



Why Ethics?

In this post-Enron era, the public's trust has also been shaken by the unethical behavior of some public servants nationwide. As Superintendent Carl Cohn has noted, by adopting an Ethics Code and creating an Ethics Office, we join many other public and private organizations in actively promoting a culture that encourages ethical conduct, supports personal responsibility, and builds trust.

As employees of the San Diego Unified School District, we are not only stewards of public resources, but parents entrust to us their most precious family members—their children. That adds a special dimension: we're all role models. It means that how we behave and how we treat each other sends messages to students. A key message is that ethical behavior is not only a personal issue but, equally important, a crucial part of the district-wide culture. Our shared values define—for us and for students—"how we do things around here." And those norms are deeply entwined with the success of our drive toward excellence.

SDUSD's new [Code of Ethics](#), approved unanimously by the Board of Education, embodies our district's values. It defines what we expect of each other and what the public can expect from us. This site aims to heighten our sensitivity to the ethical dimensions of our actions and decisions as employees of SDUSD. The starting place is helping everyone become familiar with the Ethics Code and its usefulness.

Moving through the elements of this site can allow you to:

- gain clarity on each aspect of the [Ethics Code](#)—including relevant laws, regulations, and policies—and understand our responsibilities as employees;
- see scenarios and examples of how the code's elements may play out for differing district role groups;
- know what to do when facing ethical uncertainties or observing ethical misconduct;
- increase confidence about making decisions that address ethical challenges.

Why ethics training?

The Ethics Office will be coordinating face-to-face small group ethics training dialogues. The sessions will clarify each employee's role in compliance: we all need to understand and apply the Ethics Code to our jobs and abide by the relevant laws, regulations, and policies.

But compliance is only a starting point. Training sessions will also be a place for constructive conversation, reflection, and dialogue, focused on helping people navigate gray areas and work through ethical dilemmas. As individuals, each of us is guided by our own ethical, or moral, code of behavior. In our workplace roles, however, particularly as public servants, "right" decisions can be far from intuitive. We often face "moral mazes" involving such issues as potential conflicts of interest, wrongful use of resources, or mismanagement of contracts.

Other situations involve true ethical dilemmas. In school communities, complex situations inevitably arise involving multiple parties and interests and conflicting values. Rather than right versus wrong, we are often dealing with right versus right decisions involving equally justifiable alternatives. Which value or whose interests should prevail?

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"Abiding by laws and policies is crucial, but the goal is not a compliance culture. The goal is a culture of integrity."

Norm Augustine, a former chair of the Lockheed Martin Corporation who works with the Ethics Resource Center, lists four challenges that characterize all ethical issues:

1. An individual facing a decision may not realize that the matter has ethical connotations. This is perhaps the most common way for basically decent, well-meaning individuals to find themselves in serious trouble.
2. Even when one recognizes that an ethical choice is being confronted, the “right” course of action often is not immediately obvious.
3. When the "right" course is clear, taking that action often requires considerable moral courage.
4. When one does do the morally correct thing, the outcome—at least short term—often will not be what one would have preferred.

Our SDUSD ethics training will help raise awareness of ethical dimensions, offer tools and practice to help determine the “right” course, and address moral courage. On this website, we also provide an online training, in the form of a self-assessment of ethics knowledge.

What does an ethical culture look like?

Individuals influence an organization's moral climate even as they are influence by it; our context affects our behavior. At SDUSD, our commitment to “Becoming America’s Best” implies a highly ethical culture—an environment that not only attends to compliance but is fundamentally aspirational. Our aim is to achieve significant positive good—in this case, to improve student performance and prepare students to lead productive, fulfilling lives.

An ethical culture includes the following characteristics:

- **Values employees and their contributions.**
Employees are supported with:
 - Information, knowledge, and skills needed to do the job;
 - Opportunities for growth and development;
 - Recognition for exemplary performance.
- **Fosters a work environment of respect and trust.**
 - People trust that the spoken values are the organization’s real values.
 - Cooperation and teamwork are the norm.
 - Employees freely raise problems and concerns in a climate of candor, not fear.
- **Supports conversation about values and provides help for ethical decision making.**
 - Everyone is familiar with the [Ethics Code](#)
 - Help is provided for navigating gray areas.
 - Tools and practice help people work through ethical dilemmas.
- **Has leaders at every level who model the behaviors they demand of others.**
 - Starting at the top and throughout the system, leaders consciously role model.
 - Managers and supervisors communicate the importance of integrity when making tough decisions. They overtly talk about ethics and values, spread stories about exemplary actions and decisions by members of their teams, and reward ethical behavior.
- **Fosters personal responsibility.**
 - Employees feel a sense of responsibility and accountability for their actions and the actions of others.
- **Supports teamwork and community.**
 - A strong sense of common purpose prevails. In the case of SDUSD, everyone is focused on making a difference for kids.
 - People are highly motivated by the sense of community.
- **Earns essential public trust.**
 - Each individual takes personal responsibility for his/her performance and for the district’s reputation.



