Patriotism by Coercion: When School Authority Crosses Ethical Lines

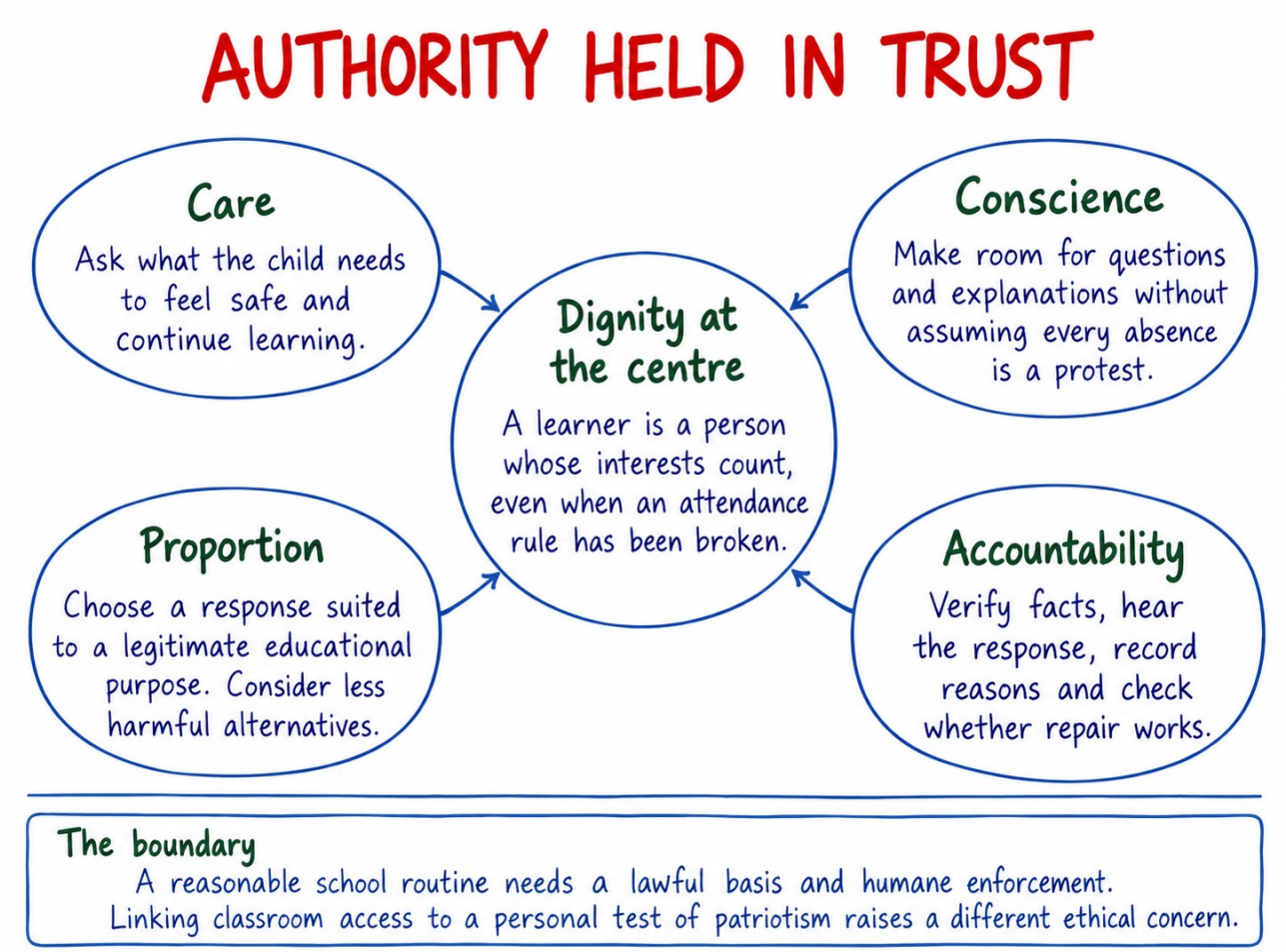
Source report: 17 August 2026

Gist of the Issue

NDTV reported on 17 August 2026 that Raju Davis, chairman of a private school in Mala, Thrissur, expressed regret after remarks about students absent from its Independence Day programme. According to the report, a message in a parents' WhatsApp group labelled absentees "anti-national", told them to "go to Pakistan", and threatened to prevent them attending class. The report said some absences involved personal or urgent reasons. It records reported remarks and a response; it does not establish that the threatened exclusion occurred or that an authority determined liability. [1]

