"Cheating Upwards"
Robert Kolker
Published in *New York Magazine*, Sep 16, 2012
http://nymag.com/news/features/cheating-2012-9/

On Wednesday, June 13, Nayeem Ahsan walked into a fourth-floor classroom at Stuyvesant High School with some two dozen other students to take a physics test—one of a number of Regents Exams that many New York State high-school juniors are required to take. Small and skinny with thick black hair and a bright, shy smile, Nayeem is 16. Like many teenage boys, he seems to straddle two worlds: One moment you see a man, another a boy.

The son of Bangladeshi immigrants, Nayeem was born in Flushing Hospital and raised in Jackson Heights, a 35-minute subway ride to Stuyvesant in lower Manhattan. In the academically elite world of Stuyvesant, Nayeem maintains solid if unremarkable grades, and is a friendly, popular-enough kid known to take photographs of sports teams after school and post them on Facebook. When he walked into the exam room that morning, he seemed confident and calm. Nothing about him suggested he was about to pull off the most brazen feat of cheating in the illustrious school's 107-year history.

Nayeem had cased the room beforehand. His iPhone had spotty service inside Stuyvesant, and he wanted to be sure he'd have a signal. He tested the device in the second seat of the first row—he'd assumed he would be seated alphabetically—and it worked. He tried out the second seat counting from the other side of the room just to be safe—also good. Then he examined the sight lines to both seats from the teacher's desk—what could the proctor see and not see?—and checked out the seats where he thought some of his friends would be sitting. One was right in front of the teacher. He made a note of that. That kid was out.

Nayeem had cheated on tests before. By his junior year, he and his friends had become fairly well-known procurers of copies of exams handed down from students who had taken a class a year or two earlier. But since that wasn't possible with a Regents Exam, the phone was his method of choice. He'd cheated that way before, too. In his three years at Stuyvesant, in fact, he'd become somewhat skilled at surreptitiously texting during a test, developing a knack for taking out his phone and glancing down at it for just a millisecond without being noticed.

Regents Exams are typically administered for three hours. After two hours, students who are done are allowed to leave. Nayeem is a good physics student. He worked his way through the test quickly, as he knew he would, finishing in an hour and a half. (He'd later learn he received a 97.) His plan had been to use the next half-hour or so to type the multiple-choice answers into his phone, then send them to his friends, all of whom were taking the test at the same time, many in other parts of the school. In return, he expected help from others on future tests. He was the point person on this exam; others would play that role for subjects they excelled in. He and his friends had been helping one another this way for some time.

That day, however, there was a glitch. The proctor was someone Nayeem knew, Hugh Francis, an English teacher, and he was not just sitting at the desk but walking around the room. Francis even caught the girl next to Nayeem using her phone in the first few minutes of the test. While cell phones technically aren't allowed in city schools, that rule was widely ignored at Stuyvesant. Many of the school's students, some as young as 13, travel far from home, and their families insist on staying in touch. "Put it back in your pocket," the proctor said, and the girl complied. It was all Nayeem could do to send a text to his friends: "Okay, I got you guys later."

Nayeem had been writing the answers on a piece of scrap paper as he went along so he wouldn't have to flip back and forth once he had the chance to text. He waited for the shift change. During a Regents Exam, two teachers share the proctoring duties, handing off the mantle at the 90-minute mark. When Francis left, he was replaced by a woman Nayeem had never seen before. She sat behind the desk and was less vigilant. As long as she stayed seated, Nayeem realized, she couldn't see his phone. All he had to do was place it flat on the desk and curl his forearm around it.

He got bolder. Turning to page one of his completed exam, Nayeem lifted his phone just enough to snap a picture of that page, then put the phone down again. Over the next few minutes, he photographed the whole test booklet—all fifteen pages.

The night before, Nayeem had sent a group-text message to 140 classmates: "If you guys get this, I've got the answers for you tomorrow." The students on Nayeem's list included honor-roll students, debate-team members, and "Big Sibs" (upperclassmen deemed responsible enough to mentor incoming freshmen). There were kids who were also good at physics (to double check Nayeem's answers) and a girl he liked. That list still existed on

his phone from the text he'd sent the night before. He hit send fifteen times, once for each page of the test. When it occurred to him that some kids didn't have iPhones, he went back to manually typing in all the answers and sent them too. The proctor never saw anything.