- All employees are good stewards of public resources.
- People avoid even the appearance of wrongdoing.

Among its many benefits, an ethical culture:

- **Supports and empowers ethical actions.**
 - People feel trusted to take initiative, confident about their ability to make ethical and sound decisions, and supported with formal and informal sources of help.
- **Helps prevent problems before they occur.**
 - Clear expectations, a common sense of purpose, and a caring environment promote positive behavior norms.
 - Strong purpose and pride in accomplishment help deter fraud and abuse; no one wants problems that drain resources and energy from the central purpose; no one wants a negative news story that tarnishes all.
- **Helps resolve issues when they arise.**
 - Norms of openness, cooperation, and teamwork help issues surface before they become problems.
 - In a climate of openness, people feel safe conveying problems and trust that action will be taken to resolve them.

What does an ethical culture have to do with high performance?

As SDUSD strives toward “Becoming America’s Best,” the ethics program is not a stand alone effort but works in tandem with other efforts, including the [Baldrige initiative](#) (customer-focused, continuous improvement), leadership development initiative, and [Family Friendly Schools](#) (recognizing employee excellence). Ethics is part and parcel of our drive for excellence because it is the essential context for high performance.

Say you are a school principal. Why will an ethical culture—and concerted efforts to promote an ethical culture—help you accomplish the things you need to do?

To have high performing students, you need to orchestrate multiple efforts. You need to create processes and programs. You need to help the entire school staff build a great deal of “know how”—the knowledge and skills required for quality and student success.

But the characteristics of an ethical culture listed above involve other aspects of the organization beyond fundamental abilities. As ethics consultant David Gebler notes, these relate to how well the school adapts to change, how well it encourages its entire community to engage in decision making, and how well it creates a sense of shared purpose around shared values.

“Know how is about fundamental abilities; know why taps into motivation and can lead to success beyond anyone’s expectations.”

That positive sense of engagement and purpose—the “know why”—is a kind of holy grail. It taps into the underlying human dynamics that are critical to people’s motivation and behavior. It inspires and empowers people. It spurs creativity and innovation that can lead to success beyond anyone’s expectations.

This holds true not only at school sites, but throughout every division and department and for the district as a whole. A school district has the advantage of being able to surface and harness the reason why most people came to work in education in the first place: to make a difference for kids. The underlying driver is a moral imperative. Ethics-based conversation and dialogue can tap that motivation and help people keep their eye on the ball as they take on challenges.

As American Association of School Administrators’ Executive Director Paul Houston notes: “If you are only asking *how*—how do I get the test scores up, how do I create accountability in the organization—and you don’t ask *why* we are doing this and what impact does this have on children, and don’t seek deeper connections, you are going to come up with the wrong solutions.”



Listen to a leader from an urban school district that has won the Broad prize, awarded annually to the best urban school system in America. Over time, she reports, trust grew as people came together and talked about common purpose. Driven by “the why,” top leaders pushed power down, and people became galvanized to collaboratively break the rules and craft new versions of “the how.”

"This probably sounds old-fashioned to say, but people just set out to do the right thing," she says. "I don't think anyone knew what we were capable of." What they forged district-wide is "an emotionally created culture that builds caring and respect. That allows for opportunities. It's very hard to quantify, but it's easy to see."

Resources

["Why Is It So Hard to Create an Ethical Culture?"](#) by David Gebler.

["Organizational Lessons from the Columbia Disaster,"](#) by Rushworth Kidder, Institute for Global Ethics, September 2, 2003.

["There's Only Ethics,"](#) by Rushworth Kidder, Institute for Global Ethics, 2001. (pdf)

["The Ethical Choice: Making Tough Choices Between Right and Wrong is the Heart of School Leadership,"](#) by Craig Colgan. American School Boards Journal, May 2004.

National Business Ethics Survey: How Employees View Ethics in Their Organizations, 1994-2005, [Executive Summary](#), Ethics Resource Center.

Purpose: the Starting Point of Great Companies, by Nikos Mourkogiannis. Palgrave MacMillan, 2006. (See ["Purpose and Innovation,"](#) an article adapted from this book.

["An Education in Ethics: Teaching Business Students Life Lessons in Leadership,"](#) by John S. Rosenberg, Harvard Magazine, September-October, 2006.