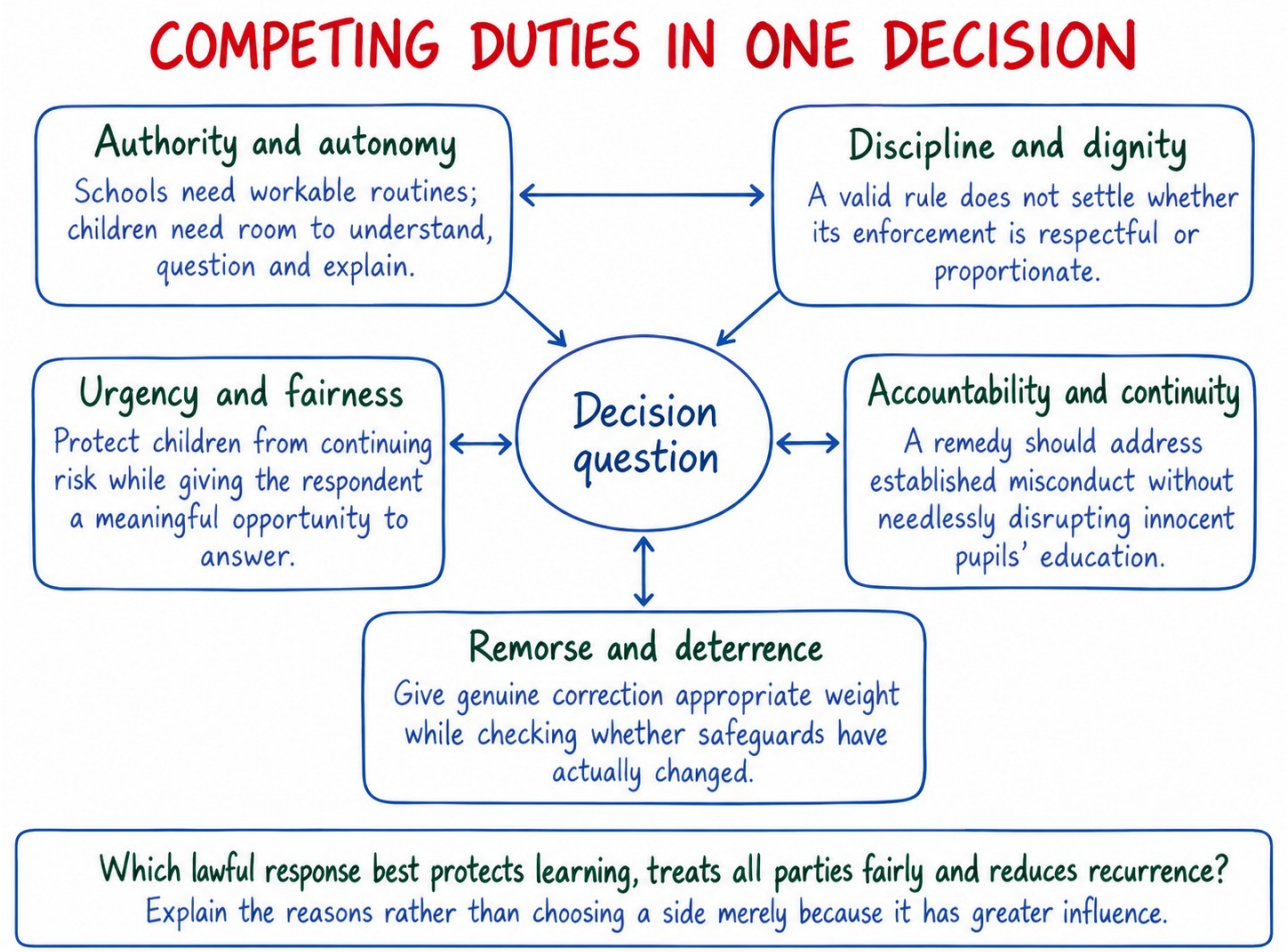
The ethical question: How can schools cultivate civic responsibility while exercising authority with dignity, fairness and care?

