

What We Do

At Challenge Success, we believe that our society has become too focused on grades, test scores and performance, leaving little time and energy for our kids to become resilient, successful, meaningful contributors for the 21st century. So every day, we provide families and schools with the practical research-based tools they need to raise healthy, motivated kids. Success, after all, is measured not at the end of the semester, but over the course of a lifetime.

The next generation will face global, economic, and social challenges that we cannot even imagine. What are the skills our children will need in this uncertain future? Above all else, they will need to be creative, collaborative, adaptable critical thinkers. Our current hyper-focus on grades, individual achievement and rote answers gets in the way of healthy emotional development and a real love of learning, and it also prevents students from acquiring the exact skills that the new global economy demands.

Founded at Stanford University, Challenge Success offers research-based courses, conferences, and presentations for educators to develop school and classroom policies that encourage students to reach their individual potential, develop their talents and interests, and remain enthusiastic learners. We provide tools for parents to help children regain their balance, strengthen their sense of self, improve their physical health, and learn how to deal effectively with the inevitable challenges of life. For more information, see <http://www.challengesuccess.org>.

Challenge Success

2012

Cheat or Be Cheated? What We Know About Academic Integrity in Middle & High Schools & What We Can Do About It

Stories of cheating in schools often make local and national headlines, but just how big of a problem is cheating, and what, if anything, can be done about it? To answer these questions, we draw upon our own work at Challenge Success, along with key studies on academic integrity in K-12 education from the last fifteen years. We organize the paper around five common misconceptions about cheating in order to explore the scope of the problem, the reasons why students cheat, and what we know about how to prevent cheating behavior.

Misconception #1: Cheating isn't a problem at my kid's school

Many people are surprised to hear just how prevalent cheating is among high school students. Several studies indicate that between 80 and 95% of high-school students admit to engaging in some form of cheating. In 2010, the Josephson Institute of Ethics surveyed 43,000 students from both public and private high schools and asked them about their cheating behaviors. They found that 59% of students surveyed admitted to having cheated on a test in the past year, and more than 80% of students admitted to having copied another student's homework (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2010). In another recent study, Wangaard and Stephens (2011) surveyed 3,600 high school students and found that 95% reported engaging in some sort of cheating during the previous year. In addition, O'Rourke and her colleagues (2010) found that 89.7% of the

college freshmen they surveyed admitted to cheating within the last semester of high school, and in a study of more than 2,000 high-school students across the country, McCabe (2001) found similarly high percentages of students who admitted to cheating. In his study, 86% of students surveyed admitted to letting another student copy their homework, 77% of students admitted to getting answers or test questions ahead of time, and 76% of students admitted to collaborating with others when they were asked not to.

Research suggests that the most common types of cheating that students admit to are copying another student's work, allowing another student to copy work, getting questions or answers from someone prior to a test, and working collaboratively when asked not to (McCabe, 2001; Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2010; O'Rourke et al., 2010). Challenge Success researchers, using a similar instrument to McCabe's, surveyed over 1,400 high-school students and found similarly high rates of cheating (Challenge Success, 2011): 97% of the students admitted to cheating at least one time in the past year, and 75% admitted to cheating 4 or more times in the past year. We also found that 26% admitted to being "repeat offenders" – that is, these students admitted to cheating multiple times in a variety of ways (Conner, Galloway, & Pope, 2009). These studies show that, unfortunately, cheating is a problem in many schools, with many students admitting to multiple forms of academic dishonesty.

Misconception #2: Kids cheat in the same ways today as they did in the past

When people think of cheating, they often envision crib sheets and wandering eyes during tests. Although these practices are still quite common, both the research and our experience in schools suggest that cheating has evolved to take on many different forms. Some common cheating behaviors that researchers have studied recently include: giving and receiving test answers, copying homework or other assignments, turning in work completed by someone else, plagiarizing word for word, presenting information without citing a source, collaborating when asked to work alone, turning in a paper from a "term-paper mill" or website, and fabricating data (McCabe, 2001; O'Rourke et al., 2010). In addition, in our experience in schools we have seen students cheat in many other premeditated ways, including: writing answers on the inside labels of water bottles or the soles of tennis shoes, hiding textbooks in bathroom stalls and then using a bathroom "pass" during the exam, and paying students who took the exam in an early period to leak the questions to a student who is scheduled to take the test later that same day.