The next day, Nayeem used the same scheme during his U.S. history Regents Exam—only this time it was his turn to get help from others. He sat in the first seat of the first row, just a few feet from the proctor, and received the answers. Next, on June 18, came the Spanish Regents. Spanish was Nayeem's weakest subject; he needed a score high enough to lift his final grade in the class out of the cellar (Regents are often factored into class grades at Stuyvesant). This time his plan was to take pictures of the questions, text them to friends who were facile with the language but not taking the test, then wait for his phone to vibrate with fully written paragraphs of Spanish.

About halfway through that test, just after the proctor switch, the school's principal, Stanley Teitel, accompanied by a handful of other administrators, entered the exam room. A science teacher by background who still taught chemistry at the time, Teitel is tall and thin with a thick Brooklyn accent. As principal, he was known as an intense presence, liked personally but given to policies the students often found too restrictive. Teitel walked past Nayeem, then doubled back and stared down at him, taking him by surprise.

"Do you have a phone?" "Yeah," Nayeem said. "Give it to me." "Why?"

"Because," Teitel said, "I'm the principal."

Nayeem knew Teitel was aware he was cheating, although he wasn't sure how Teitel found out. His best guess was that his answers on one of the earlier exams had been too similar to too many other students' (he'd later learn that was true for the physics test). Nayeem's phone not only had the recently incriminating texts and the names of those he'd been texting with on it, it still contained a record of every test he'd shared answers on since the start of the term. But there was no time to wipe the device clean. He had no choice now but to give it to Teitel.

Teitel escorted Nayeem to the front office, and instructed him to continue taking the test while Teitel and the others discussed how to proceed. Nayeem tried to calm himself with the thought that his phone was password-protected, but Teitel quickly got it open (Nayeem doesn't know how). Moments later, Teitel and an assistant principal began scribbling down names as fast as they could. The school called Nayeem's father, and when he got there, Teitel seemed almost as shaken as Nayeem was. "There's no way he can go back to Stuy in the fall," Teitel said. "If this hits the *Post,* the school is through."

**

The Stuyvesant scandal may have been the most notorious act of cheating to take place at a high school in the United States, but it is by no means the only high-profile cheating scandal of recent vintage. In May, a few weeks before Nayeem walked into his first Regents Exam, Harvard University professor Matthew Platt was grading the final exams for his spring lecture class, Government 1310: "Introduction to Congress," when he noticed that somewhere between ten and twenty exams seemed similar. The test was a take-home exam. It was also open-book and open-Internet, meaning that students were allowed to research their answers in any manner they saw fit, with one exception: The first page of the test featured specific instructions not to work with other students. Platt brought the case to Harvard's Administrative Board, which investigated the incident over the summer. In August, the school went public with its findings. Some 125 students' tests were found suspect; close to half of the class's 259 students now found themselves under investigation. One Harvard dean called the matter "unprecedented in anyone's living memory." One of the first jokes that circulated was about how some of the students must have gone to Stuyvesant.

Around the country, there are other cases: In March, nine seniors just months from graduation from Leland High School, an acclaimed public school in San Jose, California, were accused of taking part in a cheating ring (one student was said to have broken in to at least two classrooms to steal test information before winter exams). In May, a high-achieving junior from Panther Creek High School in Cary, North Carolina, was caught distributing a test to four classmates. And last fall, some twenty students from Great Neck, Roslyn, and other Long Island Gold Coast towns were arrested in an SAT cheating ring; at least four of them were said to have hired themselves out to take the test for their friends.

Eric Anderman, a professor of educational psychology at Ohio State University, has been studying cheating in schools for decades. He says research shows that close to 85 percent of all kids have cheated at least once in some way by the time they leave high school (boys tend to cheat a bit more than girls, although they might just be more likely to admit the transgression; otherwise, cheating is fairly uniform across demographic groups). Three months before Nayeem walked into his physics Regents Exam, the Stuyvesant *Spectator,* the school's official student newspaper, happened to publish the results of a survey it conducted in which 80 percent of respondents (nearly two-thirds of the school's 3,295 students) admitted to cheating in some way, with only 10 percent saying they'd ever been caught. Seventy-nine percent of all students, and about 90 percent of seniors, admitted to learning about questions before tests at least once a year.

