



Introduction to the Ethics Bowl

What is an Ethics Bowl?

An Ethics Bowl is both a collaborative and competitive event, where teams of students analyze and discuss ethical dilemmas. They imagine, criticize, and compare bold strategies, and may even amend their original positions when faced with convincing arguments. Students have opportunities to pose and respond to probing questions, which results in a deepening awareness of the stakes and principles that animate the discussion.

Teams from public schools are eligible to participate, and each school team comprises five students from Grades 9 to 12. In advance of the Ethics Bowl, schools receive cases that focus on current ethical issues—social, political, economic, scientific, cultural, or beyond. Students research and develop the cases, and arrive at the Ethics Bowl prepared to present their ideas and to listen to other perspectives. All teams participate in a round-robin style competition. In each round, two teams discuss two cases, and winning teams proceed to the semi-final and final competitions.

Students are evaluated on the following skills:

- communication
- use of relevant information
- critical thinking
- original thinking
- intellectual improvisation
- collaboration

What is the difference between an Ethics Bowl and a debate?

An Ethics Bowl looks the same as a debate from a distance: teams of serious, prepared students take turns talking and trying to outperform another team. Ethics Bowls and debates both have distinctive structures and processes, including a formal judging process. Each contest brings together two teams of students to engage in discourse around a selected topic or issue. The key difference is that a debate focuses on skilled opposition, while the Ethics Bowl encourages dialogue and collaboration.

In a debate, students demonstrate their argumentative skills. In an Ethics Bowl, they use argumentative skills to get at the heart of the matter, as they actually see it. Participants are judged on their demonstration of relevant knowledge, articulacy, respectful collaboration, originality, intellectual improvisation, and critical thinking.

Where a debate asks students to use skills of argumentation to rigorously defend an assigned position, the Ethics Bowl asks them to engage in dialogue to learn from one another about what they actually think is worth defending. They are not just trying to do it well in the Ethics Bowl. They are trying to get it right, even if that means correcting and amending their positions as the conversation develops.

In debate, teams take positions either in support of, or in opposition to a given resolution, and their goal is to “win the argument.” There are no grey areas in a debate, and the team that presents the strongest arguments is judged to have “won.” In contrast, the starting point for an Ethics Bowl is not a resolution, but an ethically rich, open-ended issue or topic with multiple perspectives and possibilities.

Rather than take a simple “for or against” stance, each Ethics Bowl team is expected to acknowledge conflicting perspectives on the issue. Teams propose a position on how to deal with the ethical conflict considered, rather than merely taking a preferred side. During an Ethics Bowl, teams have opportunities to support and challenge each other’s thinking and perceptions. They are expected to pose questions that deepen the conversation and expand one another’s awareness of the ethical stakes and principles that animate the discussion. An overarching goal of an Ethics Bowl is to provide an arena for students to share ideas and teach each other—bringing their own experiences and insights to bear on the conversation. When this works, students can show off how well they can learn from the interaction, and skillfully integrate this learning into their final positions.

Key Words to Describe an Ethics Bowl

An Ethics Bowl presents the opportunity for students to develop competencies in the following areas:

- mutual respect
- open-mindedness
- meaningful dialogue
- critical conversation
- active listening
- using evidence
- challenging assumptions
- thinking, rethinking
- courage
- flexibility, adaptability
- risk assessment
- synthesizing new information
- intellectual improvisation
- political, cultural awareness
- original thinking

About Us

Land Acknowledgement

The Canadian High School Ethics Bowl was founded and is organized on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, Dene, and Métis peoples. The primary events, including the national competition, are located on Treaty 1 Territory as well as the birthplace and homeland of the Métis Nation. The work of the Canadian High School Ethics Bowl extends across the homeland of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, and is present on the territory of all the Numbered Treaties, as well as unceded land throughout what we now call Canada. We recognize the colonization endured by Indigenous Peoples, and we are committed to working in partnership with Indigenous communities toward justice, equity, and reconciliation.

Organizers of the Canadian High School Ethics Bowl

A collective of organizations and individuals who believe in the power of students working in collaboration on the most ethical challenges our society is facing organizes the Canadian High School Ethics Bowl (CHSEB). We believe strongly in this initiative's ability to empower students and shape their identity as community members who are able and inspired to contribute to a society where everyone can thrive. Further information is available at www.ethicsbowl.ca.

