A *ProEthica®* Program Case Study —

A District Superintendent's Perspective

The *ProEthica*® program is changing the way the staff of a large, high-performing Texas school district[1] think about professional ethics and their vulnerability to ethical dilemmas

In his first few years on the job, the superintendent of one fast-growing, high-performing Texas school district found his staff in a spiral he felt an imperative to reverse. "Our problem was that during that time, we had four inappropriate student-teacher relationships," the superintendent said.

After each incident, he wrote a letter to parents and other members of the school community. "We would start off our communication writing, 'The safety of your student is paramount in our organization. We regret to inform you that we've had this particular allegation of an inappropriate student-teacher relationship,'" he recounted.

But by the fourth letter, the first part of that message — "The safety of your student is paramount in our organization"— was troubling him. "You know, once you write that two times, and three times, and four times …," he trailed off.

The pattern sparked a professional epiphany: "It was like, this *is* paramount. And we're not willing to do something about it? As a leader, I couldn't live with myself unless we did. And I didn't want to do something to just check off a box. If somebody questioned me later I needed to point back and say, 'Look, we had this training.' I wanted to be able to say we made an honest effort at this."

He enlisted a team to investigate different opportunities for districtwide training in professional ethics, and to determine the approach that was most likely to have a significant and lasting impact on his frontline staff of nearly 2,000 teachers, counselors and school leaders.

The team rejected the idea of a districtwide face-to-face event with an expert, because they didn't want the training to be one and done. "We've got some good resources here in the state," he said, but that would be an "expensive, one-shot" way of trying to address the district's needs.

They envisioned a program that provided thought-provoking videos and scenarios, and engaged educators — individually and in groups — in deep, ongoing thinking, reflection and discussion. They even considered creating their own training using online resources, but rejected the idea because of the difficulty of providing accountability for independent online instruction.

"Then we found out about the work ETS is doing with the *ProEthica*® program," which seemed to have everything they were looking for, including a tiered, multiyear approach to professional ethics training. "It's not a one shot. It's something that's ongoing. We made a three-year commitment. It was a lot for us to bite off, but I think it has a greater potential for success if it's something we're constantly coming back to and is organized for us to revisit."

In year one, the program was already impacting his staff. It was prompted, "as I said, by inappropriate student-teacher relationships, but as we get into this, it is *way* more than that. That's just the smallest part of it."

Here is a closer look at how the *ProEthica* program is helping this Texas school district change the way educators think about professional ethics and their vulnerability to ethical dilemmas.

---

[1] The names of the school district and the personnel we interviewed have been withheld from this case study out of respect for the difficult situation they faced.

The *ProEthica* program teaches educators to think about professional ethics in ways they can apply to any situation

The risk of educators coming face-to-face with an ethical dilemma is complicated by today's fast-paced communications climate, the superintendent observed. "It's worse today with the 24-hour, seven-day-a-week access that people have to us through social media and through electronic means." For instance, "communicating through a personal Facebook® page, or texting at night," can lead to relationships in which "lines get blurred."

"We continue to encourage our folks to make communication with parents easier and more positive, and those types of things," he noted, but without guidance, choosing to do it through these means "opens up the door for those conversations to go off the rails a little bit." Training in professional ethics has supported his effort to show his staff that "your role as a public educator is always on."

Most district leaders have learned to think about their professionalism that way, he noted. "Whether you're a superintendent, or a principal, or a director, you think that way. But if you're a teacher, you really don't. And there are things that seem innocuous in the beginning, but could have tentacles that reach any number of ways."

One of the things the superintendent appreciates about the *ProEthica* program is its broad applicability to a full range of potential ethical issues. With implementation, he has seen districtwide professional ethics learning "open the eyes of all sorts of educators to the different ways in which we're vulnerable that we don't think about — even myself, who has several degrees in education and has a number of years of administrative experience. That's the power that I see."

If a district's thinking about ethics "is focused on a hot-button topic," they're probably thinking in terms of "the code of conduct, not a code of ethics," he stressed. "I would encourage them all the more to look at doing work in educator ethics overall."

The *ProEthica* program challenges the expectation that it will be "just one more thing to get done"

When the principal of a large middle school in this district (roughly 900 students in grades 7–8) presented his staff of approximately 45 educators with the need to complete the *ProEthica* program, he encountered typical resistance. "Initially, I think a lot of people felt like it was just one more thing they had to figure out how to get done," he said.

