



# Setting and Maintaining Ethical Boundaries

## Competency

Educator applies professional judgment and ethical principles to navigate complex and evolving situations, maintaining ethical boundaries even when circumstances fall outside clearly defined policies.

## Key Method

The educator creates a presentation that explains the Ethical Spectrum Approach (green, yellow, and red zones) and connects it to present-day ethical challenges faced by educators, students, and colleagues in real-world educational settings. The presentation should include examples of acceptable, context-dependent, and unacceptable behaviors, highlighting how professional judgment, the Model Code of Ethics for Educators (MCEE), and district policies can guide educators in navigating complex situations and maintaining appropriate boundaries.

## Method Components

### Professional Codes of Ethics

There are ongoing efforts within the PK–12 and educator preparation communities to emphasize the importance of equipping educators and prospective educators with a clear understanding of how professional decision-making impacts the safety and well-being of students, as well as the culture and mission of schools. While most professions adhere to robust ethical principles, the education system has historically lacked a universally adopted code of ethics. In the absence of such a framework, educators

often rely on judicial decisions and legislative mandates to navigate ethical dilemmas, leaving gaps in proactive guidance for ethical behavior.

### Code of Ethics vs. Code of Conduct

A professional code of ethics sets a higher standard than regulatory codes of conduct, which define absolutes for compliance in areas such as employment, licensure, or criminal accountability. The **Model Code of Ethics for Educators (MCEE)** addresses this gap by providing a framework for mitigating risks and guiding educators through ethical decision-making processes. Unlike codes of conduct, which focus on legal boundaries, the MCEE encourages self-reflection, learning, and accountability to support educators in navigating complex, real-world situations.

### The Model Code of Ethics for Educators (MCEE)

The MCEE serves as a vital guide for educators as they navigate the ethical challenges inherent in PK–12 education. Designed by educators for educators, the MCEE reflects the public’s trust in the profession and upholds its dignity by offering a shared language for ethical practice.

The MCEE:

- Connects professional aspirations with the practical realities educators face daily.
- Promotes a broad understanding of best practices in ethical decision-making.
- Provides a framework to support educators in constructing thoughtful, informed responses to ethical dilemmas.
- Facilitates ongoing conversations across the profession about the value and application of professional ethics.

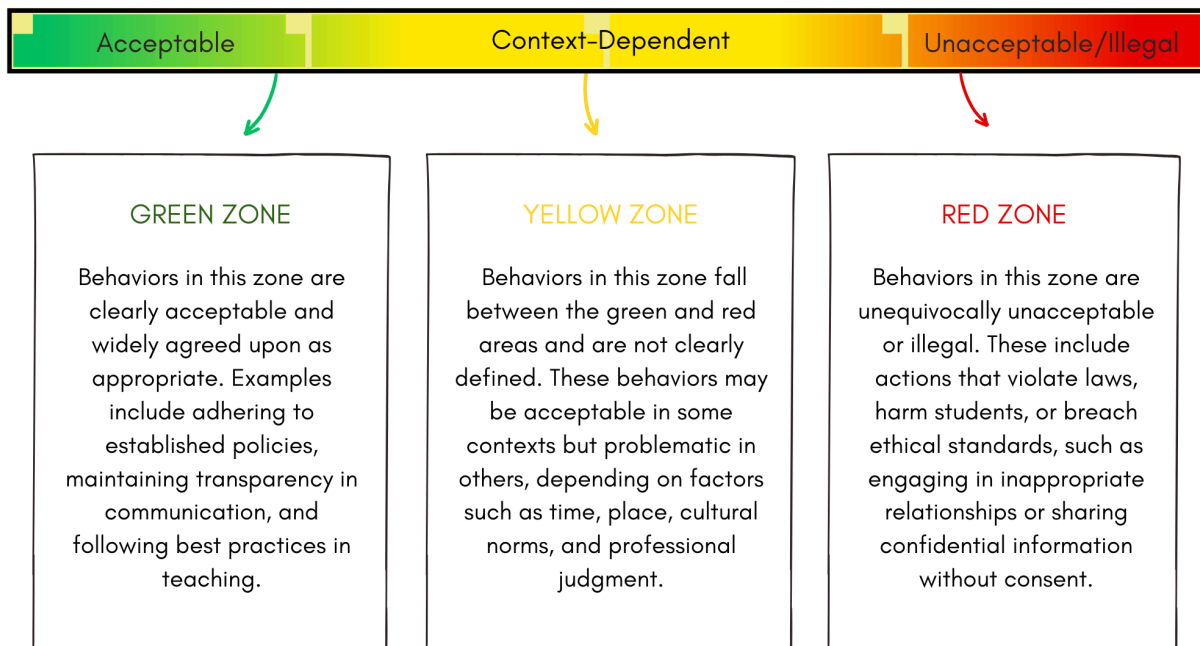
The five guiding principles of the MCEE define key areas of responsibility for educators:

1. Responsibility to the Profession
2. Responsibility for Professional Competence
3. Responsibility to Students
4. Responsibility to the School Community
5. Responsible and Ethical Use of Technology

For further information on the principles and performance indicators of the MCEE, visit [www.nasdtec.net](http://www.nasdtec.net).

