

Ethics at School: A Model Programme (United States of America)

Summary

The Model Ethics Course, designed and implemented by the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust (USA), encourages students to analyse ethical dilemmas through examining real-life examples of ethical misconduct and acting out role plays. Various scenarios are used in mock Ethics Commission hearings, with students taking on different roles, thus realising the difficulty associated with ethical decision-making.

The Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust, a constitutional, independent county agency, aims to restore public confidence in local government through education, training and community outreach. The Model Ethics Course has been offered at three public high schools during 2001–2002. The Ethics Commission is scheduled to deliver the programme in four more high schools for the 2004–05 school year.

The programme was funded by the General Fund of Miami-Dade County.

Background

"I have always believed in ethics, but as a result of this program I have realised how difficult it is to truly be ethical."

Student (15)

In the United States, local ethics commissions are increasingly common, particularly in the major metropolitan areas. Their powers and responsibilities vary substantially. The Miami-Dade Ethics Commission is one of the few commissions that devote a significant portion of its budget to education, training and community outreach. It was created in 1996 and is entrusted with four major responsibilities:

- i. Education and community outreach – to train and educate local government officials, candidates for office, employees and parties doing business with government, as to the appropriate standards of conduct and to partner with other community actors to hold conferences, programmes, workshops on ethics and accountability;
- ii. Providing advice – a process by which a party under the jurisdiction of the Ethics Commission may seek ethics guidance regarding the conduct of an individual and whether their conduct is consistent with relevant laws and rules;

- iii. Enforcement – the Commission employs a prosecutor and several investigators who investigate charges of ethical misconduct and corruption; and
- iv. Policy development – to assist local governments in Miami-Dade County to adopt good government laws.

Youth is an important target group of the Commission's teaching. As future community leaders, students should be provided with the necessary tools to become effective and ethical leaders. The Commission aims to provide education materials that focus on the realities faced by student populations, e.g. media reports about abuses of public trust and corrupt practices in Florida. Education should empower students to understand the impact of this on the community, and to find constructive ways to address the situation.

The project

"The programme helps us to make real life choices in tough situations and not only about ethics, but about reality."

Student (15)

The idea originated from a doctoral ethics course on ethical leadership for administrators in the Miami-Dade public schools. These administrators were polled and the vast majority expressed their support for a model student ethics programme in their schools.

The programme required the support of school principals and social studies teachers in the Miami-Dade public schools. Once the School District recognised the value of the programme, the Model Student Ethics Programme was included in a character education grant. Incidentally, character education is a state-wide requirement¹. Thus, schools were given the option to choose the Model Ethics Programme to satisfy the character education curriculum mandated by law. The reception by the school district's Ethics Advisory Committee and members of the elected school board has been overwhelmingly positive.

Rationale for the ethics programme

The objectives of the programme are to improve the problem-solving and decision-making skills of students as they relate to questions of ethics

¹ Public Schools in the state of Florida have broad discretion regarding the character education curriculum. In Miami-Dade County, the School Board approved a set of core values and directed staff to infuse these values into the curriculum. The school principals and their staff determine how to implement the Board rule.

and character; and to provide real-life examples of misconduct that students can comprehend and the difficulty associated with giving out punishment.

It is hoped that students realise even minor acts of ethical misconduct have serious implications for the community-at-large for two major reasons. Firstly, people may have difficulty relating to one another if they believe that most individuals they interact with cannot be trusted. Secondly, as students are placed in leadership positions, the stakes become higher as their decisions impact others. Therefore, students must learn that excusing behaviour of allegedly minor ethics violations set the stage for more serious acts of misconduct to be committed, including violations of the public trust, graft and corruption.

The ethics programme lasts 32 hours, usually one hour per week for a period of eight months. The students are between the ages of 14 and 18 and the programme is offered to classes of 25 to 30 students. The course is part of the curriculum and no extra credit is awarded. However, the students receive a letter and a certificate of completion.

Course content and methodology

Each school decides what delivery method it prefers. Ideally, the Commission would like to offer the course one hour per week for eight months. The outreach and training specialists for the Ethics Commission conduct all sessions. The trainers must prepare the curriculum for the programme, including the lectures and case studies. Trainers provide input and lecture in the beginning of the course on the topics of problem-solving, decision-making and the major ethical theories. The remainder of the programme is dedicated to the resolution of the case studies and role playing exercises, e.g. a mock ethics commission. Students rotate during the project, which enables them to assume different roles.

There is no place in the programme to moralise or preach to the students – instead, case studies are used to both touch on issues of concern to teenagers and address larger societal questions. Some of the sessions are strictly lectures. Once the course reaches the case study phase, students are randomly selected to sit on the mock ethics commission, to play the role of defendant, defence attorney or prosecutor. All of the other students in the room are allowed to participate once the dilemmas have been presented to the ethics commission and the commission has reached a decision. In subsequent sessions, roles change to enable more students to be part of the ‘official’ proceedings. Those who have no formal role to play remain very much engaged and all students tend to be quite emotional about the proceedings and the outcomes.