Some staff presented the argument that the training didn't apply to them. "'I don't do any of those things, so this doesn't pertain to me,'" he recalled them telling him. Or "'You're talking about doing inappropriate things with kids or stealing money or something.' And that's where their minds would stop."

After his leadership team — which includes department heads, literacy and math specialists, assistant principals and counselors — completed the program, they told him, "'We think it's good,'" he remembered. "But it did not take long before teachers of all ages were also coming to me and saying, 'I never really thought about that that way before. I watched that video on *ProEthica* and it's making me think about some things differently.'"

He could tell that his eighth-grade ELA teachers were talking about the content as they completed the online program. "They would come and say things to me periodically, like 'Hey, I watched this video and it went into this scenario. What do you think about that?'"

And a few teachers were uncomfortable about the program's takeaways. "'I don't think what they said was right. Or, I didn't see it that way,'" he recalled them telling him. "Some people can be very uncomfortable with anything in that gray area, but you have to learn to be comfortable with ambiguity. They had to process it through conversation."

But what surprised him most was that "the quiet people who don't really say a whole lot in whole-group settings" sought him out to talk. "Something compelled them to want to tell me whatever it was. I think they were most definitely internalizing it and the conversation with me was to see what I thought. And if my thinking didn't align with their thinking, then we would have more conversation."

All in all, "it was the start of the discussion for them. It helped teachers think differently and hopefully learn to pause and think through some of those things" before acting. "That's one of the things that I appreciate about the program. It exposes a lot of things that people don't really think of as being ethical issues."

The *ProEthica* program helps educators understand how their natural disposition to be helpful and caring can inadvertently place them at risk

"Essentially, we live in the gray as educators. We have thousands of decisions we make every single day that we think are kind of innocuous, but really, they can get us in a sticky situation without us realizing it," the district's director of instruction and leadership development observed during a webinar the district created to share its successes regarding ethics training.

As an example of how teachers' natural dispositions inadvertently place them at risk, she pointed to a hypothetical teacher who offers an after-school tutorial to help struggling students: "What if only one student shows up — one of the opposite sex — and you find yourself in a room alone? How do we help the student but keep ourselves out of hot water?

"There's no right and wrong here," she added. Risk can include the appearance of a boundary transgression, such as might occur if a photo is snapped and posted online by a student with a crush. "What's the risk? That's really the question we're asking educators to think about when we're talking about ethics."

The *ProEthica* program's video scenarios and decision-based questions help educators understand how much risk they face day to day

The *ProEthica* program modules "are *really* good," the superintendent noted after completing the online training himself. "They're very effective in helping staff members think about the different options that are available in various scenarios, and the perils of the various decisions they can make throughout those. You can see yourself in a lot of those different situations, and they cover a number of different ethical dilemmas.

"You could play a scenario out and there was no one right answer," he observed. "You could go back out and do it again if you wanted to, try a different decision, and kind of chase that, but there's risk involved however you go through the training."

That message was not lost on him. "Every decision has some amount of risk. That helped our folks. It helped me personally to understand that some of these ethical dilemmas are in fact that: They are *dilemmas*. There's not just a right and wrong answer. That's something you can't get in a one-shot training," he said.

"Too often we think in terms of a code of conduct; what's permissible and what is impermissible," he said. Instead, the objective should be to determine "what we can do to minimize the risk — both to me — personally and professionally — and to the organization.

"Before, I don't think we even calculated risk," he observed. "We were like, O*kay, as long as it's not illegal, why am I really thinking about this?* Well, we *need* to think about it because it's not just this one decision that you've made right now during second period on the 28th of August. It's about what this can mean down the road."

The *ProEthica* program provides a framework school leaders can use to collegially discuss potential ethical dilemmas they observe day to day

Since completing the *ProEthica* program online training, "There is this ongoing joke that we have as administrators," confided the middle school principal quoted earlier. "I have principal peers at different campuses across the district, and when something occurs, we may communicate with each other in a conversation or in a text message" using the shorthand, "What would *ProEthica* say?"

Even though "we would have a chuckle about that," he noted, "as administrators, we would then have that back-channel conversation with each other and we would talk through something that happened" in the news or on another campus.

The shorthand spread quickly, giving the school leaders a way of signaling the need to discuss a potential ethical dilemma they see around them. For example, a district attendee at a statewide conference used it to spark a conversation about the practice of districts swapping room placements so staff with spouses working in different districts can share rooms. "If that causes a campus to have to buy another room, is that ethical or is it unethical?" the principal remembered the attendee asking. During the discussion that ensued, another asked: "Is it right for someone to end up in a room by themselves because their roommate ended up in a hotel with their spouse, while other people have to be doubled up in a room?"

