

# 2026

# MIDDLE SCHOOL ETHICS BOWL

# CASE SET

**CASE AUTHORS:** Elisha Amadasu, Cora Gibson, Jodi Robert-Oragbon, Joshua Teller, Amelia Ward

**EDITOR:** David Holiday, Jeff Dunn

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## COMPETITION CASE #1: A FRIEND IN THE CLOUD

By Cora Gibson

In the summer of 2026, Bluewood Middle School announced plans for a new and unusual pilot program set to begin in the fall. Partnering with a tech company called MindMate, Bluewood would now offer AI “friends,” chatbots designed to talk with students about everyday life, offer encouragement, and help them practice social skills.

Through an app, students could design their AI companion’s name, appearance, and personality. Each AI friend could text or talk through an app, learn about a student’s interests, and remember past conversations. The company claimed the program would reduce feelings of isolation, especially for students who struggled to make friends, felt anxious about school and social situations, or those who transferred in throughout the year. Students would not have to use the AI friend, but could choose to use them if they wanted, so long as their parents signed a form saying it was okay. Once they were signed up, they could use the AI friend both at school and at home.

At first, many parents found the idea comforting. One parent said, “My daughter won’t come home crying anymore, she’ll finally have someone to talk to.” But others were uneasy. Teachers and counselors worried that students might start relying on their AI companions instead of forming real relationships with classmates. Some parents also raised privacy concerns, since MindMate’s system would collect chat data to “improve emotional understanding.”

“It’s supposed to make kids feel less alone,” one counselor said, “but what happens when their best friend isn’t real?”

There are also deeper concerns about how this could affect personal growth for young minds. Some educators fear the program could make friendship feel effortless, removing the very challenges that help kids mature and develop empathy.

Supporters, however, see MindMate as an innovative, caring way to reach students who are isolated or struggling. They argue that an AI companion could be a bridge, not a barrier.

The district is set to vote on whether to launch the pilot for the upcoming school year. For now, families, teachers, and students are divided, wondering whether MindMate could become a genuine source of support or a substitute for real connection.

**Match Question:** Should Bluewood Middle School launch the MindMate AI-friend pilot program? Why or why not?

**Discussion Questions:**

- What does it mean to be a friend? Can something that isn't human fill that role?
- Could depending on an AI friend make it harder to form real friendships later?
- How should schools balance emotional support through technology with teaching real-world social skills?
- Should schools use AI to address loneliness, or is that a personal and social skill students must learn through real experiences?

## COMPETITION CASE #2: WHERE ARE MY WINGS?

By Joshua Teller

Pasha has spent the last four years working for Monster Energy, a popular energy drink brand, and she finally decided to start her own business.

Using her knowledge of the business and development process of energy drinks, she created her own drink and company. While this new drink has many similar ingredients to Monster Energy, it also uses ingredients that reduce the jitters resulting from high caffeine content and provides flavors that taste more natural than many popular brands.

To design her brand's image, she sought inspiration from health drink and smoothie companies like Naked and Vita Coco. Quickly, the visuals used for the brand and claims of a more natural flavor helped her to build a small but loyal audience of college student athletes looking for healthier alternatives to drinks like Red Bull or Monster Energy. This new audience has allowed her company to gain significant traction, and most customers genuinely enjoy the drink. Furthermore, the company's growth has allowed her to support her friends by employing them at her business.

While her marketing strategies reflect those of many health brands, her drink is not actually healthier than other popular energy drinks. She also makes no specific claims that the drink is a safer or healthier alternative, and she is aware of the bad potential effects of energy drinks. Some of Pasha's friends say her marketing is dishonest, claiming that she should change her branding so her drink doesn't appear to be a healthy alternative.. Her intention was not to send a dishonest message to consumers but rather to promote healthy activities like sports and create a unique visual identity for the brand. She is concerned that changing her marketing tactics will hurt the business as well as her company's employees. Regardless, she is debating whether her friends are right or if she should feel comfortable making no changes.

**Match Question:** Should Pasha change her company's branding to clarify its message?

### Discussion Questions:

- Is Pasha responsible for how people interpret her branding?
- Does the fact that she is using the profits to help her family change her obligation?
- Is there any real harm being done if the customers are satisfied with the drink?
- Does it matter that many of the drink's components are similar to those of the company she worked for previously?

## COMPETITION CASE #3: THE RELUCTANT NURSE

By Jodi Robert-Oragbon

Amee is a high school student at AU High School Group. Her younger brother Josh is undergoing physical therapy for his right leg, which he shattered in a little league baseball accident. As part of his recovery plan, Josh requires regular therapy sessions, special medication and close supervision at home.

