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Plagiarism Controversy Engulfs Kansas School

By Andrew Trotter

It all started with a 10th grade biology project about leaves. But the dust-up over the handling of a student-plagiarism incident in the normally tranquil Kansas City, Kan., suburb of Piper doesn't appear likely to subside any time soon.

So far, the teacher at the center of the controversy, Christine Pelton, has resigned. Another teacher resigned last month in support, and several others are contemplating whether they want to stay with the 1,300-student district.

The latest casualty is Michael Adams, the principal at the 450- student Piper High School, who announced last month that he would resign at the end of the school year. He cited "personal and professional" reasons, but added in an interview: "You can read between the lines."

In addition, the district attorney has filed civil charges against the district's seven-member school board, accusing the members of violating the Kansas open-meetings law last December when they reduced the penalties for the 28 students accused of plagiarism. And three board members now face a recall drive.

"All of us have gotten tons of hate mail, from all over the country," said Leigh Vader, the Piper school board's vice president. "People are telling us we're idiots and stupid. ... Moving on—I think that's the goal of everyone."

But that may be difficult. The dispute, which has drawn national attention, will return to the national spotlight in May, when the CBS newsmagazine "48 Hours" is expected to air an investigative report on the Piper plagiarism case.

"For a lot of people," said David Lungren, the president of the Piper Teachers Association, "the feeling is we can debate the decision to death or figure out what we need to do to move on. If we can all agree that this did not work out well for us, what could we figure out to prevent this from occurring again?"

Anatomy of a Controversy

The trouble began last fall when Ms. Pelton, a second-year biology teacher, concluded that 28 of her 118 students had plagiarized portions of a major project and gave them grades of zero for it.

A crowd of parents brought complaints to the Dec. 11 meeting of the Piper school board. They questioned the severity of the penalty and asked whether students had been instructed in the nuances of plagiarism. Some later suggested that Ms. Pelton's inexperience in the classroom had played a role. Other parents, however, have backed the teacher.

In fact, the teacher had asked parents and students to read and sign a class syllabus in September that laid out the definition of plagiarism and the penalty—similar to the penalty for cheating described in the school's student handbook.

The project, on leaves, had been a fixture of the sophomore year at Piper High for the past decade. Rising sophomores, starting in summer, collected leaves from the school grounds and their neighborhoods, measured and described them and the trees they came from, and by December each produced a report that would be the worth 50 percent of his or her semester grade.

Ms. Pelton said she confirmed that students had cribbed leaf descriptions when she "checked out all the [botany] books in the library," and submitted papers to a commercial online database designed to catch plagiarists. Mr. Adams, the principal, also checked some projects after receiving the first parental complaints, and he agreed there was plagiarism.

The incident grew into a tempest only after the Dec. 11 board meeting—and district Superintendent Michael Rooney's emergence from a closed session with the board to say the students' penalty would be reduced.

The next day, Mr. Rooney directed Ms. Pelton to change the project's weight from 50 percent to 30 percent of the course's semester grade. And he said that 600 points should be taken from the plagiarists, rather than the entire 1,800 points the project was worth.

Ms. Pelton resigned in protest the same day.

"I'd lost the kids' respect. I heard kids talking about that if they didn't like what I did in the future, they could go to the board of education and they could change that," she said in an interview last week.

Ms. Pelton said that she felt undercut by the school board, and she contended that the decision also was unfair to students who had completed their projects without cheating. The grading change allowed 27 of the 28 students to escape an F, but it also pulled down the grades for about 20 students whom had not plagiarized.

Board members, in turn, said last week they felt pressured to resolve a dispute that school administrators should have handled.

Media Whirlwind

Ms. Pelton's resignation had a dramatic effect on publicity about the incident, which had been merely a local news story, but soon attracted a whirlwind of national, and even international, coverage.

Some observers have cited the Piper plagiarism incident and the district's handling of it as evidence of society's sagging morals and overindulgence toward children.

All 12 deans of Kansas State University signed a letter to the Piper school board that including the statement: "We will expect Piper students ... to buy into [the university's honor code] as a part of our culture."

Angered, Piper school board member James Swanson—who is one of the targets of the recall drive—wrote the university to note that the implication that Piper students might be subject to greater scrutiny because of one controversial incident involving only 28 students was unfair. He received an apology from university officials.

More troubling to the community, Piper students have also been mocked. At an interscholastic sporting event involving Piper, signs appeared among the spectators that read "Plagiarists."

Students have reported that their academic awards, such as scholarships, have been derided by others. And one girl, wearing a Piper High sweatshirt while taking a college-entrance exam, was told pointedly by the proctor, "There will be no cheating."

Another round of news stories was launched in March, after Nick A. Tomasik, the Wyandotte County, Kan., district attorney, filed a civil petition against the school board for allegedly violating the state's open-meetings law.

He read a news story about the Dec. 11 board meeting, and "when I started looking into it, it became obvious that a decision was made and action was taken, and none of this was done in public," said Mr. Tomasik, who has taken sworn depositions from all the board members.

Mr. Tomasik and the board currently are negotiating a settlement based on his proposal, which would include the board holding a full, public discussion of the policies and events relating to the incident. Mr. Lungren of the teachers' union, an affiliate of the National Education Association, said such an airing is needed to reassure the district's 85 teachers. "One of our concerns is the fact that we never understood why the board made the decision they did," he said, "and how they made that decision.

"So much is unknown," he added. "A large concern for teachers is that if this happens to one of us, one of our own, what's going to keep it from happening to me?"

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

["Piper, Kan., Board Accused of Open-Meetings Breach,"](#) News in Brief, March 13, 2002.

["Many Teachers Ignore Cheating, Survey Finds,"](#) May 9, 2001.

["Gotcha!,"](#) Teacher Magazine, February 2001.

["Educators Turn to Anti-Plagiarism Web Programs to Detect Cheating,"](#) Dec. 13, 2000.

Our [Kansas](#) page includes articles and statistics on education issues from the past year.

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

In ["On Plagiarism,"](#) from [The Atlantic Monthly](#), April 2002, Richard A. Posner, examines the questions, "What is 'plagiarism'?" and Why is it reprobated?"

Read ["Plagiarism: What It is and How to Recognize and Avoid It,"](#) from Indiana University's [Writing Tutorial Services](#).

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