, Cecile finds herself worrying about how much time Mellie uses AI chatbots. She texts with them through numerous chat boxes at all hours of the day and night. They seem to be hilarious, given how often Mellie laughs looking down at the screen of her cellular device.

Cecile also realizes that to Mellie, these chatbots are not just robots. They are characters, some from books, others from films or TV shows. They answer questions quickly, take part in conversations—some serious, some silly—and are realistic enough to trick the human brain. Mellie spends most of her time talking to a bot named Jace, which she introduces to Cecile as her “boyfriend.” Jace sometimes does not clearly understand how Mellie words her questions, and it gives her unrelated answers. Nevertheless, Mellie has started doing things because Jace told her to watch particular videos, try new dance moves, and change her hairstyle. So far, this is just fun and games.

But during their third week in Brazil, Cecile reflects on how often Mellie and Jace misunderstand each other, and she starts to worry about what Mellie might do in real life if she thinks Jace suggests it. Thanks to her own work, Cecile knows that the algorithms behind AI are meant to attract and retain young people's attention, whether it is good for those young people or not.

#### Match Questions

1. How should Cecile intervene, if at all, with Mellie's “relationship” with the chatbot?
2. What age limit, if any, should be imposed on the use of this kind of chatbot? Why?

#### Study Questions

1. Would it be fair for Cecile to tell Mellie to stop using AI even though Cecile uses AI everyday at work?
2. Who is at fault if a chatbot leads someone to commit harmful acts in real life?
3. Should governments regulate AI apps designed to be romantic partners?

## Case 4: The Final Semester

It is late April. At Hamilton Independent School, graduation is only a few weeks away, and excitement fills the campus. Seniors are preparing for final exams, celebrations, and the transition to college.

But one student, Ethan, has come under serious scrutiny. From September through December of his senior year, Ethan secretly created short videos mimicking popular TikTok trends. Ethan created 15 videos, each one a reenactment of original clips containing inappropriate or offensive content. Each video included a link back to the original, making the connection between the source and Ethan's imitation unmistakable. The inappropriate content consistently fell into three categories: (1) clips that included excessive profanity, in which Ethan lip-synced gestures and context that clearly referenced curse words; (2) reenactments of bullying behaviors that mocked people's physical appearance; and (3) imitations of outdated 1980s movie scenes that relied on harmful stereotypes or insensitive humor. Although Ethan never verbally said a curse word himself in these re-creations, students easily recognized the profanity through the original references.

Only recently have some students come forward, showing teachers and administrators a collection of the concerning videos. These revealed that Ethan's behavior was not a one-time mistake but a repeated pattern over a 4-month period. What made the situation even more surprising was that Ethan's online videos did not mirror his in-person interactions; he had never been cited for an infraction related to the kind of conduct portrayed in the clips.

The situation becomes especially complicated given Ethan's circumstances. Not only has he already been accepted to Princeton University, but his family also has close ties to the Hamilton School's community; his father serves on the board. This situation has left students, parents, and faculty struggling to balance compassion for a teenager's mistakes with the responsibility of upholding the school's values. Ethan himself is horrified at being put under so much scrutiny and swears he will never make another mocking video again. The ultimate decision about what to do next falls to the head of school, Ms. Kumar.

### Match Questions

1. What consequences, if any, should Ms. Kumar impose on Ethan, given that it is the final week of school, and Princeton may revoke his acceptance if they learn of this scandal?
2. How should Ms. Kumar respond to Ethan's videos, given that they perpetuate stereotypes and mockery, but do not use explicit slurs or target individual students?

### Study Questions

1. How should a community balance fairness, compassion, and accountability when addressing a student's mistakes?
2. If a student demonstrates genuine remorse and growth, should that affect how they are disciplined?
3. How should schools weigh fairness to the student against their duty to protect and support the broader community harmed by the behavior?
4. What limits, if any, should exist on a school's responsibility for addressing student behavior?

## Case 5: “Like, Study, and Share?”

Rachel, a 16-year-old social media influencer, has built a large following by posting study tips and organizing hacks. Her audience trusts her, and brands have taken notice. Sponsorships now bring in steady income — money Rachel feels pressured to accept since her family relies on her financial contributions to cover school costs and other expenses.

Recently, she agreed to promote a new educational app. The company frames it as a tool to make completing assignments for school “simpler and more efficient.” At first, Rachel thinks it seems useful enough. But after her ads for it are posted, she notices a shift in her audience’s response. Students thank her for the recommendation, but many of the comments focus less on learning and more on getting through homework as quickly as possible: “I’m done in half the time now — finally free!” or “This makes homework so much less of a pain.”

Privately, Rachel feels torn. As a student, she knows school isn’t just about completing homework quickly. Often, she feels as if she learns most when she slows down and struggles through a problem or debates ideas with classmates. She isn’t sure she agrees with the promise of the app she is promoting. Still, the pay is significant, and walking away would mean turning down income she and her family need.

When Rachel raises these concerns with friends, they shrug it off: “It’s just advertising. Everyone knows influencers exaggerate.” But Rachel isn’t convinced. She worries that her influence, especially over younger followers, can carry more weight than she intends. If she believes that her content could have a negative impact on how students think about learning, how should Rachel navigate her commitments to her followers and to the company that hired her?

### Match Questions

1. Should Rachel continue promoting the app even if she privately disagrees with the message it sends?
2. Would it make a difference to whether Rachel should continue promoting the app if she personally uses the app or doesn’t use it herself?
3. Is Rachel ethically responsible for the way her followers interpret her promotions?

### Study Questions

1. What responsibilities do young influencers have when their followers are mostly other students?
2. Should society hold influencers to the same ethical standards as teachers, mentors, or other role models since they can shape attitudes and behavior?
3. Is it possible for Rachel to evaluate whether her influence helps or harms her followers? What difference would it make on her decision if the app’s impact could be determined?
4. When, if ever, is it acceptable for people to place their own financial interests above the well-being of their audience or community?