The research suggests that using technology for cheating is also on the rise. Although we don't know whether technology has actually led to an increase in cheating, there is clear evidence that it has opened up new avenues for cheating. Common uses of technology for cheating include plagiarizing from the internet,

Five common misconceptions about cheating

1 Cheating isn't a problem at my kid's school.

2 Kids cheat in the same ways today as they did in the past.

3 Only kids who struggle in school cheat.

4 Students who cheat don't know right from wrong.

5 Cheating is unpredictable.

using cell phones to look up questions during tests, programming answers into calculators without permission, changing grades on the school computer system, and giving or receiving information about exams through cell phones (e.g. sending pictures of questions or texting). In an online survey with more than 1,000 teenage students, the Benenson Strategy Group (2009) found that 35% of teens who had cell phones reported having used them to cheat at least once, and 65% said that they were aware that others in their school cheat by using cell phones. In addition, 52% of the students surveyed reported that they had cheated using the internet. Online cheating behaviors appear to be worse among high-school students than college students. In a large-scale survey study, McCabe (2001) reported that while 52% of high-school students admitted to plagiarizing from the internet, only 10% of the college students he surveyed admitted to doing so.

Misconception #3: Only kids who struggle in school cheat

Many people assume that cheating is an act of desperation committed by students who can't do the work. The research suggests that it's not that simple. Although some studies have found that cheating is more common among students with lower academic performance (Finn & Frone, 2004; McCabe, Treviño & Butterfield, 2001), other studies find that cheating is also very prevalent among high achieving students (Honz, Kiewra & Yang, 2010; Educational Testing Service, 1999). In fact, in 1998, Who's Who Among American High School Students conducted a survey of more than 3,000 of the nation's high-achieving high-school students and found that 80% of them admitted to having cheated on a test to get ahead in school (Who's Who Among American High School Students, 1998 as cited in Strom & Strom, 2007; Educational Testing Service, 1999). In addition, when Taylor, Pogrebin and Dodge (2002) conducted interviews with high-school juniors and seniors in Advanced Placement classes and the International Baccalaureate program from six different high schools, the majority of students interviewed said that they were aware that cheating was common among their peers and that they occasionally cheated themselves.

Students are not all equally likely to cheat. Research shows that cheating becomes more commonplace as students move through their K-12 education. Rates of self-reported cheating are fairly low in elementary school, then increase in middle school and peak in high school before showing slight declines in college (Anderman & Midgley, 2004; Murdock, Hale & Weber, 2001; Jensen, Arnett, Feldman & Cauffman, 2002). However, many commonplace assumptions about who cheats are not supported by the research. For example, it is commonly assumed that boys cheat more than girls, and current research does not support this assumption (McCabe, Treviño & Butterfield, 2001; Murdock, Hale & Weber, 2001; Anderman & Midgley, 2004). Similarly, findings about cheating in public versus private school are mixed, with some researchers finding a difference in cheating rates and others finding that all students showed similarly high levels of cheating regardless of school type (Bruggeman & Hart, 1996; McCabe, 2001).

Misconception #4: Students who cheat don't know right from wrong

Many people assume that high rates of cheating indicate that students either don't realize that what they are doing is cheating or don't realize that cheating is wrong. The research doesn't fully support this assumption. In a study of 3,600 students from six diverse high schools, Wangaard and Stephens (2011) found that more than half of the students who admitted to cheating also admitted to knowing that cheating was wrong. Similarly, Honz, Kiewra, and Yang (2010) surveyed 100 high-school juniors at a Midwestern high school on their perceptions of what constituted cheating. They found that, although most of the students perceived that the majority of the target behaviors around test taking and homework did constitute cheating, most students admitted they were cheating in these ways.

