

Cheating: Where's the Moral Compass?

Cheating represents one of the most serious forms of student misconduct in schools today and can have a devastating impact on the classroom and school environment (Wiseman & Hunt, 2008). Some students cheat because they're lazy or busy and want to get good grades without spending time studying. Others feel like they can't pass the test or get good grades without cheating (Cheating, 2007). Kohn (2007) notes that cheating may be influenced by the rules, expectations, and focus on competition and rigor that teachers and schools have established. Berger (2007) comments that it is easier to cheat than to do one's own work and that the prevalence of cheating reflects a social decline in individual honor. Cheating destroys trust between teachers and students and adults do no one a kindness when they justify deceit when students need and deserve an unambiguous ethical standard. As technology makes it easier than ever to cheat, educators are combating the problem on at least three fronts: setting clear standards and consequences, using technology to fight back, and talking with students and parents about ethics and pressure (Noguchi, 2006).

In a recent international study where students gave themselves high marks for ethical behavior, around 60% of American high school students reported having cheated on a test, 28% admitted stealing from a store, and 23% said they stole from a parent or other relative (Sixty Percent of U.S. High School Students, 2006). Ninety-two percent of the students indicated that they were satisfied with their personal ethics and character and 74% agreed with the statement, "When it comes to doing what is right, I am better than most people I know." Following the start of high-stakes school testing and accountability, some now say they want to make sure that testing results are credible. Much of this is a reaction to reports of cheating where some high test scores have been reported to be the result of "adult interference" (Kummer, 2006). Benton and Hacker (2007) report that thousands of students have cheated on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), including thousands on the state's graduation test. An analysis found cases where over 50% of students had suspicious answer patterns that researchers say indicate collusion, either between students or with school staff. A Rutgers' Management Education Center survey of high school students found that 75% of them engage in serious cheating (Survey: Many Students Say Cheating OK, 2007) and over half have plagiarized work found on the Internet. Many students don't see anything wrong with cheating; 50% responded saying they don't think copying questions and answers from a test is even cheating. For many students the pressure to do well and compete for good colleges has made cheating a natural behavior. A Josephson Institute of Ethics report indicates that cheating, stealing and lying by high school students have continued in a decade-long upward spiral. Students admitting they cheated on an exam at least once in the past year went from 61% in 1992 to 74% in 2002, the number

who stole something from a store within the past 12 months rose from 31% to 38%, and the percentage that said they lied to their teachers and parents also increased substantially (Survey Documents Decade of Moral Deterioration, 2007). The report also indicated:

Gender: The most significant differentiating factor among high school students is gender. While girls cheat and lie as much as boys in general, they are significantly less likely to engage in theft or other dishonest practices and have more positive attitudes toward ethics.

Sports: Participation in varsity sports does not build or undermine character. In most cases it is not a differentiating factor with one significant exception; varsity athletes are more likely to cheat on exams.

Religious Schools: Those who attend private religious schools do not behave or think much differently from others. In most cases, it is not a differentiating factor; they steal less but cheat and lie more to teachers and parents.

—Cheating destroys trust between teachers and students. . . students need and deserve an unambiguous ethical standard.—

Religious Convictions: Students who say their religion is essential or very important to them, regardless of the kind of school they attend, generally perform at the national average, though they shoplift at a slightly lower rate, are less likely to lie to get a job and tend to have more positive attitudes about the importance of ethics.

College and Honors Classes: Those who plan to go to college and attend honors or advanced placement classes generally say they cheat, steal and lie less than others.

However, cheating may reflect flaws in the education system, not in a student's character, as is often concluded (Kohn, 2007). Research on cheating suggests:

1. When teachers don't seem to have a real connection with their students, or seem to care much about them, students are more inclined to cheat.
2. Cheating is more common when students see their academic tasks as boring, irrelevant, or overwhelming. The perceived likelihood of cheating is relatively high when a teacher's pedagogy is seen as poor and relatively rare where the learning is genuinely engaging and meaningful to students, and where there is a primary commitment to exploring ideas.
3. When students believe that the ultimate goal of learning is

to get good grades, they are more likely to see cheating as justifiable behavior. Cheating is more likely if schools use honor rolls and other incentives to heighten the value of grades or if parents offer financial rewards for good report cards.

