

News and Features from the National Education Association

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**What Can Be Done About Student Cheating?**

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*It’s not exactly breaking news that students cheat in school. Whether it’s the student who peeks at crib notes during a test or another who can’t keep his eyes from drifting over to a classmate’s paper – schools have always had to deal with cheaters on some level. But is student cheating merely a nuisance or has it become a serious problem?*

NEA Today *recently spoke with Dr. Denise Pope, senior lecturer at the Stanford University School of Education and co-founder of Challenge Success, an organization that works with schools and families to improve student well-being and engagement with learning.* [***Challenge Success recently released a white paper***](http://www.challengesuccess.org/Portals/0/Docs/ChallengeSuccess-AcademicIntegrity-WhitePaper.pdf) *about cheating in schools that delves into the reasons why student cheat, misconceptions around the issue and some successful preventive strategies.*

**How prevalent is student cheating?**

Student cheating is very serious. According to many studies, in between 80 and 95 percent percent of high school students admitted to cheating at least once in the past year and 75 percent admitted to cheating four or more times. The research goes back 15 years but that’s the highest it’s ever been. In the mid-1990s, it was around 60 percent. Cheating happens in every school.

One bit of encouraging news is that the Josephson Institute of Ethics released a survey a couple of weeks ago found that students who had cheated on one exam in the past year dropped quite a bit. We might re-survey in the spring and hopefully find something similar but it could just be noise. Too soon to tell.

**Who are the students who cheat?**

You have the obvious example – students who are struggling and don’t understand the work. One of the big misconceptions, however, is that it is only these struggling students who cheat, when in fact studies show that high-achieving students cheat almost as much as other students.

We haven’t found that there are discernible gender differences. Many assume that boys are more likely to cheat than girls because they’re more competitive, but the research actually doesn’t support that. Cheating is also more likely as the student moves through the system so the problem is more common in middle and high school than in elementary.

**Is access to technology leading to more cheating?**

Not necessarily. Student cheating has taken on many new forms. It’s not just wandering eyes or notes copied on a hand, and technology certainly provides more opportunities without a doubt – plagiarizing from the Internet, using cell phones during tests, etc. But what we found is that while these technologies provide many more avenues for students to cheat, so far its not clear that these technologies has actually led to an increase in cheating overall.

**In the Challenge Success white paper, you say students cheat because they believe that only grades and test scores are valued in the school, not mastery of the subject.  This causes them to devalue the education they’re receiving. Can changing assessment systems significantly reduce the problem?**

Students cheat for a number of reasons. They cheat because everybody else is doing it, they cheat because they have too much work to do and not enough time to do it. They’re under pressure and they see cheating around them everywhere – sports stars, movie stars, Wall Street. These are very powerful cultural factors that influence students’ behavior. So the culture of cheating in our society is formidable even if you took one single factor out of the equation. Nonetheless, I think the testing culture in schools plays a role. There’s pressure from the teacher, there’s pressure from the parents. There’s a reason they call them “high-stakes.” Some schools fudge the numbers because they know their money depends on these scores. All this gets conveyed to the student.

Student are less likely to cheat if they believe that their school values real mastery of a subject, as opposed to an overemphasis on rote memorization or how you do on a test.

Changing assessments is not easy, but it is one of our  top recommendations. At least schools should use multiple measures, different ways for students to show what they know. We should be allowing kids on assignments to produce multiple drafts, to revise and iterate, which is what happens in the real world anyway. We need to find new ways to determine and develop student skills.

**Does Common Core move schools in that direction?**

I’m encouraged by what I hear and read about the new standards’ emphasis on performance-based assessments. They’re not complete yet, but it sounds like it’s moving in the right direction. And you do see more professional development around teaching for subject mastery. So the trend looks good, but it’s going take a while.

**Since systemic change can be such a long and arduous process, what are some of the more immediate potential solutions schools can take to address the cheating problem?**

A major one is the need for schools to dialogue. Student cheating is a taboo subject – many schools just don’t want to talk about it. One of the big misconceptions is that “That’s not a problem at our school!” when in fact it occurs everywhere. And people think if they don’t talk about it, then it won’t happen. But admitting cheating exists in your schools is a big first step and there’s strong evidence that, at least at the college level, honor codes are useful.  There are now a lot honor codes that are being developed at the high school and middle school level. If you talk about it, admit there’s a problem, come up with a way to show it won’t be tolerated, and have everyone sign onto doing something about it, cheating can be curbed.

**What can teachers do?**

There are a lot of individual strategies that teachers can take to stop cheating or catch cheating right before it happens, but we focus on a more a preventive course – creating a climate of caring in the classroom. Of course teachers care about kids, but students have to *perceive* it. Do you know the name of every child in your classroom? Do you know their interests, do you take the time to answer every question? If not, that’s not a climate of care and not a fertile ground for learning. We found that students who really believe they belong in the classroom and really feel teacher support are less likely to cheat.

**How about parents?**

Everybody has to be part of the solution. Parents can do a lot of what we ask of teachers – emphasize high standards for honesty, make it clear that cheating is unacceptable. Parents can help foster that sense of belonging in school by encouraging school activities and other ways to focus on the positive aspects of school.  Also, they should also think about changing how they talk about grades with their children – especially in the way parents compare their kids to how others do.

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