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Investigation into APS cheating finds unethical behavior across every level

By [Heather Vogell](#)
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Across Atlanta Public Schools, staff worked feverishly in secret to transform testing failures into successes.

Teachers and principals erased and corrected mistakes on students' answer sheets.

Area superintendents silenced whistle-blowers and rewarded subordinates who met academic goals by any means possible.

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.

For years — as long as a decade — this was how the Atlanta school district produced gains on state curriculum tests. The scores soared so dramatically they brought national acclaim to Hall and the district, according to an investigative report released Tuesday by Gov. Nathan Deal.

In the report, the governor's special investigators describe an enterprise where unethical — and potentially illegal — behavior pierced every level of the bureaucracy, allowing district staff to reap praise and sometimes bonuses by misleading the children, parents and community they served.

The report accuses top district officials of wrongdoing that could lead to criminal charges in some cases.

The decision whether to prosecute lies with three district attorneys — in Fulton, DeKalb and Douglas counties — who will consider potential offenses in their jurisdictions.

For teachers, a culture of fear ensured the deception would continue.

"APS is run like the mob," one teacher told investigators, saying she cheated because she feared retaliation if she didn't.

The voluminous report names 178 educators, including 38 principals, as participants in cheating. More than 80 confessed. The investigators said they confirmed cheating in 44 of 56 schools they examined.

The investigators conducted more than 2,100 interviews and examined more than 800,000 documents in what is likely the most wide-ranging investigation into test-cheating in a public school district ever conducted in United States history.

The findings fly in the face of years of denials from Atlanta administrators. The investigators re-examined the state's erasure analysis — which they said proved to be valid and reliable — and sought to lay to rest district leaders' numerous excuses for the suspicious scores.

Deal warned Tuesday “there will be consequences” for educators who cheated. “The report's findings are troubling,” he said, “but I am encouraged this investigation will bring closure to problems that existed.”

Interim Atlanta Superintendent Erroll Davis promised that the educators found to have cheated “are not going to be put in front of children again.”

Through her lawyer, Hall issued a statement denying that she, her staff or the “vast majority” of Atlanta educators knew or should have known of “allegedly widespread” cheating. “She further denies any other allegations of knowing and deliberate wrongdoing on her part or on the part of her senior staff,” the statement said, “whether during the course of the investigation or before.”

Don't blame teachers?

Phyllis Brown, a southwest Atlanta parent with two children in the district, said the latest revelations are “horrible.” It is the children, she said, who face embarrassment if they are promoted to a higher grade only to find they aren't ready for the more challenging work.

Still, she doesn't believe teachers should be punished.

“It's the people over them, that threatened them, that should be punished,” she said. “The ones from the building downtown, they should lose their jobs, they should lose their pensions. They are the ones who started this.”

AJC raised questions

Former Gov. Sonny Perdue ordered the inquiry last year after rejecting the district's own investigation into suspicious erasures on tests in 58 schools. The AJC first raised questions about some schools' test scores more than two years ago.

The special investigators' report describes years of misconduct that took place as far up the chain of command as the superintendent's office. The report accuses Hall and her aides of repeatedly tampering with or hiding records that cast an unflattering light on the district.

In one case, Hall's chief Human Resources officer Millicent Few “illegally ordered” the destruction of early, damning drafts of an outside lawyer's investigation of test-tampering at Atlanta's Deerwood Academy, the report said.

Another time, Few ordered staff to destroy a case log of cheating-related internal investigations after The Atlanta Journal-Constitution requested it, the report said. Few told staff to replace the old log with a new,

altered version. When the district finally produced the complaints, the investigators wrote, it illegally withheld cases that made it “look bad” — either because its investigation was poor or because wrongdoing received minimal sanction.

Few also made false statements to the investigators, the report said.

Few, who could not be reached for comment Tuesday, denied to the investigators that she tampered with documents or ordered anyone else to do so.

Lying to investigators and destroying or altering public records are felonies under Georgia law with a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison.

Deputy Superintendent Kathy Augustine, as well as area superintendents Michael Pitts and Tamara Cotman, also gave the investigators false information, the report said, and the district’s general counsel Veleter Mazyck “provided less than candid responses.”

The report also said Hall and Augustine illegally suppressed a report by a testing expert last year. Andrew Porter, dean of the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, largely confirmed an AJC analysis that suggested cheating occurred, but the district withheld his findings from the media and public.