After Manitoba schools participated over two years in the American High School Ethics Bowl at the University of North Carolina Parr Center for Ethics, organizations and individuals decided to organize the Canadian High School Ethics Bowl. Led by the Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties as the secretariat, the CHSEB team has endeavoured to create a uniquely Canadian event open to high school students across the country.

Our organizational partners are

- Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties (secretariat)
- Manitoba Education and Training
- University of Manitoba Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics
- Université de Saint-Boniface
- under the patronage of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO

Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties

Formed in 1978, the Manitoba Association for Rights and Liberties is a non-profit, non-governmental, human rights and civil liberties organization. MARL envisions a world where people's diversity is valued, liberties are respected, and rights are lived. MARL takes action for social justice, human rights, and civil liberties through education and advocacy. MARL educates and creates awareness for rights and liberties, building engaged communities and empowering citizens to improve our society.

Manitoba Education and Training

The Kindergarten to Grade 12 division of the provincial government Department of Education and Training provides students in Manitoba with relevant, engaging, and high quality educational opportunities that prepare them for lifelong learning and citizenship in a democratic, socially just, and sustainable society. The priority areas for Kindergarten to Grade 12 are as follows:

- high levels of achievement
- equity and inclusion
- citizenship, sustainability, and well-being
- public engagement

University of Manitoba Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics

The Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics is a research centre at the University of Manitoba. The Centre promotes research and discussion on a wide range of ethical, social, political, and legal issues. The Centre frequently sponsors public talks and forums on topics of interest to academics, students, and the public. The Centre does not promote any particular perspective or set of views. Instead, it tries to encourage free and open debate.

Université de Saint-Boniface

Established in 1818, Université de Saint-Boniface is the first educational institution in Western Canada. Université de Saint-Boniface now attracts local, national, and international students due to the quality of its technical and professional French programs. The university is also the centre for the celebration and expansion of the French language through their innovative community relationships.

Canadian Commission for UNESCO

The Canadian Commission for UNESCO serves as a bridge between Canadians and the vital work of UNESCO—the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. By promoting UNESCO values, priorities, and programs in Canada, and by bringing the voices of Canadian experts to the international stage, the Commission contributes to a peaceful, equitable, and sustainable future that leaves no one behind.

Testimonials and Endorsements

Student Feedback

The Ethics Bowl has had a great impact on participating students, and on their school communities:

“Discussing ethics is discussing the future of the world.”

– H.

“It really makes you see things from a different perspective.”

– K.

“The cure to ignorance is discussion.”

– T.

“You will walk away a different person.”

– N.

“I’ve learned how to approach social issues through education rather than anger.”

– S.

“Now I’m going to look at all the different sides of a subject and what people it could affect.”

– B.

“I definitely want to share my lessons I’ve learned with people around the world.”

– V.

“It helped me be more open-minded and a more well-rounded citizen.”

– K.

Teacher Feedback

Participating teachers have observed that student discussions are deeper and more meaningful as a result of participation in an Ethics Bowl. Many report that other teachers in their schools have been inspired to integrate critical thinking and collaboration skills into their classes, creating a school-wide approach to discussing challenging ethical issues.


“The Ethics Bowl is an excellent opportunity for students to think critically about the issues facing society in a collaborative setting. It brings together so many different skills, such as teamwork, literacy, analysis, and communication, that are essential for success in the twenty-first century.”

– Kara

“The Ethics Bowl has become part of our school culture. . . . We have more and more students involved each year. . . . Other teachers in our school use ethics as a teaching tool in their classrooms now.”


– Caroline

Endorsements



“The Canadian Philosophical Association (ACP-CPA) heartily endorses the creation of a National High School Ethics Bowl. As advocates for reasoned discourse and careful thinking, we see encouraging high school students to engage with questions of ethical significance in a collaborative, constructive manner as an important and beneficial part of creating a public attuned to the philosophical dimensions of life. In working to create such a public, we believe that the National High School Ethics Bowl will simultaneously promote many of the virtues central to democratic citizenship.”

June 27, 2017, Samantha Brennan, President, Canadian Philosophical Association




“Through collaborative analysis, students participating in an Ethics Bowl gain a better understanding of ethical questions they encounter. The ethical cases they are asked to analyze are exemplars of issues relevant to their daily classroom experiences and mirror national and international ethical issues.

