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Grades and Graduation

An Ethical Dilemma

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This case was written for use in courses dealing with school administration, philosophy of education, or ethics in educational leadership. It deals with the ethical dilemma of an assistant principal at a low-performing, urban high school. Caught between a principal and a teacher who have different views on plagiarism, the assistant principal must decide whether to bring to light allegations of illegal grade-changes for two students that could threaten their status as high school graduates. Students reading the case should assume the role of the assistant principal and, considering the perspectives of the opposing parties, resolve the situation in an ethical manner.

Keywords: *ethics; leadership; principals*

Case Narrative

If it's 2:00 a.m. on the day a paper is due and you are so desperate that you are thinking about plagiarizing, call me. One grade in one class is not worth getting kicked out of school.

Matt Siegfried's college English professor

As the second semester began at Summerline High School, the students in Matt Siegfried's 12th-grade world literature class knew that their last big hurdle before graduating was completion of the senior research paper. Most of the students struggled to write clear, organized papers in the first semester, and Siegfried wondered how he could help them improve as they began this district-mandated assignment. He would be challenged especially by two male basketball players who recently had been transferred to his classroom. With poor academic skills and little focus on school work, they would present their teacher with an ethical dilemma. On what basis should he grade their work, considering that their grades in his class would affect their chances of graduating from high school and going to college?

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Summerline High School

Summerline High School was a large, comprehensive high school located in a depressed section of Chicago. The school's history could be divided into two periods based on demographics. For the first 50 years of its existence, Summerline's student body was composed mainly of middle- and upper-class White students. In the late 1960s, however, the community's demographics shifted and the student body became almost exclusively African American. During the 2001-2002 school year, Summerline High served approximately 1,200 students, 99% of whom were African American and 91% of whom received free or reduced-price lunch.

Summerline High was known for its academics, although not for positive reasons. Students' average performance on the national ACT test hovered around 15 every year (the national average was 21); on the annual state achievement exam, only 11% of students met basic standards in reading, and only 5% scored at that level in math. Summerline High's reported graduation rate was 75%, but with entering freshman classes numbering 350 and graduating classes of fewer than 200, many teachers were skeptical about the accuracy of that percentage.

Chicago Public Schools

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) enrolled approximately 425,000 students during the 2001-2002 school year, making it the third-largest school district in the United States. Its 600 schools employed 26,000 teachers, and its annual budget was just short of \$4 billion. Ninety-one percent of the students in this urban district were non-White, and 85% came from low-income households. The CEO of CPS, Arne Duncan, had been appointed by Mayor Richard M. Daley (who also appointed the school board) in August 2001. The district had come a long way since 1987, when it was described by U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett as "the worst in the nation," and it was hoped that Duncan could transform CPS into the best urban school district in America.

Matt Siegfried

Matt Siegfried, 22, was beginning his first year as a teacher in fall 2001. At Summerline High, Siegfried taught one period of senior world literature, two periods of sophomore American literature, and two periods of freshman literature/composition.

Richard Reynolds

Dr. Richard Reynolds, 52, had been principal of Summerline High School for five years. His 30 years in education included the roles of teacher, coach, and principal

at both the middle and high school levels. Dr. Reynolds had numerous connections within CPS and was rumored to be in pursuit of a high-profile central office position.

Arlene Anderson

Arlene Anderson, 42, was in her second year as assistant principal at Summerline. She was one of three assistant principals and oversaw the special education, English, and history departments. This was her first administrative position; she previously taught for 10 years at another CPS high school. Before switching to a career in education, she worked in the banking industry for 8 years.

The Research Paper

Throughout the second semester, Siegfried's world literature course was centered mostly on the research paper. It was supposed to be a capstone project; at eight pages in length, it would be the most intense assignment most students ever had undertaken. Students were given deadlines for each portion of the writing process (thesis statement, outline, first draft, first draft conference, etc.), and most students made the effort to meet these deadlines. Siegfried included these "process products" in students' research paper grades to ensure that they did their own work. The most important of these was the letter to the reader: Siegfried instructed students to "explain the problems you struggled with in writing this paper, or things you want the person to notice. You can also tell the reader about information that you ended up not using, why you decided to use a certain source to back up your claims, or your opinion on a certain issue." Two of Siegfried's students, Andre and Terrell, met none of the deadlines and turned in only a final draft of the paper on the day it was due. The complete absence of process products from their project alerted Siegfried to the possibility of plagiarism.

