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Honesty Committee to address the question, “why be honest?”

This fall, while sixth graders were welcomed to the school and seniors worked on college applications, Stephen Paluseo’s 8th graders did an exercise about values. Paluseo gave his students 30 note cards with a personal value, such as honesty, integrity, loyalty, and fame, printed on each. He then asked the kids to categorize the cards from “most important” to “least important.”

“It made me realize that honesty was really important,” said 8th grader Meg Woodruff of the exercise. “Honesty” and “integrity” were two of the values the class labeled “most important.”

In this respect, Paluseo’s eighth grade class acts as a microcosm of the Rivers community. Head of School Tom Olverson has assembled an Honesty Committee, comprised of various members of the Rivers Community, to address the question, “why be honest?” and present an answer to the community.

The administration wanted to “bring a wide breadth of perspectives to the table” for this discussion, according to Head of Upper School Patti Carbery. The committee, which is chaired by Paluseo, includes Carbery, trustee Widgie Aldrich, parent Andrea Birger (Nina ‘06, Jack ‘08, and Maxwell ‘10), English department chair and teacher Barbara Ligon, senior Aaron Edelman, junior Ainsley Mallows, and eighth grader Jennifer Pollan.

“The students were huge, they played a big role,” said Paluseo a few days after their first meeting. The meeting was held on November 29th, from 8:00 to 2:30 in The Willis House. Paluseo said that they focused on aspects of honesty as it applies to oneself, others, and work. As Mr. Olverson had hoped, the six and a half hour meeting resulted in philosophical answers to the question and practical methods of approaching the community about it.

The head of school has been encouraging philosophical and ethical conversation in faculty meetings since the revamping of The Core Values last spring (see the 2004 Commencement issue of *The Edge* for full story). He said that he wanted the core values to have a meaning in the community, and not be insubstantial words that are presented only at open houses and other admissions events.

With this in mind, he asked the faculty members how they could better themselves by “living the core values.” He then asked them to decide on one issue in particular to focus on for the 2004-2005 school year. After a few meetings that touched upon a myriad of issues and examples in society, the faculty voted and settled on the question, “why be honest?”

Olverson approached Paluseo to chair the Honesty Committee because of his participation with “The Good Works Project.” This group, made up of researchers from Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, has written two books, *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet*, and *Good Work: How Young People Cope with Moral Dilemmas at Work*. Over this past summer, Wendy Fischman, one of the authors of the books, and Lynn Baronsem, who is also a member of “The Good Works Project,” asked Paluseo and six other teachers from various schools to conduct exercises with their

students, such as the note card exercise, and report on results and trends observed. They also wanted the teachers to ask their students what they feel constitutes as “good work.”

The *Good Work* books expose the pressures society places on workers to sacrifice their values in order to succeed. “Dishonesty can take many forms.” said Wendy Fischman, “There’s blatant dishonestly, like lying or cheating, and then not-so-obvious dishonesty, such as cutting corners in your work—in journalism, not checking sources of quotes; in science, not double or triple checking findings before publishing them.” Fischman believes that such dishonesty is becoming more common in today’s fast-paced world.

“There are a lot of pressures to compromise integrity and honesty,” said Carbery. Greed and success are often the motivation behind dishonest acts by people in public positions, from corporate scandals such as Enron to performance enhancing drugs among athletes.

“The Good Works Project” knows that high school students are under similar pressure to succeed. “As parents and educators we want our students to do well and to meet their own goals, and our pushing and the resulting pressure can lead to dishonesty,” said Fischman.

Indeed, cheating and plagiarism has been on the rise over the past decades, partially because of the convenience of the internet. There was a record number of Disciplinary Committee hearings last year, at least 12 of which concerned plagiarism and academic dishonesty.

Other factors, however, can lead to dishonesty. Through his work for “The Good Works Project,” Paluseo is aware that other values can be more important to individuals

than honesty, such as loyalty and friendship. “A lot of schools have that issue of lying, cheating, and so on, but it goes deeper than that too,” he said. It is not uncommon for students’ values to conflict. An example of this is helping a friend cheat on a test, or throwing a football around outside instead of studying for an assessment, explained Paluseo.

The Honesty Committee does not want to influence students’ actions when under such circumstances, but instead wants to help prepare them for the unavoidable moral conflicts they will face in life after Rivers.

“I want there to be a degree of humility as opposed to preaching to the community,” said Olverson.

Paluseo added that the Committee was not formed “to fix something that’s wrong, but to throw it [the issue of dishonesty] out on the table... hopefully, to have a more open culture.”

Possible plans of action so far include role-playing assemblies to present dilemmas that people could apply to their own lives, a panel with speakers possibly from “The Good Works Project,” video and discussions, town meetings, and advisory group activities. Paluseo will give the committee members questions to think about before the meeting at the end of November, but he does not want to form a structured agenda.

The Honesty Committee exists to encourage open and honest dialogue about honesty as it applies to society and the Rivers community. “Recognizing, identifying, articulating, and discussing the kinds of ethical dilemmas that students, teachers, coaches, and administrators, and other staff face would be valuable to the school community,” said Fischman.

To most, the answer to the question “why be honest?” has been lost in a fast-paced, modern culture with construed morals, according to Carbery. “Society has moved away from this question” said Carbery, “and this is Rivers’ chance to move towards it.”