

EDUCATOR ETHICS IN WASHINGTON

Report for HB 1239

September 2025





AGENCY OVERVIEW

Who we are and what we do

The Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB)

Created in 2000, PESB ensures that Washington’s educator workforce is composed of highly effective, professional educators who meet the diverse needs of schools and districts. PESB works towards this vision by creating innovative policies that improve and support educator quality, workforce development, and diversity.

The Paraeducator Board

Created in 2017, the Paraeducator Board establishes requirements and policies for paraeducator professional development certificates, and makes policy recommendations that will increase opportunities for paraeducator advancement through education, professional learning, and increased instructional responsibility.

A collaborative approach

PESB and the Paraeducator Board recognize that high standards for all educators are essential to student success and achievement. To support our students, we must support our educators.

THE MODEL CODE OF ETHICS FOR EDUCATORS (MCEE)

The [Model Code of Ethics for Educators](#), abbreviated as MCEE and referred to as the Model Code in this report, was originally developed in 2015 by a team of national leaders in the field of educator ethics. The Model Code serves as a tool for educators to make informed decisions when faced with dilemmas in their personal and professional lives. It also serves as a starting point for discussions and professional learning about the ethical dilemmas faced by educators.

The Model Code of Ethics for Educators was developed by educators for educators to protect the profession. Many other professions have long-established codes of ethics, including law, medicine, and accounting. The Model Code of Ethics for Educators, which was developed by stakeholders across the educator spectrum, is a relatively recent development: the original version of the Model Code of Ethics for Educators was written in 2015 and updated in 2023.

It is important to note that the Model Code of Ethics for Educators is not intended to be implemented as a disciplinary tool where educators can “violate” the code. Rather, the Model Code is aspirational in nature and was developed to provide educators with guidance and as a tool for decision-making. Educators are the ultimate decision-makers, and the Model Code serves as a set of professional norms that they can rely on to help make decisions.

The Model Code helps protect educators by providing them with a tool to help evaluate the different types of risk when making decisions. Educators use the Model Code to weigh the pros and cons of the different options they may have, allowing them to better understand the various levels of risk of the decisions they may make. Oftentimes, these decisions are made because written policy and laws cannot cover every single type of scenario that educators may encounter.

Ethics vs. conduct

The Model Code of Ethics for Educators is different from a code of conduct. A code of conduct is designed to show what educators may and may not do, and is often comprised of binary choices. The Model Code is designed as a tool to help guide educators when they are faced with choices that are more “gray.” Without a code of ethics, individuals typically rely on their personal values when making decisions. These are based on values they were taught growing up, including the cultures they are embedded in.

The Model Code of Ethics for Educators helps educators move away from using their personal values toward values that the profession believes in. By creating, learning about, and using a set of shared values and norms, a code of ethics helps protect the reputation of the profession, mitigate potential risk, and protect the individual educator.

Researching adoption of the model code

Consulting leaders in the field

To understand current practices and learn from what other states have done, PESB staff conducted interviews with leaders who helped develop the Model Code and/or oversaw the adoption and implementation of the Model Code in their respective states. Interviews included:

- **Dr. Troy Hutchings, a Senior Policy Advisor for the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC).** Dr. Hutchings helped facilitate conversations that resulted in the Model Code of Ethics for Educators and is considered a leading subject matter expert in the field. The conversation with Dr. Hutchings provided a broad overview of educator ethics in general as well as best practices and stories about successes and challenges in implementation across the country.
- **Dr. Lynn Hammonds, Operations Director for NASDTEC.** Dr. Hammonds was formerly the Executive Director of the Hawaii Teacher Standards Board, where she helped to lead the implementation of the Model Code for educators in the state of Hawaii. Additionally, her dissertation provided a research base for how the Model Code was implemented in various states. Conversations with Dr. Hammonds informed the report with details about how Hawaii thoughtfully implemented the Model Code.
- **State education leaders from Georgia, North Dakota, Oregon, and Pennsylvania** helped PESB staff understand how the Model Code was implemented in those states.

