

The Education Series: Academic Dishonesty AKA “cheating”

David Kristofferson from The Highlands · 4 Feb 2016

© 2016 David Kristofferson: <http://www.kristutoring.com>

I have about five installments left in this series on issues in education including this article on the cheating problem in schools. As I have alluded to several times earlier, the problem is directly related to the need to get outstanding grades in order to succeed in the highly competitive college admission process.

First, though, a humorous preamble before we tackle a grim situation.

My wife was a former high school math teacher who eventually left the field and went into public accounting. When she heard that I was thinking of returning to teaching, she advised me that I had better try substitute teaching first. Substituting would be my “trial by fire;” if that didn’t do me in, the rest would be easy.

To be a substitute teacher, one must pass the first criterion - having a pulse. Secondly, one must know how to take attendance - pronouncing foreign names can be daunting! Finally, one must pass the ultimate hurdle of the CBEST test which determines if one can read and also add up a column of numbers by hand while chewing bubble gum and balancing a ball on one’s nose. After shedding several pounds due to worry and intense preparation for this exam, I eeked through and attained my lofty goal.

I signed up with the San Mateo Union High School District (SMUHSD) in early February 2010 and was placed on the telephone alert system. Around 5 AM the first morning, my phone rang. The recorded “female” computerized voice cheerfully told me that I was needed to substitute for girls PE at San Mateo High School.

“Press 1 to accept this job. Press 2 to mute howling laughter and go back to sleep.”

SMUHSD has (had?) a computerized substitute system that had the capability to consider a sub’s academic subject expertise to make assignments, but this feature was not implemented. The goal was clearly to get a body into a class as quickly as possible to keep order and take attendance. Everything else was secondary. Unless a teacher who will be absent requests a sub who he/she knows can teach a particular subject (I’m not sure how often such an effort is made), the staffing choice will be made almost randomly by this system (at that time it ran down the list of names alphabetically until someone accepted the job). This system of picking subs was not unique to SMUHSD. To get around it, I sent my resume out to teachers at math and science departments in schools around the district, but this effort never resulted in a substitute job request.

Moral of this story for parents - when your kid tells you that they had a substitute that day, be pretty certain that the day was either wasted or they took a test. Tests seem to make some teachers ill. They get even sicker when the substitute hands out the wrong test to the wrong class ;-)... Surprisingly, kids have been known to take the test while wondering why the math problems are so hard. Were they retested when the error was discovered? No, due to the need to keep up the rapid pace to cover all of the subject material, the grades were adjusted, and they moved on.

I vividly recall one of my first jobs substituting in a math class at Hillsdale HS. I was astonished to find that the teacher had went to the trouble of preparing TWO tests, an “A” and a “B” version. Each version was given to alternate rows in the classroom in an attempt to discourage cheating. This practice has also been extended to some standardized tests with test booklets having version numbers that students have to write down on their answer forms.

How widespread is the problem? I ran into it everywhere I went, not just at SMUHSD, but also at Serra, and up in San Francisco. As I mentioned in an earlier article, teachers in SF told me that the problem was particularly bad at Lowell High School, the premier school in The City. Similar stories have appeared in the press about cheating scandals at prestige schools in the wealthy neighborhoods outside of New York City. If this doesn't speak volumes about the college admission race, then what does?

So why don't we get serious about this problem? Perhaps we have become inured to it. I went to see the movie “The Big Short” recently about the subprime mortgage scandal. One comes away with the impression that all of the rich and famous on Wall St. do it. During the previews, a trailer for an upcoming Mellissa McCarthy movie (which we should all boycott as far as I am concerned), showed her leading a bunch of girl scouts in a brawl with a rival girl scout troop. We are treated to scenes of little girls beating each other up, pulling hair, etc., for our “entertainment!” What has become of us??? Politicians always do it according to stories in the press. In Atlanta, even school administrators and teachers themselves were sent to jail after changing answers to “improve” scores on standardized tests. Why should kids be unique?

If a teacher suspects cheating, it is imperative that they have solid evidence if they bring an accusation. I have heard stories of parents coming in to schools accompanied by lawyers who make threats of lawsuits to nip punishments in the bud. This might be appropriate if the student was unjustly accused and a proposed extreme punishment would destroy their future, but the impression I received was that this was usually not the case.

