

**A ProEthica® Program  
Case Study —  
A State Administrator's Perspective**

# ETS's professional development program helps teachers recognize ethical conflicts and predict where they may lead

Jonathan Neubauer, an education associate in the Delaware Department of Education, understands how easy it is for teachers facing ethical conflicts to make well-meaning choices that eventually lead to unintended consequences.

In his past role as an investigator of educator misconduct, "it became very clear to me that there was more we could do to help educators with the ethical decisions they face," he said. "Many infractions seemed like they could have been proactively addressed by having conversations around ethics — by making educators aware that the decisions they make have consequences."

Over the years, Neubauer and his current supervisor — also a former investigator of educator misconduct — frequently discussed the need to find a way to do this. So when they recently attended a conference where the *ProEthica*® program was introduced, they immediately started brainstorming ways to bring it to Delaware teachers.

Since mentoring is a licensure requirement for all new teachers, "I offered up the idea, why don't we address it in mentoring?" he said. "Yes, it's going to take a few years before everybody in the state has gone through it, but our plan is that, eventually, we'll have an entire state of educators who have exposure to this content."

Today, the department proactively prepares teachers to navigate job-related ethical conflicts by requiring completion of the *ProEthica* program during induction. All provisionally certified educators complete the online course in their first year of work.

"The feedback has been very positive," Neubauer said. "A lot of people are saying that they never thought about the concept of ethics the way [the] *ProEthica* [program] is making them think about it." Staff who implement the program at the district level have told Neubauer, "This has been long overdue. We're so excited that you are introducing this content."

Now he's encouraging discussions about professional ethics and including veteran teachers and other staff in the conversation.

Here are specific reasons why the *ProEthica* program has been well-received by Neubauer, his colleagues and Delaware educators at the school level:

## » **The *ProEthica* program fills a critical need**

Professionals in many other fields receive training in ethical decision making during their college preparation programs, but "we don't spend a lot of time in education focused on that," Neubauer said. "Professional ethics is an area we have neglected for many years."

While educators commonly face the kinds of ethical conflicts presented in the program's scenarios, the need to discuss professional ethics is often lost among competing priorities. "We've been so focused on helping folks grow as educators: Classroom management, questioning techniques, engaging students," he said. "I think that we just lose sight of the importance of ethical decision making and all the challenging decisions folks face on any given day."

"Having [the] *ProEthica* [program] pushes that agenda forward. People are finally understanding the importance

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of having conversations around ethics. We wouldn't be having these conversations if there wasn't this tool out there. We actually have a solution now. It's going to go a long way with helping teachers understand their responsibilities."

» **Often construed as black and white, the *ProEthica* program shows that the conflicts educators face are actually gray**

"Typically, when we talk about ethics with educators, we talk about clear cases," Neubauer said. "Where I think we missed the boat is in those gray areas that are not as clear cut, and a sequence of events is kicked off by making one decision."

The program highlights this reality — providing educators with an opportunity to think through the consequences of such choices in a safe, penalty-free environment, he said. "What is so appealing about [the] *ProEthica* [program] are the scenarios and case studies that are presented within the course. They are not easy-to-make-a-decision-on, black-and-white, clear-right-from-wrong types. They require you to think through it."

*"This opportunity to proactively address ethics with educators — rather than it being a retroactive or reactive response when they don't do something right and forcing them to take this course on the back end — is a nice way to point to the importance of ethical decision making within the profession. I think it honestly raises the level of the profession to some other professions that are out there, like lawyers, doctors and other groups that have ethics embedded within the profession."*

— **Jonathan Neubauer**  
**Delaware Department**  
**of Education**

» **Novices and veterans engage in meaningful discussions about ethical dilemmas and share their experiences**

"What happens when I have conversations with folks about [the] *ProEthica* [program] is people automatically shift to: This happened to me! I remember when I was left with a kid after school and here's what I did," Neubauer said. It has been helpful "for novices to hear from veterans that they were faced with those situations and didn't always make the right choices," he continued. "It stresses the importance of talking about these things on the front end rather than waiting for bad things to happen."

"We're helping our new folks, and even our veterans, think through what the potential sequence of events may be before they're put into the situation. It feels a little bit like a competency-based model. You're proving your competency in the area of ethics by having to really think through the scenarios that are presented. You have to give it a lot of thought. You have to understand ethical decision making."

» **Novices receive both personal and professional support in their roles as educators**

According to Neubauer, the Delaware Department of Education strives "to provide both personal and professional support to novice educators to help them be more effective in their roles. By focusing on ethics, I think we address both of those." The program helps teachers think through personal feelings they bring to their jobs, such as wanting what's best for kids, Neubauer explained, then ties decisions they make based on those feelings to their professional responsibilities.

Adding any new requirement to the district's mentoring program requires careful consideration, especially since new teachers already juggle many responsibilities and commitments. "One of our biggest challenges is the balance between providing support for new teachers through the mentoring program and time commitments they

already have. Their plates are already so full," he said. "There's nothing worse, if somebody has a full plate, than adding a bunch of stuff that has no value to them."

The *ProEthica* program, however, dovetails with the district's goals for the state mentoring program. "It's a logical addition to what we're trying to do for our new educators," Neubauer said.

### » **The *ProEthica* program is not a "one-and-done" type of professional learning**

"One of the things that I really wanted to make sure of was that this was not a one-and-done type of program because I believe so strongly in the content," Neubauer said. "I didn't want new teachers to take this online course and never have to think about it again."

One way Delaware is keeping the conversation going is by inviting new groups of novices to complete the *ProEthica* program each year. Gradually, more peers at adjacent levels will have taken the course and be able to refer to it collegially. In addition, he recommends supplementing the online training with face-to-face opportunities.

"The topic is so rich," Neubauer said. "To just allow somebody to take an online course doesn't do the topic justice. There are many more opportunities for educators to engage in that conversation and hear from one another — and for new folks to be in a room having those conversations and hear[ing] from school leadership about how they would want them to handle situations presented in the scenarios and the case studies."

Teachers have asked Neubauer, "Can't we make everybody in the entire state take this? This would be valuable, not just to new teachers but also to veterans," he said. Because the *ProEthica* program's extended learning materials provide a way to expand the reach of the training, "I think more and more, our LEAs will latch onto that."

In the future, he anticipates the program could be incorporated into the professional development teachers need to maintain their continuing licenses. "I can easily see [the] *ProEthica* [program] playing a part in that." He said he also envisions LEAs electing to make the program part of their professional development strategies.

Read more case studies or get information about the *ProEthica* program at [www.ets.org/proethica](http://www.ets.org/proethica).

*"Teachers like the fact that it's not just a boring, monotonous, online professional learning tool; that it's meaningful to them; and that it gives them something to think about. What I like the most is the user-friendliness of it. The way the material is presented is very easily understood. It doesn't feel like what a lot of online professional development has become, which is a voiceover PowerPoint® you turn on and let go. I love the fact that, as a participant, you have to be engaged in it. You have to make choices. You have to respond."*

— **Jonathan Neubauer**  
**Delaware Department**  
**of Education**

### **State Snapshot** **Delaware Department of Education**

- Approximately 9,000 active teachers in the district
- About 700 new educators inducted each year
- New educator pool includes counselors, psychologists and school nurses
- One-year mentoring program for those new to Delaware
- Three-year mentoring program for those new to the profession
- Plans to expand new-teacher mentoring program to four years in the future