ETHICS

Yes, No, Maybe So

Ethics can be discussed in the framework of “little e” and “Big E.” “Little e,” or “little ethics,” refers to the guidelines expressed in written laws, policies, rules or regulations that help us when we face the dilemmas and decisions of daily life. From travel reimbursement to ex parte communication, every state has provisions governing conduct, though some codes, like California’s and Illinois’, are more comprehensive than others.

But no code can cover every ethical dilemma a legislator might face. Rules and regulations rarely address, for example, what may be considered proper—or improper—behavior toward a staffer, or where a legislator should draw the line with a lobbyist.

In these situations, legislators must be guided by their personal values and principles—the “Big E,” or “Big Ethics.” These values—many know them as a moral compass—guide our behavior when we face the ethical quandaries not covered by the little e. The Big E pilots us throughout life, in and out of politics.

Once you decide on the morals and values that will guide you—your Big E—it will be easier to navigate the gray areas of decision-making in today’s complex world. Bad decisions can lead to severe personal consequences—from well-known resignations, like Nixon’s after Watergate, to the less-publicized departures of several legislators following sex-related scandals last summer. And in all cases, public trust suffers.

Conversely, good decisions—those consistent with your values—will elicit trust and admiration from others and, perhaps, bolster the public’s faith in their government along the way.

—Mark Quiner

Mark Quiner is director of the Center for Ethics in Government at NCSL.

Re: “A Degree of Savings”
By Jessica Hathaway, March 2016

Special thanks to Jessica Hathaway and the editorial staff for the excellent article on children’s savings accounts (CSAs), “A Degree of Savings,” in the March issue. The article is historically correct, comprehensive and informative. The concept of CSAs started with the Asset Development and Education movement, as noted by the author, who also described the public-private partnerships involved in the variety of approaches states, counties and municipalities have adopted. The promise of CSAs combined with financial literacy education is creating more opportunities for students to be successful. The economic benefits might also lead to a reduction in the nation’s escalating child-poverty rate. “A Degree of Savings,” as written, captures it all.

—New Hampshire Representative Mary Stuart Gile

Re: “Tackling Tuition”
By Roger Fillion, March 2016

Very thorough. Well done! Thanks for shining light on this issue.

—Oregon Senator Mark Hass

Got Comments? Send them to magazine@ncsl.org