Ethical Concepts & Keywords



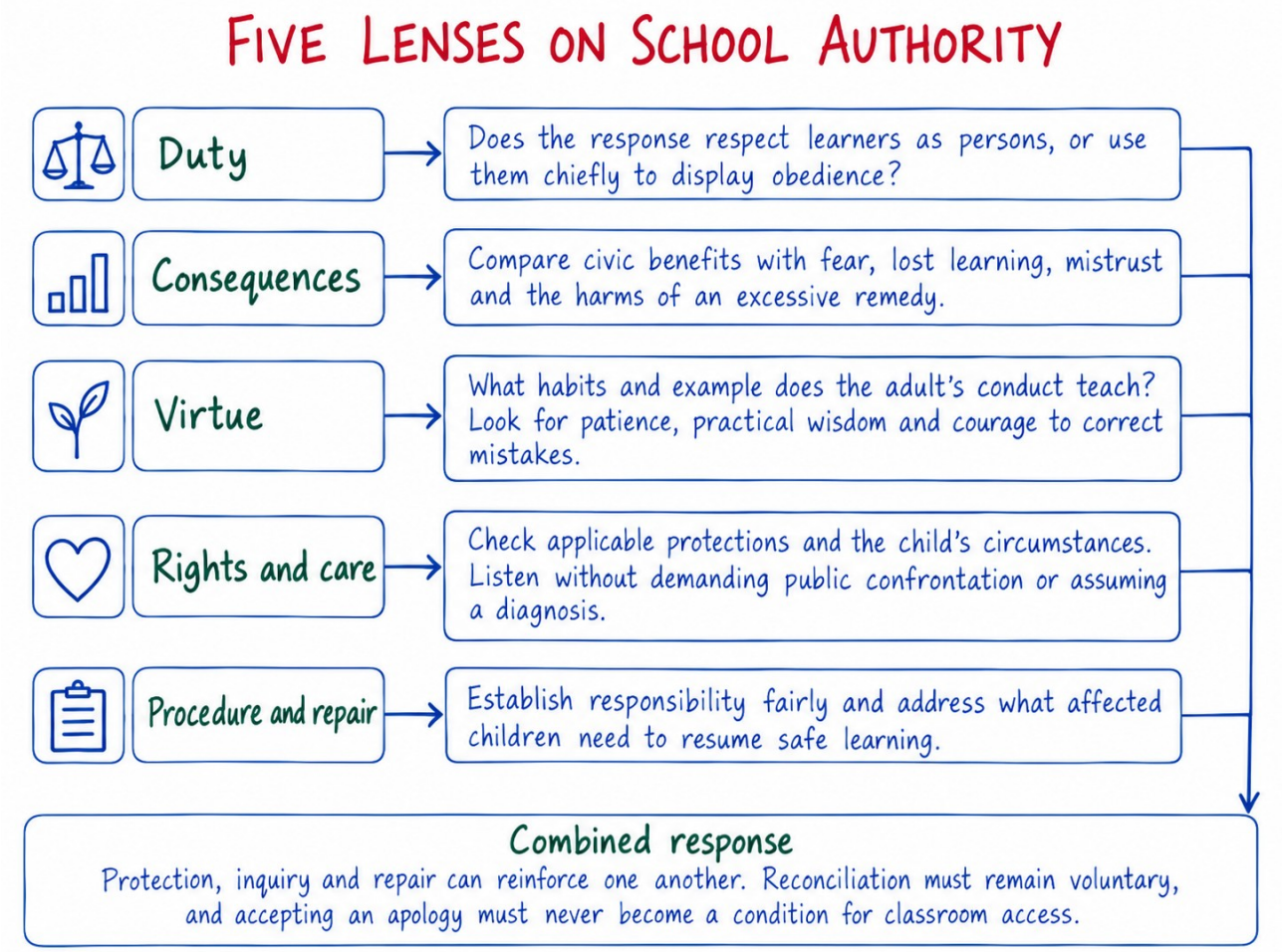
Value / concept	Application to the issue
Dignity	A child's standing should not depend on satisfying an adult's personal test of national loyalty. Correct conduct without degrading the person.
Duty of care	Educational authority creates responsibilities towards dependent learners. A threat can matter before it is implemented because children may reasonably fear losing access to learning.
Freedom of conscience	Allow space for reflection and respectful explanation. This ethical concern does not create an automatic exemption from every lawful attendance requirement.
Proportionality	Ask whether a response serves a legitimate educational purpose, whether a less harmful measure would work, and whether the burden is excessive.
Responsible speech	Institutional messages carry consequences beyond ordinary disagreement. Consider their audience, likely impact and the power behind them.
Fair procedure	Verify the allegation, hear those affected and give the respondent a meaningful opportunity to answer. Protection and impartial inquiry can proceed together.
Ideological coercion	Pressure becomes ethically troubling when access to schooling is used to secure a display of loyalty. Distinguish this from explaining civic values or applying reasonable rules.
Accountability and repair	A credible response addresses harm, responsibility and recurrence. An apology is relevant evidence of correction, not a substitute for examining the complaint.

Core Ethical Dilemmas



- **Educational authority and developing autonomy:** Schools need workable routines and can encourage collective activities. Children also need opportunities to understand values and explain difficulties. Where should guidance end and coercion begin?
- **Discipline and dignity:** Even a valid attendance rule leaves a separate question about enforcement. Would private discussion, a reasoned reminder or an educational alternative achieve the purpose without humiliation?
- **Urgency and procedural fairness:** Waiting for every fact may prolong fear. Announcing guilt immediately may undermine a fair inquiry. Protective arrangements should be tailored to risk and distinguished from final sanctions.
- **Accountability and educational continuity:** Strong action may be warranted if misconduct is established. Yet a remedy that disrupts innocent pupils' education can impose a second harm on those the system should protect.
- **Remorse and deterrence:** Genuine correction deserves weight. An institution must also demonstrate that children's safety does not depend on whether a powerful adult apologises after publicity.