At a different conference, a colleague observed personnel from a rural district out at dinner. "They had district shirts on and they were all drinking alcohol," the colleague texted the principal. "She sent that, and the next thing she said is, 'What would *ProEthica* say about that?' Because we've always had that conversation: If you're going to go out and indulge yourself in food or drink, you change your clothes, you know? And if we go out of town in a district vehicle, we always say, 'Remember, the district name is on the side of the vehicle, so be careful of what you do or how you drive.'

"Is that right? Is that fair? Is that ethical? Is that the best use of resources? Those are examples of conversations that come up now," the middle school principal observed, whereas in the past, "most people would go, 'What's the big deal?'"

The superintendent, too, hears the catchphrase throughout the district. Having lived in the community for almost 20 years, "I'm friends with a lot of teachers outside of work, and every once in a while, one of them will pop up and they'll say, 'Man, what would *ProEthica* say about this?'" he laughed. "It's not about what *ProEthica* would say, but at least they're thinking about this. What they're really saying is not, 'What would *ProEthica* say?' but, 'All right, what are the ethical dilemmas I need to be calculating as I go through these particular things?'"

Districtwide implementation of the *ProEthica* program provides staff with a common experience and language for discussing ethical dilemmas

The district's assistant director of human resources — formerly a principal in the district — found himself looking at the *ProEthica* program over the shoulders of staff members as he provided them with technical support, because it was unusual to hear them say how much they were enjoying a training program.

"It's modern. That's the word that comes to mind," he said of the program. "It's very current. The feature that everybody has liked allows them to take it anywhere on their phone. They thoroughly enjoyed that piece.

"We as a district could not even produce a video that has done what *ProEthica* has done," he said. "It's well crafted, well produced, smooth and easy. That outside factor was very good for us. It shows the power of using videos to spark conversations."

He believes the approach district leaders took implementing the districtwide training helped it get a positive reception. "I like how our superintendent emphasized the importance of it to our leadership team. I think that was good," he said. Moreover, he liked how the district's director of instruction and leadership development "got other departments involved, so it didn't feel like a quote, unquote 'curriculum department thing', or a quote, unquote 'human resources thing'. It just feels like it's all of us. We're all moving in the same direction. I think that was effective."

Similarly, the deeply relatable nature of the *ProEthica* program's video scenarios, combined with the districtwide implementation, gave him the impression that everyone in the district had "a common experience" and from that, gained a common language for talking about professional ethics. "I think that's the power behind it — that everybody has experienced the same thing. And now, you have a foundation. It did a very good job in terms of making you always look through a lens of 'Is this ethical?' If the goal was to get everybody on the same page, looking through the same lens, then it did its job. I think we are, as a district, better equipped to address problems now."

The *ProEthica* program provides tools school leaders can use to help those in their charge grasp the potential consequences of small oversights

In year one of the three-year training, the middle school principal quoted earlier discovered that the *ProEthica* program had given him an invaluable tool for communicating with those in his charge about the potential consequences of small oversights. "Having a program like *ProEthica*, with all of these real-life case scenarios — things that have made it to the courts — like, boom, it's resources in my hand that I can take and then have conversations about right then and there," he said. "I may have never lived it, but I can analyze it, I can talk about it and I can generalize it to that situation. It's a tremendous tool."

Specifically, the *ProEthica* program has helped him see that problems often stem from "little steps along the way" that in the moment "seem innocent enough, but when you stack them on top of each other" seem like poor decisions in retrospect. Now he uses this framework to "paint that picture" for his staff.

For example, one day it came to his attention that a teacher, who was also a district parent, was allowing his children and their friends — a dozen or so teenage boys — to use the school gym at night. "They were basically playing pick-up basketball games," he recalled. When confronted, the teacher's response was, "I don't understand. No one's using the gym. We're not hurting anything. *We clean up after we leave. We turn out the lights*," the principal remembered. The teacher "did not make the connection that he was abusing a special privilege that he had, which was access to the school, so I tried to paint the picture for him. I said, 'You need to think of it this way: You're using

the electricity, which costs money, and you're using something for free that anyone off the street has to pay a facility fee to be able to use. And you are opening yourself up for liability, because if one of these kids tears their ACL while they're up here playing, you're the adult that's here — you're the one that let them in. So you have some responsibility there.'"

