

PRESS RELEASE



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ETHICS IN PUBLIC EDUCATION STILL MATTER

Educators have one of the most challenging jobs in our society. Teaching is one of the most honorable professions a person can choose. I invite people who think it is an easy profession to spend a day as a substitute teacher. More importantly, policymakers would greatly benefit from spending time in our classrooms.

School districts in Tennessee are required to conduct annual professional development training concerning the teacher code of ethics and its requirements. In addition, the training should address what constitutes unethical conduct. It is worth noting that educators, or all school system employees, should act in their private lives in a way that does not undermine their importance in the classroom, demean their position or school, or damage their position as a moral leader in the community in which they serve.

Bad behavior and scandals put all the good work our educators do at risk. In 2010, as we examined our Code of Ethics, I was struck by the underlying principles that govern the behavior of our educators. Our teachers are women and men of high character.

Former State Board of Education member Allison Chancey, now a retired educator, wrote, “A teacher’s integrity both inside and outside the classroom is paramount. First, because the safety of students entrusted to our care is our utmost priority. Second, because we know the decisions we make set a model for our students. We knew this when we entered the profession, and so we submit to a high code of ethics for the protection of our students.”

In regards to our students, most educators understand that our first obligation is to the students entrusted to our care. Parents are the primary moral educators of their children. Nevertheless, Lewis Hodge, a former University of Tennessee professor, pointed out, “Educators are obligated to help foster civic virtues such as integrity, diligence, responsibility, cooperation, loyalty, fidelity, and respect for the law, for human life, for others, and for self.”

We understand the purpose of education is to develop each student for his or her fullest participation in the American democratic society, to pursue truth and to seek excellence. Educators across our state are willing to accept the responsibility of taking the initiative to eliminate all barriers that prevent full access to this unique education for all. Not many professions make that commitment to those they serve.

Educators are professionals. Our organization believes that academic freedom is inherited and essential to, the teaching profession. To that end, for students to learn, teachers must be “free to teach.” This freedom encompasses picking source material to guide the class discussion and learning along the teacher’s chosen path. Discussions of religious or political issues should be relevant to the subject matter and have a demonstrated educational purpose. However, educators must abide by school regulation and policy. If you have any doubt, simply check with a building level administrator. Every educator must have a broad general education, a depth of preparation in special areas and mastery of knowledge and skills. Educators should be endowed with a thorough understanding of professional ethics and should possess a zeal for continuous self-improvement. They should be imbued with a sense of moral and professional responsibility.

SUMMARY

A strong ethical code is the foundation of individual and educational success for educators and our students. Ethics still matter.

We believe free public education is an integral part of the community it serves, and we encourage the development of educational opportunities for all. We believe the continuation of our free nation and its strength and well-being are dependent on free public education. If a school is to relate to the students, educators must understand the community in which they live. That is why local control of public education is critical. Quality education must be the shared purpose of the public, boards of education, and educators.

Professional Educators of Tennessee advocates for public education. However, we will never endorse political parties or candidates as an organization or on behalf of our members. We also do not have a PAC, nor do we plan to start one. It would harm our effectiveness. We must advance public education without the divisive tribalism of partisan politics, and we will never get involved in non-education related social issues.

Yet, we do believe every educator has a right and a responsibility to be an informed and active citizen for whatever candidates, causes or issues they support individually. You cannot, however, promote your personal beliefs on students because they are a "captive audience".

President Dwight D. Eisenhower said: "The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office." A strong ethical code is the foundation of individual and educational success for educators and our students. Ethics still matter.

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JC Bowman is the Executive Director of Professional Educators of Tennessee, a non-partisan teacher association headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the association are properly cited. For more information on this subject or any education issue please contact Professional Educators of Tennessee. To schedule an interview please contact [Audrey Shores, Director of Communications](#), at 1-800-471-4867 ext.102.