Multi-Framework Analysis



Duty-based ethics: Kant's humanity principle supplies a test of instrumentalisation: does the institution treat learners as persons whose interests count, or chiefly as instruments for displaying obedience? Applied here, a substantiated threat to withhold ordinary schooling to obtain patriotic conformity would raise a serious dignity objection. This is an ethical application, not a finding about the reported individual. [5]

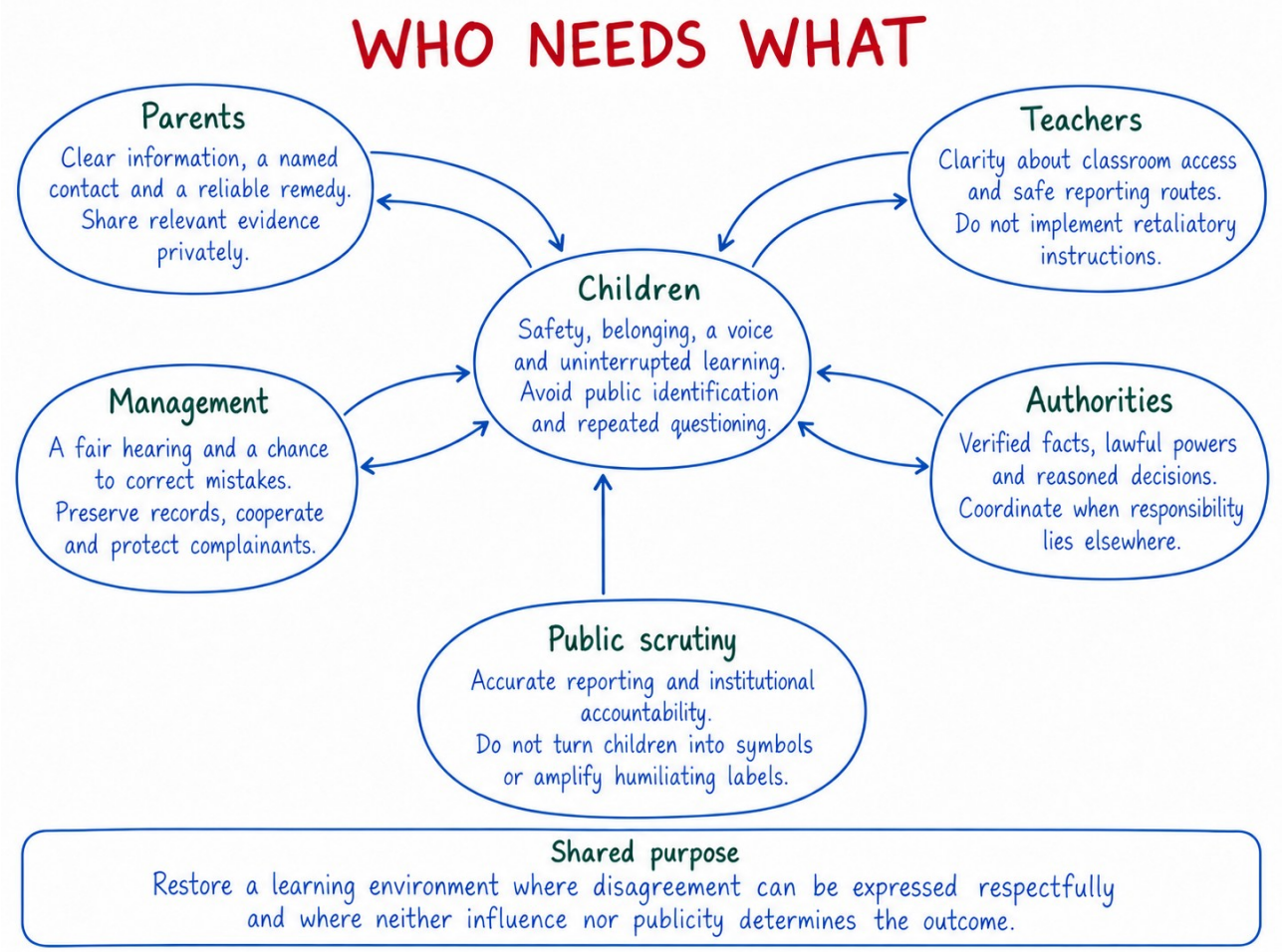
Consequentialism: Consider the intended benefit of shared civic participation alongside foreseeable fear, lost learning, mistrust and polarisation. Compare these with the likely effects of dialogue and clear, humane rules. A crowded ceremony alone cannot demonstrate educational success. The response to misconduct also needs scrutiny: indiscriminate closure may damage many pupils without providing a better remedy.

Virtue ethics: Aristotle links character to repeated action and deliberate choice. A school leader teaches through conduct as well as instruction. Practical wisdom calls for firmness fitted to circumstances, patience when reasons are unclear, and the courage to correct one's own error. Habitual compliance may begin learning, but does not by itself establish civic understanding. [6]

Rights and care: Begin with the learner's welfare, dignity and access to education, while checking the actual legal framework. A young child may need a trusted adult and reassurance rather than a public confrontation. Family circumstances and the child's voice deserve attention. Care also requires avoiding unsupported assumptions about a child's beliefs, emotional condition or reasons for absence.

