

2026-2027 Middle School Ethics Bowl Case Set

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

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Case 1: Clocked out of Opportunity

Shanaya is a sophomore at Ridge Academy, a boarding school that draws students from 25 states and 17 countries and also enrolls a small number of day students, including Shanaya. She lives fifteen miles from campus. Her parents have struggled financially and recently began working early morning shifts at the local hospital leaving Shanaya responsible for getting her two younger siblings ready in the morning and walking them to their own school before taking public transportation to Ridge Academy. This rarely goes smoothly. As a result, Shanaya, a scholarship student, frequently arrives late.

Ridge Academy prides itself on raising “disciplined leaders” and considers discipline a core value. Its strict attendance policy even imposes severe consequences for tardy arrivals. Shanaya, who is now rarely on time, is on Academic Probation and risks losing her scholarship. She speaks with Mr. Furth who teaches her first period Pre-Calculus Class and asks to make up materials she has missed. Mr. Furth, himself a former boarding student at Ridge Academy, sympathizes with her situation but responds that the attendance policy applies equally to all students, regardless of individual circumstances. What’s more, he argues, employers in the real world won’t give a pass to chronically late employees: it’s just as well that students learn to be on time.

Distressed with the prospect of losing the scholarship she has worked so hard to earn, Shanaya turns to Ms. Young, the head of Financial Aid, who has supported Shanaya throughout her time at Ridge Academy. Ms. Young grew up in the same town as Shanaya and in a similar socioeconomic situation. They have developed a close relationship. Shanaya views Ms. Young as a role model and mentor. Ms. Young is torn. She has the authority to make an exception for Shanaya but knows that doing so would set a precedent and could open a “can of worms.” After all, some families pay considerably more than Shanaya’s to attend Ridge Academy and would jump at the injustice of setting a double standard for scholarship students.

Match Questions

1. Since Ridge Academy has authorized Ms. Young to make exceptions to scholarship policies, would it be fair for her to factor her personal relationship with Shanaya into her decision? Why or why not?
2. Would the threat of future complaints justify Ms. Young choosing not to grant Shanaya an exception? Why or why not?
3. Would it be fair to boarding students, who have their own challenges to deal with, to provide an exception for Shanaya? Why or why not?

Study Questions

1. How far should schools accommodate students for circumstances that are actually beyond their control?
2. If a private school is built around particular core values, should students who cannot abide by those values simply go elsewhere for school?

Case 2: Who Really Created Your Homework?

Recently, Pleasant Valley Middle School created a policy about AI use. Students are now prohibited from using any form of generative AI, and student access to generative AI platforms has been blocked on school-issued laptops. Issues arise when Kristin, a student, notices that homework packets from her history class appear to be generated by Gemini AI. They use similar formatting and sentence structure along with Gemini watermarks on photos and diagrams. Kristin consults the school policy, readily available online, and finds that none of the rules against generative AI applies to teachers.

Kristin feels that the policy is unfair and brings her concerns to a monthly school board meeting. She questions why students are prohibited from using AI to complete their work while teachers are permitted to use it to create assignments. She argues that both teachers and students have demanding schedules, and that a teacher's job is to create materials tailored to their particular students' needs. Kristin thinks that using homework assignments created by generative AI negatively affect students' learning experiences and undermines teachers' roles. Some board members agree with Kristin and think that a harmful double standard is in place.

Dr. Jones, a recently retired history teacher and board member, views the situation differently. During her years in the classroom, she regularly spent her evenings grading assignments, planning lessons, and creating worksheets. She was also raising two children at the time and recalls how difficult it was to balance her home and work lives. AI would have helped her achieve more work-life balance. Teachers who use AI to create homework packets also can spend more time grading assignments, return student work more quickly, and build relationships with students. She argues that since teachers already have expertise in the subjects they teach, AI is a convenience and doesn't compromise their learning as it would students who use AI to speed through their work.

The school board is seriously divided.

Match Questions

1. How, if at all, should Pleasant Valley amend its AI use policy to make it more equitable? Why?
2. Should teachers create classroom materials themselves, given that generative AI can produce materials of equal quality in significantly less time? Why or why not?

