

# Academic Integrity in the High School

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## And What Can Be Done to Support It

Kristin M. Storey

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Dr. Peter Gibbon

It's rampant. Some say it's an epidemic. Surveys show that the majority of high school students are doing it. And, it's not just high school students but also politicians, business professionals, authors, scholars and even teachers. The issue under examination is not drug abuse but another social malady: Cheating. As a public high school Language Arts teacher, I have seen it firsthand too many times and, more likely than not, missed it even more times. Every time I am faced with students cheating a wave of emotions washes over me: I feel angry, disrespected, disappointed and defeated. The anger and disrespect stem from my ego being offended and my initial reaction that their cheating behavior indicates that they think I'm stupid or uncaring. The disappointment and defeat stem from concern that I have somehow failed my students by assuming that they knew more than they did about cheating and academic integrity. Recognizing my visceral reaction and the ubiquitous nature of cheating, I feel obligated to ask "What am I doing about it?"

The truth is that high school students cheat in numerous ways: most commonly copying one another's homework, finding answers to questions on Internet blogs, bringing crib notes or spying on a neighbor's paper when testing and, most egregious to me, plagiarizing when writing. According to research data from Duke University's Center for Integrity, 75% of high school students admit to cheating (Dichtl). A study completed by former Rutgers Business school professor and researcher Donald McCabe found that 60% of high school juniors surveyed plagiarize their written assignments (McCabe). These numbers indicate a widespread problem and are shared across students of all abilities and academic standing (Geddes). When I asked my students for their point of view on cheating they shared, and research corroborates, that students often cheat because: They feel pressured to get good grades from their parents, or themselves, and/or their belief that colleges require extraordinary GPAs. They are overwhelmed with school work and overbooked with extracurricular activities and jobs. They think much of the work is busy work and therefore not worth spending time and brain power on. In addition, researchers have found that students feel that because it's so widespread, students opt to go along with what appears to be the norm (Pearson). Often students blame teachers saying that they don't care or are unfair or incompetent. In fact, some students admit to cheating in some classes but not others based on

the level of respect they have for the different teachers. Finally, employing what social scientists refer to as “neutralizing rationale,” students argue that they figure they have nothing to lose because others do it and don’t get caught and many figure that they aren’t hurting anyone else so it’s no big deal (Geddes).

I argue that students need to understand that it actually is a big deal and why this is the case. Debates abound regarding whether schools or churches or families should take the lead in the endeavor of teaching right from wrong, and although some may find it controversial, I believe that youth need moral guidance from as many sources as possible. Great philosophers and scholars have grappled with the question of how society should best educate their youth and time after time they address the importance of teaching virtues through schooling. Known primarily in political science circles today for his 1689 work *Two Treatises of Government*, John Locke, a man of many interests and achievements in fields such as philosophy, psychology, diplomacy, and education wrote another influential work, *Some Thoughts on Education* (1693) based on his belief that the prosperity and strength of a nation depends upon the education of its youth. In this treatise he emphasizes that because “virtue is harder to be got than knowledge of the world” it needs to be taught with intentionality and he even goes as far as to say it should be prioritized over lauded subjects of the day such as Greek and Latin (Locke). Following this line of thinking, American statesman and scholar Thomas Jefferson would argue in the same vein emphasizing the importance of public education and the role of virtues therein. In his correspondence over the years, he repeatedly encouraged young men, to “make these [virtues] then your first object” and to learn from mentors of high standing following a similar argument made by Locke that students learn by emulating those who teach them. Horace Mann, considered to be the founder of the American public education system in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, recommends that teachers don “garments of virtue” and his contemporary Catharine Beecher adamantly promoted teaching as an apt profession for women based on their innately virtuous natures (Goldstein).

Advocates for teaching virtue, or “character education” in today’s nomenclature, continue to publish books, speak publically, and provide resources and curriculums for schools to implement.

Thomas Lickona’s 1992 *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect & Responsibility*

influenced the creation of the Center for the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Rs: Respect and Responsibility at SUNY Cortland's School of Education. The center provides curriculum materials and support for teachers and schools who want to adopt their 12-point approach to "helping schools, teachers, and parents develop good character in youth" (Center for the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Rs). *New York Times* best seller *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* by Paul Tough explains the research behind successful character education. All of these individuals advocate for teaching virtues in the school. Obviously the education system serves an important role in raising good, moral citizens. While I do not support canned curriculum, especially at the high school level where challenges to successfully implement it abound, I do believe that teachers are obligated to teach students virtues in the context of academic integrity and directly and specifically instruct on the topic of cheating.

An overwhelming number of books, research data, articles, and websites exist that explore the topic of cheating in schools and the importance of academic integrity. Teachers need to heed the advice of researchers who have found that we cannot assume that students possess clear and precise knowledge about cheating and all it entails (Bispin, et. al. as cited in Geddes). Ideally, by providing instruction about integrity teachers will avoid the arduous and disheartening task of catching students who cheat and punishing them (according to often harsh school district academic misconduct policies for such actions). While consequences do need to occur at some point, the first concern should be prevention. Refusing to believe that kids are bad or malicious, I prefer to give them the benefit of the doubt and provide them with information to ensure that they know what constitutes cheating and why it is unacceptable before failing them. In addition to the important role of the classroom teacher, responsibilities lie with the school administration, the parents and the student themselves. Recommendations for addressing cheating and developing academic integrity in students include:

## **TEACHER ROLE**

**Engage in Conversation** – Teachers can begin by engaging the students in conversations about cheating and academic integrity. What do they think? How prevalent do they think it is? Why is this the case? What concerns do they have? What misinformation do they believe? Discussions (throughout the year) are imperative to having students internalize the principles of academic integrity and provide the teacher with insight into where misunderstandings lie which can guide further instruction.