The “Ethical Spectrum”

# Ethical Spectrum



To navigate professional boundaries effectively, educators must consider behaviors across an **ethical spectrum**:

- **Green Zone (Acceptable):** Behaviors in this zone are clearly acceptable and widely recognized as appropriate. Examples include adhering to established policies, maintaining transparency in communication, and following best practices in teaching.
- **Yellow Zone (Context-Dependent):** Behaviors in this zone fall between the green and red areas and are not clearly defined. These behaviors may be acceptable in some contexts but problematic in others, depending on factors such as time, place, cultural norms, and professional judgment.
- **Red Zone (Unacceptable/Illegal):** Behaviors in this zone are unequivocally unacceptable or illegal. These include actions that violate laws, harm students, or breach ethical standards, such as engaging in inappropriate relationships or sharing confidential information without consent.

Educators today are increasingly working in an environment that does not have clear-cut definitions of right and wrong.

### Operating in the Yellow Zone

Educators often find themselves in the "yellow zone" of the ethical spectrum—situations that fall between clearly right and clearly wrong. These gray areas require thoughtful professional judgment, awareness of context, and guidance from ethical frameworks such as the MCEE to ensure decisions uphold student safety, fairness, and trust.

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) may introduce new yellow-zone dilemmas—for instance, whether it is appropriate to use AI-generated messages in communication with families, or to rely on predictive tools that flag student risk. In these situations, the same principles of transparency, professional boundaries, and ethical reflection apply.

By understanding ethical complexity and recognizing situations that fall outside clear-cut rules, educators can make principled decisions with greater confidence and integrity, supporting strong relationships and maintaining professional boundaries.

## Supporting Rationale and Research

Harrison, L. K. (2019). Educator misconduct in Idaho: A quantitative analysis (Order No. 13426867). Available from ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2175705732). Retrieved from: <https://www.proquest.com/openview/c1bee69a25f9d5a904182583c3f54f74/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>

Gurr, S. K., Geron, T., Forster, D. J., & Levinson, M. (2024). Philosophical Reflections on Teachers' Ethical Dilemmas in a Global Pandemic. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-024-09937-4>

Kafi, Z., Motallebzadeh, K., & Ashraf, H. (2018). Developing, localizing & validating code of professional ethics through PLS-SEM: EFL university instructors' perspectives. *Cogent Education*, 5(1). DOI:<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2331186X.2018.1492340?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

Kemman, H. R. (2019). Ethical school leadership: The conceptions and practices secondary principals use to maintain ethical context and relationships in their schools (Order No. 13810380). Available from ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2201789195). Retrieved from <https://scholarspace.library.gwu.edu/etd/mg74qm740>

Dawson, S., & Napper, V. (2020). Determining Educator Ethical Decision-Making Factors Using the Jones Model. JISTE, 24(1). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1304617.pdf>

Levy, R., Asman, O., & Barnoy, S. (2024). Boundary-blurred behaviors in academic teachers-students Facebook interaction: are guidelines needed? A cross-sectional study. BMC Nursing, 23(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-024-02466-y>

Maxwell, Bruce & Tremblay-Laprise, Audrée-Anne & Fillion, Marianne & Boon, Helen & Daly, Caroline & Hoven, Mariette & Heilbronn, Ruth & Lenselink, Myrthe & Walters, Sue. (2016). A Five-Country Survey on Ethics Education in Preservice Teaching Programs. Journal of Teacher Education. 67. 135-151. 10.1177/0022487115624490. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/294105993\\_A\\_Five-Country\\_Survey\\_on\\_Ethics\\_Education\\_in\\_Preservice\\_Teaching\\_Programs](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/294105993_A_Five-Country_Survey_on_Ethics_Education_in_Preservice_Teaching_Programs)

## Resources

General Ethics and the Model Code of Ethics for Educators (MCEE)

[Code of Ethics with Troy Hutchings and Phil Rogers \(Part 1 of 2\)](#)

[Code of Ethics with Troy Hutchings and Phil Rogers \(Part 2 of 2\)](#)

