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EDITORIAL OBSERVER

Digging Out Roots of Cheating in High School

By MAURA J. CASEY

Surveys show that cheating in school — plagiarism, forbidden collaboration on assignments, copying homework and cheating on exams — has soared since researchers first measured the phenomenon on a broad scale at 99 colleges in the mid-1960s.

The percentage of students who copied from another student during tests grew from 26 percent in 1963 to 52 percent in 1993, and the use of crib notes during exams went from 6 percent to 27 percent, according to a study conducted by Dr. Donald McCabe of Rutgers. By the mid-1990s, only a small minority said they had never cheated, meaning that cheating had become part of the acceptable status quo.

Dr. McCabe's later national survey of 25,000 high school students from 2001 to 2008 yielded equally depressing results: more than 90 percent said they had cheated in one way or another.

Dr. Jason Stephens of the University of Connecticut has now embarked on a three-year pilot program to reduce cheating. His premise is that honesty and integrity are not only values but habits — habits that can be encouraged in school settings, with positive benefits later in life.

The program seeks to enlist students and teachers in six high schools in promoting a culture of honesty. Schools will be asked to consider honor codes, and, since peer pressure is vitally important, students will be invited to help shape policies and strategies to discourage cheating. Two schools are suburban and wealthy, two are middle class, two are urban and poor. One school from each pair will work to end the cheating epidemic, and the other will serve as the control group.

The challenge is daunting. Students of both genders and every demographic group cheat even though they know it is wrong, a mind-set Dr. Stephens describes as “a corrosive force” — especially when it is acquired in the early years of moral development.

The fact that so many students cheat doesn't make them intrinsically bad, he says: "It's not a case of the bad seed. It's more like bad soil."

The biggest determinant is not the values that students are exposed to at home, but peer norms at school. Students are under pressure to achieve high grade-point averages, which helps them rationalize their behavior. And the schools themselves are complicit, because they reward high grades more than the process of learning — while too often turning a blind eye to the cheating. But there's hope. The 1993 study suggested that cheating dropped in schools that encouraged a culture of integrity — either by formally instituting an honor code or by stressing at every turn the importance of honesty and integrity. A follow-up study showed that dishonest business behavior was lowest among employees who had attended schools with an honor code and whose workplaces encouraged ethical behavior.

If the effort shows results, Dr. Stephens plans to enlist more schools in the hope that eventually a standardized program will be adopted throughout the state. If that happens, both students and society as a whole will profit.