Amee's parents work long hours and are rarely home during the day. Thus, they can't watch over him full time as he recovers and they cannot afford to hire someone to help. Amee has stepped in to fill this role. She takes him to his appointments, helps him with his exercises and watches over him at home. Her parents are very grateful and praise her for her maturity and selflessness.

Recently, Amee was accepted into a year-long exchange program in Japan. She is thrilled about this study abroad opportunity, her parents not so much. Instead, they are worried. If she leaves, who will take care of Josh?

Amee argues that while she loves Josh dearly, she should not have to prioritize his needs above hers. Her parents argue that she is being selfish. If Josh relapses in his recovery, he may have to undergo another corrective surgery which would affect the entire family. They insist that she has to wait and reapply for the program in a year's time.

As the disagreement escalates, the family seeks the advice of a counselor. Amee feels pressured to give up an opportunity she worked hard for. And her parents feel hurt, seeing her decision as insensitive to the family's needs.

Should Amee's autonomy outweigh her parents' plea or should Amee conform to their wishes?

**Match Question:** Does Amee have a moral obligation to prioritize Josh's needs?

### Discussion Questions:

- Is Amee's reason for discontinuing her service to Josh justified? Does it matter what her reason is?
- If the stakes were raised and Josh is in a life or death situation does that change your opinion?
- Should parents be allowed to use one child in service to another?

## COMPETITION CASE #4: DIAMONDS ARE A THIEF'S BEST FRIEND

By Amelia Ward

On October 19th, 2025, the Hillman Museum, part of the Prindle Institute, was robbed. Thieves used a ladder mounted on a truck to enter through the second floor of the museum and stole 8 pieces of art work, valuing nearly \$102 million. The entire heist lasted only four minutes. This story went viral as the art work stolen was from the 19th century and are priceless parts of DePauw's history. The thieves have not been caught yet, and none of the jewelry has been recovered.

Last week, PicVerse announced to the public that they plan to make a TV series about this crime. They have already hired big names in Hollywood to play the thieves. The series will tell about the thieves' early lives, their planning of the crime, and finally the robbery itself. The show will not discuss any repercussions that the thieves might face. And because the Hillman is a public museum, it will not receive any compensation for the rights to the story or the recreation of its likeness in the TV show.

When this robbery happened, the event was a big news story and many people followed it closely. It became so popular not only because of the sensationalism of the crime, but the pieces of the Institute's history that were now missing. The announcement of this show garnered much excitement from the public, and it's projected to earn PicVerse a lot of money, leading to many employees getting a raise. Many people were so excited that PicVerse is creating a show about this event that they bought a subscription. The show will also discuss the historical connotations of the art work, promoting education. The Hillman is also seeing record attendance numbers after the announcement of the show.

In the TV show, PicVerse plans to portray the museum staff and guards as lazy workers who weren't paying attention to the heist going on right in front of them. The museum staff is angered by this representation of them and their museum, as they believe it is offensive and inaccurate. They also plan to portray the thieves as brilliant, criminal masterminds who worked on the logistics of this crime for years. Officials worry that this type of representation might inspire confidence in copy-cat thieves, putting other famous pieces of art and history in danger.

**Match Question:** Is it okay to exaggerate details of a crime in fictional media for entertainment purposes?

### Discussion Questions:

- Is it okay to make fictional television shows that are based on crime events?
- How much say should victims have in the creation of these shows?
- Does the seriousness of the crime matter? Would the same standards apply if this was a case about a murder, for example?

## **PRACTICE CASE #1: TAKING INITIATIVE (FROM YOUR PEERS)**

By Joshua Teller

Rafa is an ambitious eighth grader at Jefferson Middle School. He's part of the school's Future Leaders Program, which helps students develop their leadership skills. Every year, the Future Leaders Program works with a few popular summer camps in the area to get internships for students from Jefferson Middle School. But there are only three spots available each summer, and twenty students in the program. Each year, the summer camps prioritize hiring members of this program, but they are not prohibited from hiring students from other schools to fill their positions instead.

Usually, the summer camps wait to choose student interns until after the Future Leaders Program officially sends them a list of applicants. This year, Rafa noticed that students with higher grades and stronger teacher recommendations were more likely to get chosen than he was. Worried that he might not get a spot, Rafa decided to contact one of the summer camps on his own before the application process began. He knew that the summer camps prioritized Future Leaders students and figured that applying before other students might give him an advantage. Rafa's initiative impressed the camp director, and they offered him a position before Jefferson Middle School had even sent over a list of names.

When other students in the Future Leaders Program found out, some were upset. They felt that Rafa didn't follow the spirit of the program and took an opportunity that should have been available to everyone at the same time. Rafa, however, believes he didn't do anything wrong. He argues that anyone else could have reached out early like he did. After all, showing initiative is what future leaders are supposed to do.