While reading the papers, Siegfried quickly realized that neither Andre nor Terrell had written anything except their own names. The writing quality was exponentially higher than they had shown themselves capable of producing during the previous months, to the point that Siegfried thought the papers could have received good grades in a college literature course. The papers clearly had been downloaded from the Internet, which left Siegfried facing a dilemma. His immediate thought was that the students deserved to fail. They did not go through the process of writing the paper, they did not ask for help, and they cheated. Giving them credit for academic fraud would discredit Siegfried as a teacher and make him a part of the school's culture of corruption. Although Siegfried had no hard evidence, he had good reason to believe that administrators helped a number of freshmen cheat on the city reading test that spring, changed the attendance records of a talented senior so she would qualify for a scholarship to an elite college, and annually pressured teachers to change the failing grades of senior students so they could graduate.

On the other hand, if Andre and Terrell failed Siegfried's class, they would not be eligible to graduate in June (although they might be able to retake the course in summer school and graduate in early August). There was a possibility this could derail their plans to play junior college basketball and further their education. What if they were so demoralized by failing to graduate in June that they gave up and did not pursue their diplomas? They would have virtually no chance to succeed economically and could become dependent on welfare or drug dealing as a means to survive. And was it really their fault? They had spent nearly 13 years in schools that did not provide them with the basic skills needed to complete a project like the research paper. Furthermore, Siegfried knew there was no consistency across classes in how teachers approached the paper; every teacher made up his or her own requirements and grading rubric. Perhaps he was taking it more seriously than other teachers or had better methods to ensure that students were not cheating. Was it fair to fail these students when another teacher may have passed them?

It also occurred to Siegfried that this dilemma could have been avoided had he talked more with Andre and Terrell about their progress on the paper. He could have called or visited their homes to gain the support of their parents or even could have asked their basketball coach to send them the message that school needed to be a priority. Was it Siegfried, who had failed the students, rather than the other way around?

Graduation

If the principal of the attendance center changes an assigned grade, the principal assumes responsibility for the determination of that grade. No grade or evaluation shall be changed without dated, written notification to the teacher by the principal. This notification shall be sent to the teacher within three weekdays of the change, and shall include the nature of and reasons for the grade change. In the interests of good communication between teacher and administrator, the principal is also encouraged to confer with the teacher, to discuss the grade and the reasons for the change. If the teacher is not in agreement with the change of grade, the teacher may appeal, in writing, providing information on why the grade change should not have been made. (Chicago Public Schools Policy Manual, section 605.7)

Siegfried decided to give both Andre and Terrell failing grades on their research papers because the students obviously had plagiarized the papers. Siegfried saw the decision as justifiable. In his opinion, the principal had transferred the students to Siegfried's classroom so they would get a free pass. Siegfried was inexperienced, White, and without connections in the district, whereas the teacher from whom Andre and Terrell were transferred was a classroom veteran, African American, and not afraid to go to the Chicago Teachers Union if she did not agree with something. Siegfried felt that to build a reputation as a serious educator who had high standards, he needed to stand firm on his grading practices.

A few weeks later, after commencement exercises, Siegfried ran across a group of teachers talking about who graduated and who did not. After hearing someone express disbelief that a particular student had graduated, Siegfried asked about Andre and Terrell. According to the teachers, both students had walked at graduation and received diplomas. Siegfried knew that this could have happened only if the principal had changed the students' grades without notifying him. Siegfried saw this action as a sign of respect; the principal must have realized that Siegfried, unlike the teachers he called into his office and coerced into changing grades, was a principled educator.

An Administrator's Dilemma

Nonetheless, Matt Siegfried was furious that his judgment as a teacher had been discounted. He immediately set up an appointment with Arlene Anderson, the assistant principal who supervised him, because he felt comfortable being open and honest with her. After hearing his story, Anderson asked what he thought should happen next. Siegfried voiced his desire to expose the principal's actions by sending his story to one of the city's newspapers and mentioned the possibility of leaving the school if the situation was not addressed properly. Anderson asked him to give her a few days to think about resolving the situation.

As Anderson drove home that night, she agonized over her dilemma. She understood Siegfried's perspective. He was attempting to hold high standards and teach students the consequences of cheating. Having not talked with Dr. Reynolds yet, she tried to understand why he might have changed the students' grades. He may have thought that helping the students move on to better opportunities, and away from a school and school system that had failed them, was the right thing to do. Perhaps the reason Dr. Reynolds did not approach Siegfried about changing the students' grades was not simply that he thought Siegfried would not do it, but also that he did not believe Siegfried understood the ramifications of their not graduating (or not graduating until late summer). Siegfried was in his first year of teaching, and Dr. Reynolds may have assumed that the young teacher did not see the big picture—the 12+ years of sub-par schooling that Andre and Terrell had endured before walking through Siegfried's door; the fact that without a high school diploma they virtually were guaranteed to fall into the same trap of poverty, drugs, and violence as so many others in the neighborhood; or the possibility that attending junior college might lead them to eventually earn bachelor's degrees. Dr. Reynolds also may have assumed that Siegfried would not have listened to these arguments because he was thinking about his future as a teacher as opposed to the future of the two students.