**Define the Terms and Present Information** - Teach students the difference between copyright and public domain or creative commons status. Provide tools for helping students effectively and judiciously utilize the information from on-line and traditional paper resources. In addition, explain the difference between collaboration and collusion when working with others. Share with students essays on the subjects of cheating and academic integrity and encourage them to discuss points of interest or concern (Lathrop & Foss).

**Provide Practice** – Create interactive lessons for writing wherein students can identify and practice paraphrase strategies and proper citation techniques. Present samples of paraphrased text and have students practice doing the work themselves using methods such as the “Paraphrase x 3” (Rosenwasser). Review sample citations and correct errors in samples in order for students to hone their skills with this element of writing with integrity.

**Deliberately Design Assignments and Assessments** – Sometimes the way an assignment is written can lend itself to a higher likelihood of cheating (Whiteman). Teachers should be conscientious about what they are asking students to do and select specific words that guide students toward more original thinking and away from quick Google search cut and paste type results. In addition, considering and articulating the purpose and relevance of the assignment is key. Research indicates that “decreased cheating is associated with classrooms where the emphasis is on mastery, improvement and effort” rather than the points or the grade (Murdock, et. al. as cited in Geddes). Regarding plagiarism, emphasize with students the value of stating their own ideas and provide time for more in class paper and pen writing. For research work, build in reflective learning steps where students assess their understanding and authenticity and/or defend their work orally.

**View Honor Codes and Academic Integrity Policies** - Read college honor codes or those of academic organizations like the American History Association with your students in order for them to learn more about the issues of academic misconduct. Present and analyze your own district or school’s policy early in the year and at significant intervals throughout.

## **ADMINISTRATOR ROLE**

Create a climate of integrity in which students receive the message from throughout the disciplines and levels of authority in the building. Participate in classroom discussions. Encourage teachers to educate students about academic integrity. Support the teachers in their efforts to maintain academic integrity. If teachers don’t feel supported they may be reluctant to hold students accountable, a circumstance which often leads to more cheating (Dichtl). And, of course, enforce whatever policy or honor code exists in your building. As we well know, “students respond like any other life form: consistent reinforcement is

much more effective in producing a desired behavior than intermittent reinforcement. Consistent adherence to academic integrity in high school prepares students for academic integrity in college,” and I would add, career, and life as well. (Kessler).

## **PARENTAL ROLE**

Review the school academic integrity policy with your student. Discuss strategies for balancing academic responsibilities with extracurricular activities or work obligations. Consider the level of stress your child experiences and strategize ways to reduce it.

## **STUDENT ROLE**

Learn about the rules of academic integrity and challenge yourself to uphold them. Ask questions when you don't know how or if to cite something. Realize that when you cheat you lose the chance to “formulate a question or problem, identify and locate the information needed, evaluate and organize the relevant information, and then report their [your] findings” (Lathrop & Foss) and thus miss an opportunity to grow and improve your mind. Present and be proud of your own work and ideas. Hold yourself accountable.

William James, the influential 19<sup>th</sup> century psychologist and ardent supporter of teachers, wrote that “our virtues are habits as much as our vices” and believed that teachers need to model virtuosity and guide students towards their better natures. The debate over the purpose of public education began prior to the inception of public schools and continues today with no silver bullet solution in sight. For all of the contention surrounding what to teach in terms of content and how to teach it in terms of pedagogy, it should be accepted that teachers have a responsibility to not only model but also teach with intention the values that are crucial to academic thinking and work. And it's hard. There have been times when I have been tempted to look the other way and not hold a student accountable for plagiarism or cheating because I know how much work this can entail and how emotionally draining it can be. But knowing the importance of the work I do, as so many others have emphasized, I frame the situation as a “teachable moment,” take a deep breath and face the student. While the sign on my classroom door indicates that I teach Language Arts, I know that I am obligated to do more than that in order to ensure that my students

embody integrity beyond the walls of my room as they go out to become our next politicians, business professionals, authors, scholars and, hopefully, virtuous teachers.

**RESOURCES** As mentioned above, supporting materials on the subject of teaching virtues and setting high and clear expectations about academic integrity abound from character education curriculum packages to graduate school of education programs; books; blogs; websites; articles galore. Following are some suggested resources:

**BOOKS:**

*Guiding Students from Cheating and Plagiarism to Honesty and Integrity: Strategies for Change* by Ann Lathrop and Kathleen Foss.

*Plagiarism: A How-Not-To Guide for Students*, by Barry Gilmore

*Writing Analytically* by David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen

**ACADEMIC SUPPORTS:**

Boston University - Center for Character and Social Responsibility

Harvard – Office of Academic Integrity and Student Conduct

Stanford – Challenge Success

Western Washington University – Coalition for Integrity

**WEBSITES & ORGANIZATIONS:**

Center for the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Rs: Respect and Responsibility

Character.org – 11 principles of effective character education

International Center for Academic Integrity.org

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