Similarly, the tool has helped him reframe a conversation he's been having with teachers for years about the role of personality conflicts in their interactions with some students and parents. "They're not doing it on purpose, but it's very obvious in their body language and their interactions." In the past, he has told different teachers, "When I watch the interactions between you and this kid (or you and this parent), I can see that you don't like them. I can read that." Now he positions the behavior as an ethical responsibility. "You're in this to support all of your kids," he reminds them. "You're supposed to be looking after the best interest of every child. So you've got to check your personal feelings at the door."

The tool has been particularly helpful when stressing the importance of a "documentation trail" to emerging principals. "As a school leader, most things that we deal with are not fireable issues. Some things are very black and white, but most things are going to end up in a reprimand of some kind" rather than in termination. However, new principals are often torn between documenting a reprimand and maintaining trust with a teacher. "You've still got to work with the teacher, and you still need them to trust that you're going to be there for them when they need you," he explained. The *ProEthica* program framework has helped him describe how "patterns of behavior occur" and to project who can be hurt by these patterns. "If an ethical violation occurs once, and I decide that I'm just going to talk through it with the person but not document it, and then I've got a second violation — I've got a whole other ethical situation to deal with."

The understanding the *ProEthica* program provides has given the principal "more confidence" in his ability "to help people understand why we have to do the things we have to do — the bigger picture, the ramifications down the road," he reflected. "It has helped me have good conversations with people when they are making bad choices, and to help them understand the magnitude of what it is that they've done in a different context."

The *ProEthica* program provides understanding that can be used to develop and refine more effective district policies and procedures

Training in professional ethics and a new understanding of how vulnerable to risk educators are have helped this Texas school district learn how to prevent and minimize ethical dilemmas. It "really helps us to operate within the gray, gives us guidance, helps us mitigate those risks," the district's director of instruction and leadership development observed during the district's webinar on its ethics training. "We are acting in the public interest every single day, and we have to be aware of where we fit and what we're talking about."

The district's new ethics fluency has also pointed to the need to revise "local policies to address the gray," she said. "If you've got policy that is not providing guidance, you're leaving your folks out there on a little bit of an island."

One such island left teachers adrift when communicating with students electronically or through social media, she explained. To aid educator decision making, the district revised its electronic communication policy to include guidelines that reflect those aspects of electronic communication that leave teachers most vulnerable.

The new policy makes a distinction between "personal and school-related" electronic communication, she pointed out. It forbids networking through personal social media pages, such as Facebook and Twitter®. However, a teacher who wishes to use Facebook to communicate with parents and students can set up a separate, public page for that purpose.

Because communication by email or text can appear to be private, one-on-one electronic conversations with students are prohibited. Teachers who choose to communicate with students this way must always include a parent or guardian on the message. In the absence of a parent or guardian with the necessary technology skills, a teacher may copy a supervisor or colleague, but using such means at all is limited to defined "appropriate hours," the director said.

Districts "can't train away all ethical dilemmas," she stressed, but policy revisions like these give educators "guidance on the best course of action."

The *ProEthica* program has the power to change the collegial conversations educators have in their school districts

"I can now honestly tell you that we are having conversations collectively that we didn't have before," the district's chief human resources administrator said during the webinar created to share the district's successful ethics training with other school districts. In the past, educators tended not to think about ethics until after the fact, whereas "now we've flipped that around to where it's much more proactive."

He observed that district teachers have an increased willingness to come forward and talk about these things now, are being more observant, and are listening a little better than before.

The superintendent of schools concurred. "I want us to be thinking to what is an ethically higher standard, as you guys talk about in *ProEthica*. 'What is the best way through this? What is my duty to my students? What is my duty to the organization? What is my duty to my fellow educators?' Those types of things. You've got to be able to grapple with that as an educator, but you also have to understand the risk you run with any decision."

The *ProEthica* program "gives us a framework or a filter to look through as we get confronted with these things," he added. The filter is something his staff "didn't have in the past," but that now allows them to "stop and think, and say, 'What are the ethical dilemmas that are inherent with this decision I'm faced with?' Something that makes them cognizant of that and gives them something to filter some of these decisions through."

Revisiting ethics in year two and year three will help "keep this in the forefront of our minds," he projected. In years two and three, staff will "interact with the concepts in a different way" by reacting to scenarios in small groups, responding to questions and discussing their thinking. "I think that gives us the greatest chance for success."