The Paraeducator Board and the Professional Educator Standards Board received multiple presentations on the progress of the research and report writing across several months.

Learning from national models: implementation vs adoption

Note that this report provides a summary of best practices for the *implementation* of the Model Code. Implementation of the Model Code of Ethics for Educators is different from the adoption or endorsement of the Model Code. Implementation, as described in this report, is a measure of how successfully educators took up the Model Code in their respective states.



A key learning from the research was that the mere adoption or endorsement of the Model Code of Ethics for Educators did not necessarily lead to strong implementation. Rather, simply adopting or endorsing the Model Code often led to a “check the box” type of policy. This policy allowed states to declare that they had adopted the Model Code of Ethics for Educators, but in reality, educators often just scrolled through and acknowledged that they had read it without discussion of actual usage, as it was intended to be used in the field.

Model Code of Ethics for Educators

The Model Code of Ethics for Educators is a national model that has been well-vetted and implemented by multiple states. With strong implementation, professional learning in Washington State can be developed around a shared set of standards, with a common language. Additionally, implementing the national Model Code saves time and resources as the national model continues to be updated.

National codes of ethics already exist for other professions that are adjacent to or overlap with the educators working in our P-12 schools today. For example, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Implementing the national model will help reduce confusion with other codes of ethics that already exist for educators. For example, the National Education Association (NEA) teachers’ union has its own national Code of Ethics for Educators, but that code is several years old now. Additionally, much of the content from the NEA’s Code of Ethics for Educators overlaps with the more widely adopted and implemented Model Code of Ethics for Educators.

Implementing the Model Code of Ethics for Educators also puts a spotlight on educator ethics in our state. Although ethics are embedded in various other standards that have already been adopted or implemented by our state (for example, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards [NBPTS] or the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium [inTASC] standards), implementing the Model Code of Ethics for Educators highlights that this is a priority for professional learning and pre-service learning for educators. It also provides standards for roles that may not be covered by other professional learning standards, such as paraeducators.

Adaptation of the Model Code for Washington state

The Model Code of Ethics for Educators sufficiently addresses the multiple professional educator roles within each school, the various age ranges of schools, and the varied contexts (for example, geographic, delivery models, or racial/ethnic demographics) within schools in Washington State. Additionally, the Model Code of Ethics for Educators includes national trainings and guidelines that have already been developed and can provide a starting point for the professional learning providers in the state to adapt the learning for the diverse contexts in our state.

Challenges anticipated

Ethics vs. conduct confusion

Although the Model Code is not intended to be used in discipline or evaluation, there continues to be confusion in the field about whether or not a Model Code may be “weaponized” against educators. The fear that language from the Model Code could be included as part of collective bargaining agreements, for example, was mentioned in initial feedback and raised concerns from members of the Paraeducator and PESB boards. This fear was also mentioned in interviews with many other states as they sought to implement the Model Code.

Budget

Strong implementation of the Model Code of Ethics for Educators would require adequate resources to carry out the recommendations listed in this report. Examples of funding could include grant programs to support professional learning providers, labor associations, and educator preparation programs in developing training programs around the Model Code. It could also include resources for data monitoring and implementation of the Model Code.

If ethics were made a requirement for educators without adequate resources, it would place a financial strain on professional learning providers, educator preparation programs, and others who may be tasked with implementing this initiative.

Unfortunately, at the time of publication of this report, Washington State is facing a budget shortfall. Due to the financial constraints, other priorities may take precedence over this initiative.

Balancing ethics with other requirements

Washington State already has multiple standards and requirements for educators, starting from pre-service requirements for educator preparation programs and spanning through professional learning and certification renewal requirements for experienced educators. Examples of current requirements for certificate renewal include professional learning in equity, educational leadership, government-to-government relations, STEM integration, and suicide prevention training. Although learning about ethics is important, it is critical to integrate this learning alongside the other requirements that already exist and balance how this learning fits into the larger system.