Students give many reasons for cheating even when they believe the behavior is wrong. To explore these rationalizations, Stephens and Nicholson (2008) interviewed a sample of nine middle- and high-school students who said cheating was wrong but chose to cheat anyway. The rationalizations students used for the discrepancy between their beliefs and their

behaviors included feeling unable to do the work, feeling bored by the work and feeling pressure to do well.

Other studies show that students perceive different forms of cheating to be more serious than others. For example, Honz and colleagues (2010) found that students perceived cheating actions that still required the student to put forth some effort (e.g. giving someone the test question but not the answer) to be less dishonest than cheating that did not require effort. They also perceived giving information to be less dishonest than receiving it. Students in this study also rated cheating behaviors that happened inside the classroom as more serious than ones that occurred outside the classroom. For example, students responded that it was more serious to cheat on a test in class than on a take-home exam (Honz et al., 2010).

In addition, students may think differently about cheating depending on the motive. Jensen, Arnett, Feldman and Cauffman (2002) surveyed 490 high-school and college students (aged 14-23) and found that students saw cheating as most acceptable when it was for pro-social reasons (e.g. if a student copied homework that she didn't have time to finish because she was caring for a family member), and least acceptable when it was for purely individualistic motives (e.g. to see if the student could get away with it). These findings show that students give all sorts of reasons and excuses for cheating, including using "neutralizing attitudes" (e.g. "everybody else is doing it") to justify their actions (O'Rourke et al., 2010). Knowing that cheating is wrong does not seem to deter the behavior.

Misconception #5: Cheating is unpredictable

Although no one can say with certainty which students will or will not cheat, research suggests that there are some key predictors of cheating. First, the research suggests that students' perceptions of their classroom values and norms matter. Specifically, students cheat more when they believe that grades and performance are valued in their classrooms, and they cheat less when they believe that learning and mastery are valued. In a study of 285 students from an urban middle school, Anderman, Griesinger, and Westerfield (1998) found that when students

perceived an external reward for doing well (for example, they could earn a privilege for doing their work well), they saw cheating as more justifiable and cheated more often. In addition, when students thought that their schools valued performance goals (e.g. grades and test scores) on the whole, they were more likely to both justify and engage in cheating. Anderman and Midgley (2004) found similar results: when students moved from math classes that emphasized performance to classes that emphasized mastery, students' self-reports of cheating went down; when they moved from classrooms that valued mastery to those they perceived as valuing performance, cheating increased. Similarly, in a study of 204 ninth- and tenth-grade students, Murdock, Miller and Kohlhardt (2004) had students read hypothetical scenarios in which teachers either valued performance (grades, test scores, etc.) or mastery (learning, continual improvement, etc.) and found that students saw cheating as both more likely and more justified when the classroom focused on performance.

Students' perceptions of their teachers can also affect cheating behavior. When students perceive that they have a competent teacher, they report less cheating and see cheating as less justified (Murdock, Hale & Weber, 2001). In addition, when students perceive that their teachers care about them, they are less likely to cheat. For example, Murdock, Miller and Kohlhardt (2004) found that high-school students believed that cheating was both more justified and more likely in hypothetical scenarios in which the teacher showed low levels of caring about the students. However, students' perceptions about teacher caring only mattered when they also perceived that the teacher was competent. When students were given scenarios where the teaching was poor, they justified cheating regardless of how much they thought the teacher cared. Challenge Success surveys show similar results. Findings from more than 9,000 middle- and high-school students indicate that the more teacher support students feel, the less likely they are to report having cheated in the past year (Challenge Success, 2009; Conner et al., 2009).

In addition, students' feelings about themselves

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matter. When students feel concerned about their academic capabilities or expect poor outcomes, they are more likely to cheat. In one study, researchers surveyed 495 middle-school students and found that self-reports of cheating behavior were associated with feelings of self-doubt about academic capabilities (Murdock et al., 2001). In another study, Finn and Frone (2004) surveyed 315 full-time students between 16- and 19-years old and found the same thing: students who reported low feelings of competence and capability were more likely to cheat. They also found that students who valued school and its outcomes and felt that they belonged in school (factors that they called “school identification”) reported less cheating regardless of how they were doing in school (Finn & Frone, 2004).