It's impossible to determine whether the recent incidents reflect an uptick in the overall incidence of cheating ("It has been high, it continues to be high, and it's extremely high now," says Anderman). But the much-publicized scandals have shined a light on the problem, and social psychologists say today's high-school students live in a culture that, perhaps more than ever, fosters cheating, or at least the temptation to cheat. The prime offender, they say, is the increased emphasis on testing. Success in school today depends not just on the SAT, but on a raft of federal and state standardized exams, often starting as early as fourth grade and continuing throughout high school. More than ever, those tests determine where kids go to college—and most kids believe that in an increasingly globalized, competitive world, college, more than ever, determines success. (A weak economy only intensifies the effect.) Carol Dweck is a Stanford psychology professor. Her research shows that when people focus on a score rather than on improvement, they develop a fixed idea of their intellectual abilities. They come to see school not as a place to grow and learn, but as a place to demonstrate their intelligence by means of a number. To a student with that mind-set, the importance of doing well, and the temptation to cheat, increases. In 2010, Eric Anderman found that even the most impulsive cheaters cheated less often when they believed the point of the test was to help them master the material, not just get a score. "If everything is always high-stakes," Anderman says, "you're going to create an environment conducive to cheating."

The culture of sharing appears to also create fertile ground for cheating. It's not just that e-mailing, texting, and the web make exchanging answers and plagiarizing far more practical. We live in a Wikipedia world, where file-sharing and blurry notions of personal privacy have, for some young people, made the idea of proprietary knowledge seem like a foreign, almost ridiculous, concept. If in the seventies, some students argued that pocket calculators made it senseless to do arithmetic by hand, now the very value of sole authorship is called into question. Today's plagiarists may not even think they're doing much of anything wrong, according to Kristal Brent Zook, the director of the M.A. journalism program at Hofstra University on Long Island, who recently wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review* about students who lift passages, apologize, and then do it again and again. "I mean, the word *plagiarism,* to me, is a hurtful word," she said one Hofstra student told her when accused.

It's tricky business to blame the Dick Fulds of the world for breeding a generation of cheaters, but Wall Street titans, politicians, and other high-visibility leaders who cheat—and especially when they get away with it—can have an impact. Dan Ariely, a Duke social scientist and the author of *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty,* has made a career studying the effects of social norms on decision-making, particularly when it comes to irrational and unethical decisions. "There is right and wrong, and there is what people around us tell us is right and wrong. The people around us are often more powerful," Ariely says. "There's a speed limit, but you see people around you driving at a certain speed, and you get used to it pretty quickly." In one experiment, Ariely and his team filled separate rooms with test-taking Carnegie Mellon students and hired two acting students to visibly cheat with impunity in front of them, one in each room. One of the actors wore a University of Pittsburgh sweatshirt, the other a Carnegie Mellon sweatshirt. Ariely found that in the room where the actor was wearing the University of Pittsburgh sweatshirt, fewer people followed his lead. But in the room where the actor was wearing a Carnegie Mellon sweatshirt, more cheating took place. The Pittsburgh cheater was not one of the group, so the cheating felt less normal; the Carnegie Mellon cheater was one of them, so it didn't seem like such an unacceptable thing to do.

We now understand enough about brain science to blame biology as well. Modern research shows that the parts of the brain responsible for impulse control (measured in the lateral prefrontal cortex) may not completely develop until early adulthood, while the parts that boost sensation-seeking (the ventral striatum and the orbitofrontal cortex) get started growing just after puberty begins. Teenagers may cheat (or do drugs or drive too fast) partly because their sense of the thrill outweighs their sense of the risk. The phenomenon is magnified when friends are present, which may help explain why teens often cheat in groups. A 2010 Temple University study

found that when playing a driving video game, teenagers were more likely to take big risks and even crash when their friends were watching than they were when playing the game alone.

But why do bright kids—Stuyvesant and Harvard students—cheat? Aren't they smart enough to get ahead honestly? One might think so, but the pressure to succeed, or the perception of it anyway, is often only greater for such students. Students who attend such schools often feel they not only have to live up to the reputation of the institution and the expectations that it brings, but that they have to compete, many of them for the first time, with a school full of kids as smart, or smarter, than they are. Harvard only admits so many Stuy students, Goldman Sachs will hire only so many Harvard kids. Competition can get ratcheted up to extreme levels. "Kids here know that the difference between a 96 and a 97 on one test isn't going to make any difference in the future," says Edith Villavicencio, a Stuyvesant senior. "But they feel as if they need the extra one point over a friend, just because it's possible and provides a little thrill."

Stuyvesant's 2012 valedictorian, Vinay Mayar, talked about the pressure at the school in his graduation speech. Mayar, who lives on the Upper East Side and just started at MIT, called his classmates "a volatile mix of strong-minded people armed in opposition against one other." He listed a few things his friends said epitomized the Stuyvesant experience, like "copying homework in the hallway while walking to class," "sneaking in and out of school during free periods," and, at the end of the list, "widespread Facebook cheating."