Procedural and restorative ethics: An impartial inquiry asks what happened and who was responsible. Repair asks what children need to feel safe and resume learning. These approaches can reinforce one another. Participation in reconciliation must be voluntary; neither public forgiveness nor withdrawal of a complaint should become the price of classroom access.

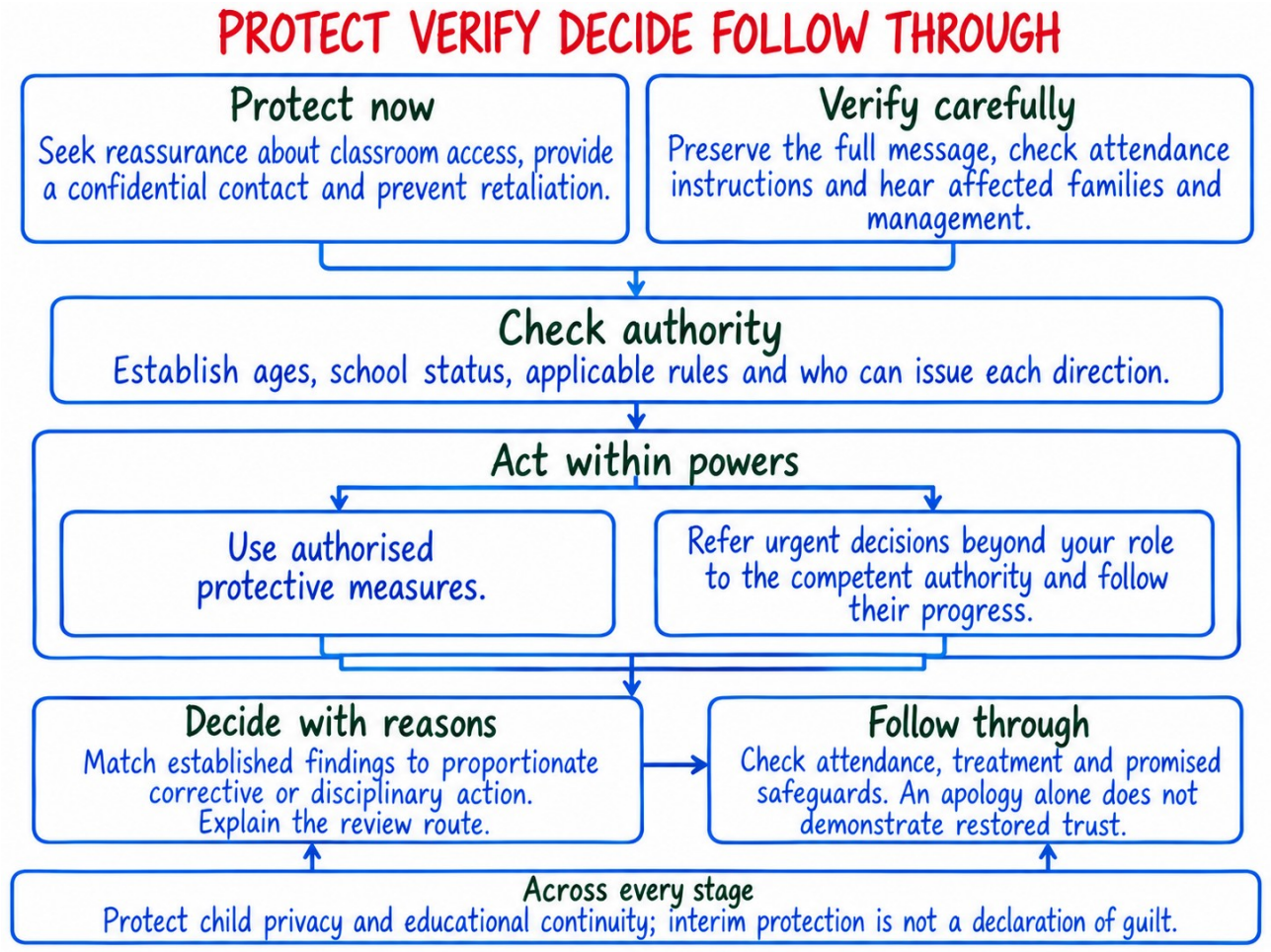
Stakeholder Analysis



Stakeholder	Interest / concern	Ethical responsibility
Affected students	Safety, belonging, learning and a voice appropriate to their age	Be heard without being required to prove patriotism or endure repeated public questioning.
Other students	Stable classes and a respectful school culture	Avoid bullying or repeating labels; learn to disagree without excluding peers.
Parents and guardians	Children's welfare, clear rules and a reliable remedy	Provide relevant information privately; avoid exposing other children's identities or turning them into campaign material.

