

Schools look to reinforce ethics

Jill K. Dion, Editor
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Sara (not her real name) is a local high school student who admits to cheating more than once on a test.

"I remember a history test," she said. "I had the answers written on a piece of paper under my leg, and the teacher, a substitute, came over and caught me. I got a detention."

Molly, a 20-year-old graduate of the Milford school system, said she remembers that she and fellow high school students had hand signals to help them through Spanish tests.

"This meant 'a' and this meant 'b'," she said, holding up fingers to indicate the code. And Joseph, who recently graduated from the Milford school system, said he routinely copied and pasted information from websites when writing papers. Despite a computer program that reportedly catches plagiarism, Joseph said he was "never caught."

Cheating: It's one of the prime targets of the Milford-based School for Ethical Education (SEE), which recently received one of the biggest grants in its 12-year history to help further academic integrity.

David Wangaard, SEE director, said he thinks the non-profit educational consulting organization is on the cutting edge of educational directives in addressing integrity in school.

"Sixty to eighty percent of kids are cheating regularly in school," Wangaard said. "Adults don't like to deal with it. Kids see it as a norm. It's a huge gap in the school process." School officials may not agree the gap is quite that large. David Hourigan, Milford's new school board chairman who taught math for 39 years, said his colleagues "were always very diligent about overseeing the use of the internet and did everything they could to dissuade kids from misusing the internet." Hourigan also referred to a program aimed at detecting plagiarism, and he noted a Milford school policy that addresses plagiarism. Still, Wangaard says the issue is large, and he cited some national discussions about school integrity. The School for Ethical Education recently received \$381,000 from three organizations to implement and evaluate an academic integrity program in the region.

The largest portion of the grant, \$320,000, came from the John Templeton Foundation of Pennsylvania, which traditionally funds scientific research. Another \$45,000 came from the Richard Davoud Donchian Foundation of Connecticut, which promotes leadership and integrity, and from Wright Investors Service, which founded SEE in 1995.

SEE is recruiting six schools to participate in the three-year project, and hopes to

work with other school systems on an informal basis. Each participating school will form an academic integrity committee, which will meet monthly. The committees will consist of students, faculty and administrators. The ultimate goal is to see schools devise strategies and plans to curtail cheating. Wangaard said SEE hopes to have schools selected by next month. School may still send in applications by going to the website, ethicsed.org, or by calling 783-4438.

About the school The School For Ethical Education is a non-profit organization that teaches strategies to put ethics in action. The three-person SEE staff is housed within the office suite of its founding company, Wright Investors, at 440 Wheelers Farms Road. John Winthrop Wright, an area businessman who died in 1996, founded the School for Ethical Education to promote positive characteristics in education.

"The core ethical concepts or virtues Mr. Wright desired to promote included respect, responsibility, caring, justice, honesty, truthfulness, courtesy, citizenship and the principles of the Golden Rule," according to SEE's annual report. The program usually takes the form of community service projects. SEE worked with Milford's alternative education school recently to clean up Walker's Pond. Last month, SEE facilitated a workshop for a sixth-grade class in Bridgeport to brainstorm ideas for community service projects. The group recently worked with students in Groton to generate stories about their town's senior citizens. "That was a stellar program for us," Wangaard said. "It's ethics in action."

Mixing social values with public education can be a tricky task, Wangaard admitted, because people sometimes frown upon one group setting another's moral compass. But SEE is not a religious organization, Wangaard pointed out, and it does not represent a specific religious belief through its programs. When it works with a community, it typically talks to the local adults instrumental in securing SEE's services to determine what values they hope to promote. "We help promote the local ethics of the group we're working with," Wangaard said. "It challenges the organization to identify virtues and characteristics."