

## **Parents Tell School Board: Retest Hurts Sophomores, Harsher Penalties Needed for Those Guilty of Cheating**

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Numerous parents and high school students who spoke at a packed Board of Education meeting on Tuesday criticized school administrators' decision to retest nearly 300 Darien High School sophomores after a major cheating incident was discovered in mid-January.

The speakers also said the retesting would hurt students' grades in other courses when they had other "unit" tests to take the same week as the retests.

Those speakers were supported with repeated loud applause from the room, packed with a standing-room-only crowd of at least 100. A smaller number of the speakers, backed by less applause, supported the decision.

About 45 minutes of the special meeting was spent on the public comment portion in a room that was packed tightly with just over 100 parents and students.

Several speakers also said they were concerned that the students who had stolen test answers for two the

sophomore courses and made them available to an untold number of other students in mid-January weren't being punished adequately.

Superintendent Alan Addley gave a short report to the board, providing more details about the cheating incident than had been made public before.

He said the theft of test answers from a faculty office shared by social studies and English teachers had been entered by a number of students on Saturday, Jan. 18, when the test answers were stolen. Addley said the matter has been referred to Darien Police Department for a criminal investigation.

### **Addley's Report**

Addley said there was a lot he couldn't say about the incident in order not to violate the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (also known as FERPA), which obligates school officials and employees to protect student privacy.

For one thing, he couldn't say just what the punishment was for the students who had been found to have taken the results of the multiple-choice parts of the 300 World Studies and English 10 courses.

On Saturday, Jan. 18, some students had entered the office and seen the test results, which were then shared on social media. At some point "a week or so afterward, maybe even more" and well after the two midterm tests had been taken, administration officials found out about the theft and determined that certain students had been involved, according to Addley.

He gave out no details during the meeting indicating how the students had got into the room and found the test answers.

One parent during the public comment period said the students should be arrested on breaking and entering charges, but Addley, interviewed briefly right after the meeting, said there was no breaking of anything — the students had walked in.

He didn't say how the students got in the room or if he knew how it was done — for instance, whether or not doors were locked. Asked how many students were known to have entered the office, he said FERPA doesn't even allow him to say that. In a prepared statement he read at the meeting, he said it was a "finite" number.

Somewhere between 280 and 300 sophomores then took one or both of the midterm exams, after the answers had been widely shared. Essay portions of the midterms were unaffected by the cheating.

Asked by Board member Dennis Maroney what the school district was doing to prevent a similar situation from happening in the future, Addley said the district would be reviewing the matter.

Board Vice Chairperson David Dineen then said he assumed the review would cover "how students got into

that specific area, why those documents were out and visible and just look at security protocols around the school. I know the school is used on the weekends [...] but there seems to be a breakdown in security protocol that I'm sure will be reviewed by the administration."

Addley replied: "Yes, the security protocol is actively being looked at."

Board member Jill McCammon asked whether Addley was reviewing the district's rules for student misconduct. Many of the parents and students had complained that the students being disciplined in the cheating scandal seemed to be getting very light treatment.

"One of the concerns is that they [the district's student sanctioning policies] are open to a fair amount of interpretation, and then people are interpreting it. I realize that you have to have some flexibility, but could you speak to the state of the policy as you inherited it [from past superintendents and the Board of Education]?"

Policies that the Board of Education mandates and the administrative regulations that the superintendent puts into effect "are being reviewed," Addley said. "I will say that I do like some interpretation to some degree. I think we want to treat our children and our young people individually and respect their differences and have some flexibility in there.

"But there's a meeting of the minds for reasonable expectations commensurate with behavior," he continued. "So I think right now the policy pertaining to this are pretty straightforward — but [...] we always review every situation, what could be done differently? what are the guiding documents? what's the security? So we'll do that 360-degree evaluation."

Answering a question from McCammon, Addley agreed that the review would include looking at policies and administrative regulations about student discipline regarding cheating, as well as security protocols around exams.

Addley replied: "I think it's fair to say it's on the table, just looking at exams in general [...] just the composition of the exams in general."

### **Addley on the Decision to Have the Tests Retaken**

Addley told the board, "The pervasiveness and issues of fairness and scope of the compromise [the breach of test security] helped inform the administrators' current decision that the most reasonable action to take is to re-administer the multiple choice part of the exam.

"This is consistent with practices for standardized tests administered, such as the SAT, Advanced Placement courses or SBAC (the state's Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium standardized test), he said.

Addley also said that it was better to have the test taken again rather than simply not use the mid-term test because the school district uses it to know students' "mastery of skills, instructional practices, curriculum design and interventions for students. When the integrity of the exam has been compromised, none of these valuable measures are reliable."

During the days when 10th graders are taking the retests, other "unit" tests that were scheduled will not be taken, he said.