Stakeholder	Interest / concern	Ethical responsibility
School management	Fair hearing, educational standards and institutional trust	Explain the record, protect attendance, prevent retaliation and correct harmful communications where warranted.
Teachers and staff	Professional integrity and freedom from improper pressure	Maintain learning, document concerns and use appropriate reporting channels without circulating children's details.
Education authorities	Child protection, lawful regulation and consistent treatment	Establish jurisdiction, investigate fairly and give reasoned, proportionate decisions.
Civil society and media	Public accountability and accurate information	Scrutinise institutions without identifying children, amplifying abuse or demanding a predetermined outcome.

Administrative / Governance Angle



Use the right legal starting point. Article 21A concerns free and compulsory education for children aged six to fourteen. Article 51A includes respect for constitutional ideals and

national symbols, together with harmony and a spirit of inquiry. It supplies no express power for a school chairman to impose this particular attendance sanction. Attendance obligations require their own lawful basis. [4]

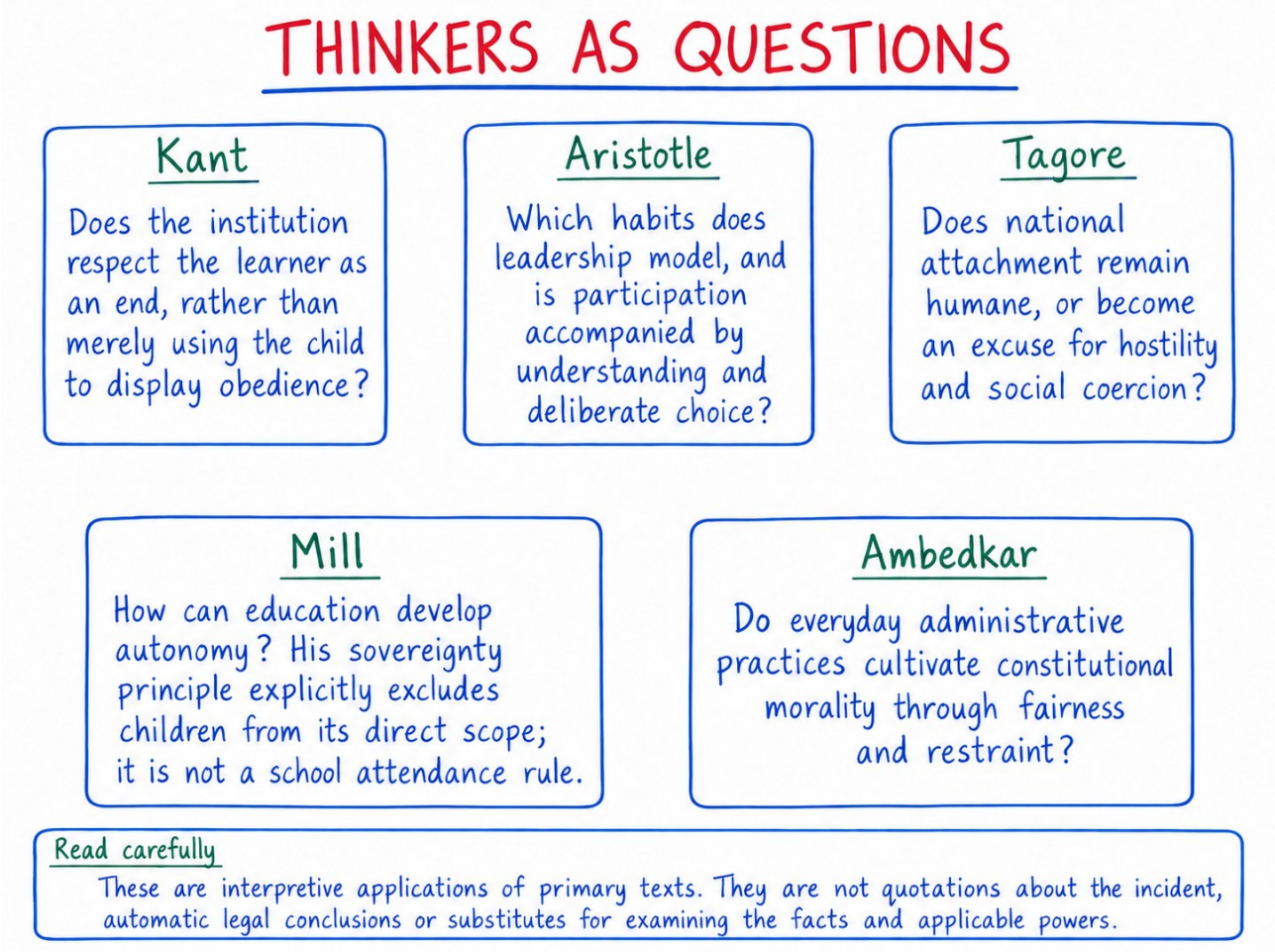
Check the RTE Act's application. Section 17 prohibits physical punishment and mental harassment and refers contraventions to applicable service rules. The Act's age, elementary-education and institutional scope must be checked, including relevant exceptions and judicial rulings. Recognition and board affiliation are distinct matters. Neither the actual students' ages nor the school's governing status should be assumed from the news report. [2]