What students’ think their peers are doing also matters. Research suggests that when students perceive that their peers cheat, they are more likely to cheat themselves. In one study, researchers gave students both surveys to rate their own behavior and fictional scenarios involving cheating to read and evaluate. They found that both in reality and in fictional scenarios, when students were aware of other students cheating, they saw cheating as more acceptable and were more likely to cheat themselves. This effect held regardless of students’ pre-existing opinions about cheating or the rationale for cheating that was given (e.g. whether a student cheated for pro-social or selfish reasons). Only students with very strong anti-cheating beliefs were unaffected by peer behavior (O’Rourke et al., 2010). Peer influence effects have been replicated in several other studies, although generally with college students (McCabe et al., 2001). However, a few small-scale studies with middle- and high-school

students suggest that peers are important to cheating decisions in high school as well (Eisenberg, 2004; McCabe, 1999). McCabe (1999) conducted two focus groups with nineteen high-school students and found that perceptions that cheating was common were correlated with feeling less guilty about cheating oneself. Challenge Success surveys yield similar results. Middle- and high-school students who report more frequent cheating themselves are also more likely to report having seen other students cheat as well as rate more cheating behaviors as “trivial” (Challenge Success, 2009).

Finally, feelings of achievement pressure matter. Taylor, Pogrebin and Dodge (2002) conducted interviews with high achieving high-school juniors and seniors, and found that students in the study attributed decisions to cheat to the pressure they felt from parents, teachers, and their peers; to feeling overloaded with school work; and to the pressure they felt to get into elite colleges. Similarly, when middle-school students were given fictional scenarios about cheating, Eisenberg (2004) found that students approved more of copying others’ work when an exam was seen as important. Challenge Success researchers found that students cite trying to “get ahead,” and getting into the “right” college, along with a school culture that is “overly focused on achievement” as justifications for cheating on tests and assignments (Challenge Success, 2009). And qualitative findings from a similar sample of high-achieving students links cheating behavior to feelings of parental pressure, exhaustion, and work overload (Pope, 2001).

What does Challenge Success recommend?

Given the high rates of cheating across many groups and settings, and the various rationales that students use for their cheating behavior, it may seem impossible to promote a climate of academic integrity in K-12 schools. Based on our review of the research and our own experiences working with Challenge Success schools, we know it is not easy but indeed possible to make a difference. We offer the following suggestions to help curb cheating behavior and encourage integrity.

What Educators Can Do:

- **Strive for school-wide buy-in for integrity and honest academic practices**

Launch school-wide discussions and dialogue about expectations for integrity and encourage students, parents, and educators to work together to establish clear and consistent policies for handling academic integrity infractions. Some schools create honor codes -- a school-wide agreement about ethical behavior-- that parents sign at the beginning of the year and students sign each time they turn in an assignment, quiz, or exam. Honor codes used at the college level have successfully lowered rates of cheating (McCabe, Treviño & Butterfield, 2001).

- **Emphasize mastery and learning rather than performance and grades**

With the current focus on high-stakes testing, we realize that this is easier said than done, but research clearly shows the benefits, including reduced rates of cheating and higher achievement, when students focus on learning the material in-depth and mastering skills, instead of just learning something because it will be on the test tomorrow. One good way to focus on mastery is to encourage problem- and project-based learning where students have some choice over the content and can demonstrate their knowledge in multiple ways. When students turn in drafts of papers and projects, and you monitor their progress over time, they are less likely to cheat on the assignments.

- **Establish a climate of care in your classroom**

When students perceive that the teacher knows them as individuals, cares about them, and cares about integrity, they are less likely to cheat. Focusing on students' social and emotional learning can improve the climate of the classroom and school, and can lead to several related benefits, including students who feel like they belong, are more competent, and want to put in the effort to do well (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011) – all characteristics that are related to lower cheating rates.

