

## **2022-2023 Middle School Ethics Bowl Case Set**

To learn more about this event, please visit:

<https://www.ethicsatkentplace.org/student-programs/middle-school-ethics-bowl>

### **Cases Written by the Writing Committee:**

Ayushi Wadhwa (middle school student), Ben Who (high school student),  
Claire Cherill (high school student), John Rockwell (middle school teacher),  
Juliet Schwartz (high school student), Matt Ferguson (committee  
member), and Sonia Nikhil (middle school student)

### **And edited for final approval by the Middle School Ethics Bowl**

#### **Executive Committee:**

Ariel Sykes, Deric Barber, Dustin Webster, Erik Kenyon, Karen Rezach, Matt  
Ferguson, Michael Vazquez, and Roberta Israeloff

## **Case 1: Internet Use at School**

The administration at River City Middle School is considering the purchase of a new software that will monitor students' internet usage while they are using the school's wifi network. This program is designed to flag internet searches that might indicate that students are struggling with their mental health or at risk of doing harm to themselves or others.

If the program detects certain keywords or a pattern of searches, it flags the student and their search history. A school counselor then meets with the student to determine if the student needs help and if parents need to be contacted. Some teachers at River City Middle School think that the school should purchase this software. They believe it would help struggling students to get the support they need early on, especially if they are scared to ask for help. These teachers also think that the tracking software will reassure anxious parents who would want to know if their child was expressing violent tendencies online. Other teachers, however, are concerned about the use of the tracking software. They worry, for example, that the software threatens students' right to privacy by tracking all student online use in order to find content to flag. Additionally, students wonder if they will be able to defend themselves if the system wrongfully flags their search history. Some families think that the existing firewall, that already blocks certain website content, is enough to keep students safe at school.

**Match Question: Should River City Middle School buy and use this tracking software?**

### **Study Questions:**

1. Is there a limit to a school's responsibility to prevent harm to students?
2. Do students have a right to privacy when using the school's internet?
3. What obligation, if any, do schools have to notify the students and/or parents about the tracking software?

*Inspired by the National High School Ethics Bowl Case:*

## Case 2: Freedom of Tweet

On April 14, 2022, Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, offered to buy Twitter, a popular social media platform that allows users to share short messages — known as tweets — to a wide audience. Although many lively and important discussions take place on Twitter, it also hosts a fair share of hateful comments. Company policy states that: “We have a zero tolerance policy against violent threats. We prohibit content that wishes, hopes, promotes, incites, or expresses a desire for death, serious bodily harm, or serious disease against a group or individual.” Twitter also reserves the right to ban users who repeatedly violate this company policy. Some users believe that this policy violates people’s right to free speech.

Elon Musk voiced this concern when asked why he invested in Twitter: “I believe in its potential to be the platform for free speech around the globe, and I believe free speech is a societal imperative for a functioning democracy. Twitter needs to be transformed as a private company in order to meet this need.” Elon Musk wants the current limits on what users can say on the platform needs to be changed.

Those who embrace Twitter’s no tolerance policy against hate speech point out that a person’s freedom of speech ends when it creates harm or the possibility of harm. Many think that the right to free speech does not give you permission to yell “Fire!” in a crowded theater when there is no fire. They point to the power of online platforms to spread ideas and messages quickly and widely, as a reason for creating limits. Those who believe that policies like Twitter go too far in controlling speech often raise the concern around why the company owners and not the users get to decide what should or should not be allowed on the platform.

**Match Question: Should private companies, like Twitter, have the right to censor speech and content on their virtual platforms?**

### Study Questions:

1. Are there other types of speech, beyond violent content, that companies should censor?
2. What other types of people or organizations could dictate what free speech looks like on social media?
3. Should the rules around freedom of speech in-person be applied the same way in an online environment?

### **Case 3: Donation Dilemma**

Patrick, a middle school student, grew up in a family surrounded by art. His father works as a professional painter, and his mother is a singer. Every month, his family donates a portion of their income to a local art gallery that uses the money to fund trips for homeless youth to visit the gallery for free. Patrick's father used to be homeless himself, so he feels a calling to donate to this cause.

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The war caused Europe's largest refugee crisis since World War II: around 6.7 million Ukrainians fled the shelling and destruction of their homes. Patrick, who has been keeping up with the news, is shocked by the brutality and wants to do something to help. He decides to hold a bake sale at school to raise money for Ukraine and will donate the proceeds to a local Ukrainian nonprofit that supports families fleeing the war.

