

Parents and Educators Reflect on Ethics

By Sophie Braccini



Panelists Paul Mack and Ian Farr with moderator Gwenly Carrel Photo by Sophie Braccini

The Campolindo High School Parents' Club couldn't have planned a more timely and pertinent Parent Education Night: "Academic Stress, Cheating and Ethical Behavior." Recent newspaper articles have been highlighting what the Educational Testing Service (ETS) has been studying for years: The as many as 80% of high school children participate in some form of cheating, and the growing acceptance of this behavior by the public.

To address parent concerns, Campolindo assembled a panel of educators, teachers and teen behavior specialists.

School psychologist Bonnie Willax started the presentation by discussing the reasons that lead students to cheat. Some of the most motivated students do it, she says, "These students are choosing extremely rigorous curriculum, adding as many AP classes as possible, yet still knowing this might not be enough to get into Stanford, Berkeley or MIT and they panic." Willax believes that the student that cheats is not the average student who want to avoid an F, but the over-achiever that cannot afford anything below an A.

The teachers on the panel stressed the necessity for students to talk to them when problems arise. They too see extreme stress as a factor leading students to compromise their integrity, and they would rather students come to them and negotiate a later date to turn an assignment than receive unoriginal work. "We can almost always see when the voice of the student changes and when the piece they turn has been re-written by a parent or taken from the Internet," commented English teacher Dan Doyle.

Associate Principal Paul Mack explained, "When cheating occurs, the school enforces a very precise policy with gradual consequences." All stressed that when a student is caught, learning can take place and re-occurrences seldom happen. "It is important that parents speak in the same voice as the faculty," stressed counselors Jeannie Ballard and Ian Farr, "consequences for cheating in college can be way more dramatic, with students expelled from a whole university system. If parents try to fight the school's decision, or contradict the teacher, the message sent to the child is wrong and confusing."

As the end of the evening, the most lingering concern of parents started

to surface: how the way colleges structure their admission process induces the competition frenzy that can lead to valuing results at all costs over character building. Campo college advisor Gwenly Carrel told the audience that a glimmer of change was on the horizon. She invited parents to come back to Campolindo on September 20th to hear Dr. Robert Massa, vice president of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, talk about ways to find the colleges where the best learning happens –which are not necessarily the most selective ones- and strategies for gaining admission.

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