

3 Scheins Roundtable #5

Written by Maggie, Martha & Bernie Schein
Friday, 16 March 2012 13:30



Playing By The Rules

(And what if the rules are unfair?)

I am the parent of a 15-year-old student whose principal was recently let go because he changed the grades of quite a few students to make them eligible for college.

It was a difficult issue to discuss with my child in that I could understand the principal's compassion for students and desire to open up a pathway for them to continue their education. But, on the other hand, I didn't want to condone a person in authority breaking some strict boundaries that have been put in place for honorable reasons. Is there a way of looking at this question that transcends these two divergent opinions and yet doesn't suggest to my daughter that I condone breaking laws? What is the bigger issue here?

Mary, from Mississippi

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Mary, there are so many “bigger issues” here that your real problem will be in choosing which one you want to use in discussing this with your daughter. (Btw, we have a call line now, so if any of you readers want to chime in, we’d love to hear from you, especially about issues as complicated as this. Please call 843-252-0424.)

Given our combined 80+ years of working in education, this question brought on a raucous mess of a discussion that careened back and forth between the purpose of rules, the purpose of schools, the status of cheating, standardized tests, American education and its failings, and finally, ways of communicating to a child that adults should take care of them and rules and authority should be respected, but sometimes rules are wrong, and sometimes adults take care of kids in ways that violate the rules in place to protect them —and this may or may not be okay. Complicated, indeed. Even if we came to no clear answer to the question, we did come out of the discussion with new titles: The Cheater (Bernie), The Judge (Dr. Martha), and The Wrangler (Dr. Maggie).

The Wrangler: Although I respect the issues brought up by this question, and I think it is an unavoidable conundrum given recent events, I am hesitant to get too involved because it resembles those horrible examples we used to get in ethics class, where without knowing the why’s and how’s and details, to me it was impossible to place a value on the action.

The Judge: So let’s address it as best we can without getting too bogged down in all the assumptions we could make—such as whether or not each student’s future would’ve been destroyed or insured by the grade-changes, whether they were overall good students, whether the principal was trying to protect his own reputation or was genuinely interested in the students.

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The Cheater: Sometimes the rules are wrong. That's just a fact. Particularly when it comes to our current educational system. I can't fully agree with Mary that the "strict boundaries" to which she refers were set up for "honorable" reasons, particularly since progressing from grade to grade nowadays is so determined by standardized tests. In school, I felt unaccounted for. The system didn't see me; the way I learned and the way I didn't. The rules left me out. My inability to do math almost kept me out of college.

The Wrangler: So how'd you get in?

The Cheater: Same way Captain Kirk beat the Kobayashi Maru. By cheating. Only I took that responsibility myself. I took quite a risk, of which I'm proud. Even with a tutor, I couldn't have passed math. I was too stupid in those areas – what would now be called 'learning disabled'. I knew the system was unfair. Had I not cheated, I wouldn't have gotten into college, become a teacher, written *If Holden Caulfield Were In My Classroom*, nor contributed to this column. For the creative rather than academic mind, there was—and is to this day—little that schools have to offer but unmitigated boredom and frustration.

The Judge: Maybe cheating worked for you, but if it were the norm, the whole system would fail.

The Cheater: Take it from me, it's harder and more energy and time consuming to cheat successfully than to actually do the work and pass, if that's possible for you. Just like it's easier to go ahead and do the work, if you can, than to procrastinate.

The Wrangler: Hmm. First, Dr. Martha, the whole system has already failed. Is there chaos? No. But is there real learning? Very little. So, poor Mary has an even bigger problem on her hands: she also has to talk to her daughter about why it is important to commit and follow through and work hard for an "education" in a place that may be fundamentally corrupt, fundamentally flawed and that, if she is lucky, might just teach her just enough to know that she didn't get taught to learn very well.

The Judge: I agree, the system is flawed. But cheating doesn't change the system.

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The Wrangler: I am not sure the question is about what would happen if cheating were the norm—though, in fact, I suspect it is far more the norm than not. And Bernie, you are speaking of a choice made by a student, not a choice made by an authority figure responsible for the running of the system. The question to me is what it would look like if the norm were actually to attend to each kind of student, to each kind of mind. What if the norm were a commitment not to scores but to the value of each kind of mind—the artist, the rationalist, the musician with an auditory processing disorder?

The Judge: I am not sure you and Bernie are being fair. I know that many of the schools are trying, have specialized instruction and programs to help. The problem is partly that the schools often don't have the personnel necessary to really do a good job. We would be upset if the county said we have to build flawed roads because we can't afford ones that last.

We all agreed that The Judge was correct: many teachers and many schools are doing their best and do try to address what the students need, but the age-old problem of funding—for smaller schools, personnel, execution, and programs (shop, music, art, etc) that enable those with non-academic gifts to shine—just isn't there or isn't being properly allocated. This leaves those in the trenches feeling helpless and frustrated. Not only are their students' futures on the line, but also in many cases, so are their own livelihoods. So, is it surprising when they go rogue—either to protect their own jobs or to right what they perceive as a flaw in the system for their students' sakes? No.

The Judge: It isn't surprising, no; Most of them truly want to help their students and feel their hands are tied, but is cheating the only option? Is it the best option? What does that do to the system and what does that, in itself, teach the students?

The Wrangler: Well, that brings us back to the actual heart of Mary's question. There is, to me, a set of rules that is superlative to any individual school rules: one way Mary might approach this without either condoning the breaking of "rules" but also not dismissing what she calls the "compassion" of the teachers who "cheat" in what they believe is their students' best interests, is to say that the school's commitment, and its employees commitment, is to the success and flourishing of each student. That is the ultimate rule. What could be learned is that individual compassion and commitment trumps bureaucracy. Perhaps the principal made a choice to go with what he thought was best for the students and against what the school rules said. It was a risk, and he will face the consequences for that. But in my mind, individual connection and compassion should trump bureaucracy every time.

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The Judge: I like the emphasis on the personal trumping bureaucracy, and I agree that the motivation behind the actions of the teacher/principal was likely noble, trying to save these kids and open up a future for them (though again, that is one of the things we can't really confirm). But his actions not only don't solve the problem, they obscure it.

The Wrangler: But whose job is it to solve the problem? Can an overworked underpaid teacher/principal do it? Whose responsibility is it?

In the end, we agreed that perhaps Mary might want to take these events as an opportunity to discuss personal responsibility. The students in question were not young children; they were about to graduate as adults. If we as a community, we as educators, we as parents, aunts, uncles, friends and neighbors taught them properly, they will want to – and know how to – take responsibility for their own lives. If it bothers them that they received a grade without earning it, then they should demand the opportunity to earn it. If they feel the “system” was, in fact, so flawed that it was impossible for them to earn it within the system, then they, like Bernie, can take responsibility for going around it. In the end, this is a moment for them, as much as for the principal, to establish their own values, act on them, and accept the consequences.

About the authors: Dr. Martha Schein is veteran educator and licensed practicing psychologist; Dr. Maggie Schein has taught and consulted for 15 years and holds a PhD in Moral Psychology and Ethics; Bernie Schein is a veteran educator and author of If Holden Caulfield were in My Classroom: Inspiring love, creativity and intelligence in middle school kids.

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