

Teaching How to Cheat

Concerns about cheating in school are nothing new, but they usually don't include teachers. The widespread scandals of teachers cheating on standardized tests provide the wrong ethical guidance to those who will later staff and lead business organizations.

Stories about teachers cheating have become a regular occurrence in the news. A September 19, 2011, ProPublica story titled “America’s Most Outrageous Teacher Cheating Scandals” describes serious student testing irregularities at both the grade and high school level occurring in eight states and the District of Columbia. A further review of news reports over the last few years found that several other states in addition to those cited by ProPublica had either found instances of teacher cheating or taken steps to prevent possible testing irregularities. The cheating scandal in the state of Georgia provides one of the most detailed accounts of an environment of pervasive teacher cheating at public schools.

The narrative began in February 2010 when the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement released official results from its investigation into possible cheating on the

2009 state competency examination required in grades 1 through 8. The study was performed by educational testing company CTB McGraw Hill, which reviewed all the answer documents from Georgia test takers in order to detect erasures. Any classrooms having a proportion of wrong-to-right answer changes that fell well above the statewide average were flagged. Although suspicious results were found statewide, the Atlanta public school district was home to 58 of the 191 schools. These schools were selected for further investigation.

After the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (*AJC*) began reporting evidence of possible cheating in Atlanta public schools, administrators in the school system commissioned an expert to challenge those findings. The report from November 12, 2010, “Report on Atlanta school cheating inquiry validates *AJC* analysis,” determined that the *AJC*’s reporting was proper but didn’t prove cheating had taken place. The school system never made the report public.

Shortly thereafter, Atlanta school board members were warned by one of the nation’s top accrediting agencies that their

capacity to govern was “in serious jeopardy.” The system faced two inquiries into test cheating allegations—one by federal prosecutors and the other by an investigative team appointed by then Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue.

These same officials had previously received accolades for the success they had reported in increasing superior performance on standardized competency tests. For example, in February 2009, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) named Beverly Hall, Atlanta’s long-serving superintendent, its 2009 National Superintendent of the Year. In the press release announcing the award, AASA Executive Director Dan Domenech said, “Beverly Hall is an outstanding superintendent whose leadership has turned Atlanta into a model of urban school reform. Throughout her long and successful tenure in Atlanta, Hall has accomplished significant gains in student achievement.” An *AJC* story on July 11, 2011, quotes Domenech as considering rescinding the award, saying, “It’s the first time one of our superintendents of the year has been so tainted by an investigation.”

The results of Georgia's investigation into Atlanta's administration of the 2009 state competency exams was released publicly on July 5, 2011, by Georgia Governor Nathan Deal. The investigative team conducted 2,100 interviews and reviewed 800,000 documents. Here are some of the findings from the more than 800-page report:

- ◆ Cheating existed in 78.6% of the schools selected on the basis of the analysis of erasures on test sheets.
- ◆ Principals in 67.9% of the schools where cheating existed were found to be either responsible for or directly involved in the cheating process.
- ◆ The number of cheating teachers and principals was determined to be 178. Confessions were obtained from 82, six principals pled their Fifth Amendment rights, and 32 others either were involved with or should have known that there was test cheating in their schools.
- ◆ The culture of fear, intimidation, and retaliation that existed in the Atlanta public schools created a conspiracy of silence and deniability with respect to misconduct on standardized testing.
- ◆ In addition to the cheating found on the 2009 exams, the state investigation found other improper conduct, including several Open Records Act violations, instances of false statements, and instances of document destruction.
- ◆ Cheating occurred as early as 2001.

The July 6, 2011, *AJC* story about the Georgia investigative report provided interesting details of how the fraud was organized and implemented:

- ◆ Atlanta Superintendent Beverly Hall and her top aides ignored, buried, destroyed, or altered complaints about misconduct; claimed ignorance of wrongdoing; and accused naysayers of failing to believe in poor children's ability to learn.
- ◆ Area superintendents silenced whistleblowers and rewarded subordinates who met academic goals by any means possible.
- ◆ Unethical and potentially illegal behavior was present at every level of the bureaucracy, allowing district staff to reap praise and sometimes bonuses by misleading the children, parents, and community they served.

Some examples of the types of misconduct contained in the report are:

- ◆ The wrong-to-correct process was so sophisticated in some cases that plastic transparency sheets were used to make changing answers easier. In at least one case, the process took place in a teacher's home.
- ◆ Teachers arranged classroom seating so that lower-performing students could better utilize the efforts of the better-performing students.
- ◆ First and second grade teachers used voice inflection while reading the test to identify the correct answer.
- ◆ One student refused to take the test but still passed.

Volume 3 of the Georgia state

investigative report, "Conclusions: Why Cheating Occurred and Cover-up Allegations," gave more details of the findings of the investigative team. Three answers were provided to the question of why cheating occurred:

1. The targets set by the central Atlanta administration were often unrealistic, especially considering the cumulative effect of the fraud.
2. A culture of fear, intimidation, and retaliation spread throughout the system.
3. Hall and her administration emphasized test results and public praise to the exclusion of integrity and ethics.

The Atlanta fraud experience emphasizes the importance of a number of well-known ethics principles that should guide an organization in achieving its objectives. First, an ethical tone at the top is critical to avoiding unethical behavior. Like the CEO of an organization pressured to report ever-increasing earnings in spite of both inherent and external adverse factors, Hall pressured principals and teachers to "make the numbers" by any means necessary. Once the fraud began, it had to increase in scope and extent in order to justify last year's fraudulent results and then show improvement this year. The lack of a strong ethical culture facilitated this outcome.

Second, the controls set forth in the testing protocol were obviously inadequate. Teachers and principals denied ever receiving any training in ethics. Those who reported unethical conduct to management not only faced a

cover-up but often became targets of retaliation, intimidation, and harassment. As set forth in Volume 3, Hall certified that the Atlanta system had followed required procedures “relating to testing and test administration, including the distribution and collection of test materials, test security, use of these results and department testing dates and reporting of irregularities” as required by the manuals and directions development by the independent professional test manufacturer. This certification was demonstrated to be largely false.

A final lesson to be learned from the testing scandals is that the hierarchical nature of the governance structure in public education requires repair. A one-size-

fits-all ethics and compliance program that would suffice in a business environment may not be effective in the public school environment. Pressures from parents and students as well as principals and administrators leave teachers in an extremely vulnerable position of conforming to external demands rather than professional responsibilities.

The worst part of this deception is that teachable children are firsthand witnesses to these events. One worries about the lessons they will take away from seeing their teachers and other important authority figures in their lives essentially tell them that breaking rules to achieve some objective is acceptable—even justified. ProPublica’s sum-

mary of reports of unethical testing events in Alabama, California, Illinois, New York, Ohio, West Virginia, and additional states and the District of Columbia indicate the national breadth of the challenge. To be effective, we need ethically oriented rules for administering standardized tests, and these rules must be strictly enforced by an independent organization. **SF**

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