Study Questions

1. What is the role of relationships in education? How might the use of generative AI by teachers and by students impact these relationships?
2. What is the value of individuals' time and effort in a school context? Does this differ for students and for teachers?

Case 3: The Price of the Perfect Cast

Blue Ridge High School is holding auditions for the annual spring musical, *Wizard of Oz*. Ms. Smith, the drama teacher, has directed musicals for the past seven years and is known for creating spectacular productions. The high school has won state competitions for musicals three years in a row.

Anita Jackson, a junior, gives an incredible audition for the role of Dorothy. She has performed in musicals and plays since she was in fifth grade. She easily memorizes her lines and has a dazzling stage presence. Another student, Lily Zu, a junior, also auditions for the role of Dorothy. For the past two years, Lily has been one of the hardest working cast members and has often stayed late for extra rehearsals or come in early to improve her singing. She has a great audition, demonstrating real confidence – but she lacks Anita’s experience. Students all know that theater is “Anita’s thing” and simply assume that she will be cast as in the musical’s leading role.

The cast is finally announced: Lily will play Dorothy, and Anita will be the Wicked Witch. Anita is crushed. As the Witch, she will only have 15 minutes of stage time while Dorothy will appear in nearly every scene. Anita asks Ms. Smith why she was not chosen for the lead and how she could improve for her next audition. Ms. Smith compliments Anita’s audition and says that Lily was simply a better “fit” for the role because she is petite, just as Judy Garland was when she played Dorothy in the original 1939 film. Anita, however, towers over most boys in her class. Ms. Smith explains that a director should give her audience the most “authentic” version of a production and make casting choices based on what is best for the production as a whole. That is what directors on Broadway and in Hollywood do. What’s more, Ms. Smith argues, nobody questions a coach who recruits tall students for the basketball team. Why should a theater production be any different?

Match Questions

1. Given that Lily and Anita both gave excellent performances in their auditions, what weight should Ms. Smith have given to other factors in casting Dorothy?
2. In using the norms of professional theater to decide the cast of a school production, has Ms. Smith committed a moral error? Why or why not?
3. Should Anita simply make the most of her role as the Witch or continue to pursue a fairer casting choice? Why?

Study Questions

1. What makes a particular production “authentic”?
2. Is there any moral difference between how schools should approach casting a musical and how they approach recruiting a basketball team? Why?

Case 4: Dinner or Dealbreaker?

Enzo and Andrea are rising high school freshmen who chose Fratelli's Family Restaurant for their first date. They both love Italian food. Andrea's family has been going to Fratelli's for years. In fact, her grandfather had been a chef there. Enzo spent the first 8 years of his life on his grandmother's farm in Italy and has fond memories of that time. He especially loved seeing the cows give birth and remembers the first time he saw the baby cattle.

The date was going well. Their conversation flowed naturally, and they both enjoyed their appetizers. Trouble arose, however, when Enzo asked Andrea what she wanted to order for her main dish. "Veal Milanese," she said enthusiastically, explaining that it had been her grandfather's signature dish. After he passed, she vowed to order Veal Milanese whenever she went to Fratelli's, in memory of him.

Enzo is shocked. Veal is baby cattle, and the thought of casually ordering such a dish is offensive to his most cherished childhood memories. He tries to explain this as tactfully as he can. Andrea doesn't see what the big deal is and points out that the veal is in the kitchen whether anyone orders it or not. This further upsets Enzo who says that their date is over if Andrea orders the veal. Andrea responds that Enzo should not be throwing around ultimatums. In the midst of this discussion, the waiter walks to the table and asks for their order.

Match Questions

1. Should Andrea order the Veal Milanese? Why or why not?
2. Is it right for Enzo to make this demand of Andrea? Why or why not?
3. If Andrea orders the veal, should Enzo follow through on his ultimatum and leave the restaurant? Why or why not?

Study Questions

1. Is it ever right to give an ultimatum, if so, when?
2. Is it ever right to go against your own deeply held beliefs to fit in with the crowd?

