



Forum Guide to Data Ethics

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This document presents a code of ethics for data management in education settings. Its canons, examples, descriptions, and recommendations reflect situations that arise in real schools, school districts, and state education agencies. The guidance is intended to supplement existing data ethics policies in education organizations or serve as a template when organizations create new policies.

While laws may set the legal parameters that govern data use, ethics establish the fundamental principles of “right and wrong” that are critical to the appropriate management and use of education data. The ethics of collecting, maintaining, reporting, and using data are far too complicated to manage effectively unless education leaders support data ethics as an important organizational priority. School leaders can set expectations that make ethical behavior an organizational norm or, alternatively, they can intentionally or unintentionally accept behavior that routinely or even systematically falls short of accepted ethical standards. Good communications and training help data handlers to both understand and exhibit reasonable standards of ethical behavior. As such, this document recommends that education organizations train staff about their ethical responsibilities; clearly state expectations for ethical behavior; create explicit policies and procedures pertaining to data ethics; determine the consequences of unethical behavior; and enforce these rules uniformly so that everyone is accountable.

While the Code encompasses a wide range of ethical considerations and scenarios, it is not presumed to be an exhaustive representation of ethical issues facing educators.

The Forum Code of Data Ethics:

- I. Demonstrate honesty, integrity, and professionalism at all times
- II. Appreciate that, while data may represent attributes of real people, they do not describe the whole person
- III. Be aware of applicable statutes, regulations, practices, and ethical standards governing data collection and reporting
- IV. Report information accurately and without bias
- V. Be accountable and hold others accountable for ethical use of data
- VI. Promote data quality by adhering to best practices and operating standards
- VII. Provide all relevant data, definitions, and documentation to promote comprehensive understanding and accurate analysis when releasing information
- VIII. Treat data systems as a valuable organizational asset
- IX. Safeguard sensitive data to guarantee privacy and confidentiality

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