

Cheating Scandals Rock Three Top-Tier High Schools

National Survey Finds Two-Thirds of Students Admit Cheating

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Sam is a top student in a high-pressure high school just outside New York City who openly admits he "cheats along the way" to academic success.

The 16-year-old sees nothing wrong with looking at another student's paper during a quiz or borrowing a classmate's ideas.



He insists "90 percent or higher" of the students at his school engage in cheating — from tucking vocabulary crib sheets under their hats to stealing math exams.

But Sam insists he has a moral conscience — he won't use his last name for this article — and he swears he will never cheat in college. But he justifies his cheating.

"My parents would consider this cheating, but I don't have any major problems with it," Sam told ABCNEWS.com. "It's school, and you're cheating your way through the system."

Sam is typical of most American students. An estimated two-thirds of all high school students admit to "serious" academic cheating, according to a national survey by Rutgers' Management Education Center in New Jersey.

A startling 90 percent say they cheat on homework.

Cheating is epidemic, say experts, and recent scandals have rocked — and in some cases divided — both public and private high schools from New Hampshire to California. Some are the highest-performing schools in the nation, where the pressure to get into an Ivy League college is intense and parents buy into the academic game.

Ruthlessly Competitive

This month at Chapel Hill High School in North Carolina — described as ruthlessly competitive with faculty children from nearby Duke University and the University of North Carolina — four students were suspended in two cheating incidents.

In one, students used a master key to enter a teacher's office at night to steal an AP history exam. In the second, students copied an exam with a camera phone. They told school officials the cheating had gone on for years, as graduating seniors passed the key on down.

In a similar case in Hanover, N.H. - home of Dartmouth College where faculty children attend the local high school - criminal trials have been going on since November in connection with a 2007 cheating incident. Students broke into a teacher's filing cabinet, stealing math exams.

Now, the incident has split the community, as 10 students face criminal charges, even though 50 were implicated in a police investigation.

And at the Harvard-Westlake School in Los Angeles, a top-tier private school with a national reputation for academics, six sophomores were expelled and more than a dozen other students faced suspensions this week for distracting teachers and stealing Spanish and history tests.

Harvard-Westlake president Thomas Hudnut said in a prepared statement that the incident was "an unprecedented breach of trust and a true aberration."

"Our school is nationally known for its excellence," he said. "But ... we don't want exceptional to include academic achievement only. We want and expect our students to be exceptionally honest and good people."

Students like Sam argue there are different levels of cheating, and in some cases the end justifies the means. But teachers say that adolescence is when moral values are hard-wired and that forgiving cheating then spells trouble later.

"Academic misconduct is small potatoes in the moral domain, compared to murder, rape and drug abuse," said Jason Stephens, assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of Connecticut.

"But the cheating epidemic is kind of death by a thousand cuts," he said. "Ultimately, it undermines [and chips away at] the self when the moral self should be growing."

Cheat for Good Grades

Most students admit that cheating is wrong, but do it anyway, according to Stephens. They cheat for pragmatic reasons — to get good grades or because they don't have time to do the work carefully.

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/Story?id=4362510&page=3>

Indeed, one New Jersey student, who now holds a doctorate and is a successful consultant, was caught cheating a decade ago at his New Jersey high school. He is still "so embarrassed" he won't use his real name.

Leon and a friend — whom he describes as "model students" — were asked to outline several chapters within their AP chemistry textbook. They divided the work in half, but their teacher recognized what they had done.

"We knew this was cheating, but at the same time we felt it was a more tedious assignment, rather than an educational one, and we just had to get it done," Leon told ABCNEWS.com. "In college, I felt uncomfortable doing it. There was a louder voice that it was not right."

Nearly all students participate in what Stephens calls the "most mundane" cheating — "unpermitted collaboration" on homework. Up to half of all students don't see plagiarism as wrong — when they copy a few sentences or don't give proper attribution.

Half would also deem giving other students a heads-up on exam topics as "semi-innocuous." But 85 percent would see using a crib or copying an entire paper as wrong.