### **Public Comment**

The decision to have the tests retaken was the central subject of most of the people who commented at the public hearing, although concerns over whether or not the students caught cheating were being treated too lightly or too harshly was also discussed.

The meeting, in any practical sense, turned into two meetings: one for the board to hear from Addley and ask questions of him; then the second, a public hearing.

The board does not answer questions from the public during public speaking periods, so the rest of the meeting consisted of the board hearing from parents and students who got up to speak. There was no dialogue whatever between members of the public and officials.

The speakers sorted themselves into two groups: Most objected to the retest because they said it was difficult on the students to both study for the retest and study for other major tests scheduled for the same week, before February vacation.

The other group of speakers said the retesting, while regrettable, seemed to be the best way to handle a cheating problem that made all the test results suspicious.

Fewer speakers commented on punishments for students who steal test answers, but of those who did comment on it, almost all said they were concerned that the district wasn't strict enough.

### **Objections to the Retest**

My son is a 10th grader, and he's currently in both 300 level English and World Study classes," Theresa Vogt told the board. "He worked hard all semester for his grades and prepared for both of those midterms diligently, even having [me] quiz him on the World Studies midterm in the days leading up to the test.

"He's more of a math and science kid, so those two midterms were the ones he stressed out the most about, and when they were done, even though he still had others to go, he felt a weight lifted off of him. So, for these two to be the tests that he would have to retake is really not something I feel like reliving in my house."

Kristen Harnisch, the mother of a sophomore, said, "Requiring students to retake these exams places exponential hardship on students who suffer from physical learning and emotional disabilities like test anxiety, which is very real for some kids, and for those who require much more than to re-prepare to retake the test."

Like others did, Harnisch suggested giving students a choice on whether to retake the test, and if they didn't want to, to simply not use it as part of establishing an individual student's semester grade.

Tommy Lasagne, a student, suggested that the date of the retest at least be pushed back. Others, including Michelle Sini, the mother of a student, said it would have been much easier to schedule the retest very soon after school authorities discovered the incident. "That would've been an easier pill to swallow," said Sini, the wife of board member John Sini.

Olivia Punishill told the board: "I have three to four tests on that one Thursday (right after the retests next week) [...] and I know students who have the same number. So because of the placement of these makeup exams, students are now having to compromise their studying."

#### **In Favor of the Retest**

Declan O'Mara, a student, said he thought the idea of retesting was reasonable.

"I think the reality of the situation is it's not easy to distinguish between someone who cheated on this test and someone who was innocent," he said. "For a lot of the parents here tonight, it's easy for you to say, 'There's no way that my child did this. There's no way that my child is involved, and therefore my child should not have to retake this test.'

"But the reality of the situation is that it is quite possible and it is quite probable that many of your students were involved in this incident, contrary to what you would believe, and contrary to what they would probably tell you."

Benjamin Huffman said: "I think we really have to recognize the fact that we don't know who cheated and who didn't, in its entirety. With that in mind, I think it makes sense to retake that exam."

#### **Harsher Discipline Needed**

"A lot of students in my grade and my peers have been feeling like the kids that committed these acts got away with a slap on the wrist," said Pace Flaherty a student who started an [online petition](#) calling for the school administration to "level more serious consequences against the students that cheated on their midterms." In 72 hours, he said, the petition received 276 signatures.

Some speakers said or indicated that they worried that light punishment for students was becoming a pattern

and that they had heard of other incidents in recent years.

Amy Zerbe, a parent, said a seventh grader last year took a test early and took a picture of the test on his phone, then sent it to others on Snapchat.

A student mentioned that a football player who had been involved in a well-known incident where some New Canaan teens were beaten. The player had been benched from the Turkey Bowl but was allowed to play in the state finals game and allowed to be a co-captain of the team, she said.

Several speakers said that many in school believed that the students who stole the test answers were being given in-school suspensions for less than a week as a result of the incident.

Several said leadership positions should be denied to students who commit this serious an offense, along with disallowing them from extracurricular activities, including sports teams, at least for a significant period of time.

"Students need to, in a healthy way, fear the repercussion," said Henry Kanlian. "If the board and the administration do not levy more severe consequences against academic dishonesty, you will absolutely see this [cheating] in the future."

"There is a lack of confidence in the discipline that is being imposed in our schools," said Shelly Skoglund, the mother of a sophomore. "Do our disciplinary policies reflect our values, and if not, can we tighten them up? And can we live by them, so that our kids know that there is a rule of law in their schools?"

"I think what we're seeing is that there is a culture of intimidation. There's intimidation of administrators by parents, and there are students intimidating each other. That is why not a single kid stood forward and told us this was happening. Hundreds of kids got this [set of answers to this] test and no one told us? I-I-I-I'm astonished, I really am, that these are our kids, and this happened, right? We can't let this happen again."