Teachers need better enforcement methods to stop cheating and maintain discipline. When I went to school, there was still a paddle hanging on the wall in the principal's office. This was an archaic, barbaric method which was rightfully outlawed, but I was surprised by the problems involved in even implementing something as mild as detaining a student after school! To its credit, Serra HS had an after school detention program that was staffed by dedicated personnel.

*** I discovered to my amazement that at many public schools, if a teacher assigned detention as a punishment to a student, the teacher had to stay after school and supervise the detention!!!! ***

**** When a teacher does their job properly, it is one of the hardest jobs out there. Why do we design systems that make it harder??? ****

The following will sound exaggerated, but I will swear that it is not. When I taught math and science at George Washington HS in San Francisco, I got up around 4:45 AM each morning to eat breakfast, get ready, commute in before school, do copying for the day's lesson handouts which required leaving a time buffer in case the damn antiquated copy machine jammed/broke, etc., all before my first class at 7:30 AM . There was no parking at the school except for senior staff, so I also had to factor in time to cruise around the neighborhood

until I found a spot and then walk in up hills with a heavy backpack, particularly fun during rainstorms. As a “rookie” contract teacher I was given the worst classes, lots of discipline problems, etc. Nevertheless I did my damndest to do a good job by those kids. I carefully prepared my lessons and graded papers almost every night until 12 midnight, getting by on 4.5 to 5 hours of sleep for the entire school year. As a newbie, I didn’t have my own classroom, used other teachers’ rooms during their break periods, and thus had to lug all of my books and gear to different rooms all day up and down three flights of stairs through crowded hallways. The school couldn’t give me anything better than an ancient laptop to use with my lessons, so I spent over \$500 of my own money to get a decent one and a total of around \$1,000 for the year on various other items I needed to do my job. I fondly remember having a student, who habitually came to class late, paraded in during my lesson with the obvious intent to impress friends and be disruptive, stand up and yell “FU” at me when I tried to discipline them.

I spent most of my career at Silicon Valley startups where I worked my butt off, but this was one of my hardest years during my entire career.

Needless to say I was a little bit tired by the end of each day... I knew where every coffee shop / Starbucks was along my commute route because I was often on the verge of falling asleep at the wheel and had to fortify myself just to make it home alive and then be awake for that evening's lesson prep and grading. At the end of the year, San Francisco had a \$53 million budget shortfall and all of the one-year contract teachers were laid off, myself included, because we had no seniority.

Why would I be motivated to assign detention, so that I could stay after school with these little darlings?

Teachers need better tools to deal with discipline/cheating issues, and detention periods staffed by paid personnel is one important option. They need the support of parents, not threats of lawsuits brought to defend spoiled brats. Proper parenting is a constant struggle given the demands of work, negative societal influences which must be constantly overcome, etc., but there is no other choice than to do it. Kids learn their ethics at home and from what they see around them.

I would suggest that, if you have children in school, talk to them about this issue. Hear what they have to say. And then, next time when you are going to advocate for more rigorous academic burden in high school, please be aware of this situation.

One final unfortunate consequence of this problem has to do with homework. Homework is a critical part of the learning process, especially in mathematics, but it has been destroyed by cheating. When I went to school, every teacher graded homework. Now, copying other students' homework has become such a problem that teachers no longer grade it. They just "check it for completeness." I was given a stamp with a smiley face as one of my welcome gifts to teaching in San Francisco. I threw it into the trash and graded my students' homework papers. I assigned homework enough points to prod students to do it, but not enough points so that the cheaters could counteract their failing grades on tests. There just weren't enough hours in the day to do everything above and try to track down and punish students every time homework was copied, so this was the best method that I could devise. I overheard one math genius proudly announce to his friends that "I got 15 points for doing nothing!" I walked over and asked him, "What grade corresponds to 15%?"

The students were amazed that a teacher actually graded homework! Faculty told me I was wasting my time. It was really tempting just to chuck it all and get more sleep every night, but I decided to be "stupid" and soldier on for the entire year.

It was the right thing to do.