

**A ProEthica® Program  
Case Study —  
A Mentor's Perspective**

# The *ProEthica*® Program is helping Delaware's Laurel School District promote a culture of professionalism that fosters positive outcomes for students

In Delaware's Laurel School District, everything revolves around "what's best for kids," said ELA instructional coach Tiesha Niblett. And meeting that end-goal requires professionalism, continuous growth and the use of focused instructional approaches by teachers. "We strive for above-the-line behaviors. What we do, we do with professionalism, integrity and purpose."

She thought about that when, as the district's mentoring coordinator, she was faced with relaying the news to first-year teachers that they had to add something to their workload. As she left the DOE meeting where she learned about the new requirement, she anticipated the sighs she was likely to hear — at least initially — when she told new teachers they had "one more thing to do, and it's got user names and passwords, those kind of things."

So Niblett decided to take a different approach. What she had experienced at the state meeting still astonished her: The leader introduced the *ProEthica*® program by sharing a scenario from the training — a video about a coach who, after practice, is left alone with a student who has no ride home. "What would you do?" the facilitator asked.

Niblett, a veteran educator, had faced similar situations in her career, but suddenly worried whether she had done the right thing. "I got nervous!" she recalled. As to whether the teacher in the scenario should give the student a ride, "it never occurred to me that not everybody feels that's a good idea." But as she and her colleagues debated the scenario, supporting their arguments with examples from their own experience, the importance of anticipating potential outcomes before acting slowly eclipsed the notion of "the right thing."

"I never thought about any of those things," Niblett said. "I thought: *This poor kid needs a ride home*. Being introduced to the program really made me reflect. It's a new world. Everything's changed. Society's changed." The dialogue inspired her so much, she decided to introduce the *ProEthica*® program to the district's new teachers the same way. She dedicated a regularly scheduled, two-hour professional development session to the task, "not only to say, *This is [the] ProEthica [program]; here's what you have to do*, but to explore this idea of ethics in education and the different situations that can occur."

What mattered, Niblett realized, was the trajectory

thinking the program sparked. She wanted district mentees to reflect on the notion that "our backgrounds often drive how we respond to situations." Among her discussion goals for the meeting were: The meaning of the term *professional educator*; the difference between a disposition and a regulation; and the fact that the novices *would* face ethical conflicts in their careers.

"I don't know that I could have envisioned it going any better than it did. It was so rich and so meaningful," she recalled. As she had hoped, the *ProEthica* program impelled the district's new teachers "to think about a parent's perspective, a superintendent's perspective, another kid's perspective. And that's just incredible."

Here are some additional reasons the *ProEthica* program is making an impact on this district.

## Teachers are the decision makers when they use the *ProEthica* program

"What I like about [the] *ProEthica* [program] so much is there's no right or wrong," Niblett said. "For example, if I'm going to drive a student home and that's what I choose to do, currently in my district, there's nothing that says I can't," she stated, referring to the scenario used at the state-level meeting she attended. Instead, what the *ProEthica* program instills is the need to think about the specific circumstances of situations — and potential consequences of different actions — before making a decision.

"It causes an educator to think before they act, and to plan out the different scenarios that can happen," she said. "Because we all know we can do something for all the right reasons and it can end in the most horrific way."

## The *ProEthica* program is a necessary addition to mentoring programs

Prior to implementation, Niblett said she and other experienced mentors discussed whether the program was best introduced in year one or year two of the state mentoring program. "Is this one more thing that they're going to buzz through, just to get it done?" she said they asked themselves. But as a group, they decided it could not be postponed.

"What I might like to see in my little ideal world is a progression of the program, where in year one a teacher does a small piece, but it continues in year two and even into year three," she said. She sees added value in keeping new teachers thinking about

professional ethics as they encounter new educational situations. For instance, it could be a year or two before a new teacher participates in an IEP meeting and has to think about “walking down the hall, openly using that kid’s name.”

### **The *ProEthica* program helps prepare new teachers for workplace realities**

In her joint roles as instructional coach and district mentoring coordinator, Niblett has become well-acquainted with the expectations first-year teachers bring to their jobs. In addition to reinforcing the need for best practices in instruction and lesson planning, she often finds herself faced with a disconnect. It’s “kind of vague and somewhat cliché, but they have a very unreal sense of what encompasses the entire job,” says Niblett, attributing this to the transition between theory and practice. “They haven’t spent enough time doing what they’ve committed themselves to for the next 30-plus years.”

The *ProEthica* program has given her a way to introduce the realities of the workplace to mentees. “You can do something for all the right reasons and it can still end really badly. A new teacher is not necessarily going to think about that,” reflects Niblett. Nor do they think about the fact that negative consequences can arise from “very normal, real-life, everyday situations.” In the group session she held with mentees and their mentors, a few new teachers responded to the *ProEthica* program case studies by saying, “Are you kidding me? Does this really happen?” Niblett continued, “It allows us, as a district, to introduce something new teachers would not normally think about, because they’re just trying to survive. It’s an invaluable piece to new teacher education.”

