PLATO
philosophy learning and teaching organization

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Middle School Ethics Bowl
General Information and Rules

General Introduction

Modeled after the Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl, 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 Ethics Bowl is about giving an insightful perspective on each case, one that an intelligent layperson should be able to follow. The program emphasizes students' reasoning abilities, with the focus on the broader ethical implications of the cases and less on rule-oriented approaches.

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 program 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 Middle School Ethics Bowl will be comprised of a two morning rounds and a final round.

Round Structure:

1. Team Conferral Time (2 minutes)
2. Team A Presents (3 minutes)
3. Team B Presents (3 minutes)
4. Team Conferral Time (2 minutes)
5. Open Dialogue (10 minutes with Team A starting)
6. Judges' Conferral Time (2 minutes)
7. Judges' Questions to Both Teams (15 minutes)
8. Team Conferral Time (2 minutes)
9. Final Question for Team A & Team B (1 minute each with Team B starting)
10. Scoring Time (5 minutes)

In the morning rounds, there will be several rooms, each including two teams of students, three judges, and a moderator (as well as any family, friends, and other audience members). The final round will involve the two highest ranking teams from the morning rounds.

The students and their coaches have worked this winter and spring to prepare their responses to six ethics cases, three of which will be the subjects of the morning and final rounds, though team members do not have advance knowledge of which cases will be used at the event. Scratch paper is provided for teams to make notes during the cases, but **outside notes and materials are prohibited except for one 3x5 notecard per team member**.

Team members must be selected and seated at the table before the round begins. A 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 first case to the team members and judges and will read aloud the first case.

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.

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

All teams will receive 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.

After the moderator finishes reading the case aloud, the rounds are structured as follows:

1. **Presentations.** Both teams have up to 2 minutes to confer. After this, any member(s) of Team A may speak for up to 3 minutes. Team A can earn up to 10 points from each judge for its presentation. After this, any member(s) of Team B may speak for up to 3 minutes. Team B can earn up to 10 points from each judge for its presentation.

2. **Open dialogue.** Both teams have up to 2 minutes to confer after the presentations. Then the two teams engage in a self-moderated open dialogue for up to 10 minutes. The idea is for the teams to think together about the issues that emerged in the presentations. The open dialogue begins with Team A speaking. Teams are 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 open dialogue.

3. **Judges' Questions to Both Teams.** Judges have 2 minutes to confer, and then have up to 15 minutes for this portion of the round (total, for questions and answers). Each judge may ask team members a question related to the case. If time remains, judges may ask additional questions. Team members should not confer for more than 30 seconds after a question has been asked. Each team can earn up to 10 points from each judge for their responses to the judges' questions.

4. **Final Question.** Both teams will have 2 minutes to confer, and then each will respond to the following question: ***What point or points did the other team make that really made you think?*** Team B will respond to the question first, for up to 1 minute, and then Team A will respond to the question for up to 1 minute. Each team can earn up to 5 points from each judge for their response to the final question.

At that point, the teams will be excused, and the judges will complete their score sheets and provide written feedback to the teams. Judges do so individually, without conferring with one another.

The moderator will then check the math of each score sheet and make sure the winner is circled on each judge's score sheet. The moderator **will not** announce the round's winner.

The round winner is the team that receives the highest score on the score sheets of the majority of judges. If a team wins on one judge's score sheet and there are ties on the score sheets of the other two judges, that team wins the round. If neither team wins on more of the score sheets, the round is a tie (even if one team scores a greater number of total points). The winner of the round is determined by number of judge wins, not total number of points.

Score sheets will then be collected. After the morning rounds, the teams advancing to the final round will be determined using the following tiebreakers, in this order:

- **Highest number of judge vote**s (a team can win the votes of up to 3 judges in the morning round; if one team has 3 judge votes and the other has 2, the team with 3 votes is ranked higher)
- **Highest point total over the three rounds**

<u>Final Round</u>

The rules and procedures for the final round are identical to the morning 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 a trophy for the "Spirit of the Ethics Bowl," which will be awarded to a team that was not a finalist, based on the total number of respectful dialogue points after the morning round.

Guidelines for Judges

- Judges should not interrupt teams during the presentation, commentary, or response periods 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 (usually 30 seconds or less) and should be designed to help probe the team's understanding of the case.

- Judges should not base scores on whether one person, several people, or all team members speak. Each team decides how to divide speaking time. Some teams choose to have one student "own" a certain case. Other teams prefer that 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.

- Judges should not talk to teams about their scoring (or other judges' scoring). 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.

- We do encourage judges to make comments on the scoring sheet. After the competition, each team's scoring sheets will be given 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. They should consider opposing or different viewpoints and explain why they have reached their conclusions. 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 because of the other team's ideas. 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 if team members are consistent and not contradicting themselves.