

Professional Development Activity on Ethical Decision Making—Supplemental

The following activity will help the school counselor–administrator team learn the six-step ethical decision-making model. This activity will challenge team members to reflect on difficult student issues.

Time Frame

The team should allow forty-five to sixty minutes for this activity.

Materials

This activity requires a facilitator, and every participant should have a copy of the scenario and a pen or pencil.

Process

The team should do the following, making sure they answer all questions in the six-step ethical decision-making model and determine how they each would handle the situation.

1. Ask the team members to read the scenario to themselves.
2. Guide members through the following six-step ethical decision-making model. Begin with step one, answer individually and discuss as a group, then go on to the next step.

Step 1 Define the problem from two perspectives.

- **Emotional reaction:** Ask members, “Is there something about this problem that makes you uncomfortable?”
- **Intellectual reaction:** Ask members, “What are the facts?” This information should be objective, although rumors can be informative.

Step 2 Consider the age and grade levels of all individuals involved. Were their decisions age appropriate? Do they have any developmental delays or mental or cognitive challenges?

Step 3 Consider the setting and the basic public or private school cornerstones for their setting before moving to decisions. Consider the following questions.

- “Is the school’s primary mission for students related to rigorous academic expectations, degree completion, or alternative education pathways?” Be mindful that some issues are related to a student’s mental or emotional well-being and they are at school for those reasons.
- “What parent or guardian rights to raise their child as they see fit should we consider?”
- “What are the student’s relevant rights as a minor should we consider?”
- “Do student handbook rules or district policies impact this decision?”
- “Are we a public or private school (which may impact state, provincial, or federal considerations)?”

- Step 4** Develop a wide range of potential decisions. The norming questions in chapter 1 can move the team from an investigation to a range of potential decisions.
- Step 5** Test the options with the following considerations and questions.
- **Harm:** “Does this option do less harm than alternatives?”
 - **Justice:** “Is this fair, unbiased, and equitable?”
 - **Universality:** “Would we make this decision again given similar circumstances?”
 - **Publicity:** “What would this look like on the front page of the local paper or on social media?”
 - **Defensibility:** “Could we defend this choice before a committee of peers? What would our lawyer say about this choice?”
 - **Reversibility:** “Would we still think this is a good choice if it adversely affected either the school counselor or the administrator?”
- Step 6** Develop an action plan based on steps 1–5. A basic action plan includes who is responsible for various aspects of the decision, the implementation time line, and the criteria for evaluating (judging the value) and assessing (judging the effectiveness) the decision, including noting any unintended consequences that may come from implementing the decision.

Results

Participation in this activity will impact the school counselor–administrator team’s ability to process a variety of options in an ethical manner for student issues that are not straightforward. The team will have a deeper understanding of each members’ thought process in solving student issues.

Ethical Decision-Making Scenario

You are the counselor in a small rural high school. The leadership team consists of the school counselor and administrator. Consequently you work very closely together. You have been supporting an eleventh-grade girl named Shauna as she experiences challenging home and school situations. Shauna is a biracial student in a school district that is 97 percent white. Both parents are incarcerated for drug use and her grandparents, both white, have sole custody. She is an above-average student who is on the dance team, and she is the only member who is not white. She is outgoing and gets along very well with all team members. She has shared with you that over the summer she began spending time with another group of students who have a reputation for drinking alcohol. The dance team does not practice during summer, and the new peer group lives near her. Those students do not participate in any extracurricular activities. She also shared that she leaves the house after her grandparents have gone to bed on the weekends.

On Mondays during the fall semester, you can tell which group she has spent the weekend with; if it is the dance team, she is upbeat and outgoing. If it the other group, she looks tired and is withdrawn. Because you have a strong relationship with her, she discloses that she has been drinking when she is with the other group of students. You have an honest conversation about the consequences if she were to get caught. Underage drinking is illegal; she would not be able to participate in any extracurricular activities per the student handbook; and she may be associated with the juvenile justice system.

She worries that she will end up like her parents. She agrees that it is not worth the risk and states she will no longer hang out with those students. She is successful for five weeks but then you notice a change again. You speak with her and she confirms that she made a poor choice but will not do so again. At this point, you have not disclosed any information to the administrator. You have been in touch with Shauna's grandparents, who are loving and supportive, but are serving in grandparent roles, not as parents, given their age. Shauna is successful for four more weeks before making another poor choice. Several concerns are at the back of your mind.

- She is drinking underage, which is illegal.
- She says she has not been driving, and you believe her because of her honesty with you to this point.
- If she were randomly screened for drugs, as any student participating in extracurricular activities can be, she would not pass and would be removed from her only positive peer group.

You feel too close a connection to make a decision, so you share the details with your administrator.