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2025-2026 Middle School Ethics Bowl Case Set

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Case 1: The Face of the Future

Selina is a rising sophomore in Blue Ridge High School. Two years ago, fifty percent of the student body and faculty came down with the flu which resulted in a significant and negative impact on students' education. In response, the school invested in a facial recognition system, "Face First," which allows those scanned to unlock classroom doors and purchase lunch. By reducing the number of times students physically touch doors and other points of contact in the school environment, Face First reduced the number of flu cases by eighty percent in the first year it was employed.

However, Selina often has trouble getting Face First to recognize her. Curious, she starts watching as other students scan their faces when entering a classroom, and she notices a pattern: the doors do not open as often for students with darker complexions, such as herself, or for students with braces or glasses. Taken together, these students make up about five percent of the student population.

Selina asks the school's computer science teacher why Face First has difficulty recognizing certain students and not others. Ms. McKinny explains that some AI and computer programs have an "algorithmic bias." This means that the data that was used to train the system was not representative of the whole population. Face First was most likely developed to recognize people who have light complexions and do not wear glasses.

Ms. McKinny raises Selina's concerns about Face First with the school board which, in turn, questions the creators of Face First about these apparent flaws in the system. The company says that they cannot change the system until two full school years are over – which is when the contract between the school district and company will expire – because they do not have the resources to create new testing data. School board members, therefore, must decide what to do with the facial recognition system given that they have already made a significant financial investment in Face First.

The school board president invites Selina to attend the public meeting when the board will discuss the issue. Some members vote to keep Face First through the two-year contract, arguing that it has reduced the spread of the flu, which benefits all students. Other members vote for removing the system immediately, arguing that this will help all students feel more included and comfortable. The meeting ends with many feeling frustrated and without resolution.

Match Questions

1. What should Selina do next since the school board could not reach a resolution?
2. Are there other options the school board could consider and if so, what options?

Study Questions

1. How should the values of health and inclusion be weighed in this decision?
2. What obligations do schools have before introducing new technology to their students?
3. What weight should be given to students' views about using new technology before it is put in place?
4. Is it worth adopting a system that benefits a majority of students at the expense of the minority?