Teitel, Stuyvesant's principal, used to like to share a quip with incoming freshmen: Grades, friends, and sleep—choose two. The work can be so demanding at top schools that students sometimes justify cheating as an act of survival, or rebellion even. At Harvard, the *Crimson,* which broke the story, reported that part of the take-home exam—an unexpected set of short-answer questions—seemed to rankle the students. And so, even on something so relatively insignificant (as indeed the Regents were for the Stuyvesant kids), students may have felt justified in banding together against the professor and helping one another. At Harvard, "everyone thinks this incident is not unique at all," says Julie Zauzmer, managing editor of the *Crimson.* "It's fairly unique in the scale of it, and especially the way Harvard has handled it by going public. But I don't think it's unusual in other ways. Everyone comes here surprised to find they're not the best anymore. Everyone feels they're able to come out at the same point they came in." When they can't, perhaps, some people decide to cheat.

"Not everyone cheats, but it is collaborative," says Daniel Solomon, a former Stuyvesant *Spectator* staffer who graduated in June, and is now starting at Harvard. "One of my friends told me, 'School is a team effort.' That's sort of the ethos at Stuy."

Some students rationalize cheating as a victimless crime—even an act of generosity. Sam Eshagoff, one of the students involved in the Long Island SAT scandal, justified taking the test at least twenty times, and charging others up to $2,500 per test to take the exam for them, by casting himself as a sort of savior. "A kid who has a horrible grade-point average, who, no matter how much he studies is going to totally bomb this test," Eshagoff told *60 Minutes.* "By giving him an amazing score, I totally give him ... a new lease on life."

19

**

Nayeem and I meet for dinner on a weeknight in August at the Old Town pub, near Union Square. He says he decided to speak to me to tell his side of the story, and make his case for returning to Stuyvesant. His parents know about his decision, he told me later, but aren't happy about it.

Nayeem speaks rapidly, and barely bothers with his food when it comes. He is wearing two bands on his wrist, one from the Stuyvesant Red Cross Club, another a hospital I.D. bracelet. Back in July, as news of the cheating scandal spread, he underwent a previously scheduled surgery, the removal of a benign tumor from his leg. "That was a real low point," he says. "I was limping home with my parents. I was experiencing physical pain from the stitches. And people were contacting me on Facebook, asking 'What's gonna happen to the Regents?' " (Nayeem's father, Najmul, had told a reporter that the tumor, along with a recent mugging, left Nayeem stressed and forced him to miss time at school. Those factors, he said, explained the cheating incident.)

Nayeem's parents, he says, had always wanted him to go to Stuyvesant. Najmul publishes a small cultural Bangladeshi newspaper in Queens, and his mother, Nilasur, stays at home. Nayeem's older sister had gone to La Guardia High School and later NYU, but Nayeem felt he was expected to do even better. When Nayeem was in seventh grade, he went to an open house at Stuyvesant. He remembers marveling at how big the place was—ten floors, with a swimming pool—and hearing about the colleges graduates attended. "It's almost like a dream experience, right? It showed me that I'm not just working to make my parents happy. I'm working to make my future look a lot better than what it is now."

Nayeem started studying for the city's Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT), the gateway to the city's elite public schools, two or three afternoons a week in the summer before seventh grade at a so-called cram school in Queens. By the middle of seventh grade, he bumped up to five days a week. By the time the SHSAT came around, he'd practically memorized every question on every published test-prep manual for the exam. In eighth grade, he scored in the low 600s on the test—not as well as his coaches expected, but good enough to get into Stuyvesant. His long-term goal was Harvard.

Almost from his first day at Stuyvesant, Nayeem knew what GPA he'd need to maintain to have a shot at Harvard. "When you get into Stuy, they show you where the graduating seniors went to college and what grades they got," Nayeem says. "You don't get to see names, but you get to see their GPA in every subject and their SAT scores." But the schoolwork was more difficult than Nayeem expected. He dreaded double-period science days, when he'd come home with nine pages of notes, handwritten back and front, then have to comb through them to complete an assignment. So he learned to set priorities. He knew, for instance, that one of his teachers checked homework once every four days. "There were days where I had so much other work, I was like, 'Okay, what are the chances she's going to check today?' And most of the time, she didn't check."