One of the antidotes to cheating is good teaching, according to Stephens. "It's not only important that a teacher know the subject matter and how to effectively communicate, but there is ethical goodness — fairness and caring."

Sam from New York says he is selective about where he cheats. "I tend to cheat much less if I take a liking to the course," he said. But he would never steal a test from a teacher or break into a room to copy a test.

The two students who stole the test at Chapel Hill High School were caught on a surveillance camera. According to Stephanie Knott, assistant superintendent for communications, there was no evidence to suggest the cheating was part of a long-term ring, but "the focus has been on the future of the school culture."

Kira Borman, who is vice president of the student body, said she worries that a few students will mar the reputation of her "great school" — where 94 percent of the students go on to college — but she admits the incident was "an eye opener."

'It's Not Right'

"Cheating goes on everywhere at our school, and we should find a solution," said the 16-year-old. "It's definitely not OK. It affects everyone else's rankings. It's not fair morally or ethically. It's not right. You would hope everyone knows that, but with the pressure of everyone getting into schools, some kids might have forgotten about it."

Since 1990, much of the cheating research has been conducted by Donald McCabe, founding president of the Center for Academic Integrity at Clemson University.

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He has surveyed 24,000 students in 70 public, private and parochial schools throughout the United States and found that 64 percent of all students engage in one of three of the most serious cheating behaviors — copying from another student's work, using cheat notes or helping someone else cheat.

"Cheating has always gone on, but it's never been this high," said McCabe, who now teaches global business and education at Rutgers Business School. "Two hundred years ago, there was more shame associated with cheating."

"There are also new ways of doing it, like cell phones and the Internet, that have led to an increase," he said. "And those who are engaging are doing it so much more often."

Parents are often complicit in cheating. One in four students surveyed said their parents had done more than half their homework assignment at least once.

Schools, particularly public ones, are hesitant to report cheating because lawyers are called in. "The schools know parents are desperate not to have marks on the child's record so they can't go to best schools," he said.

Indeed, in Hanover, N.H., parents were furious when school officials turned the cheating case over to police. After a seven-week investigation, 10 students were charged; nine of them were 17 and considered adults, so they could receive criminal records for life. Since last fall, four more students have admitted to cheating, but have not been charged.

Only 14 students, including the 10 charged by police, have admitted to cheating.

Some say parents encouraged their children not to step forward, fearing penalties that could harm their college chances.

Jim Kenyon's 17-year-old son Nicholas was charged with being an accomplice. Kenyon says his son admits he saw the exam but said he did not participate in the theft.

"Everyone in the case has acknowledged the cheating," Kenyon, a columnist for the local newspaper, told ABC News. "The kids gathered in the Dartmouth Library for two days trying to figure out the answers and put them in their calculators. My son didn't want to be involved."

Only four students, including Nicholas, owned up to the incident, according to Kenyon. "It's a wrong message," he said. "The poor parents who told the kids to tell the truth got the consequences, and 40 of their classmates walked away from this."

"We live in an Ivy League community where the status symbols aren't the car you drive or the size of your house, but what colleges your sons and daughters go to," he said.

After the affair, Kenyon sent his son to private school and will do the same with his 14-year-old daughter because of the flak she has taken from teachers.

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"Kids make mistakes," he said. "My son learned a lesson. You can't be a follower because your friends are doing something. He also learned a healthy lesson about how adults deal with things."

Meanwhile, according to Jason Stephens, who just received a \$400,000 grant for the classroom ethics project, "Achieving With Integrity," the national cheating scandals are merely a reflection of the broader society.

"These kids are desensitized in a culture that values the bottom line," he said. "You see these scandals play out in the broader culture — Enron, Tyco and the journalists and politicians that continue to misrepresent themselves."

"It's ubiquitous," said Stephens. "We are also taught not to take responsibility and we look for someone else to sue. ... We have a vast psychological mechanism that helps us exonerate ourselves."