Identify the competent authority. RTE section 32 provides a local-authority complaint route and an appeal to the State child-rights commission or prescribed authority. Section 18 places recognition decisions with the prescribed authority and requires a hearing before withdrawal. These provisions do not make every DEO competent to order every remedy. Check current state rules, delegations and affiliation conditions before acting. [2]

Translate safeguards into practice. NCPCR guidance includes intimidation and humiliating name-calling within its discussion of mental harassment. Use this as relevant child-protection guidance, while determining the legal character of the particular conduct through the proper process. [3]

- Secure original messages and relevant records; restrict access to those handling the complaint.
- Seek immediate reassurance about classroom access and a confidential reporting contact. Use binding directions only where power exists, otherwise promptly refer them to the authorised decision-maker.
- Offer appropriate support with the child and guardian involved. Avoid public identification or repeated interviews.
- Record findings, reasons, corrective steps and review arrangements. Check implementation, including indirect retaliation through grading, activities or treatment.

Thinkers & Ideas



Thinker / text	Verified idea and careful application
Immanuel Kant	*Groundwork*, Second Section: treat humanity as an end, never merely as a means. Ask whether school discipline respects the learner as a person. This does not establish a modern legal remedy. [5]
Aristotle	*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II: moral character develops through practice; virtuous action also involves knowing and choosing. Use this to examine the example adults set, rather than assuming all imposed routines are ethically worthless. [6]
Rabindranath Tagore	*Nationalism*: national power must remain answerable to humane moral purposes; hostility and social coercion can corrupt collective life. Apply this warning to exclusionary loyalty tests without presenting Tagore as rejecting every form of civic attachment. [7]
John Stuart Mill	*On Liberty*, Chapter I: the celebrated sovereignty principle explicitly excludes children and those below legal adulthood from its direct scope. Use his concern about coercion as a question about education towards autonomy, not a decisive legal rule for school attendance. [8]

Thinker / text	Verified idea and careful application
B. R. Ambedkar	Speech of 4 November 1948: constitutional morality needs cultivation, and administration can undermine a constitution's spirit. Apply this to fair, restrained institutional practice. Ambedkar discusses George Grote's formulation; do not attribute Grote's wording to Ambedkar as his own. [9]

The applications above are interpretive paraphrases. They are not quotations about the reported incident.

Adapted Case Study

Fictional training case. All people, institutional details, pressures and consequences in this scenario are invented for ethical analysis. It is not a reconstruction or a finding about the reported Kerala school.

Priya is a district education officer. Parents at a private school complain that its chairman sent a voice message portraying pupils who missed a civic celebration as disloyal and warning that they could lose classroom access. Several affected pupils are aged eleven to thirteen. Parents give differing reasons for absence, including illness and family commitments. The complete original recording and the attendance instructions have not yet been verified.

One parent says their child is afraid to return. Teachers seek clarity about whether they should enforce the threat. The chairman expresses regret, says he intended to encourage participation, and disputes the interpretation of part of the message. A local group demands immediate withdrawal of recognition. A senior official informally suggests resolving the complaint without a written record because the chairman has supported community projects.

Priya must address the immediate risk while identifying which authority can investigate, issue directions or take recognition-related action. The school's legal status and applicable rules still require checking.

1. Identify the ethical issues and the facts Priya needs to establish.
2. Evaluate the available courses of action and set out a justified sequence.
3. How should the chairman's expression of regret influence the response?
4. What responsibilities does this case reveal for private schools and public authorities?

Expanded Model Discussion

(a) Ethical issues and verification

I would treat the reported fear of exclusion as requiring prompt attention while keeping the allegation open to examination. The central issues are dignity, dependence, fairness in discipline, the educational purpose of authority and the risk of retaliation. The chairman's community work cannot justify preferential treatment. Equally, public anger cannot justify depriving him of a fair opportunity to respond.

I would obtain the original recording, its full context, circulation details and any reliable translation. I would check the event notice, attendance policy, communications about exceptions, and whether exclusion was ordered or implemented. Threat, intention and actual

consequence are related but different questions. I would establish the children's ages, relevant school status, applicable rules and the powers delegated to my office. Distress should be taken seriously without diagnosing a condition from a parent's account.

(b) Options and chosen sequence

Option	Merits	Limits / risks
Close the matter after informal regret	May reduce immediate confrontation.	Leaves contested facts, continuing fear and safeguards unresolved; particularly problematic if driven by influence.
Begin a fair inquiry without interim support	Creates an evidentiary record and permits a response.	May leave children uncertain about returning and staff uncertain about instructions.
Combine protective arrangements with inquiry	Addresses immediate needs while preserving impartiality and educational continuity.	Requires clear authority, careful communication and follow-through; interim measures must not become disguised punishment.
Immediately seek the strongest institutional sanction	Can appear decisive and may be necessary where a verified serious risk meets the legal threshold.	Premature action may be unlawful, unfair or disruptive. Recognition withdrawal is not a general-purpose first response.

