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ON EDUCATION

## Cheapening the Cap and Gown

By MICHAEL WINERIP  
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RAMSES SANTELISES was supposed to graduate from [John F. Kennedy High](#) in the Bronx in June 2005, but, he said, he goofed off his senior year. He failed senior English in the second semester and two gym classes. "I got senioritis," he said.

He was planning to make up the courses at summer school, but said that he got sick and was hospitalized, and that by the time he reported to summer school, he had missed too many days. They told him to sign up for night school in the fall. "I was upset," he said. "I was hoping to start college."

In late August he went to Kennedy to register for the night program, discussed the three courses he needed and, he said, got a big surprise. "They said, 'No questions asked, we're going to let you graduate,'" he recalled. "I never had to take the two gym classes and English class I should have taken."

And he wasn't alone, he said. "I know for a fact there were kids there they let graduate to get it over with," he said. At Kennedy's September 2005 graduation, Ramses was one of 105 students awarded diplomas, 31 more than graduated the September before.

For the last year, the city has been investigating whether long-troubled Kennedy High, which has been perilously close to landing on the state's failing school list, used several illegal methods to improve its academic standing. In February, this column raised questions about the principal's decision to change scores to passing from failing on 16 students' English Regents exams required for graduation. City officials were so concerned about grading practices at Kennedy that they issued a memorandum in March to all high school principals, announcing a new citywide policy aimed at closing loopholes in graduation requirements.

Faculty members at Kennedy say the abuses go beyond changing state Regents exam scores. Susan Werner, a longtime Kennedy guidance counselor, said that she and her colleagues knew of a dozen students who lacked the credits to graduate, but were awarded diplomas in the fall of 2005. Several counselors refused to sign papers certifying those students for graduation, she said, and complained to their supervisors, as well as the principal, Anthony Rotunno.

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"We felt this was unethical," Ms. Werner said.

Ms. Werner said that when she talked to Norma Smith, assistant principal for guidance, Ms. Smith "threw up her hands and said 'principal discretion.'" Ms. Werner said that when she complained to Rashid Davis, assistant principal for administration, "He made a big joke or got nasty."

Mr. Rotunno, Mr. Davis and Ms. Smith refused to be interviewed for this article. A city spokesman, David Cantor, said he could not comment on matters being investigated.

But Kathleen Pollina, the local superintendent who oversees Kennedy, defended Mr. Rotunno. She said that the school was being downsized, with staff members being "excessed" to make room for smaller schools, and that that caused tensions. She blamed a small group of staff members resistant to change. "Kennedy is making great strides toward changing what has long been a culture of failure," she said. "These changes are to benefit students."

Not all students, though, feel that they have benefited. "I'm happy to be leaving," said Luisa Gonzalez, the valedictorian. "It's been a stressful, disappointing year."

In September, Mr. Rotunno eliminated 4 guidance positions, on top of 5 cuts the previous June — an overall reduction to 6 counselors from 15. He said this was part of the restructuring of the school; the counselors say it was retribution for challenging him about students' graduating without enough credits. Either way, his move spurred a demonstration by many of the school's top students, which broke into fights and led to seven student arrests.

Recently, Kennedy was added to the list of the city's most violent schools.

"The administration is at war with students and teachers," said Kimberly Rodriguez, a senior who will attend the University of Rochester this fall and wrote her college essay on the problems caused by her counselor's leaving. She said she got little help applying to college. "You could never get in the guidance office," she said. "I'm glad to be getting out."

Faculty members say relations with the principal degenerated after he announced a new grading policy in October 2004. A memorandum from Mr. Rotunno said that any student who passed a Regents exam with a 65 or better in a core subject like math would be given retroactive credit for any failed math classes leading up to the Regents. Mr. Davis, the assistant principal, explained that the new policy was needed to improve the graduation rate and keep Kennedy off the failing school list, according to minutes of an Oct. 13, 2004, meeting recorded by the principal's secretary.

"It was like giving kids a free pass," said Doris Diaz, a counselor whose position was eliminated and who works at DeWitt Clinton High in the Bronx. "Why would kids work during the year if they knew all they had to do was pass the Regents?"

Ms. Werner said, "They started giving out credits like candy." Global history is a four-term course spread over two years, and Ms. Diaz and Ms. Werner say they saw transcripts for students who had failed four terms of global history and were given credit for all four courses after passing the global Regents exam.

This reporter obtained copies of transcripts (with names blanked out) from a teacher who requested anonymity for fear of retribution. In one case, a student who failed three semesters of global history classes starting in January 2003 was given credit for those courses after passing the state global history Regents exam with a 65 in January 2005. A student who failed

freshman English 1 and 2 in 2002-03 was given credit for those courses after passing the English Regents with a 68 in January 2005.

In an interview in February, Mr. Rotunno said the policy was not new, just a clarification of an existing policy that went back to the school's beginning.

Several longtime teachers and administrators disagreed.

Charles Saltzman was an assistant principal when Kennedy opened in 1972, and principal from 1984 until retiring in 1995.

Mr. Saltzman said the only time a Regents score was used to give a course credit was if a student passed the first half of a yearlong course, was failing the second half, but then passed the Regents exam. In that case, he said, "the teacher had the option to give a passing grade for second semester." But he added, "the teacher had final say."

UNDER Mr. Rotunno's policy, teachers no longer needed to be consulted. Eileen Sokoloff, an English teacher, had a student in the spring of 2005 whom she flunked with a 50. She said he did no work and was often absent, but much to her surprise, there he was at graduation. "I was furious," she said. "And other teachers were saying the same thing."

In February, after this reporter questioned whether Kennedy's grading policy was legal, Deputy Chancellor Carmen Fariña sent a memorandum to all high school principals warning about the limits of using Regents scores for course credit. Her memo quotes state policy: "the awarding of credit may not be based solely on the results of the state exam." She also announced a new city policy: If a Regents exam is used as part of a final grade it should be weighted no more than 33 per cent of the "terminal course" leading to the Regents exam.

Mr. Cantor, the city spokesman, said that under this new policy, giving credits for four terms of global or two freshman English classes based on a Regents score "would be a gross violation of the rules."

The city investigation will determine whether Kennedy's policies violated state or city rules in place at the time.

After Ms. Werner, a 20-year veteran, challenged the policy, her student caseload was taken from her, and she was given little to do. She retired in October, because, she said, she felt beaten down and disgusted.

Hard-working students like Kimberly Rodriguez felt the same way. "These kids who didn't work hard passed anyway," she said. "Why even bother when you could pass without doing anything?"

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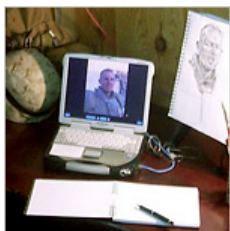
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