Ethical dilemmas:

Examples

One of the scenarios the trainers use is 'Good Coach/Bad Coach' – a dilemma a university president has to resolve involving a winning football coach, who is routinely abusive of his players, the university community and the media. A second scenario is entitled 'To Cheat or Not to Cheat' – a dilemma facing students who are alerted to the fact that answers to test questions are on the blackboard (unknown to the teacher). The discussion then focuses on the factors that affect the students' decision before cheating or not cheating. A third case study deals with racial profiling and some of the perceptions and misperceptions individuals have when they observe various situations.

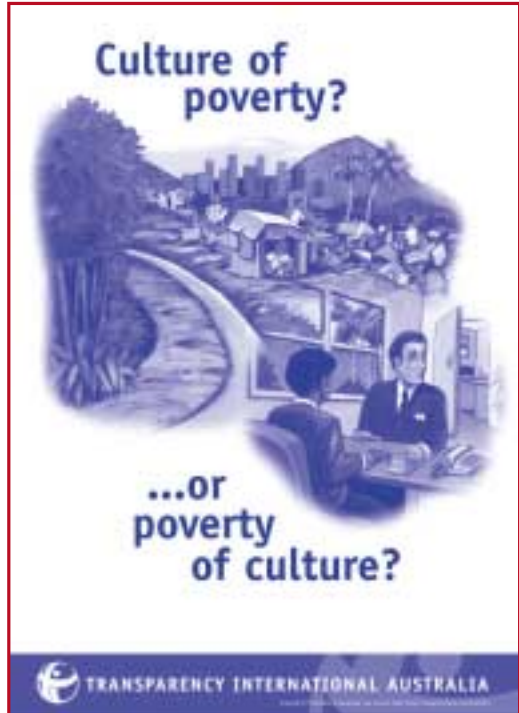
There are no right answers to these cases; however, some responses may be viewed as more ethical than others. In reaching their decisions, students were asked to evaluate whether their actions are consistent with the ends-based, rule-based, or care-based philosophies.

Results

"Now I view the importance of ethics as something that affects the community. It gets to the point where discussions and decisions made through the scenarios are very important to situations in our society."

Student (16)

The success of the course can be illustrated most tellingly by an incident when one of the sessions scheduled for September 11th, 2001 was cancelled due to the terrorist attacks in New York. The students were distraught when informed of the cancellation, and many claimed that they looked forward to this hour



every week because they learnt a great deal. Some felt the trainer might help them make better sense of the tragic events of September 11th. Generally, after taking this course, many students developed a better understanding of the consequences associated with unethical behaviour and how ethical dilemmas are a regular part of people's everyday lives. Some students indicated that adults should also to be exposed to this programme. Finally, several students showed a greater interest in getting involved in their communities – even to the point of writing letters to the editor and addressing other wrongs that occur within their world. The programme had caused them to re-evaluate the way they view current events.

A different look at the world

Before the programme began, the students had a limited knowledge of ethics, especially when applying their values to a real problem. They viewed matters very simplistically (right vs. wrong). After the programme, the students agreed that deciding right from wrong can be complicated and often there are times when there is no single right or ethical response to a problem. The students

also gained an insight into the degree to which corruption can be destructive to a community – even relatively minor acts of corruption.

As a general rule, the students agreed that they now look at the world differently because of this programme. The students also realised the danger of prejudging people or circumstances and began to accept the fact that they have biases that can influence their perceptions. Finally, the students found that cultural and environmental factors may affect a person's ethical make-up.

The most important achievement was to raise the consciousness levels of students to recognise the relevance of



ethics in their everyday lives. In particular, students are confronted with difficult decisions, and it is important to know that tools are available to assist them in addressing these issues. Through recognising the difficulties associated with ethical decision-making, the consequences of one's own actions on others are better understood. The overwhelmingly positive responses from the students indicate the programme is successful.

Recommendations

Florida public schools place great emphasis on state-wide student achievement tests, and social studies teachers have expressed frustration with the lack of freedom to teach subjects that are not part of the test, such as the model student ethics programme. Students were also reluctant initially, as they had concerns about the format and the ability of the trainer to communicate with and relate to them. However, the students felt empowered when they realised the course was interactive and implemented in a setting where they could express themselves about issues that are relevant to them and their peers.

Challenges

In addition to the feedback received at the end of the programme, it would be useful to track the students who go through the programme and ask for their feedback at a future point in time – possibly a year or two after they matriculated – to determine whether the lessons learned are still of value to them.

The programme faces a budgetary challenge. In order to place the programme in all public schools, there needs to be a major infusion of resources to support the programme. Given the current staff levels at the Ethics Commission, the programme can be offered to a maximum of four schools per year. Miami-Dade County public schools is the fourth largest school district in the country and at the rate of four high schools per year; it would take nearly a decade to reach every high school.

If funding can be covered by a private foundation, the programme can be implemented at all high schools in the area. This will be accomplished, in part, by training local college students majoring in education to assist the Ethics Commission with the course, e.g. through being given internship credit for teaching in the programme. The ultimate goal would be to offer the programme at every public school in Miami-Dade (high school, middle school and elementary school). Media coverage would also help to publicise the programme and would also be useful with regard to fundraising.

The Model Student Ethics Programme is an ongoing experimental initiative in the Miami-Dade public schools and is viewed as a pilot programme for other

government/school districts and organisations to emulate. Ethics education in an interactive form and germane to students, should be universally popular across the globe. However, the materials must be tailored to meet the needs of individual school systems/districts.

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