I would choose the third approach. First, I would contact management and relevant authorities to secure a clear assurance that pupils can attend classes while the matter is examined, and that neither complainants nor staff will face retaliation. If an enforceable interim direction is required beyond my powers, I would make an urgent, reasoned referral and retain responsibility for following its progress.

Second, I would give the families a named contact and arrange a discreet conversation about support. A child should not be required to speak before the chairman or a crowd. Where specialist support is appropriate, I would facilitate it with suitable consent and attention to the child's wishes. Practical arrangements might include a trusted teacher meeting the child on return.

Third, I would put the specific allegations to management, preserve relevant evidence, hear responses and avoid unnecessary repeat interviews. I would record the superior's instruction accurately, explain why a documented process protects all parties, and use the appropriate supervisory or grievance channel if improper interference persists. Courage here requires calm reasons and a defensible record.

Finally, the competent authority should decide on established facts. A substantiated lapse may justify correction, training, monitoring or authorised disciplinary measures. Serious, repeated or continuing misconduct may require stronger lawful action. Any decision should explain its basis, why lesser measures suffice or fail, the review route and how learning will continue. No sanction should be selected simply to satisfy the loudest group.

(c) Assessing regret and repair

Regret matters when it becomes credible corrective conduct. Relevant indicators include acknowledging the specific words and their impact, withdrawing the threat, communicating reassurance to the original audience, cooperating with scrutiny, and changing practice. A conditional expression of regret can begin that process, but cannot establish that it is complete. The inquiry should also consider the response fairly rather than presuming every apology is insincere.

Repair should reach those affected without creating fresh exposure. A general correction can be sent to the relevant parent group without naming children. Private support and restored access may matter more to a pupil than a public ceremony. Children must not be pressed to accept an apology, appear in photographs, withdraw complaints or certify the chairman's good character. Genuine remorse can affect a proportionate outcome without erasing responsibility.

(d) Institutional responsibilities and prevention

Private management does not remove the ethical duties generated by educating dependent children. Public oversight should protect those children through the applicable legal mechanisms, while recognising institutional autonomy and procedural limits. Officials should not substitute personal views of patriotism for evidence or law. The immediate aim is safe learning; the longer aim is a school culture in which authority can be questioned respectfully.

Prevention should include published attendance expectations, a humane process for explaining absences, staff guidance on respectful communication, confidential complaints and clear escalation contacts. Civic education can use discussion, community service and reflection on constitutional values. Follow-up should ask whether children are attending, whether treatment has changed and whether promised safeguards work. A written apology and a closed file are insufficient evidence of restored trust.

Reasoned conclusion: Protect learners promptly, establish facts fairly, act through the competent authority and make repair verifiable. A different administrative sequence can also be defensible if it explains its legal basis and secures these safeguards.

Practice Questions

1. "Patriotism cannot be enforced; it can only be cultivated." Critically examine this proposition, distinguishing civic education, reasonable school routines and coercive loyalty tests. (150 words)

2. A school authority threatens to exclude pupils who missed a civic event. As an education officer, explain how you would protect children while ensuring a fair inquiry and continuity of learning. (250 words)

3. Explain ideological coercion in an educational setting. How does it differ from legitimate discipline, and which safeguards preserve developing autonomy without denying a school's responsibilities? (200 words)

4. "The manner of exercising authority is part of its ethical legitimacy." Discuss with reference to dignity, proportionality and the conduct expected of educational leaders. (150 words)

5. A superior advises you to close a complaint against an influential school after its chairman apologises. How would you assess remorse, resist improper pressure and choose a proportionate response? (250 words)

Sources & Reading Notes

1. NDTV, 17 August 2026: reported school chairman's remarks and expression of regret
2. Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009: sections 1–3, 17–18 and 31–32
3. NCPCR, Guidelines for Eliminating Corporal Punishment in Schools: sections 4.3, 5.4 and 6
4. Constitution of India: Articles 21A and 51A
5. Immanuel Kant, Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals: Second Section
6. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics: Book II, habituation and deliberate choice
7. Rabindranath Tagore, Nationalism: Nationalism in Japan and Nationalism in India
8. John Stuart Mill, On Liberty: Chapter I, including the qualification concerning children
9. B. R. Ambedkar, Constituent Assembly speech, 4 November 1948: constitutional morality

The news gist is attributed to reporting; the ethical analysis does not determine liability. The training case is wholly fictional. Legal application depends on verified facts, institutional status, current rules and relevant judicial decisions. NCPCR guidance is used for child-protection principles, not its older references to criminal legislation. Thinker applications are paraphrases.