

Dinowitz outraged over cheating incident at JFK High School

By JOHN DeSIO

If you were asked to conjure up an image of a typical high school cheater, chances are you would likely come up with the same picture as your friends and neighbors:

A student.

That's not the case at John F. Kennedy High School in Marble Hill.

Reports have circulated for months that English grades on Regents examinations had been unethically changed from failing to passing by faculty at the school.

Those reports have apparently turned out to be true. At the center of a Department of Education investigation is Rhokeisha Ford, a 31-year-old assistant principal for English hired last year to serve under Kennedy Principal Anthony Rotunno.

Ford, with Rotunno's approval, raised 16 grades from failing to passing on the January 2005 English Regents exam, purportedly to boost graduation rates at the school.

Rotunno has denied that graduation rates were the issue, but rather that the grades should have been changed because they were not graded properly in the first place.

Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz sent a letter to Rotunno this past week, expressing his outrage that educators would go to such great lengths to inflate grades at the expense of a student's education.

"I found the entire situation of grades

being altered shocking and outrageous," wrote Dinowitz. "If grades were improperly inflated and inappropriately altered, then I would find it scandalous."

But the real issue for Dinowitz, one with broader implications, is that Ford, a young teacher with no experience in English at any level, would be placed in charge of grading Regents exams.

Ford started in the education world as a substitute teacher in 1999 at M.S. 391 in Tremont, becoming a full-time teacher at the school in 2001 with a certification in special education.

She remained at M.S. 391 until 2004, when she took a manager's position in the Region 1 offices.

Ford then came to Kennedy High School in February 2004, having never been a specialist in the subject she would manage.

"Ms. Ford has risen rather quickly in the ranks," wrote Dinowitz. "Perhaps she has extraordinary talent; I don't know."

The Assemblyman wonders in his letter if there are other cases of a teacher becoming an assistant principal just four years after being certified to teach.

"Is it the normal procedure for a teacher to be named an assistant principal of a department when she is not certified to teach that department's subject? It's only natural that one would speculate on the possibility than Ms. Ford received her job

based on factors other than qualifications," wrote Dinowitz.

He added, "Is such speculation well founded?"

Dinowitz called on Rotunno to explain the hiring of Ms. Ford and the grade changing scandal.

"If we are to have confidence that the new structure of the school system, which is supposed to eliminate patronage and cronyism, is in fact the merit-based sys-

tem that we were led to believe, then we need to know how the appointment of Ms. Ford was made," wrote Dinowitz. "As an elected official who very much wants to see Kennedy become the very best school possible and who will support efforts to improve the school, I look forward to your expeditious response."

At press time, Rotunno had yet to respond to Dinowitz letter, according to the Assemblyman's office.