By the end of the first term, Nayeem's GPA hovered around 89—solid, but not high enough for Harvard. He began staying up all night studying at friends' houses. "My parents were a little tentative," he says. "They'd rather I stay home, but they understood." By the end of his second term, Nayeem had raised his GPA to 92. That's when he says his biology teacher offered the class a deal: If everyone correctly completed their final Friday assignment, working through the weekend on it, she would raise everyone's average by three points. "She knew there was this one guy who wouldn't do it," he says. "He never did a single homework or a single lab."
But Nayeem wasn't going to miss out on this chance for extra credit because of a slacker. On Friday night, he rushed and finished the homework. Then he put it up on Facebook as a note, tagging about fifteen of the kids in his class (he says he did it to lift the whole group up). It was, as he recalls, his first major act of cheating. He got caught and the class didn't get the three points, but, he says, the teacher took mercy on him and didn't turn him in.

When Nayeem began struggling in his sophomore year (trigonometry was especially hard for him), he started sharing—and borrowing—answers more. By junior year, when grades matter most to colleges, cheating had become a regular habit. "History had five teachers. I was getting tests for four of them. I was being nice to everyone, and they started helping me out." By now he realized "how lazy teachers could be. I studied for the first test. But I looked at the new test and last year's test and they were, like, 75 percent the same exact questions and the same exact answers. So I was like, 'Okay, why am I studying?' "

Some teachers teach not just the same subject but the same class for three or four different periods over the course of a day. Nayeem began passing test answers from the early classes to the later ones. He knew he was taking a risk, but he also knew he hadn't officially been caught yet, not even for a first offense. (At Stuyvesant, a first cheating incident triggers a warning, and a second goes on your permanent record, which compels you to answer *yes* when asked on college applications if you've ever cheated.) Nayeem's rationale for who he did and didn't share answers with was byzantine. "There's kids you know, and there's kids you really know. There are kids I trust a lot and kids I care about. There are kids I really don't care too much about, but I want them to have a bright future. There are kids that can help me in the future. There are kids that are good at most subjects, but they suck at one, and I worked that to my advantage."

Nayeem remembers wondering before the physics Regents if it was worth it to put so much time into cheating on such an easy test. But he decided it was—especially considering the help he could use on the Spanish test. Studying, he says, seemed pointless. "It's not like studying is going to change one point on my exam," he says, "because there are things I am bound to not know." He says he thought about it morally, too. "I was like, 'There's a ton of kids that are studying so hard, and here's 140 kids that are just going to ace the exam without knowing shit, right?' But a good number of people at Stuy have asked me for some kind of help."

The only reason he got caught, he says, was that "it was too many people with one exam. It got really big, much faster than I thought it would. One day it was 5 people, and one day it was 140."

**

Stanley Teitel told Nayeem right away that he couldn't return to Stuyvesant in the fall, but Nayeem had all summer to fight that decision, which he did. Since last March, ironically enough, he's been working teaching kids at a test-prep center in Queens.

Nayeem's identity might never have become public knowledge if a friend hadn't tried to help him by circulating a petition online to try to convince the school not to expel him. "He told me, 'There's a lot of people that do a lot worse in Stuy. There's people that smoke weed, people that do drugs. True, it's unethical, it's an extreme breach of academic integrity, and it's at an elite school. It is bad, but I don't get how kicking you out would help anything.' " The DOE had previously acknowledged it was investigating the incident, but the petition exposed the scandal, and outed Nayeem.

Shortly after Nayeem got caught, he went home and remotely wiped his phone of its data; the school and the DOE aren't commenting, but Nayeem has implied that they didn't get the names of all 140 recipients of his text message before that. Initial press reports held that the school had 92 names. Later that number drifted down to 72, and more recently to 66. A few of those 66 students were cleared owing to lack of evidence. While at first it seemed that only a handful of the remaining accused students would be suspended, the DOE announced earlier this month that all 66 would be suspended—a dozen for up to ten days and the rest for up to five days, depending on what each of them has to say in a one-on-one conference with school officials. Those students will also have to retake all of their Regents tests. On the face of it, this seems fair enough. But Nayeem notes that the glaring absence of Regents scores on the students' college applications (at least some of the next Regents Exams aren't offered until after applications are due), combined with the fact that they go to Stuyvesant, would lead any college-admissions officer to assume they were on Nayeem's list.