“Manitoba supports the idea of a Canadian High School Ethics Bowl to take students beyond the polarization of issues to a deeper and broader understanding of the dimensions of current topics that make the headlines each day. It will build citizens who are knowledgeable and able to communicate a rich understanding of their role as citizens to maintain a democratic and socially just society.


“Students in schools from across Canada can improve their global competencies of critical thinking, communication, creativity, collaboration, and citizenship by participating in the Canadian High School Ethics Bowl.”

January 17, 2018, Darryl Gervais, Director, Instruction, Curriculum and Assessment Branch, Manitoba Education and Training



“The Manitoba Provincial Health Ethics Network and its council are pleased to endorse the High School Ethics Bowl. The aims of collaborating, research, critical thinking, active listening, and public speaking are increasingly important and this type of event has the potential to support important educational objectives for schools at all levels. This type of approach to problem solving you describe will serve students well throughout their lives in whatever role or field they end up working.”


February 6, 2017, Jennifer Dunsford, RN, MN; Co-Chair, Manitoba Provincial Health Ethics Network



“While the same rigour of empirical inquiry and investigation is expected, as exists in traditional public debate, there is one important distinction to the overall strategy taken by students during the Ethics Bowl: through their collaborative inquiry, students are meaningfully engaged in an intrinsic and fundamentally important understanding of how both the individual and collective dimensions of situated context and lived experience do influence and shape public dialogue with their peers on the issues and challenges raised. This moves beyond mere ‘facts’ to a more critical appreciation and iteration of each dilemma.

“From my vantage point, our students’ abilities to circumnavigate this valuable confluence of the many ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ realities that inform each ethical question provides them with a foundational basis for renewed and strengthened public dialogue. It is my firm belief that our students’ abilities to achieve mutual understanding of, and co-defined solutions or outcomes to, these important questions, is a valuable method for ensuring that the public school system’s twin objectives of preparing students to assume their rightful roles as citizens and as social contributors will be fully achieved by the time they graduate.”


July 20, 2017, Josh Watt, Executive Director, Manitoba School Boards Association



“On behalf of the more than 15 000 members of the Manitoba Teachers’ Society, we are very pleased to lend our support to both the Manitoba High School Ethics Bowl and the creation of a National High School Ethics Bowl. We see these events as amazing opportunities to support the growth and development of our youth in areas of collaboration, critical thinking, and active listening.

“It is as a result of opportunities like this that students develop the confidence and skills that ensure future leaders who are open minded, respectful, and receptive to new ideas.”

April 6, 2017, Norm Gould, President, Manitoba Teachers’ Society




“By encouraging dialogue among high school students, we believe the Canadian High School Ethics Bowl will enable them to develop an open-minded spirit to build on what they have in common and transform their differences into a source of value.

“The Bowl constitutes education for global citizenship and promotes understanding of the challenges facing humankind. It fosters a spirit of coexistence, informed by an awareness that actions that profit one group of people might have a negative impact or be perceived as a threat by others.


“Gaining confidence in their capabilities through participation in the Bowl the students will develop the skills to actively participate, as engaged citizens, in solving the problems facing society and the world.”

Tony Meers, General Director, Soka Gakkai International Association of Canada



“The Ethics Bowl is unique in its commitment to promoting free and open debate on topics of vital importance. MARL does not promote any particular point of view, but rather encourages students to reflect on their own views, and to learn how to discuss those views with others. Students are exposed to a method of public discussion that breaks free from the rancor and partisanship that characterizes much of our current political discourse, and in doing so they are given an alternative model of engaged citizenship. I fully anticipate that many of them will carry those schools forward into their lives and careers.”

April 16, 2018, Neil McArthur, Director, Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics, University of Manitoba



“The Manitoba High School Ethics Bowl teaches and embodies qualities essential to business, government, and community success. Respectful, evidence-driven collaboration isn’t just the best path for advancing shared prosperity in our communities, it’s the only path.

“The skills the Ethics Bowl invites attendees to develop are what turn young people into catalytic leaders. The Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce couldn’t be more enthusiastic about this initiative and its potential to drive transformation in our city.”

April 26, 2017, Loren Remillard, President CEO, Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce