



ETS on Educator Ethics

June 25, 2015, was a landmark day for the teaching profession. It was the day the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC) released the country's first-ever national Model Code of Ethics for Educators. If that doesn't sound like a big deal, consider that a poor response to an ethical dilemma can ruin careers, wreck reputations and harm vulnerable children.

Codes of ethics are common in professions that require specialized knowledge, training and formal credentialing and that impose heavy fiduciary obligations on their practitioners, a description that fits teaching. Doctors, lawyers, accountants and other professionals have long benefited from formal guidance on navigating the ethical thickets of their work.

To say that a model code of ethics for educators is overdue is an understatement: The American Medical Association, for example, adopted its first code of ethics when James Polk was president — which is to say, 1847.

And yet educators, licensed by government and entrusted with the cognitive, academic and emotional well-being of impressionable, often at-risk children, have mostly been left to apply their own personalized sense of how to handle dilemmas whose complexities are matched only by their perils, which can be grave and permanent.

The need for ethical guidance has grown more urgent given the power and ubiquity of social media. Even a well-meaning but misunderstood email can circumnavigate the globe — and a school district — in seconds, with no hope of retraction.

To be sure, various teacher organizations have developed ethics codes for their own use. While commendable, this has resulted in a state-by-state patchwork that ranges from aspirational standards of ethics to codes of *conduct*, which are used to sanction educators after the fact rather than guide them in the moment.

NASDTEC stepped into this vacuum. With support from ETS, the University of Phoenix's College of Education and the National Network of State Teachers of the Year, it formed a task force of educators from across the country.

Its Model Code of Ethics for Educators comprises common principles to help prospective educators and those already on the job make ethical decisions that promote student safety and welfare and foster public confidence in the teaching profession. It will also provide opportunities for educators to discuss difficult issues without fear of being misconstrued, whispered about or vilified.

One thing the Model Code is not is a mandate. It is, as its name says, a *model* that state licensing authorities can adopt or adapt as they see fit, and that educator preparation programs can use in their curricula.

NASDTEC deserves tremendous credit. It has been at the forefront of promoting high standards for educator conduct for almost 90 years. I'm proud that ETS contributed to the effort by convening an Ethics Teaching Symposium in 2012. Helping educators manage the ethical dilemmas they often face is an important part of our work. We developed the Georgia Ethics Assessments, and we recently launched the **ProEthica™ Program**, a series of research-based, interactive video simulations and activities. Aligned with the Model Code, it's designed to inform, challenge and hone ethical decision making.

Ethics go beyond a simple calculus of right versus wrong, and good intentions aren't enough to drive good decisions. Serious, even criminal issues often start with small daily challenges.

The Model Code of Ethics for Educators will help protect teachers, promote the public interest and support the teaching profession. The Code puts it well: It "honors the public trust and upholds the dignity of the profession." And it's long overdue.

Sincerely,

Janet Cook

Executive Director

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