Nayeem says he feels bad about what may happen to the kids who are being punished. "I don't want them to go to lousy colleges because of this." But he insists his friends aren't upset with him. "I've done a lot for these people, so much so that they know I have got good intentions." He says his parents go back and forth about what happened. "Sometimes they're mad at me. Sometimes they're sad. Sometimes they're very optimistic." Nayeem says he is ready to accept any punishment the DOE throws at him as long as he is able to go back to Stuyvesant. The worst damage, he argues, has already been done—a simple Google search will ruin him in the eyes of any college-admissions office. Why kick him out on top of everything else? He insists he's learned his lesson. "The fact that I could have gotten kicked out, that changed my life."

On August 3, Stanley Teitel resigned from Stuyvesant, saying in a letter that it was "time to devote my energy to my family and personal endeavors." Teitel's critics say he pushed kids too hard. "He saw the students' stress as a sign that the school was doing what it was supposed to be doing," says one teacher. Another calls him "a visionless bureaucrat who is sort of like, 'Well, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. And we know it ain't broke because everyone's doing such a good job getting into college.' " His defenders note that he did more than most administrators to curb cheating, and caught Nayeem.

The new interim principal, Jie Zhang, is a Chinese-born veteran teacher and administrator who most recently oversaw a network of schools that includes Stuyvesant. She'll have to deal with the scandal's aftermath, at least for now, starting with how to prevent future cheating. In a recent letter to Stuyvesant families, Zhang said all students and parents will now have to review and sign an "academic honesty policy." She has also stepped up enforcement of the school system's cell-phone ban, reportedly seizing seventeen phones in the first two days of classes. At least one teacher says those moves are not enough. "I hope this will be a chance for self-- examination, of what high school should be and why we're all here." Less homework, a decreased focus on testing, curbs on competition have all been raised as possible reforms. But to accept any such change, Zhang—and whoever is chosen to lead the school long-term—will have to be convinced that a less cutthroat Stuyvesant is still Stuyvesant. While many Stuyvesant parents are outraged by the scandal, some seem to think the school has been unfairly vilified. In terms of cheating, Stuyvesant "is no different from Horace Mann or Bronx Science," one father says. Many of the students who were not implicated, meanwhile, feel betrayed by Nayeem and his confederates. "All the people I talked to said [Nayeem] deserved to be expelled," says one student. "They said they were angry taking the tests knowing other people were cheating it."

As for Harvard, the probe there is expected to continue well into the fall and perhaps even beyond, with each student's situation being adjudicated individually. "It will take as long as it will take," says Harvard spokesman Jeff Neal. "We are committed to ensuring the students involved have their due-process rights." The Administrative Board at Harvard has wide latitude in formulating punishments. Depending on the proof and a student's extenuating circumstances, he could receive informal admonishment, a mandatory redo, a failing grade on the test

itself, a mark of no credit for the entire course, or even probation or a one-year suspension. According to a tipster e-mail to the IvyGate blog, the Ad Board has told at least some of the students who were involved that it will not take into consideration the "culture of collaboration" that supposedly existed in the course for many years when reaching its decisions.

As of this writing, Nayeem has been sitting out the start of the school year, not yet enrolling at another high school in hopes that the DOE will relent and allow him to return to Stuyvesant. He's hopeful, but far from confident, that will happen. When he visited other schools with an eye toward transferring, Nayeem says, his heart sank. "I just wanted to stay at Stuy more. Now I realize, but before I didn't—you're so lucky to go to Stuy. You're able to learn. In other schools, there are kids in school who are texting during the day while the teacher's talking. There's no learning. It would have been easier, but it wouldn't have been what I wanted."

When I ask him if he thinks he'd be able to handle the workload at Stuyvesant without cheating, he doesn't hesitate. "I can definitely study my way out of it. Like, now that my future's on the line."

But he says he still wonders if maybe he could have gotten away with his cheating scheme if he spent more time organizing it, or put more locks on his phone. At times, it seems, he's still trying to rationalize what he did. He says he didn't think the Regents was as big a deal as the SAT. "I didn't know I could have gotten kicked out of Stuy if I pulled this off. That was never made clear to me."

This stops me. He cheated on not just one but three different Regents Exams, and he didn't think that could get him kicked out of high school?

Nayeem squints. "I mean, like, I really didn't think so." Then he sits up straighter. "And now it's like a second chance. It's like a second chance that has a lot of dark clouds. It still has consequences, right? I was still suspended. I still won't be able to go to a decent college. But hopefully I'll be able to go somewhere. That's what I'm worried about. Somewhere decent enough to work my way up into a career."

What career? "I want to be an investment banker."