— END —

District Snapshot

- A large, independent K–12 school district (almost 13,500 students)
- A multicultural student body ranging from very low to very high SES
- One of the fastest growing school districts in Texas
- Eighteen campuses (soon to be 19): nine elementary schools (K–4), three intermediate schools (5–6), three middle schools (7–8), and three high schools
- A close relationship with a nearby university

Getting Feedback from Teachers

ETS conducted optional surveys with educators in this district throughout the program year to gather their thoughts on their experiences with the *ProEthica* program.
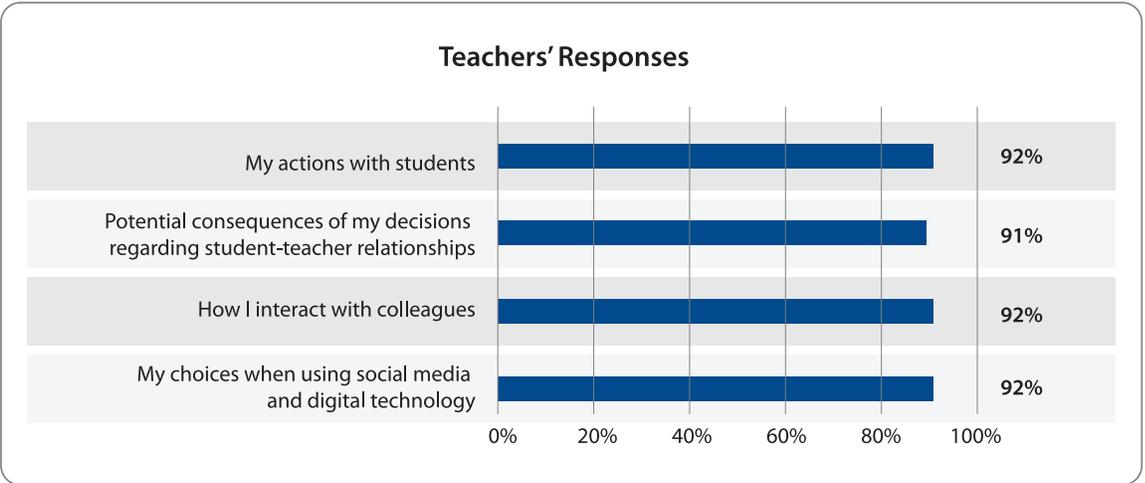
Overall Program Satisfaction and Value

The following chart shows the percentage of educators who were very satisfied, satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the *ProEthica* program (from the Course Completion Survey).

Value of the learning experience	85%
Overall experience taking the *ProEthica* program	83%
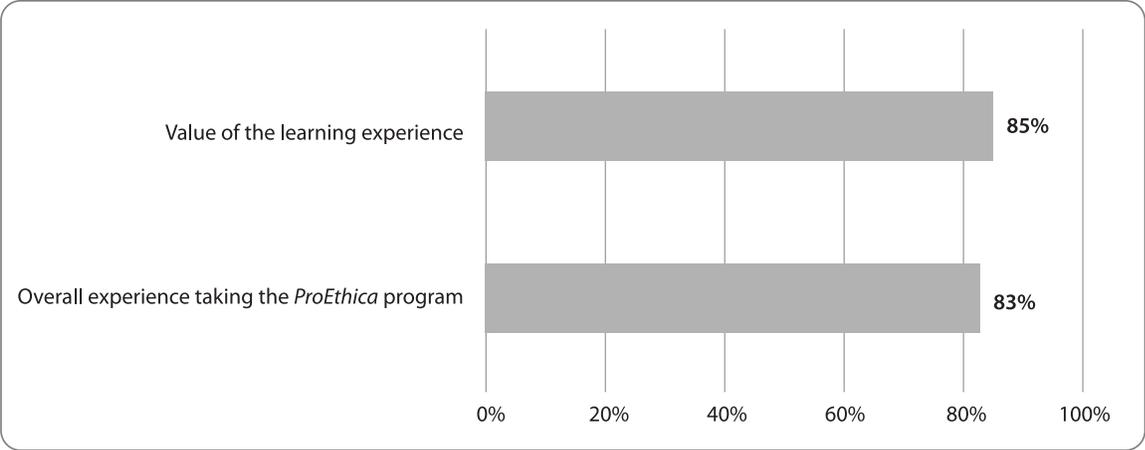
More Awareness after the *ProEthica* Program

The following charts show the percentage of educators who strongly agree, agree or somewhat agree with the statements below (from the Course Completion Survey).

As a professional educator, since participating in the *ProEthica* program, I am more thoughtful about:

Teachers' Responses

My actions with students	92%
Potential consequences of my decisions regarding student-teacher relationships	91%
How I interact with colleagues	92%
My choices when using social media and digital technology	92%

Measuring the Power of Learning.®

www.ets.org