Report recommendations

A best practice for strong implementation is when educators are leading the initiative to promote and implement the Model Code. This process is lengthier than simply mandating ethics training across the educator career spectrum but it makes it more likely that educators will actually use the Model Code. In states where educators took up the Model Code themselves, this work was typically led by the labor unions representing teachers.

Recommendation one: Refrain from ethics training requirements in Washington state, if implemented

When considering ethics training as a certification or renewal requirement, there are multiple pros and cons. Although other professions, such as law, medicine, and accounting, require ethics as part of initial training, these professions have had established codes of ethics for many years.

When looking at other states' approaches to an educator code of ethics and whether or not they have mandated ethics training, it seems that the most successful states have been the ones that have taken a two-pronged approach. These states implemented the Model Code and required training for the educators, but they worked closely with labor unions and educators themselves to implement the training. States that developed top-down approaches reported that it often felt like "checking the box" and not actual implementation.

One other consideration in establishing ethics as a requirement is that it needs to be balanced with many other mandated requirements in our state. There are already multiple requirements for pre-service educators and

certification renewal. It may be worth looking at other standards and how they have been implemented as parallel models. For example, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Cultural Competency, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (CCDEI) standards have been integrated into professional learning providers over the past several years. The implementation of these standards may provide a road map for ethics training.

Based on observations of successful implementation in other states and taking into consideration Washington's current educational landscape, it is recommended that a strict mandate for learning about ethics be held off until implementation has a chance to be more sustainable. Once there is a strong grassroots, educator-led momentum around taking up ethics for educators, requirements can be established.

Recommendation two: Monitor the impact of implementation

As this initiative builds a culture of educator ethics across Washington state, it is important to monitor the impact of the implementation to best understand how to allocate resources and guide further implementation. PESB is well-positioned to collect data around implementation. Some examples of possible measurements could be tracking professional learning attendance related to the Model Code, gathering feedback, monitoring discussions around the topic of educator ethics, and even monitoring the impacts around educator certificate sanctions. Additionally, data could be broken down to see the effectiveness and reach of professional learning across various regional geographies, educator roles, and modalities of professional learning (for example, online vs. in-person vs. hybrid). This would allow for adjustments as the initiative develops.

Timelines would need to be established with periodic check-ins and data collection over the next several years to see how effective the implementation is. Of course, there are also budget considerations. At the time of the publication of this report, the state is in a budget shortfall, and resources are slim. However, for school districts, understanding that successful implementation of educator ethics supports their risk management and prevents potential litigious action is an opportunity for the field to embrace this movement under the idea that, ultimately, this is a preventative movement that can save money for school districts and the state in the long run.

Recommendation three: Washington state should implement the Model Code of Ethics for Educators with adequate resources

Implementation refers to the development of a culture of ethics that is taken up by educators in a way that impacts their decision-making, professional learning, and ultimately, their interactions with students, colleagues, and the community. This means that educators are engaging in discussions and learning about ethics, applying their learning in various contexts, and the educators themselves are advocating for the growth and the necessity of ethics for their profession. This recommendation is based on research that shows that effective implementation is more meaningful for the profession than adoption alone. This is the foundational recommendation for all of the actions and recommendations afterward.

As mentioned earlier, implementation is different from simply adopting or endorsing the Model Code. It is also different from mandating that the Model Code is “learned” by all educators through a standardized training module or document that is simply read and acknowledged. Adoption or endorsement of the Model Code is still an option, but by itself, adoption is not sufficient for effective implementation.

Implementation also requires adequate resources in order to be successful. As mentioned earlier in this report, examples of ways to implement the Model Code could include grant programs or pilot programs. Without adequate resources, there is a risk of the initiative becoming simply a “check the box” effort, where educators are technically meeting the requirements, but there is not a strong culture of ethics that is built out in the state.

Recommendation four: Support professional learning providers, with labor associations taking the lead

Successful implementation of the Model Code of Ethics for Educators will require supporting professional learning providers.

