

## Chapter 8

# Developing Professional Ethics: A Statewide Curricular Solution

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### ABSTRACT

*In this chapter, the development of the Educator Ethics and Conduct Toolkit (EECT) will be examined. The EECT was created as part of a comprehensive initiative for developing Professional Ethics for preservice and new teachers across the state. Rather than examine educator ethics from a philosophical point of view, the EECT is a practical, scenario-based curriculum which helps beginning teachers examine their fiduciary responsibilities and analyze ethical decision-making in authentic contexts. Utilizing a case study approach, the chapter examines the overall instructional design, development and implementation of the curricular materials.*

### INTRODUCTION

It seems that reports of “teachers behaving badly” often dominate the nightly news. While the successes and achievements of gifted instructors aren’t often highlighted, the ethical and moral mistakes made by educators are regularly spotlighted. For instance, national news outlets provided ongoing coverage of the public school teachers in Atlanta who were accused of changing student responses on statewide assessments (McWhirter & Porter, 2014). The teachers’ subsequent trial and sentencing were featured heavily in print, online and broadcast formats. Widening the lens to include the broader ethical and moral missteps by teachers, however, it’s clear that educator misconduct spans a variety of means, methods and media. News stories abound with unethical teachers having sexual relationships with underage students, engaging in illegal activities, utilizing unprofessional teaching strategies and participating in illicit behaviors online. While one could argue that only a small percentage of teachers engage in unethical and immoral activities, the damage and impact to individual students, local schools, communities and the teaching profession is far-reaching.

To promote ethical and professional expectations for teachers, many states have formed boards and commissions that oversee the standards and practices of certified teachers. These groups maintain teacher

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1668-2.ch008

licensing, adjudicate charges of educator misconduct and identify appropriate disciplinary procedures for teachers found guilty of unethical and unprofessional behavior. The state standards and practices commissions also establish and promote codes of conduct for teachers. These codes of conduct outline the ethical and professional expectations of teachers and designate appropriate behaviors for interacting with students, parents, colleagues and the community. The codes of conduct are designated as the moral standard for professional conduct and utilized in disciplinary proceedings.

Despite the establishment of standards and practices commissions and state codes of conduct, educator misconduct continues. While clear standards for behavior and disciplinary actions may help to prevent unethical behaviors, other avenues are needed. One option is to provide focused ethical training for preservice teachers so they better understand the moral and ethical expectations of the profession. Reflecting this objective, the commonwealth of Pennsylvania developed a comprehensive educator ethics curriculum to be used by teacher education programs across the state. This eight unit online curriculum addresses common ethical dilemmas that teachers face and offers practical action plans to help teachers make more responsible and professional decisions. The curriculum, called the Educator Ethics and Conduct Toolkit, was developed in conjunction with the commonwealth's Professional Standards and Practices Commission and designed to reflect the state's code of conduct for teachers. Supported through a grant through the State System of Higher Education, the curriculum emerged through ongoing conversations with teacher educators across the state. This chapter outlines the overall development process and the foundational beliefs that impacted its design and construction.

## **BACKGROUND**

There are many ways to examine ethics philosophically. For example, Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) proposed six stages of moral development. In his view, individuals have the capacity to develop morally over their lifetime. Individuals initially base their ethical decisions on rules and regulations and act in ways to avoid punishment. As individuals develop morally, they may eventually reach a stage where their actions are based on universal principles of justice and respect for human life. These stages of moral development help to provide a lens to view one's ethical decisions. For instance, a person at Stage 1 may act a certain way to avoid getting in trouble. Individuals at Stage 2 primarily make ethical decisions based on preserving their own self-interests. When people reach Stage 3 in Kohlberg's model of moral development, they begin to see the larger societal aspects of their actions and decision-making. At Stage 3, following established societal norms is a person's primary motivation. Individuals at Stage 4 focused on following the laws. At Stage 5, however, people's ethical decisions are guided by the welfare of others and by considering what is best for the common good. An individual who reaches Stage 6 focuses on larger universal ethical principles of human rights, justice and equality.

In her book *In A Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan (1982) presents a different view on ethics and moral development. Gilligan posits that actions are not solely guided by considerations of universal justice but also by views of caring. In her view, individuals develop morally through three different steps of caring. In step one, individuals initially base their ethical decisions on how those decisions care for their own needs. In Gilligan's next step of development, individuals are guided by how their decisions care for the needs of others. In this step, individuals act to achieve the approval of others, even at the expense of their own needs in the process. Individuals who reach Gilligan's third step of moral development consider how their decisions care for themselves and others. Their decisions are not motivated by how

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