- **Revise assessment and grading policies**

Instead of relying predominantly on unit tests, which may increase the pressure to cheat due to their high-stakes, try using different ways to determine students' knowledge and skills, offering them more opportunities to shine. A mix of essays, projects, presentations, diagrams, etc., along with traditional tests and quizzes, may more accurately reflect a student's knowledge and can reduce the anxiety (and subsequent urge to cheat) that may come from major exams. Schools have also reduced cheating by revising their policies on late work, eliminating "zeros" and class rankings, and allowing test corrections and occasional ungraded assignments. Finally, some teachers use multiple versions of tests and software programs that check for plagiarism as ways to deter cheaters.

- **Reduce workload without reducing rigor**

Since research shows that stressed-out and exhausted students may be more likely to cheat, schools may want to abide by the "less is more" rule. Determine how much homework is really necessary to assign and be sure that students understand the purpose of each assignment. Check out the Challenge Success paper on homework, "[Changing the Conversation About Homework from Quantity and Achievement to Quality and Engagement](#)", for more information on how to make homework more effective. And avoid scheduling multiple tests and projects during the same time period, so students have enough time to study and complete their work without feeling the need to cut corners.

What Parents Can Do:

- **Model integrity and maintain high standards for honesty**
Students hear about integrity infractions all the time – in school, in the media, and in their communities. Discuss with your child the importance of integrity. Emphasize that your family values honest and ethical behavior and that cheating will not be tolerated.
- **Watch how you talk about grades**
Many students tell us that they know that cheating is wrong, but they don't want to let their parents down by bringing home a low grade. Instead of asking, "How did you do on the test?" – which emphasizes grades and performance – ask if they felt prepared for the exam and if it accurately measured their understanding. This can be a way to open up discussion about what the student might do differently next time. Emphasize and praise effort and persistence. And resist the urge to compare your child's grades and test scores with others. This may send the message that you care more about the grade than the learning.
- **Avoid using external rewards for schoolwork**
Some parents offer rewards such as money or privileges for students who complete their work and bring home good grades. This may reinforce the importance of grades without an emphasis on mastery and effort. A focus on intrinsic motivation -- doing something to satisfy curiosity, find enjoyment, and a feeling of pride after exerting effort -- typically yields better results and fewer incidents of cheating.
- **Encourage positive school identity/belonging**
Students who are more engaged in school and feel like they belong are less likely to cheat. Encourage your student to get involved with school activities, seek friends at school, and get to know teachers and administrators. Accentuate the positive aspects of school and help your child to get interested in the classes and lessons.
- **Respond appropriately if your child is accused of cheating**
If your child is accused of cheating, resist the immediate urge to take a side or lose your temper. Ask your child to explain his/her side of the story and schedule an appointment with the teacher and administrator or counselor at the school to hear their accounts. Seek consensus about what occurred and the appropriate steps to be taken. Emphasize that you will not tolerate cheating, and try to brainstorm more positive coping strategies with your child. Throughout the process, remind your child that you love him/her no matter what, and use the incident as an important learning moment.

For Further Information

Challenge Success offers parenting classes and professional development workshops that discuss academic integrity, as well as other issues that concern parents and schools. Please consider making a donation to Challenge Success to support our work so that we can continue to keep you informed on important issues such as integrity. For more information please visit us at <http://www.challengesuccess.org>.

Other Resources

- The School for Ethical Education's Integrity Works curriculum: Aimed at reducing cheating in grades 8-12. Includes an 85-page list of abstracts of articles on academic integrity.
- Challenge Success video case study on academic integrity: View a short case study of how one school reduced cheating infractions from 38 to 7 and plagiarism infractions from 50 to 11 in just one year.
- Josephson Institute Center for Ethics "Character Counts" Curriculum: Offers lessons for teachers and tips for parents on helping youth make ethical decisions.
- International Center for Academic Integrity: Offers research and conferences to combat academic dishonesty in higher education.

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