August 29, 2017

In this past summer’s issue of the SHS PTSO Newsletter (http://bit.ly/2wADYw4), I referenced that the 17-18 school year would be one during which there would be a concerted effort to reinforce our commitment to academic integrity. This letter comes to provide you with an update on some of our plans.

Before getting into specifics, allow me to convey that the strategies outlined in this letter haven’t been identified as a result of any specific incident or current event. Rather, they have arisen from collaborative discussion amongst a variety of stakeholders spanning a few years as stress management and the influx of technology have become more prevalent in the lives of students.

Academic integrity was highlighted in the 2nd goal of the 2015-2016 SHS Improvement Plan (http://bit.ly/2viFa7F) as a topic necessitating more attention. Since then, the practices of other schools & colleges have been investigated, the staff have listened to colleagues and students on the subject, and students and staff have also completed related surveys. All of the information that’s been gathered has helped define a multifaceted approach that will complement practices already in place.

I. Phone Park Trays

In the spring, the School Committee approved the language below for the Parent/Student Handbook (http://bit.ly/2wTJk5j):

Between classes and in the cafeteria during lunch, students may check their cell phones. However, at all times during class unless permission is granted by the teacher, cell phones must be stored in the phone park trays located in each classroom, including during trips to the restroom/water fountain. During Eagle Block, students may check their cell phones in the classroom, but during trips to the restroom/water fountain cell phones must remain in the phone park trays. At the conclusion of class or when the teacher permits, cell phones can be retrieved. Taking someone else’s cell phone will initially be treated as theft by the administration.

Each classroom will have one of the phone park trays pictured below. As students arrive to each of their classes, it will be the expectation of all teachers that students place their cell phones in the tray. Any student who chooses otherwise will have their smartphone confiscated if they are observed using it during class without the teacher’s permission or in the hallway during class when it should be in the tray. Confiscated cell phones will be held in the main office and returned to students at the end of the school day following a 1st offense and to parents/guardians following a 2nd offense.

II. Turnitin

SHS will pilot a program called Turnitin (http://bit.ly/1fQ707e) that is intended to deter plagiarism and to also improve writing skills. Educational institutions across the country, including local colleges/universities such as Bentley, BC, BU, Brandeis, Brown, Harvard, Northeastern, Simmons, Stonehill, and Tufts to name a few, have long used it. At the high school level, Xaverian, Oliver Ames, Newton North/South, Needham, Mansfield, and Hingham use it as well.

Prior to rolling it out to students, staff will be trained to use the various aspects of the program, which includes multiple means of providing students with feedback about their writing. Turnitin also syncs with Schoology – a helpful feature in light of the fact that students and staff are already accustomed to using that program to manage their school work and to submit assignments.
III. Honor Code/Pledge

In January of this year, Jake Marglous (SHS ’17) made a presentation (http://bit.ly/2iAgmBU) to the staff where he summarized a book written by Dan Ariely, a professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University. Titled The (Honest) Truth about Dishonesty (2013), Jake shared several anecdotes from the text that convincingly demonstrated the author’s finding that ‘reminders of moral codes make us less likely to cheat.’ Jake also pointed out that many colleges and universities require students to write an honor code or pledge before submitting their work, a fact that was supported further by a subsequent presentation (http://bit.ly/2w9PEoy) made by Mr. O’Reilly of the Social Studies Department.

Taking advantage of a simple, proven practice that fosters improved decision-making is a wise step, especially when our own students and staff advocate for such a move. Therefore, SHS will adopt a school-wide honor code/pledge that can be used and adapted as necessary by all students and staff on various forms of assessment. A contest to develop model language will kick off in early September. Shortly thereafter, a vote of the school community will determine the anchor statement that becomes institutionalized and publicized.

IV. Infraction Management

A glaring inconsistency we identified last year amongst the staff was the manner in which we enforced the cheating/plagiarism policy stated in the Parent/Student Handbook. For many years, the policy asked that all incidents be reported to the main office so that the outlined consequences could be meted out by the administration. Through conversation, it became apparent that not all instances were reported and that staff felt strongly that most first-time offenses could and should be handled by the teacher.

In hindsight, what appears to have existed was a slice of the school environment where the focus was too punitive and also somewhat permissive of unethical behavior. This may have been due to unwarranted fears by staff that bringing cheating/plagiarism up would overly impact students in a negative way. To help change this mindset, the School Committee approved new policy language in the Parent/Student Handbook (see pgs. 22-23) this past spring that establishes the conditions necessary for teachers to manage first-time offenses and report them to the main office. This approach ensures that recidivism is addressed and that our primary focus moving forward is on “teachable moments” that come from constructive and respectful conversations between students and teachers when a first-time offense occurs.

V. Case Scenarios

In early September, dedicated time will be set aside for the entire school to engage in conversation about cheating/plagiarism using case scenarios that mirror conditions our students are likely to face during their high school career. Below, find an example:

You and your lab partner just completed a lab assignment. You’re a natural at getting good clean results from the lab, but not so good at writing the lab assignment. Your partner, who’s not as adept with lab work as you are, says he’s very good at writing. Your teacher hasn’t explained how you’re supposed to work together, just that you are supposed to work together. You therefore decide to both play to your strengths, so you do the lab work alone and your partner does the write-up alone.

Avery Point Learning Commons, et al. “Cheating Discussion Activity.” University of Connecticut

We plan on creating time for these kinds of conversations on an annual basis to complement efforts already in place. By fostering this kind of dialogue more deliberately, several things occur – the staff receives ongoing professional development on the subject, students learn to better recognize conditions that jeopardize academic integrity, and the school brings attention to an issue that matters.

In closing, allow me to reiterate that the strategies outlined in this letter haven’t been identified as a result of any specific incident or current event. Rather, they have arisen from collaborative discussion amongst a variety of stakeholders spanning a few years as stress management and the influx of technology have become more prevalent in the lives of students.

Integrity is also a core value at SHS, and there is a strong sense of obligation amongst the staff to help students identify and avoid circumstances where their honesty might be questioned. In and of itself that’s an important life lesson, and by taking the steps outlined in this letter, SHS is making a renewed commitment to maintaining a learning environment that is fair to all.

I want to thank you for taking the time to read this important letter. I also strongly encourage you to find time to discuss the contents as a family so that there are no surprises as school gets underway. Please also be mindful that the use of the phone park trays will impact the frequency with which students can check their phones, so in an urgent situation be assured that if the main office is contacted that we can quickly find any student at any time.

Thanks in advance for your understanding and continued support. Feel free to contact me with related questions.

Sincerely and respectfully,

Jose Libano

Jose Libano, Ed.D.    
Principal