### **Against Harsher Discipline**

"I have faith in the school to punish the students who need to be punished adequately," Declan O'Mara said.

[Board of Education Special Meeting re: Testing Irregularities 2-4-20 6:30 PM](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).

### **FULL STATEMENTS FROM ADDLEY, OCHMAN**

Here are full or nearly full statements from Addley and Tara Ochman, chairperson of the Board of Education at Tuesday night's meeting.

**Alan Addley, Superintendent**

To the members of the public, let me say thank you for attending this evening, and for your communications over the past week or so. Please know that your thoughts already conveyed to administrators and those expressed tonight are valued by the high school administration.

In discussing this matter tonight the board and parents must understand that I'm trying to protect the personal identifiable information of all students as protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, otherwise known as FERPA.

As a matter of process, as the board chair has expressed [...] student discipline is a matter of administrative responsibility that is governed by board policies.

I share details of this incident tonight on behalf of the high school Principal, Mrs. Ellen Dunn. For those of you who know Mrs. Dunn, she would readily be present this evening, however at my request, she is not here this evening, as this is not the appropriate forum for Mrs. Dunn to comment on specific matters regarding student discipline.

Darien Public Schools is known as a community for academic excellence. The integrity of our school program, staff and students are characteristics of this excellence that should be celebrated, nurtured and protected.

The most recent incident of academic dishonesty at the high school is both unfortunate and unacceptable.

Like other mistakes occasionally made by students, it is imperative that we use this event as a learning opportunity by presenting clear expectations of firm behavior, along with appropriate consequences and interventions for violations of academic integrity.

As we now know, recently it was discovered that a finite number of students entered into the faculty language and social studies department offices after school hours and copied the answers to multiple choice sections of the 300 World Studies and English 10 exams.

It was determined that these answers were widely disseminated through social media.

These exams may have impacted anywhere from 280 to 300 students.

The pervasiveness and issues of fairness and scope of the [security] compromise helped inform the administration's current decision that the most reasonable action to take is to re-administer the multiple choice parts of the exam.

This is consistent with practices for standardized tests administered, such as the SAT, Advanced Placement courses or SBAC.

Also, as recently communicated by the high school principal in her correspondence to parents, these exams are purposeful in forming mastery of skills, instructional practices, curriculum design and interventions for students.

When the integrity of the exam has been compromised, none of these valuable measures are reliable.

The retakes are currently scheduled for next Tuesday or Wednesday. Based on the feedback we received, teachers for those students impacted at the high school will not administer other subject tests during the time of the exam, and exam review will occur and, where necessary, new study guides will be distributed to students who need them.

Additionally, as always, the high school will take into consideration the individual educational needs of the students.

I take this opportunity to reassure the board and our parents that at all times during all deliberations the administration has been reflective and considered issues of integrity, fairness, disruption, stress and reasonableness, and, as in all Darien discussions, the needs of all students — including the students who violated the academic policy — were taken into consideration.

On a related matter, there has been several inquiries about how students' discipline affects student participation in extracurricular or athletic competition.

Consequences for serious disciplinary infraction might include in-school suspension, recommendations for expulsion or police involvement.

I can tell the board that this matter has been referred to the police.

As a matter of practice, if a student under any circumstances, for any infraction — if a student were to receive a suspension, if a suspension was received for example on a Friday, and the suspension was to go in place starting on a Monday, any activities, sports or otherwise the student may be in over the weekend the student wouldn't be allowed to participate in. That is the actual practice that's been in place here, so I just wanted to reiterate that.

I respectfully request the board and the public to entrust the administration with making the best decision possible, given the circumstances, in the best interests of the students and the Darien Public School District.

In the meantime, I encourage parents with specific concerns for the children to reach out to the high school administration.

**Tara Ochman, Board of Education Chairperson**

Over the weekend Board [of Education] members were contacted by many, many in the community with

concerns and questions.

To be clear, the Board of Education was not involved in this situation and does not handle student discipline in the first instance. Also, the BOE does not determine or govern the day-to-day running of the schools.

However, given the level of concern, the Board of Ed is here tonight to receive a report on the irregularities and the process as it was applied.

A few important things, the BOE does not have, nor would it have student-specific information. If our conversation [among board members] were to veer into anything that could personally identify a student, then we will immediately call for an executive session.

Any Board of Education member may make such a motion if they are concerned about this. We are bound as a board by student privacy laws. [...]

We value free speech and hearing different points of view. we ask you to please remember that all of these comments somehow relate to children on this issue. Darien has a long history of good civic engagement and discourse. Let us continue that tradition and model for our children. Please refrain from engaging in any comments that would personally identify a minor.