[The Model Code of Ethics for Educators](#)

[Rationale for the MCEE](#)

[National Council for the Advancement of Educator Ethics \(NCAEE\)](#)

## Ethics in the Classroom

[Ethics in the Classroom](#)

[Educator Ethics in the Classroom](#) (scroll down to E25)

[Focus on Ethics. Professional Boundaries in Early Childhood Education](#)

## Technology and Ethics

[Focusing on Ethics: Smartphones in the Classroom](#)

[Blurred Lines: Protecting educators from social media mishaps](#)

## Other Ethics-Related Resources

[ESP Professional Growth Continuum | NEA](#)

[Code of Ethics for Educators | NEA](#)

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# Submission Guidelines & Evaluation Criteria

*To earn the micro-credential, you must receive a passing score in Parts 1 and 3 and be proficient for all components in Part 2.*

## Part 1. Overview Questions (Provides Context)

300-500 words

Please answer the following contextual questions to help our reviewer understand your current situation. Do not include any information that will make you or others identifiable to our reviewers.

1. List your career/membership category, specific position and title, number of years working in education, and a basic description of your worksite (grades, student population, demographics), community information (urban/rural/suburban), and other relevant information.

## **Educator Ethics**

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2. Describe your current knowledge of ethics in education, particularly related to setting and maintaining professional boundaries. Describe any training or experiences that addressed boundary-setting in your professional role. How do you determine when a boundary should be adjusted or reinforced? Provide specific examples or details that illustrate your current practices or challenges in this area.

**Passing:** Responses fully address all questions and include **specific examples** that demonstrate a clear understanding of ethical principles and professional boundaries. Writing is well-organized, clear, and easy to follow.

## Part 2. Work Examples/Artifacts/Evidence

To earn this micro-credential, please submit the following **three artifacts** as evidence of your learning. *Please do not include any information that will make you or your students identifiable to your reviewers.*

### **Artifact 1: Ethical Spectrum**

Create an “Ethical Spectrum\*” document that includes four ethical situations. Place each situation in the appropriate zone:

- One situation in the green area (acceptable behavior).
- One situation in the red area (unacceptable/illegal behavior).
- Two situations in the yellow area (context-dependent behavior).
- Briefly explain why each situation fits into the chosen zone.

*\*You can either draw this by hand and take a picture for submission or do it digitally using a tool of your choice. For reference, the “Ethical Spectrum” can be found in the Method Components. NOTE: Handwritten submissions should be neat, legible, and presented in a polished, final format.*

### **Artifact 2: Two-Column Chart**

Create a two-column chart with four ethical situations where boundaries were crossed:

- In Column 1, describe the situation (2-3 sentences).
  - In Column 2, list possible actions that could have prevented negative outcomes (2-3 sentences).
- Include the two yellow-zone situations from your Ethical Spectrum

and add two new ones. For each yellow-zone situation, explain how it could escalate into the red zone and how to prevent this.

**Artifact 3: Share Your Learning**

Choose **one** of the options below to share your learning with other educators.

**Option 1: Slideshow**

(12-15 Sides)

Create a slideshow that includes:

- A summary of the Educator Model Code of Ethics.
- A definition of ethical boundaries.
- Examples of two scenarios of violations of ethical boundaries (avoid identifiable details).
- The need for a common framework for decision-making and conduct.
- An educator's responsibility when aware of boundary violations.
- Practical guidelines for setting and maintaining ethical boundaries.
- Risks to educators from boundary violations.

**Option 2: News Article**

(400-600 words)

Write a news article for an education publication addressing how boundaries in education have evolved. Your article should include:

- The importance of setting and maintaining ethical boundaries.
- Examples of ethical situations along the Ethical Spectrum (avoid identifiable details).
- Current efforts to minimize risks for educators.
- Advice for educators on maintaining boundaries.
- The responsibility of educators when aware of boundary violations.

Part 2. Rubric

	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>Basic</b>	<b>Developing</b>
<b>Artifact 1: Ethical Spectrum</b>	<p>Drawing is neat and easy to read and includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-One situation in the green area</li> <li>-One situation in the red area</li> <li>-Two situations in the yellow area</li> </ul> <p>Each situation is accompanied by a clear explanation of why it fits into the chosen zone.</p>	<p>The drawing is somewhat difficult to read and/or is missing one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-One situation in the green area</li> <li>-One situation in the red area</li> <li>-Two situations in the yellow area</li> </ul> <p>Explanations of the placement may lack clarity or detail.</p>	<p>The drawing is unreadable and/or is missing two or more of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-One situation in the green area</li> <li>-One situation in the red area</li> <li>-Two situations in the yellow area</li> </ul> <p>Explanations are unclear or missing.</p>
<b>Artifact 2: Two-Column Chart</b>	<p>Includes four ethical situations where boundaries were crossed and includes all of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Column 1 describes the situation in 2-3 sentences.</li> </ul>	<p>Includes three ethical situations where boundaries were crossed and/or one or more of the following are missing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Column 1 describes the situation.</li> </ul>	<p>Includes one or two ethical situations where boundaries were crossed and/or is missing all of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Column 1 describes the situation.</li> </ul>

