

200 parents pack meeting on cheating at Saratoga High CONCERNS VOICED ABOUT INTEGRITY, EFFECT OF DISCIPLINE

By Kamika Dunlap, Mercury News

In the wake of recent cheating scandals at Saratoga High School, Principal Kevin Skelly told a crowd of parents at a packed meeting Thursday that academic integrity must be taught in two places: at school and at home.

"I think there is a great pressure on our kids, and we want them to be successful and have material rewards," Skelly said. "But I think what we really want for them is to have strength and character to handle whatever comes their way."

About 200 people attended the meeting in the school library, where parents seemed to share the principal's concern.

"We have raised the bar up, and kids are very nervous and anxious," said Steve Tilles, father of a Saratoga senior. "I think competition for grades is extreme for all students and that grade inflation has raised anxiety."

The meeting was held to address recent news that a small group of students at the school allegedly used tiny computer devices to find teacher passwords and steal English department tests and answers.

Expulsion hearings for two of the students involved begin today at the Los Gatos-Saratoga high school district.

Three other students are being investigated, one for allegedly breaking into a school computer and trying to change a grade, and two for allegedly stealing a printed test and saved electronic copies.

Parents of several of the students involved have hired attorneys, officials said.

At the meeting, some parents voiced sympathy for the students implicated in the cheating scandals. Though they may have done wrong, the next five years of their lives could be ruined, said Isabelle Tennenbaum.

Others said cheaters deserved to be punished. And some were simply worried about the expulsion process.

"I don't even know what to tell my son, and I'm very troubled," said Madeline Morrow, mother of a senior. "I think it's really important kids and parents have confidence in the process."

Skelly emphasized that the board's hearings would be fair and thorough. "We have a real responsibility to have a system that kids believe in, and no one has an advantage."

Saratoga High School holds a top rank for Academic Performance Index scores, at 900 points for the 2002-03 school year out of 1,000 possible, and a Scholastic Aptitude Test average score of 1272.

Students answering an anonymous survey about cheating alerted officials to the incidents. Officials have not named the students involved.

The breach forces school officials to create new tests. In addition, they are reviewing whether the cheating affected grades.