Augustine, Pitts and Cotman could not be reached Tuesday. Mazyck referred questions to her attorney. “I’m shocked that they would characterize her statements as less than candid,” said Richard Sinkfield, Mazyck’s attorney. “She was fully cooperative, fully open, and has not participated in any wrongdoing.”

The investigators said district officials misled them and hampered their investigation.

“Dr. Hall pledged ‘full cooperation’ with this investigation, but did not deliver,” the report said. “APS withheld documents and information from us. Many district officials we interviewed were not truthful.”

‘The chosen ones’

The district passes its scores on to the state each year and pledges they are accurate. Giving a “false official writing” is also a felony.

In some schools, the report said, cheating became a routine part of administering the annual state Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests. The investigators describe highly organized, coordinated efforts to falsify tests when children could not score high enough to meet the district’s self-imposed goals.

The cheating cut off struggling students from the extra help they would have received if they’d failed.

At Venetian Hills, a group of teachers and administrators who dubbed themselves “the chosen ones” convened to change answers in the afternoons or during makeup testing days, investigators found. Principal Clarietta Davis, a testing coordinator told investigators, wore gloves while erasing to avoid leaving fingerprints on answer sheets.

Davis refused to answer the investigators’ questions. She could not be reached Tuesday.

At Gideons Elementary, teachers sneaked tests off campus and held a weekend “changing party” at a teacher’s home in Douglas County to fix answers.

Cheating was “an open secret” at the school, the report said. The testing coordinator handed out answer-key transparencies to place over answer sheets so the job would go faster.

When investigators began questioning educators, now-retired principal Armstead Salters obstructed their efforts by telling teachers not to cooperate, the report said.

“If anyone asks you anything about this just tell them you don’t know,” the report said Salters said. He told teachers to “just stick to the story and it will all go away.”

Salters eventually confessed to knowing cheating was occurring, the report said. He could not be reached Tuesday.

At Kennedy Middle, children who couldn’t read not only passed the state reading test, but scored at the highest level possible. At Perkerson Elementary, a student sat under a desk, then randomly filled in answers and still passed.

At East Lake Elementary, the principal and testing coordinator instructed teachers to arrange students’ seats so that the lower-performing children would receive easier versions of the Fifth Grade Writing Tests.

Principal Gwendolyn Benton, who has since left, obstructed the investigation, too, the report said, when she threatened teachers by saying she would “sue them out the ass” if they “slandered” her to the GBI.

When the investigators interviewed Benton, she denied knowing cheating took place. She could not be reached Tuesday.

District employees suffered intense stress — enough to send at least one to the hospital — in a workplace where threats from supervisors kept them from reporting wrongdoing for fear of losing their jobs.

Area superintendents, who oversee clusters of schools, enforced a code of silence. One made a whistleblower alter his reports of cheating and placed a reprimand in his file — and not the cheater’s. Another told a teacher who saw tampering that if she did not “keep her mouth shut,” she would “be gone.”

“In sum, a culture of fear, intimidation and retaliation permeated the APS system from the highest ranks down,” the investigators wrote. “Cheating was allowed to proliferate until, in the words of one former APS principal, ‘it became intertwined in Atlanta Public Schools ... a part of what the culture is all about.’ ”

Three key reasons

The investigators gave three key reasons that cheating flourished in Atlanta: The district set unrealistic test-score goals, or “targets,” a culture of pressure and retaliation spread throughout the district, and Hall emphasized test results and public praise at the expense of ethics.

Because the targets rose each time a school attained them, the pressure ratcheted up in classrooms each year. Cheating one year created a need for more cheating the next.

“Once cheating started, it became a house of cards that collapsed on itself,” the investigators wrote.

Educators most frequently cited the targets to explain cheating.

“APS became such a ‘data-driven’ system, with unreasonable and excessive pressure to meet targets, that Beverly Hall and her senior cabinet lost sight of conducting tests with integrity,” the report said.

The investigators said Hall’s aloof leadership style contributed directly to an atmosphere that fueled cheating.

She isolated herself from rank-and-file employees, the report said. Mazyck, the district’s general counsel, told investigators that her job was to provide Hall with “deniability,” insulating Hall from the need to make tough choices.

Sinkfield, Mazyck’s attorney, said the investigators took her statements about law practice in general “totally out of context.”

