Leading with Integrity
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The cheating scandals reported in the news this summer highlight the need for our country to educate an ethical citizenry. Public education was founded with this purpose in mind. The goal then and now is to resist the practices of corruption, which can lead to anarchy and the call to re-establish a monarchy. When our teachers and administrators are cheating to improve standardized test scores, we undermine our moral authority to lead with integrity.

This essay isn't meant to "pile on" the folks who got caught up in these cheating scandals. I don't excuse their behavior, but recognize the larger cultural issues that grip our society. We live in a time where cheating is almost normative. The intent here is to use the headlines to leverage a concern that integrity is a character quality that educators, students and parents alike can rally around to resist adult and student cheating and build an ethical learning community.

The pressures that educators face are really no different than those cited by students as reasons for their cheating behavior. These justifications include: the pressure to demonstrate measurable achievement (with both incentives and consequences); the negative peer pressure to cover up cheating; and the lack of perceived fairness in school. Regardless of justifications, cheating should be identified as a moral failure that compromises our integrity.

Much damage is done when we (students or adults) allow any pressures to compromise our integrity and cheat. Authentic learning and measurement of learning is compromised. Trust is violated and trust is the bedrock of meaningful collaborations. Cheating leads to more cheating and undermines any attempt to build an ethical community. Ultimately, when our personal character is weakened by cheating, we become vulnerable to future ethical compromises.

As the adult cheating stories are hitting the papers this summer, it is useful to recall student statistics regarding academic dishonesty. In a recent national survey of 40,000 high school students completed by the Josephson Institute, almost 60 percent of students reported cheating on exams. Similarly, The School for Ethical Education surveyed more than 3,000 students in the northeast and 95 percent of them reported some form of cheating during the most recent school year.

Our interviews with students have revealed that a majority of the kids are frustrated with the cheating that takes place in schools. My re-introduction to this topic was during a CEP National Schools of Character (NSOC) site visit where the students and faculty were justifiably proud of the student/faculty committee they had established to resist cheating in their high school. In interviews about their integrity committee, it was clear that students were the driving force to take action in the promotion of academic integrity. In 2010, CEP added specific statements regarding academic integrity to the NSOC standards.

There are steps that school leaders (administration, faculty, students and parents) can take that support CEP's NSOC process and specifically focus on academic integrity. The first is to acknowledge that academic dishonesty is a real problem in schools. The next step is to set clear and published goals to advance academic integrity. This requires the effort of a team of school leaders, which should include students. Yes, another committee, but there is really no way around the requirement for a team to work together on this problem.

We've recommended in a recently published academic integrity toolkit that an academic integrity committee (AIC) can study the local issues associated with cheating and then suggest strategies to build more awareness and support for integrity. The AIC can be a sub-committee of a broader character-education initiative.

Additional steps an AIC can pursue to advance integrity and an ethical learning community include the following:
- Identify and publish core ethical values that support academic integrity,
- Take specific steps to develop adult and student ethical awareness, judgment, commitment, and action in relation to integrity,
- Measure student attitudes and self-reported behaviors regarding cheating,
- Encourage teachers to support strategies to resist cheating and support integrity.

There is a critical need for school leadership (including students) to take up the challenge to lead with integrity. Ethical leadership is essential in support of an ethical learning community and academic integrity. An ethical learning community will also support other prosocial benefits such as helping students resist bullying and promoting healthy student lifestyle choices. Leading with integrity is thus suggested as an intentional and well-publicized goal. No one is perfect, but the authentic pursuit of integrity in leadership provides an excellent foundation in support of academic integrity and the historical mission of public schools—an ethical citizenry.

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