Washington has a robust, established network of professional learning providers. In addition to school districts, Educational Service Districts (ESDs), the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Washington Education Association (WEA), the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP), and our educator preparation programs, there are hundreds of nonprofit professional learning providers. This

established network has years of experience working with educators across various contexts. By supporting our professional learning providers to develop training focused on the Model Code of Ethics for Educators, the providers themselves can adapt training for specific communities. For example, educator training in an urban setting may look different than in a rural setting; similarly, educator learning in a primary school setting may look different from a secondary school. Finally, training across the different educator roles may vary. Ethics may look different viewed through the lens of a paraeducator, a teacher, or an administrator.

Ideally, labor associations should take the lead on training their members on the Model Code of Ethics for Educators. Research from other states shows that the most successful implementation occurred when the members themselves took on this learning.

Labor unions have a shared interest in protecting and elevating the professional roles they represent. They are well-versed in advocating for their members and they have deep background knowledge about the ethical dilemmas that educators face. Developing professional learning and building a culture around ethics will be best facilitated with these organizations in leadership roles.

One way to enact this recommendation could be funding a pilot program led by the state teachers' union, state principal association, state paraeducator union, and/or several local unions. The pilot could include educators from across multiple contexts, including large and small school districts, urban, suburban, and rural districts, and elementary and secondary educators. This pilot could then be expanded to continue implementation and professional learning across the state, with the educators in the pilot taking the lead on the training.

Recommendation five: Support educator preparation programs in implementation

Finally, our educator preparation programs (EPP) need support in implementing ethics as part of the pre-service learning curriculum. Although the InTASC standards already highlight ethics, it is such a small bullet point among multiple standards that it is unlikely the ethics training is heavily touched upon. In several other states, providing training around the Model Code to faculty and teaching staff at educator preparation programs has helped establish implementation across the educator spectrum.

Educator preparation is an essential part of the career continuum, and individuals seeking to become future teachers and principals would be well served to understand how to utilize a code of ethics as they enter their respective roles. For those individuals where teaching may be their first professional role after college, understanding the multiple decisions teachers make throughout their day and how to navigate those decisions is critical for building a career. For individuals who are transitioning into the role as career-changers, learning



about the Model Code can help them understand how ethics for educators may differ from their previous roles. And for individuals looking to move into leadership and administration who may have prior experience teaching and working with students, it will be important to understand the different types of dilemmas faced by school leaders compared to their prior experience.

Stakeholder feedback

An initial draft report was completed and sent to multiple stakeholder groups for review in August 2025. Stakeholders invited to review the report included groups representing paraeducators, teachers, principals, district administrators, educator preparation programs, and the state parent-teacher association, as well as state education leaders who may be involved in implementing the Model Code.

The feedback revealed several themes, some of which reflected many of the challenges mentioned earlier in this report.

There were several mentions of a concern about ethics becoming another requirement in addition to the multiple requirements educators are already tasked with meeting. However, in general, stakeholder groups seemed open to implementation of educator ethics into the field as long as it was balanced with other requirements and was accompanied by adequate resources. Multiple stakeholders agreed that strong financial support would be a critical component for successful implementation.

Here are some selected quotes from stakeholder feedback:

- [A]dditional training on ethics would be helpful to grow the perception of the educator profession as being one that is highly professional
- I don't know where we are going to squeeze this in
- YES, YES YES to this recommendation: "Once there is a strong grassroots, educator-led momentum around taking up ethics for educators, requirements can be established."
- This feels like another mandate/expectation on K-12 schools that does not have a rationale for the why.
- The State of Washington has many barriers for teachers to renew their teaching certificate. I view this as another hoop for educators to jump through and the certification office to monitor.
- We think this seems very reasonable for our state.

The Professional Educator Standards Board

Old Capitol Building
600 Washington Street SE
Olympia, WA 98504-7236
PESB@k12.wa.us
Paraboard@k12.wa.us
(360) 725-6275

Washington State

**PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR
STANDARDS BOARD**

