

## STRICTLY STAPLES: 'ACADEMIC INTEGRITY' AND THE STAPLES STUDENT

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By: Dan Woog

John Dodig knows teenagers cheat. In his four decades in education, the Staples High School principal has seen more incidents of test-copying, plagiarism, information sharing and idea lifting than he cares to count.

Dodig also knows that cheating is not confined to the classroom. Athletes, for example, sign a "Code of Conduct" that prohibits drinking, smoking and drug use. A few know full well they do not intend to live up to it.

And Dodig knows too that some adults are complicit in their youngsters' cheating. They correct, edit – even write – their sons and daughters' papers for them. Or they add their signatures to the Athletic Code of Conduct, then host parties at which alcohol is served.

"It all adds up to a moral and ethical problem," Dodig said. "Which leads to the question: Where does a young person develop a moral code, and a sense of ethics?" He answers his own question: "At home, from parents. Through religious affiliation. In school."

The Westport public schools, Dodig said, "do our job. We teach about drinking and drugs from a very early age. We talk a lot about the importance of presenting your own work. At Staples we devote pages and hours to not only delineating our expectations, but explaining consequences."

However, Dodig said, "To think that at the high school we can eliminate cheating or plagiarism on our own – without the help of everyone in the community – is impossible."

Recently, Dodig attended a meeting organized by TEAM Westport, the first selectman's committee on multiculturalism and diversity. Clergy members discussed the need to talk about cheating more often, and more directly, with their congregations. A librarian said that issues surrounding cheating should be woven into library talks. "We need a community effort," Dodig concurred.

Staples is an important part of the community, of course. "I know there are kids who feel that if they take a test or turn in work that's their own, and they know other students are using an electronic gadget or sharing information by other means, they find it offensive. But do they turn a friend in? That's an ethical decision. Every week we face ethical decisions. Some are small, but all of them have consequences."

For several years, Staples has faced the issue of cheating head on. After a few students cheated on an Advanced Placement examination, a subcommittee of students, staff members and parents examined the feasibility of implementing an Honor Code in a public school. The group also

studied the cheating policy as outlined in the Student Handbook, and looked at ways to clarify and publicize it.

Each department addressed specific issues in the PTA newsletter. For example, the English department discussed the use of Spark Notes, plagiarism and tutors who actually write papers, while the World Language Department addressed the use of electronic translators. The newsletter also ran regular columns written by the Academic Integrity Subcommittee, addressing ethical questions from a variety of real-world perspectives.

As Staples' Collaborative Team of administrators, staff, students and parents took up the issue, it became clear that students needed to be closely involved in the process. The students on the Academic Integrity Subcommittee "really care about this topic," said chair Andrea Beebe of the special education department. "They get it. They've developed a very creative approach, and the adults are watching with amazement."

The group has rewritten and simplified the cheating policy. "It's much more cohesive and pointed now," said former chair Harry Rosvally of the science department. The policy has also been moved to a position of prominence, at the front of the Student Handbook.

But the biggest initiative kicks off April 30. On that day the committee will introduce a slogan – "Integrity Counts" – that will serve as the basis of an educational campaign. "Integrity Counts" will be shown on the "Good Morning Staples" television program, and the electronic bulletin boards. It will be announced and discussed during morning communication time.

Subcommittee members are designing postcards. One side will feature funny photos of Dodig and other administrators. The other side will provide examples of cheating – some obvious, others less so. New versions of the postcards will be handed out regularly.

In another initiative, students will be challenged to come up with "ethical questions." These will serve as the basis for ongoing discussions about cheating.

The subcommittee has spoken with Westport's two middle school principals about the program. The hope is for Staples students to initiate discussions with younger students.

Danielle Goldstein, a parent member of the subcommittee, believes strongly in the importance of its work. "Cheating is a major ethical problem," she said. "With today's technology it's easier to cheat, and harder to catch. Kids might not even realize what they're doing is unethical."

However, she said, "In a lot of ways addressing it in high school is too late. By the time kids get there, their habits and values are pretty well set." Goldstein is excited that the subcommittee is working with the middle schools. She hopes to get elementary schools involved as well.

Staples senior Jessica Tapfar has been concerned with academic integrity ever since sophomore year, when she was asked to look over a survey being designed to gain teachers' input on cheating.

"I thought it was a really important issue," she said. "As a student, I know cheating definitely happens. We want to understand it more: Why do kids do it? Do they not know the consequences? I know that in the past, it's been dealt with inconsistently – different teachers have different reactions. If everyone knows the reasons behind cheating, and they know the consequences, we can address it better."

This year, Tapfar said, "We've moved from talking about cheating, to taking steps and making progress. We've moved from discussion to action."

Yet she knows change will not be easy. "Any one thing won't make a huge difference," Tapfar said. "It takes time. I won't be here next year, but I hope the committee and Mr. Dodig stay committed to this."

Cindy Zuckerbrod, a parent who has served on the subcommittee for four years, is unsure of the program's effect. Yet, she said, "it's worth trying. If this makes a couple of kids aware that they shouldn't cheat, then we'll have accomplished something."

She is inspired by the students on the committee. "They're absolutely incredible," Zuckerbrod said. "They talk about all the pressures they feel – especially the pressure to get into a good college. It's really sad. We need a community-wide effort, but this could be a good start."

"We don't know where all this is headed," Beebe admitted. "There are lots of questions still to address: What are the most appropriate consequences for cheating? When should students' parents be involved? What if it's the parents themselves who are doing the cheating? How do you handle someone who turns himself in, and is the situation different if he does it even if no one saw him cheat? We know we can't create change immediately. But this is a start."

It is a start that, Dodig hopes, will spread to, and eventually involve, the entire community. "We'll continue to do our job at school," the principal pledged. "But without help from the entire village, nothing will change."

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