**Match Question:** Is it okay for Rafa to have been hired even though he applied outside of the normal timeline? If not, whose fault is it that he was hired?

### **Discussion Questions:**

- Should Rafa have applied outside of the designated timeline?
- Who is responsible to uphold the integrity of the program?
- Is it relevant that internships in the real world often require this type of networking rather than relying on established placement programs?
- Does it matter that Rafa had lower on-paper qualifications than the other students in the program?

## PRACTICE CASE #2: DEEPLY FAKE

By Elisha Amadasu

A deepfake is a video, image, or voice of a person that has been altered or entirely fabricated, typically using Artificial Intelligence (AI), so that they appear to be someone else and is indistinguishable from the real person. They are typically used to spread false information, but can also be used for entertainment purposes.

The European Union is working on a law about AI usage, which will go into effect in August 2026. According to this new law, any media that is created using AI must be clearly labeled so that people know AI was used. An exception to this law, however, is included for works that are judged to be artistic in nature. The policy is controversial because while it aims to protect against misinformation, the classification of content as artistic can be stretched to accommodate extreme or non-fitting cases.

Critics of this new law suggest that it is not strong enough. For example, Universal Music Group (UMG) sued the AI music generation companies Suno and Udio. UMG argued that these companies used copyrighted music from the internet to train their AI models, which can then be used to make deepfakes of real artists' voices. UMG's argument is that AI music infringes upon the rights of artists to make money from their voices. But under the new EU law, such deepfakes might be allowed without any labels since they might count as "artistic works." UMG and Udio did come to an agreement, allowing Udio to use licensed music to train their models. However, even if not commercialized, deepfakes can interfere with public perception of an artist's ideas and music-making as a practice.

Supporters of this law suggest that it can do more good than harm. If AI is labeled, then some of the ambiguity concerning whether an image or video is AI or not is eliminated. This makes work easier to trust. In addition, some argue that they help to propel imagination and creativity. Deepfakes have been used to create fan-fiction content based on imagery of deceased actors, such as from the 2016 *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, where franchise villain Grand Moff Tarkin was portrayed by Peter Cushing, who died in 1991. Without restrictions on labeling art content as AI, the community may be able to more freely and deeply enjoy the work that is being shared.

**Match Question:** Does it matter whether the creator tells the public that AI was used?

### Discussion Questions:

- What rights does a person or company have to develop their own content?
- Is it fair for someone to use someone else's material to make something new?
- Is it permissible to avoid developing technology for the sake of fairness?

## PRACTICE CASE #3: SMILE FOR THE CLASS

By Jodi Robert-Oragbon

Ms. Tee is one of the most popular teachers at Amazing Middle School. Known for her creative lessons and fun-based learning, she has built an interactive classroom culture. Every week, Ms. Tee encourages her students to come up with an 'Activity of the Week'. It's a special project the class votes on and the winning activity is filmed on Friday.

These videos are shared on Amazing Middle School's internal learning platform, a private space used by Amazing's middle school teachers and contracted educators. This platform is only accessible with Amazing School credentials. Substitute teachers watch the videos to learn classroom routines and new teachers use them during training to see examples of engaging, thoughtful instruction. Ms. Tee's videos are particularly popular among teachers, with her colleagues praising her unique approach to teaching.

Most of Ms. Tee's students love the tradition. They enjoy pitching their ideas and competing to see whose activity wins. Being in her class feels special, with many students taking pride in the knowledge that their class is used as a model and standard for other teachers. But not everyone is happy. A few students don't like being filmed. Some are camera shy. Others don't like the idea of strangers seeing their faces, handwriting or personal work, even if it is for a secure school platform. Still, they don't express their discomfort. They don't want to disappoint a teacher they admire, nor do they want to kill the vibe and ruin the fun, lighthearted atmosphere for everyone else.

At the end of class one afternoon, Ms. Tee says, 'Remember everyone, I'll be filming our next activity on Friday! And I want everyone to feel comfortable and excited. If anyone has any concerns feel free to let me know.' The room is quiet for a moment. Then one student confidently says, 'Don't worry Ms. Tee, we're okay!' Laughter follows and the chatter continues. The few uneasy students exchange glances. They do NOT feel okay, but how can they speak up when everyone else is having fun?

**Match Question:** Can children consent to being filmed for school related content?

### Discussion Questions:

- Do the educational benefits of sharing classroom content ever outweigh a student's right to privacy?
- Does the peer pressure students feel a concern if the purpose is 'good' and educational?
- Many say your digital footprint lasts forever. What are the risks of posting children online regardless of intent?
- How should Ms. Tee make sure every voice is heard and all students feel bold to speak up?