**Educator Ethics**

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	<p>-Column 2 lists possible actions that could have been taken to avoid negative outcomes in 2-3 sentences.</p> <p>Two of the situations are from the yellow area of the Ethical Spectrum, with a clear explanation of how they could escalate into the red zone.</p>	<p>-Column 2 lists possible actions to avoid negative outcomes.</p> <p>Two of the situations may not clearly explain how they could escalate into the red zone.</p>	<p>-Column 2 lists possible actions to avoid negative outcomes.</p> <p>Situations from the yellow area may not connect to how they could escalate into the red zone.</p>
<p><b>Artifact 3</b> <b>Option 1:</b> Presentation</p>	<p>Includes all of the following requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-A summary of the Educator Model Code of Ethics</li> <li>-A definition of ethical boundaries</li> <li>-Examples of two scenarios of violations of ethical boundaries (no identifiable information)</li> </ul>	<p>Includes most of the following requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-A summary of the Educator Model Code of Ethics</li> <li>-A definition of ethical boundaries</li> <li>-Examples of two scenarios of violations of ethical boundaries</li> <li>-The need for a common framework for</li> </ul>	<p>Includes only one or two of the following requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-A summary of the Educator Model Code of Ethics</li> <li>-A definition of ethical boundaries</li> <li>-Examples of two scenarios of violations of ethical boundaries</li> </ul>

### Educator Ethics

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The need for a common framework for decision-making and conduct</li> <li>-An educator's responsibility when aware of boundary violations</li> <li>-Guidelines and advice for setting and maintaining ethical boundaries</li> <li>-Risks to educators around boundary violations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>decision-making and conduct</li> <li>-An educator's responsibility when aware of boundary violations</li> <li>-Guidelines and advice for setting and maintaining ethical boundaries</li> <li>-Risks to educators around boundary violations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The need for a common framework for decision-making and conduct</li> <li>-An educator's responsibility when aware of boundary violations</li> <li>-Guidelines and advice for setting and maintaining ethical boundaries</li> <li>-Risks to educators around boundary violations</li> </ul>
<p><b>Artifact 3</b> <b>Option 2:</b> News Article</p>	<p>Includes all of the following requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The need to set and maintain ethical boundaries in education</li> <li>-Examples of ethical situations along the Ethical Spectrum (no identifiable information)</li> </ul>	<p>Includes most of the following requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The need to set and maintain ethical boundaries in education</li> <li>-Examples of ethical situations along the Ethical Spectrum</li> <li>-Current efforts to minimize risks for educators</li> </ul>	<p>Includes only one or two of the following requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The need to set and maintain ethical boundaries in education</li> <li>-Examples of ethical situations along the Ethical Spectrum</li> </ul>

### Educator Ethics

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Current efforts to minimize risks for educators</li><li>-Advice for educators on setting and maintaining ethical boundaries</li><li>-An educator's responsibility when aware of boundary violations</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Advice for educators on setting and maintaining ethical boundaries</li><li>-An educator's responsibility when aware of boundary violations</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Current efforts to minimize risks for educators</li><li>-Advice for educators on setting and maintaining ethical boundaries</li><li>-An educator's responsibility when aware of boundary violations</li></ul>
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### Part 3 Reflection

(300–500 words)

Use the word count as a guide to write a personal reflection about your work on this micro-credential.

Please answer the following reflective question. *Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to your reviewers.*

Within the realm of this micro-credential, based on your new understanding of ethical boundaries and the ethical spectrum, what strategies will you implement to establish and maintain appropriate professional boundaries in your interactions with students, parents, community, and/or colleagues?

Your response should provide evidence that this activity has positively influenced your understanding of ethical decision-making and your ability to navigate boundary setting. **Cite specific examples** from your personal and/or work-related experiences to support your claims, and **outline specific, actionable steps** you will take to apply this learning in your future professional practice.

**Passing:**

Reflection:

- Demonstrates a positive impact on both educator practice and student success;
- Includes examples cited directly from personal and/or work-related experiences;
- Provides specific, actionable steps showing how new learning will be integrated into future practice.