Is eating veal any different morally from eating other forms of meat?

Case 5: AI Tutors

Mira has always struggled to keep up with her schoolwork. Sometimes the materials her teachers provide don't help her understand difficult lessons. She puts off assignments, does not always study for tests, and sometimes barely pays attention in class. What Mira loves is soccer. She loves practicing, competing and spending time with her teammates. But students have to maintain a certain grade average to stay eligible to play. Mira's grades eventually become so low that she is placed on Academic Probation risking her position on the team. Her school, however, is short on resources and lacks academic support programs. Realizing that she needs to bring her grades up fast, Mira turns to AI.

At first, AI seems like the perfect solution. AI helps her understand math problems and explains science questions. It helps her brainstorm essay ideas, generates practice questions for tests, and doesn't grow frustrated with her when she needs further explanations. Soon Mira has a C average, high enough to keep her on the team.

Over time, however, Mira's AI use becomes a habit. Instead of asking AI to explain how to solve a problem, Mira increasingly asks it just to solve the problem for her. Instead of reading an entire chapter, she asks AI just to summarize it. Instead of thinking of her own thesis for an essay, she asks AI just to give her one. Even when she can complete an assignment herself, she automatically opens AI first. Mira's school does not have clear policies on the use of AI and would not have the resources to enforce them rigorously. Mira is thus left to make her own decisions. She tells herself that her AI use is fine because she still reads the answers it produces, and she rewrites parts of essays to reflect her own opinions and voice. The work is getting done and she is playing sports. It's a win/win all around!

Match Questions

1. Is it fair for Mira to use AI given that she doesn't get the academic support she needs?
2. At what point, if at all, does Mira's use of AI cross the line from healthy to unhealthy? Why?
3. Who bears the greatest responsibility for correcting Mira's abuse of AI? Why?

Study Questions

1. Should using AI to explain a problem be treated differently from using AI to produce an answer? Why or why not?
2. If we grant that by the end, Mira is in fact using AI to cheat, who is harmed by that cheating?

Case 6: Reading Between the Headlines

Every Friday at Great Umbridge Public Middle School, students in Mr. Kennedy's 7th-grade Social Studies class give presentations about current events. Students can choose any event they find interesting but must report what happened, where they got their information, and why this specific piece of news matters. At the beginning of the school year, students gathered their news from a wide variety of sources. Some used major newspapers, others social media, and others independent news sources that their families follow regularly. Regardless of the source, Mr. Kennedy required students to go through a series of steps to verify if the information is correct.

One Friday in December, two students presented the news that a windfarm would be installed off the coast of their community. However, they each covered the article in a very different light. One student portrayed the event as a huge step forward for the environment and a major source of new jobs; the other student presented it as a pointless undertaking that would destroy the local fishing and tourist industries. Both students were set in their opinions. Each one was angered by the other's perspective, and their disagreement caused considerable unrest in the classroom. Mr. Kennedy looked into the new sources that both students used and found that each article in fact did portray the event in opposing ways.

Incidents like this continued throughout the year, leading to clashes of values that have soured the classroom culture. Parents started complaining that the class was discussing "inappropriate content." Tensions grew to the point that the school newspaper ran a story on the class, and the school principal told Mr. Kennedy to find a resolution quickly. As a way forward, Mr. Kennedy proposed a new policy that students must run their presentations by him before the start of class so he can decide if the presentations are "appropriate." Some students and parents like this solution because it should limit the unrest by keeping controversial issues out of class. Others worry that this policy will put a stop to necessary discussion and will silence valuable perspectives.

Match Questions

1. Should Mr. Kennedy implement the new policy of vetting students' presentations? Why or why not?
2. What is more important: to maintain a peaceful classroom environment or to prepare students for the real world by discussing controversial ideas? Why?
3. Propose an alternative way forward and explain why it would be better than Mr. Kennedy's proposal.

Study Questions

1. Who should have the final say in what issues and news sources are appropriate for use in class: parents, politicians, teachers or students? Why?
2. Does Mr. Kennedy's proposed policy contradict students' freedom of speech?