

Cheating on Assessments: What if it Happens in Your District?

Appalling. Outrageous. Sad. Pick your least favorite descriptor. Each has been used to describe the behavior of teachers and principals across the country in a growing litany of schools accused of cheating on standardized tests. Schools in Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Philadelphia, New York City and Los Angeles have garnered most of the media's attention, but stories have appeared in more than a dozen other states. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, also known as FairTest, claims that such examples are "the tip of an iceberg." Whether that claim is true or not is probably irrelevant. The perception of widespread cheating—by educators—is now firmly planted in the mind of the public and it is now the job of communications professionals to address the issue head on. But how?

Focus on Ethics and Integrity

Nora Carr, APR, Chief of Staff for the Guilford County Public Schools in Greenboro, N.C. said, "It would be easy to dismiss these high profile cheating scandals as isolated incidents, or as a media-created issue. Even with media hyperactivity taken as a given, I think that would be a mistake. In my view, this could happen anywhere. The response should be systemic, not knee-jerk or focused exclusively on individual employees." Carr says her district took the opportunity to focus on ethics and integrity at their 3-day back-to-school program for principals and administrators. After some tweaking of the format, the program will be rolled out as a district-wide professional development program. She added, "We will include information about ethics, integrity, etc., in the electronic staff newsletter and other communications throughout the year."

Every state has test security protocols designed to ensure the integrity of the process. But is it enough to simply assume that every teacher and every principal will adhere to them, or should a more proactive stance be the norm?

Kelly Avants, NSPRA Southwest vice president and director of communications for the Clovis Unified School District in California, said, "I think a district's role is to continually emphasize to teachers and school administrators the importance of following these test protocols, of holding ourselves to a very high standard, and of being willing to report any possible breach of the rules. In our district we talk with teachers a lot leading into the assessment window about what can, and can't be done when students are testing. We also try to be our own worst critic by watching carefully for any signs of testing irregularities."

A Story 'with Legs'

The issue is not likely to go away anytime soon. As more states and local districts move to tie teacher evaluation (and pay) to their student's performance—measured by standardized tests--the pressure to fudge results will surely increase. As Carr

says, “Leaders have to walk the talk on this. They have to uphold high expectations for student and staff performance without putting so much pressure on people to meet one measure – improved test scores – that staff start resorting to unethical behavior in order to deliver on sometimes unrealistic expectations.”

USA Today, which launched the initial investigation into the story of larger than average rates of erasures on student tests in D.C., reports that only 20 states watch for such anomalies on a routine basis, but more are considering such actions. Clearly, this is a media story “with legs” and reporters across the country are on the alert. It would behoove communications professionals to develop a multifaceted approach with the following components.

- **Know your state and district test security protocols.** Given the complexity and bureaucratic jargon that most of them contain, consider simplifying the rules into a one-page summary that could be used as a handout for parents and the press. Be sure to have your accountability or testing staff review the summary to make sure you have it right.
- **Be ready to respond to the media’s typical “could it happen here” story.** You may not be happy with what you see as a reporter’s negative fishing expedition, but take the opportunity to laud the precautions your district takes to protect the integrity of the testing process. Geography matters here. The closer your district is to someone else’s scandal, the greater the likelihood you’ll get that call. Monitor the news. Be ready.
- **Do not over-promise.** As you discuss this issue with parents, reporters or the public, be careful not to claim perfection. No system is foolproof and the best you can do is to assure everyone that “every reasonable precaution” is taken and that you have high standards for honesty.
- **Make ethics, honesty and integrity the focus of your professional development efforts.** This may be the single most important step you should consider. Follow Guilford County’s and Clovis Unified’s lead here. Talk about it. Write about it in your internal publications. Get everyone’s attention and put the topic on everyone’s radar. You want to be operating from a position of strength should some irregularity happen.
- **Be transparent with your publics.** If your state has a requirement (like Nevada does) that parents be notified about assessment procedures and how to report suspected testing violations, make sure the information is easily located on your website. Don’t bury that information four layers deep in an obscure corner of your site. Put it up front. If you have a written parent newsletter, make it your lead story. Then, after you have followed up on a report, close the loop and let the person know your findings. That’s just good customer service.

• **In everything you do, work collaboratively with principals and teacher leaders.** A unilateral effort by the school district could easily be perceived as throwing these front line employees under the bus. Get them on board early in the planning and work toward a consensus approach.

Get in Front of the Issue

Given the seriousness of this issue and the growing number of reported scandals, a comprehensive communications plan is clearly called for. Get all the key players together including local politicians, business leaders, school board members, the superintendent, principals, teachers, district administration, parents and perhaps even students and start the conversation. Review your current assessment protocols and identify your strengths and vulnerabilities. Be brutally honest. Then, begin to develop internal and external communications strategies and tactics using the bullet points above as a starting point. If trust is the bedrock of public relations (and it is) then getting in front of this issue is absolutely vital. It could be the most important task you undertake this year.

Dr. Steve Mulvenon is the former Director of Communications with the Washoe County School District in Reno, NV and an Associate with Patron Insight, Inc.

Reprinted with permission from the copyrighted article by the same name in the October 2011 eNetwork, published by the National School Public Relations Association, 15948 Derwood Rd., Rockville, MD 20855; www.nspr.org; (301) 519-0496. No other reprints allowed without written permission from NSPRA.