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Washington State High School Ethics Bowl 2027
General Information and Rules

General Introduction

The **Ethics Bowl** involves teams of students analyzing a series of wide-ranging ethical dilemmas. The competition utilizes case studies relevant to youth, such as questions about plagiarism, peer pressure, abuse of social media, free speech, gun control, cloning, parental consent, and stem cell research. The event is intended to be easily accessible, with advance preparation optional.

Schools or individual students can register for the Ethic Bowl, either as individuals or in teams of 3-5 members (with up to 5 alternates, so a maximum of 10 students per team). Schools can register up to two teams. Individual student registrants will be assigned to teams upon arrival or, if possible, prior to the event.

The Ethics Bowl is about giving an insightful perspective on each case, one that an intelligent layperson should be able to follow. The program values students' reasoning abilities, and the emphasis is more on the broader ethical implications of the cases and less on a rule-oriented approach. It's not about memorizing ethical theories or the names of philosophers, and teams should not focus on citing philosophers or moral theories.

We want to know why students believe something is morally right or wrong and what reasons/ evidence they give to support this view. It's harder to build up a case than to tear one down, so a good objection to another team's analysis may be to agree with their view but point out a complication or worry and then respond constructively to that complication or worry.

This event is designed to promote thoughtful, civil dialogue about difficult questions. Teams should score highly when they demonstrate good ethical reasoning, clarity about and consistency in their views, and a willingness to engage thoughtfully with points made by the other team. Mock-trial and debate-team style presentations, in which students press a particular point of view without consideration for furthering a dialogue, are not favored.

Structure of the Event

The Ethics Bowl is comprised of three morning rounds involving multiple rooms, plus a final round after lunch. Each room includes two teams (3-5 students per team, with up to five alternates, so that each team has a maximum of 10 students), three judges and a moderator (as well as any family, friends and other audience members). Teams may substitute alternates between rounds, but not in the middle of a round.

From the fall up until the event, some but not all teams have worked to prepare their responses to the six cases that have been published as the possible subjects of all rounds (except round 3 – see below). Students do not have advance knowledge of which cases will be presented at the event.

Round 3 involves a case none of the students have seen. The purpose of this is to have one round in which none of the students arrive with prepared presentations, in order to give the students a chance to demonstrate their skills at thinking on their feet and developing arguments in light of a new set of facts and ethical issues.

Rounds proceed as follows:

Team members must be seated before the round begins. Scratch paper is provided for teams to make notes during the cases, but **outside notes and materials are prohibited**.

When a team is conferring or speaking, the other team, judges, and audience members must remain silent, although teams are allowed to pass notes.

Each round begins with the moderator flipping a coin. The team that wins the toss decides if it wants to go first (becoming Team A on the score sheets) or second (becoming Team B on the score sheets).

The moderator then distributes copies of the round's case to the teams and judges and reads the case aloud.

1. **Presentation.** In all rounds, both teams will then have up to 5 minutes to confer, after which any member(s) of Team A may speak for up to 5 minutes. Team B's presentation of the same case, also up to 5 minutes, will follow immediately. Both teams can earn up to 10 points from each judge for this portion of the round. The presentations should begin with a statement of the question or questions the team thinks are most important in considering the case, and the remainder of the presentation should address that question or questions.

Please note: Although in their preparation of the cases, teams may have done some factual research, facts external to the case may not be relied upon in the presentation (as there is no way for the judges to determine the accuracy of outside factual claims).

2. **Open dialogue.** In this part of the competition, an innovation developed by and instituted for the first time in the 2019 Washington State High School Ethics Bowl, teams engage in a self-moderated open dialogue for up to 10 minutes. The idea is for both teams to think together about the issues that emerged in the presentations. The open dialogue will begin with team A speaking. Teams will be evaluated on the extent to which they listen to and consider the other team's analysis and questions and on the civility and depth with which the teams discuss the case. Each team can earn up to 10 points from each judge for this part of the round, and these points will determine the winner of the Award for Civil Dialogue.

3. **Judges' Questions to Presenting Team.** Finally, judges will have 20 minutes (total, for questions and answers) to ask teams questions related to the case, 10 minutes for each team, beginning with Team B. Before asking questions, judges may confer briefly.

Each judge may ask a question, and is there is time judges may ask additional questions. Team members are not expected to confer for more than 30 seconds after a question has been asked.

Both teams can earn up to 10 points from each judge for their responses to the judges' questions.

After the question-and-answer period, judges will make individual scoring decisions for both teams.

4. **Post Round Discussion.** After the judges have time to complete their scoring, the moderator will open the dialogue up to everyone on the room, facilitating a discussion about the case for up to 10 minutes. Judges will assist in facilitating the discussion.

Guidelines for Moderators

The moderator controls the room during the rounds, including being responsible for keeping time and ensuring that there is no unacceptable behavior, including but not limited to:

- Coaches, parents, or audience members communicating with (verbally or non-verbally), or demonstrably reacting to, competitors during a match.
- Any intentional noise while one of the teams, judges, or the moderator has the floor.
- Judges showing hostility or asking inappropriate questions of competitors.
- Foul, insulting, or excessively graphic language by anyone in the competition room, including the judges.