### **The *ProEthica* program is a manageable addition to mentoring programs**

Since the Department of Education gave districts leeway in determining how first-year teachers complete the *ProEthica* program, Niblett passed this discretion along to mentees. At the professional learning meeting she held to introduce the program, she explained they could complete the program alone and reflect afterward with their mentors. In addition, they could finish it in a single sitting or in increments throughout the year. “I think it’s very manageable, because it’s self-paced,” Niblett said. “It’s a perfect fit.”

### **The *ProEthica* program has value for all school employees**

Niblett wishes all school employees, including custodians, coaches, substitutes and more, would complete a multiyear version of the *ProEthica* program during their first few years on the job. Scenarios that combine actions by substitutes, support staff and teachers “would be my dream come true,” she said, as she believes teachers should also be aware of possible unethical behavior between students and other school employees.

*“As a result of completing the ProEthica program, I am more aware and I’m better prepared. There are some things you don’t even think about. It’s helped out tremendously with that. Having this as an aid in my first year has pushed me and helped me to make the right choices in the situations I’ve been in.”*

— Lindsay Jones, health teacher, Laurel Middle School

### **The *ProEthica* program provides extended learning materials to deepen professional growth**

Niblett used the *ProEthica* program’s extended learning materials to launch the course in her district. They helped her familiarize new teachers with a checklist of principles based on the *Model Code of Ethics for Educators*, which the program offers as a decision-making tool, and to facilitate sharing and discussion. “They met in groups and read each case study, used the checklist and discussed it accordingly,” which she said generated “a lot of good discussion.”

Niblett reflected that reading the consequences of each case study to the group sparked a lot of discussion. “They were very surprised by the outcome. They thought it should be more; they thought it should be less. Whatever the case may be, they were surprised. It was good practice in reality. Because that’s what happens. You have a situation, you make a decision and there are consequences to your decision. They got to actually experience that on some level with these case studies.”

The *ProEthica* program’s proactive approach “equips teachers with what they need to know and understand before they take action,” Niblett said. “You can’t prevent consequences from happening

*“Being a first-year teacher, sometimes it’s hard to branch out and talk to teachers from the other schools in the district. With [the] ProEthica [program], you can talk about what would you do at the Pre-K level? And what would we do at the high school? It makes it easier to talk to one another.”*

— Lindsay Jones, health teacher, Laurel Middle School

completely, because it's ultimately the educator's choice, but you can equip them to understand ethics and various situations that can result in termination or legal action." In the future, she plans to use the *ProEthica* program's extended learning materials to host a second professional development session midyear. She'll instruct mentees to complete half of the program modules by January of year one, she said, then provide an opportunity for discussion. "That will give them an outlet to share situations they faced in their classrooms, with no judgment and no administrators around. That's the approach I'd like to take."

### The *ProEthica* program presents thought-provoking scenarios that model real decision making

"I love the way [the] *ProEthica* [program] itself — not the materials, but the computer — allows teachers to make a choice and see the results of their choices," Niblett said, referring to the program's decision-tree structure,

which allows scenarios to unfold differently, depending on the teacher's selections. "That is phenomenal. That makes it very real to them. It forces them to think about things they wouldn't naturally think about — their interactions with students, their decisions, and the consequence of those — in a very safe, nonthreatening [and] nonpunitive way."

By way of illustration, Niblett recalled her own thinking as she completed the program. "I'm sitting at the computer, and no one's looking. It's ten o'clock after a field trip, and yeah, I'm taking this kid home if his grandpa doesn't pick him up." She likened the computer feedback after she chose the option to a gentle challenge. "That's fine, Tiesha, you can do that, but did you think about this? The scenarios are very authentic, and very practical and very likely," she said. On top of that, "they're very interactive, very engaging. The program put me in the position of making the decisions and facing the consequences. I like the way it's structured."

*"You think that you know the exact thing to do, but [the] ProEthica [program] gives new teachers that extra little bit of training that maybe they're not getting when they're able to meet with their mentors. When I first started teaching, I probably would never have thought about some of the scenarios they were given. Something like that might not happen this year, might not happen next year, but what if it happens 10 years from now? At least they have that background knowledge and can pull it out when they need to. They're not just drowning in the water, you know?"*

— Kelly Lloyd, middle school art teacher and new-teacher mentor, Laurel Middle School

*"It really makes you think about what will and can happen, and how are you going to handle it when it actually may happen to you. It's really helped a lot of us — not only me, but other people in our meetings — to kind of relate to it in a real-life situation."*

— Lindsay Jones, health teacher, Laurel Middle School

### District Snapshot Laurel School District Laurel, Delaware (2016–17 school year)

- 2,362 students in grades Pre-K–12
- Ethnically and economically diverse student body
- Low-income families: 46.4%
- English-language learners: 8.8%
- Students receiving special education services: 14.3%
- New teachers in mentoring program: 15
- Total teachers: 151
- Total instructional staff: 180
- Total staff: 262
- Accepts school-choice students
- Prior year per-pupil cost: \$11,699

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