Anderson wanted a resolution that would not threaten the career of her principal, whom she believed to be a good man with the best interests of children at heart. She also wanted to ensure that Matt Siegfried remained at the school. He was a rising star, just the type of teacher a struggling school had to have if it was to turn around.

Most important, she did not want to harm the two students at the center of the situation. They already had celebrated with their families and soon would leave for college. A change in graduation status could mean a disruption of their postsecondary plans, a heavy psychological blow to them and their families, and the possibility of a lawsuit against the principal, school, or district.

After two days of reflection, Anderson was running out of time. Should she speak honestly about the situation with Dr. Reynolds? Would someone at the district's central office be able to offer confidential advice? How could she balance the interests of Dr. Reynolds, Matt Siegfried, and the two students in an ethical way?

Teaching Notes

Before discussing what course of action Arlene Anderson should take, the instructor can review with students some philosophical dimensions of the ethics of this case. The initial dilemma faced by Matt Siegfried and Dr. Reynolds is best explained using Kant's deontological ethics and Mill's utilitarianism.

Kant would have been in favor of failing the students because it was Siegfried's ethical duty as a teacher to follow the law (i.e., the rules). Kant wrote in *Lectures on Ethics*, "In ethics, therefore, we enquire how the spirit of the moral law is fulfilled, and pay no heed at all to actions. . . . It must not indulge man and make allowance for his limited capacity, since it contains the standard of moral perfection, and the standard must be exact, invariable and absolute" (1930, pp. 73-74). In other words, Kant would have expected Siegfried and Dr. Reynolds to make decisions without considering those decisions' consequences. As Kant explained in "Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals," the only thing to be considered is whether the decision was made "out of respect for the law" (Kant, 1983, p. 13). He also would have expected the two men to act only "in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law" (1983, p. 14). Kant might have challenged Dr. Reynolds' grade-changing by asking him if all students who cheat should be passed.

Mill, conversely, would have been in favor of passing the students based on the outcomes of doing so (or not doing so). In "Utilitarianism," he argued that "the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality" (Mill, 2003, p. 190). According to Mill's greatest-happiness principle, which holds that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (p. 186), both Siegfried and Dr. Reynolds should have conducted a cost-benefit analysis (with benefit as a proxy for happiness and cost as a proxy for the reverse of happiness) before making their decisions. Only after considering how each option would affect their personal interests, the interests of the students, and the interests of others with a stake in the situation (e.g., the school, the students' families, and future graduates) would each educator be able to make a truly ethical decision.

Discussion Questions

1. Which of the two philosophies would you have used to guide you as the teacher in this situation? As the principal? Why?
2. Considering the various accounts in Coles' (2000) work, what does it mean to be a leader who acts morally and ethically?
3. How much consideration should be given to the ethical dimension of policies at the school or district level?
4. If, as a school administrator, you had to choose between following policy or making what you considered to be an ethical decision, which would you choose? Why?
5. Peter Elbow wrote, "Our loyalty to students asks us to be their allies and hosts as we instruct and share. . . . Our commitment to knowledge and society asks us to be guardians or bouncers: we must discriminate, evaluate, test, grade, certify" (1983, p. 328). Is it possible for teachers to hold these roles concurrently? Should they? What could school administrators do to make this balancing act more manageable?

Classroom Activities

The following activity should be done in groups of two students:

1. Each student should spend 5 to 10 min explaining an ethical dilemma she or he has faced, personally or professionally, and how it was resolved.

The following activity should be done in groups of three students:

2. Students should spend 10 to 15 min acting out a meeting between the three parties. People playing the role of Dr. Reynolds should use arguments based on utilitarianism; people playing the role of Mr. Siegfried should use arguments based on deontological ethics; and people playing the role of Ms. Anderson should mediate and attempt to craft a solution that is fair and ethical.

The following activities should be done in groups of three to five students:

3. Using Starratt's personal audits as a guide (2004, pp. 136-141), students should create a list of questions that could provide guidance and serve as reflection points for administrators dealing with ethical dilemmas. Alternatively, students could create a similar list for classroom teachers.
4. Prior to class, students should find a school or district policy (preferably from a school or district in which they have worked) that they believe is ethical and another that they believe is unethical. Once in class, students should briefly explain their rationales for labeling the policies as they did. Each group should then attempt to rework the unethical policies into ethical ones.

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