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2025-2026 Middle School Ethics Bowl Case Set

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Case 4: The Final Semester

It is late April. At Hamilton Independent School, graduation is only a few weeks away, and excitement fills the campus. Seniors are preparing for final exams, celebrations, and the transition to college.

But one student, Ethan, has come under serious scrutiny. From September through December of his senior year, Ethan secretly created short videos mimicking popular TikTok trends. Ethan created 15 videos, each one a reenactment of original clips containing inappropriate or offensive content. Each video included a link back to the original, making the connection between the source and Ethan's imitation unmistakable. The inappropriate content consistently fell into three categories: (1) clips that included excessive profanity, in which Ethan lip-synced gestures and context that clearly referenced curse words; (2) reenactments of bullying behaviors that mocked people's physical appearance; and (3) imitations of outdated 1980s movie scenes that relied on harmful stereotypes or insensitive humor. Although Ethan never verbally said a curse word himself in these re-creations, students easily recognized the profanity through the original references.

Only recently have some students come forward, showing teachers and administrators a collection of the concerning videos. These revealed that Ethan's behavior was not a one-time mistake but a repeated pattern over a 4-month period. What made the situation even more surprising was that Ethan's online videos did not mirror his in-person interactions; he had never been cited for an infraction related to the kind of conduct portrayed in the clips.

The situation becomes especially complicated given Ethan's circumstances. Not only has he already been accepted to Princeton University, but his family also has close ties to the Hamilton School's community; his father serves on the board. This situation has left students, parents, and faculty struggling to balance compassion for a teenager's mistakes with the responsibility of upholding the school's values. Ethan himself is horrified at being put under so much scrutiny and swears he will never make another mocking video again. The ultimate decision about what to do next falls to the head of school, Ms. Kumar.

Match Questions

1. What consequences, if any, should Ms. Kumar impose on Ethan, given that it is the final week of school, and Princeton may revoke his acceptance if they learn of this scandal?
2. How should Ms. Kumar respond to Ethan's videos, given that they perpetuate stereotypes and mockery, but do not use explicit slurs or target individual students?

Study Questions

1. How should a community balance fairness, compassion, and accountability when addressing a student's mistakes?
2. If a student demonstrates genuine remorse and growth, should that affect how they are disciplined?
3. How should schools weigh fairness to the student against their duty to protect and support the broader community harmed by the behavior?
4. What limits, if any, should exist on a school's responsibility for addressing student behavior?