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Parents and children have been considering appropriate gifts for teachers since the first schools were established. Selecting a tidbit, a cookie, a handkerchief or a flower to please a special teacher gives a child the opportunity to display affection or gratitude or both. As time passed in the history of education, however, the tidbit became a real gift and the occasional gift became standard behavior. A valuable gift under any circumstances puts a teacher in an ethical dilemma; accept it and feel obligated to treat the child differently or refuse to accept it and risk offending the child and the parent.

Conflict of Interest

Receiving gifts from students and their families may cause a conflict of interest if the gift is of major value. A teacher who receives and accepts a valuable gift is possibly sending the tacit message to either the child or the parents that there will be special consideration given to the student. A token gift of something homemade or of little monetary value does not carry the same weight or implication.

Gift limits

Massachusetts has established a law that prohibits a teacher from accepting a gift of more than \$50, and has added other prohibitions. The limit also applies to group gifts, and taking up a collection for a teacher

is against the law if the gift will be more than \$50. Many school districts in other states are adopting procedures and codes of ethics for teachers, and teachers' organizations have begun writing specific ethical guidelines for their members.

Setting limits

One state teachers' organization, the Texas Classroom Teachers' Association, has established that a teacher should accept "no gifts that impair professional judgment or obtain special advantage." While the teachers who wrote the document obviously meant to avoid setting a dollar limit on gifts, the term 'impairment of judgment' is entirely subjective. One teacher may be dazzled by a dozen roses while another would be insulted. In addition, the motivation of obtaining a special advantage could hardly be discerned at the time the gift is given unless the student says, "I'll give you this if you give me an A." Another incentive for absolute limits set by teachers is that government entities are less likely to get involved if the teachers solve the problem.

Important implications

While the ethics of giving and receiving gifts may seem minor to some people, others consider the interaction of major importance with implications reaching far beyond mere tokens. The trading of valuable objects, money or activities for a teacher's favor is only one step away from bribery, where gifts or money are given in exchange for special treatment. More than one teacher has been faced with irate parents who bought a gift of jewelry or perfume and expected little Tim to get an

elevated grade. In many cases, teachers have protected themselves by politely refusing to accept gifts that are obviously too valuable.

What children learn

For the whole education establishment, the issue of setting limits on teacher gifts should center on what children and young people learn from the act of giving the teacher an expensive gift. The innocent act of gift-giving can become associated with expecting higher

grades, more lenient rules, extra time or some other favor in return: an appalling lesson. How much better it would be if children were involved in choosing or making or writing a gift that actually reflects their feelings toward their teachers. An apple, polished to perfection, and accompanied with an original poem is a superb gift, and teachers cherish the thank you letters and notes from both parents and students.