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Exposing the Cheat Sheet, With the Students' Aid

By JANE GROSS

ESTPORT, Conn., Nov. 19 — A Crystal Rock water bottle is Exhibit A in a campaign to reduce cheating here at Staples High School, a bastion of affluence, academic achievement and unrelenting pressure to succeed.

The label of the bottle had been peeled off, the history of atomic theory printed on the back and the label restored in preparation for a chemistry test. The test taker hoped for a handy crib sheet — indeed, it was even magnified by the water. But it also turned out to be easily visible to the teacher, who was more alert than he was at this time last year and gave the student a failing grade.

Cheating was not often discussed here until last spring, when two incidents forced Westport to confront a problem that exists all over the country and is growing worse every year. First, the school newspaper ran a student essay denouncing "epidemic cheating."

"It's part of the routine," the essay said. "Wake up, come to school, cheat." A day later, two students were caught cheating on an Advanced Placement history exam, one by opening the test booklet early and the other by peeking at a neighbor's work.

John J. Brady, the high school principal, decided to make a campaign against cheating a centerpiece of the academic year, expecting resistance from all quarters. But to his surprise, he found students relieved to have the subject out in the open, eager to help him stamp out behavior that they said was driven by a frenzied competition to get into an Ivy League school.

"The students used the word 'contagious,'" Dr. Brady said. "If they knew the kid next to them was doing it, and winding up with a higher grade-point average, it was difficult not to participate. If you look at it a certain way, it's a reasonable response to a set of unreasonable expectations. But the students told me they'd had enough of it. They want it to stop. They need adults to take it seriously."

At first, parents and teachers doubted the extent of the problem, Dr. Brady said. But he is chipping away at that resistance, with help from the students who have joined him at PTA and faculty meetings to explain how it all works: calculators loaded with computerized

study guides like CliffsNotes, electronic messages exchanged between students taking the same exam during different periods, and physics homework parceled out between friends.

The meetings have been emotional, with long debates about the reasons and remedies for cheating. Are parents' expectations unreasonably high and thus a goad to dishonesty? Are the students overscheduled with a full load of Advanced Placement classes, extracurricular activities and community service?

What about a Board of Education that wants more and more Advanced Placement offerings and posts schoolwide SAT scores on its Internet home page? Or a student newspaper that lists graduating seniors and the colleges they will attend?

Glenn Thrope, a senior, wrote the newspaper essay in May, expressing disgust with what he described as his classmates' "upside down" priorities, their "ruthless" pursuit of grades "over knowledge."

His indignation was shared by Aaron Eisman, also a senior, who said the rampant cheating was "illegitimizing what I do." Aaron, with no prompting, prepared an analysis of the problem for the principal: what sort of Staples student is a hard-core cheater, what sort is just going along for the ride and how can the school turn around the much larger second group?

Aaron's computerized slide-show was shown to the school's governing committee late last spring. Next he gathered friends to research honor codes and devise one of their own, to supplement the existing academic integrity policy, which kicks in only on the rare occasion a cheater is caught. That draft code, and many other remedies for cheating, are under discussion by a committee of students, teachers, administrators and parents.

Aaron — well groomed, well spoken and already planning for medical school — said that catching all cheaters and punishing them is unrealistic. Rather he hoped to change the attitude of "students on the fence" and "make it socially unacceptable." Even that, he said, may be hard. "Expectations are set here, externally and internally. In Westport, getting a B is like getting an F. So if you don't feel you can achieve it on your own, you find another way."

Some students said the adults around them willingly turned a blind eye to the problem. "The biggest problem is that the adults don't want to believe it," said Clayton Goodgame, a junior.

Students describe unrelenting pressure to achieve. Alicia Berenyi, a junior, cited the annual list of seniors and where they were headed. "If it's not Harvard, Yale or Princeton, you get that look," she said, less from fellow students than from parents or other adults. "It's almost like they think it's proof of what kind of person you are."

There is ample statistical evidence of the explosion of cheating in high school. Michael S. Josephson, who runs an ethics institute in Los Angeles, found in 2002 that 74 percent of

10,000 high school students surveyed nationwide had cheated on a test in the previous 12 months, up from 61 percent 10 years earlier. Donald McCabe, a Rutgers University professor, published similar findings in 2001: of 4,500 high school students, 75 percent had cheated at least once on a test, up from 50 percent in 1993 and 25 percent in 1963.

Neither of these researchers had data that isolated rich teenagers from poor. Yet both were convinced of a correlation. "There is no doubt in my mind that students who come from privileged backgrounds develop a certain entitlement mentality," Mr. McCabe said. "Also they are under much greater pressure from their parents on the college admissions issue."

Mr. Josephson, who said high-end schools generally turn a blind eye to cheating, agreed. "I don't think this is a generation of moral mutants," he said. "What's changed is parenting. If you catch their kid cheating they threaten a lawsuit."

One researcher, Suniya S. Luthar, a developmental psychologist at Teachers College at Columbia University, has made a specialty of affluent teenagers, whom she describes sympathetically as "a truly miserable group of kids." Dr. Luthar has spent the last several years surveying students in Westport, where the median family income is \$152,894 and the town's one high school, with 1,400 students, is among the top-ranked in the country. Her recent papers, published in the journal *Child Development*, report higher rates of depression, anxiety, binge drinking and cheating in the children of the rich, which she attributes to two causes: pressure to achieve and a lack of meaningful contact with adults.

Dr. Brady, the principal at Staples, said he proceeded gingerly with the parents, taking articles about corporate dishonesty and college-level cheating to a recent PTA meeting to show this was not only Westport's problem. The subject drew two dozen parents to the library, the same two dozen who Dr. Brady says always show up, whether the topic is school construction or substance abuse.

One parent asked, "Am I doing something wrong if I proofread a paper?" Another wondered if the cooperative work the school encouraged was confusing students about helping one another with homework. A third suggested the restoration of ethics in the curriculum, eliminated "when politically correct things came into play."

This group was thoughtful and not the least defensive. And Dr. Brady was careful not to criticize the no-shows. But one psychologist who works in the district said that perhaps 20 percent of the parents here resist all suggestions that anything is amiss with their children and that some threaten to sue over any disciplinary measure that might mar a college transcript.

The response from teachers, Dr. Brady said, has been more lethargic, and he is not sure why. But there are some encouraging developments. One sophomore English teacher recently assigned Ethan Canin's short story "The Palace Thief," the basis for the movie "The Emperor's Club," which deals with cheating. The math teachers met last week to discuss the possibility of having a set of classroom calculators, so students cannot load

them with inappropriate software. Many teachers have stopped giving the same tests in different periods.

The committee considering an honor code has mixed views about whether it is a good idea. The members are going slowly, setting an agenda. But the student members are excited by the prospect of being pioneers, an example for schools in Scarsdale, Greenwich or Short Hills.

"The idea that we could catalyze change in other communities made a big impression on me," said Alicia, the junior. "More schools should openly admit what's going on. I think it paints a great picture of our town that we're doing this."

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