Patrick's father is very supportive of Patrick's initiative and applauds his plan to hold a bake sale. When Patrick asks his father to divert the family's monthly donation from the art gallery to the Ukrainian nonprofit, his father hesitates. Patrick's father understands that donating to the Ukrainian organization is more immediately important, and that it might even save some lives. On the other hand, Patrick's father doesn't feel as strong of an obligation to the Ukrainian refugees as he does to the homeless youth that he's supporting with the donations to the art gallery.

**Match Question: What should Patrick's father consider before making his final decision about where to donate his money?**

**Study Questions:**

1. What are Patrick's father's options in this case?
2. How should we go about determining which causes are more important to support? Who should decide which causes are most important?
3. Are we morally obligated to donate to the more important causes?

*Inspired by the National High School Ethics Bowl Case:*

### **Case 4: Ambiguous AI art**

Anita is a sophomore in high school and loves computer programming. One day Anita learned that Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be used to make art. AI art analyzes patterns from artwork created by human artists and uses these works to create new pieces of art. Anita was amazed to discover that one piece of AI art, “Edmond de Belamy,” sold for \$432,500!

For her end-of-year computer programming project, Anita decides to create a Python computer program that allows her to choose images for AI to fuse together. The program worked and Anita soon fell in love with creating AI art. Over the summer, she worked on her AI artwork and decided to go beyond printing the compiled images created by her AI program. After printing the new artwork, she used paint and mixed media to add texture, dimension and color. Anita thought it made her work more original. Her favorite piece was “Broken Sunset” which she posted on Instagram.

“Broken Sunset” garnered a great deal of attention and praise online. Someone even offered to buy it from her for \$2,000! However, Anita had an ethical dilemma when two artists, Katara and Amari, informed her that elements of “Broken Sunset” were from their original artwork. They were upset that Anita did not ask for permission to use their work in the AI program. Katara wanted Anita to share the credit for the art and a share of the money from selling the artwork, but Amari wanted Anita to destroy the artwork. Anita was torn about what to do, but knew that she had to act quickly before the conflict escalated on social media.

**Match Question: What should Anita do?**

#### **Study Questions:**

1. Was Anita acting unethically by making, posting, and considering selling the “Broken Sunset”?
2. Is there a difference between being inspired by someone’s artwork and using someone’s artwork?
3. How much does a work of art need to be changed from the original in order to claim that it is a new and original work?

### **Case 5:. The Dress Dilemma**

In a couple of weeks, Danielle will have her sweet sixteen birthday party. She has planned what will happen every minute and selected every small decoration. But, she still needed to pick out her dress!

Danielle finds two perfect dresses and can't choose between them. The red dress she likes is on sale at Justine's Boutique, a local family-owned business; and the other, a purple dress, is from a large chain store. The red dress from Justine's is more expensive but seems to be better quality than the purple dress which is just as elegant though not as well-made. Danielle is drawn to the red dress for several reasons. She loves the idea of supporting a small business -- especially because her family owns a small, local bakery. And the well-made dress will last longer than the cheaper purple one. But, Danielle is still conflicted. She wonders if she will ever have the occasion to wear the dress again -- and if not, she doesn't think she can justify spending a lot on a dress. Danielle also knows that her parents are already spending a lot of money for the party and she worries that buying the purple dress will put less financial strain on the family.

**Match Question: Which dress should Danielle purchase?**

**Study Questions:**

1. What priorities are Danielle trying to navigate in this case?
2. Should the importance of the event matter?
3. What types of things should you consider before purchasing a clothing item?

## Case 6: Friendship Ties

Dave and Hector met through school sports and played together in town leagues throughout their elementary school years. Their parents are close friends and the boys spend a lot of time at each other's houses. The Covid-19 pandemic hit the year that Dave and Hector were in middle school. They both felt isolated at home and were able to convince their parents to let them use their tablets to play games and video chat together. This way, they could hang out together and still be safe.

Right before the start of eighth grade, when schools reopened and everyone could start hanging out together, Hector and his family moved out of state. The two friends still play games online together and message each other on their tablets. Recently, Dave feels torn about how he spends his time after school. He wants to start playing team sports again and to hang out with new friends in person. This makes it hard for Dave to find time to hangout virtually with Hector. Since Hector is having trouble making friends in his new town and is feeling very lonely, he has asked Dave to hangout online with him almost everyday. Although Dave wants to remain friends with Hector, he is also tired of "being online all the time."

One Friday, Hector asks Dave to watch Netflix together online. Dave was also invited to go to the movies with his new group of friends that Friday. Given house rules and his other commitments, Dave can only watch one movie this weekend.

**Match Question: Who should Dave choose to hang out with this Friday?**

### Study Questions:

1. How should we respond to the demands of his old and new friendships?
2. When, if ever, is it ethical to let go of a friendship ?
3. Does the way in which we spend time with friends matter?