

“Cheating themselves”  
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She used to be a teacher. Taught biology at Piper High, to be exact. Then, last fall, she assigned her students to collect 20 leaves and write a report on them. The kids knew from the classroom syllabus - a document they and their parents both signed - that cheating would not be tolerated. Anyone who plagiarized would receive no credit for the assignment, which counted toward half their semester grade.

Maybe you've heard what happened next. Twenty-eight of Pelton's 118 sophomores turned in work that seemed conspicuously similar. It took only a little Web research for her to confirm that they had indeed cut-and-pasted their papers together.

True to her word, Pelton issued 28 zeroes. What followed was to moral integrity as the Keystone Kops are to law enforcement. Parents rose in outrage, some even making harassing, post-midnight phone calls to her home. Pelton offered the cheaters make-up assignments that would have allowed them to pass the class with D's. They refused. Besieged by angry mothers and fathers, the school board ordered the teacher to soften the punishment.

She went to school the next day and found the kids in a celebratory mood, cheering their victory and crowing that they no longer had to listen to teachers. By lunchtime, Pelton had quit. The school's principal and 13 of 32 teachers have also reportedly resigned. In the months since then, the cheaters have become the target of ridicule and condemnation in media around the world.

In spite of that, the parents of the 28 ethically challenged students continue to rally to their defense. One says it's not plagiarism if you only copy a sentence or two. Another expresses doubt the kids even know what plagiarism means.

To that, I can only say this: Please shut up. Haven't you already done enough damage?

Students have always cheated, yes. Always schemed to see the questions ahead of time, write notes on sweaty palms, peer over the shoulder of the teacher's pet. But what's most troubling here is not the amorality of adolescents, but the fact that parents are so eagerly complicit, so ready to look the other way, so willing to rationalize the fact that their children are, in essence, liars and thieves. Lying about authorship of the work, thieving the grade that results.

Those students, their parents and the school board that caved in like cardboard in the rain are all emblematic of a society in which cheating has become not just epidemic but somehow tolerated, even at the highest levels. As one senior told *CBS News*, "It probably sounds twisted, but I would say that in this day and age, cheating is almost not wrong."

Who can blame the kid for thinking that way when the news is full of noted historians cribbing from one another, Enron cooking the books well done, Merrill Lynch recommending garbage stock, a Notre Dame football coach falsifying his resume. Whatever works, right? Ours is not to judge, right?

Wrong.

At the risk of being preachy, I'd like to point out the common thread between the historians, the coach, Enron, and Merrill Lynch: they all got caught.

Cheaters almost always do. No, not necessarily in big, splashy stories that make *CBS News*. Sometimes, it's just in the small, quiet corners of inauthentic lives when they are brought up short by their own inadequacies and forced to acknowledge the hollowness of their achievements. To admit they aren't what others believe them to be.

Reputation, it has been said, is about who you are when people are watching. Character is about who you are when there's nobody in the room but you. Both matter, but of the two, character is far and away the most important. The former can induce others to think well of you. But only the latter allows you to think well of yourself.

This is the lesson of *Piper High*, for those who have ears to hear.

Turns out Christine Pelton is still teaching after all.