To some, grades are one of the most common manifestations of schools to value achievement more than learning. The more that attention is drawn to academic performance, the more students engage in various types of cheating. Where the focus is on high grades and raising the bar, there may be undesired results: less interest in learning for its own sake, less willingness to take on challenging tasks, more superficial thinking, and more cheating. Students who believe that their schools emphasize performance rather than learning goals are more likely to report cheating behaviors (Anderman et al., 1998). There is more cheating when teachers emphasize good grades, high test scores and being smart and less when they make it clear that the point is to enjoy the learning and that understanding matters more than memorizing (Anderman & Midgley, 2004).

While individual attitudes are important, the policies of a classroom or school are significant in determining how pervasive cheating will be. One major cause of cheating is felt by some to be an environment where students feel pressured to improve their performance, even if doing so involves methods that they regard as unethical. The worst environments are those that emphasize one's standing relative to others. Competition is perhaps the single most negative factor to be found in a classroom, is a reliable predictor of cheating, has a negative impact on relationships as students look at each other as possible obstacles to their own success, and often contributes to a loss of intrinsic motivation (Kohn, 2007).

One problem that teachers face when dealing with cheating is that many children and adolescents are still developing their individual value systems. What is right and wrong for many students is often very much determined by the situation and the pressures found there. Because of this, teachers are advised to focus on the intent as well as the impact and results of student behaviors. Also at issue for many is the teacher's and school's definition of cheating. With more and more emphasis on the use of cooperative learning and students working together on assignments, teachers need to clearly define dishonest behavior when students are encouraged to work together and share their work products in completing assignments.

Regardless of the motivation, teachers have a responsibility to guide students in their learning of acceptable standards of conduct. No matter the age of the student, cheating should always be cast in an unfavorable light. If a student is labeled as a cheat, however, the possible ill effect on the student's future behavior and self-concept is a consequence that needs to be taken very seriously. If a student is caught cheating, the teacher is advised to talk to the student in private, present the reason(s) for suspecting cheating, express concern and try to find out why,

or if, the student cheated, explain the consequences, and then discuss future directions (Weinstein & Mignano, 2007). Dealing with such a problem may well be the teacher's most difficult teaching assignment.

References

- Anderman, E., Griesinger, T., & Westerfield, G. (1998). Motivation and cheating during early adolescence. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 90, 84-93.
- Anderman, E., & Midgley, C. (2004). Changes in self-reported academic cheating across the transition from middle school to high school. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, vol. 29, 499-517.
- Benton, J., & Hacker, H. (2007). Analysis shows TAKS cheating rampant. Retrieved June 8, 2007, from www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent.
- Berger, P. (2007). Our sacred honor: Sadly, too few students know what it means. Retrieved November 2, 2007, from www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/10/31/10berger.h27.html?tmp=503469040.
- Cheating. (2007). Retrieved October 26, 2007, from <http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/emotion/cheating.html>
- Kohn, A. (2007). Who's cheating whom? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89 (2), 89-97
- Kummer, F. (2006). Leaders aim to curb cheating on tests. Retrieved October 26, 2006, from www.philly.com/mld/philly/living/education.
- Noguchi, S. (2006). Schools fight cheaters who use tech tools. Retrieved September 26, 2006, from www.mercurynews.com.
- Sixty percent of U.S. high school students cheat, 28% steal, study finds. Retrieved October 17, 2006, from www.financialexpress.com.
- Slobogin, K. (2007). Survey: Many students say cheating's OK. Retrieved October 26, 2007, from <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/fyi/teachers.ednews/04/05/highschool.cheating>
- Survey documents decade of moral deterioration (2007). Retrieved October 26, 2007, from <http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/Survey2002/survey2002-pressrelease.htm>
- Weinstein, C., & Mignano, A. (2007). *Elementary classroom management: Lessons from research and practice* (4th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Wiseman, D., & Hunt, G. (2008). *Best practice in motivation and management in the classroom* (2nd ed.). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher. (forthcoming)

About the Author

Dr. Dennis G. Wiseman is the Director of the Biddle Center for Teaching and Learning in the Spadoni College of Education at Coastal Carolina University. Dr. Wiseman can be reached at dwiseman@coastal.edu.