All teams will get time notifications from the moderator at their request. When judges are asking questions, the moderator will notify them when there are 2 minutes remaining.

Only the moderator keeps official time. However, team members are permitted to keep time on personal devices, as long as the devices do not store data or connect to the Internet (which includes smartphones and tablets), and students may not time opposing teams.

At the end of each round, the moderator will check the math of each scoresheet and make sure the winner is circled on each judge's scoresheet. The round winner will be the team that receives the highest score from a majority of judges (usually 2 out of 3). If a team wins on one judge's score sheet and ties on the sheets of the other two of three judges, that team wins the round. If neither team wins on more of the score sheets, then the round is deemed a tie (even if one team scores a greater number of total points).

During the three morning rounds, moderators will not announce the winner of the round. A runner will pick up the scoresheets and materials from each room after each round.

Final Round

After the third round, teams will be ranked by the number of wins in all three rounds. The top two ranked teams then will advance to the final round. When two or more teams have the same number of wins, the following tiebreakers are used, in this order:

- **Lowest number of losses** (a team with 2 wins and 1 tie will rank higher than a team with 2 wins and 1 loss)
- **Highest point total over the three rounds**
- **Highest number of judge vote**s (over the course of 3 rounds, a team has the opportunity to win the votes of 9 judges. If two teams finish with 3 wins, but one team has 8 judge votes and the other has 7, the team with 8 votes is ranked higher)
- **Greatest point differential** over all three rounds (if two teams have 2 wins and 1 loss, and Team A has a total point differential of +10 [winning one round by 10 and one by 6, and losing one round by 6] while Team B has a point differential of +9 [winning one round by 3 and one by 7, and losing one round by 1], Team A is ranked higher)

At lunch, there will be an announcement of the two finalists and the winner of the Award for Civil Dialogue.

The rules and procedures for the final round are identical to the other rounds, except judges cannot have any ties. If a judge completes the scoring sheet and there is a tie in the final round, the judge must revise the score sheet.

At the end of the final round, there will be a brief closing ceremony with trophies awarded for first and second places, and the "Award for Civil Dialogue." The Award for Civil Dialogue will be chosen and given to a team from a school that is not a finalist, based on the total number of open dialogue points after the first three rounds.

Guidelines for Judges

- Judges should not interrupt teams when they are speaking with questions, prompts, or gestures.

- Judges should direct questions to a team as a whole and not an individual or a subset of the team. It is inappropriate to ask questions based on the immutable characteristics of team members, such as race, religion, gender, gender identity, ethnicity, disability, national origin, sexual orientation, appearance, etc. (e.g.: addressing a question about immigration to a student because of a perceived background).

- Judges' questions should be short and succinct (30 seconds or less) and should be designed to help probe the team's understanding of the case. Please no lengthy hypotheticals.

- Judges should not base scores on whether one person, several people, or all team members speak. Each team decides how to divide up speaking time during each round. Some teams choose to have an individual "own" a certain case. Other teams prefer to have each person on the team speak. Teams should be neither rewarded nor penalized for either approach.

- Judges should not discuss their scoring decisions with each other.

- There is no requirement that students cite philosophers or philosophical theories.

- Judges should not talk to teams about their scoring (or other judges' scoring). Teams will receive score sheets with comments after the event is over. Please refrain from explaining scores, giving overt criticism to a team during or after a round, or expressing disagreement with a fellow judge's scoring. Teams should be focused on their next match, not a comment that a judge made at the end of the last one.

- We do encourage judges to make comments on the scoring sheet. After the competition, all of each team's scoring sheets are sent to them, with judges' names whited out. In the past, judges' comments here have been very helpful to teams.

- The main criterion for judging is to evaluate teams based on the quality of their thinking about a difficult ethical situation and their contribution to a reasoned and civil conversation. That means they should have addressed opposing or different viewpoints and explained why they reached the conclusion they did. Judges should not engage a team in an argument based on a personal viewpoint nor score a team based on whether the judge agrees or disagrees with the team's position.

- On occasion, a team may discover that they want to modify an aspect of its initial position as a result of the second team's comments or a judge's question. Because the Ethics Bowl is about ethical inquiry and changing one's mind can be considered a sign of fluid intelligence, changing, or modifying a position isn't necessarily negative. Judges should consider whether teams' initial positions and/or revised positions are well-founded and thoughtfully considered.

- It is unnecessary for a team to present a united front. Team members can disagree with each other as long as team members are consistent and not contradicting themselves.

- Open dialogue: Teams scoring highly in this category contribute to a civil and collaborative discussion aimed at genuinely thinking through difficult ethical issues. Teams that score poorly in this category resort to rhetorical flourishes, adopt a condescending or critical tone, don't engage with the points made by the other team, or are unduly adversarial.