A major reason for the ethical failures in Hall’s administration, the investigators wrote, was that Hall and her senior staff refused to accept responsibility for problems.

“Dr. Hall and her senior cabinet accepted accolades when those below them performed well, but they wanted none of the burdens of failure,” the report said.

The district’s priority became maintaining and promoting Hall’s image as a miracle worker.

After an earlier investigation into cheating by a group of civic and business leaders, Hall was under pressure to crack down. The investigation was flawed, however, producing allegations but no confessions.

Nonetheless, Hall forwarded the names of about 100 Atlanta educators to the teacher licensing board for possible disciplinary action. She did so based on statistics showing high erasures in certain classrooms, despite the fact that someone other than the teacher could easily have done the erasing.

The investigators said Hall made the referral so it appeared she was taking a tough stance.

They called her actions “unconscionable.”

The report also touched on the support the Atlanta business community has provided Hall for years.

Her supporters were so concerned the district’s problems would reflect poorly on the Atlanta “brand,” the report said, that they attacked those who asked questions about the district’s purported success. A senior vice president at the Metro Atlanta Chamber, for instance, suggested a report commissioned by business and civic leaders that found cheating was limited to a dozen schools would need to be “finessed” past Gov. Sonny Perdue, the report said.

That effort failed. Perdue appointed the special investigators in August 2010.

Hall preferred to spend her time networking with philanthropic and business leaders rather than walking the halls of her schools, the investigators found.

But when the scandal erupted, she withheld key information — state data on the suspicious erasures — even from executives and civic leaders who the school board, at Hall's urging, appointed to conduct the inquiry.

“In many ways, the community was duped by Dr. Hall,” the report said. “While the district had rampant cheating, community leaders were unaware of the misconduct in the district. She abused the trust they placed in her.

“Hall became a subject of adoration and made herself the focus rather than the children,” the investigators wrote. “Her image became more important than reality.”

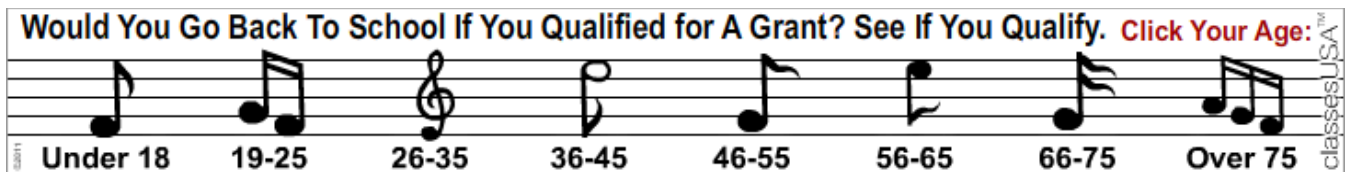
Staff writers Alan Judd, Kristina Torres, and Jaime Sarrio contributed to this article.

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America's biggest teacher and principal cheating scandal unfolds in Atlanta

At least 178 teachers and principals in Atlanta Public Schools cheated to raise student scores on high-stakes standardized tests, according to a report from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.



In February 2009, Atlanta Superintendent Beverly Hall was named 2009 Superintendent of the Year in San Francisco. Ms. Hall stepped down from her post on June 30, days before the release of a report that documented widespread cheating by teachers and administrators in the 55,000-student Atlanta Public School District.

(Paul Sakuma / AP / File)

By Patrik Jonsson, Staff writer

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Atlanta

Award-winning gains by Atlanta students were based on widespread cheating by 178 named teachers and principals, said Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal on Tuesday. His office released a report from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation that names 178 teachers and principals – 82 of whom confessed – in what's likely the biggest cheating scandal in US history.

This appears to be the largest of dozens of major cheating scandals, unearthed across the country. The allegations point an ongoing problem for US education, which has developed an ever-increasing dependence on standardized tests.

The report on the Atlanta Public Schools, released Tuesday, indicates a "widespread" conspiracy by teachers, principals and administrators to fix answers on the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT), punish whistle-blowers, and hide improprieties.

It "confirms our worst fears," says Mayor Kasim Reed. "There is no doubt that systemic cheating occurred on a widespread basis in the school system." The news is "absolutely devastating," said Brenda Muhammad, chairwoman of the Atlanta school board. "It's our children. You just don't cheat children."

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On its face, the investigation tarnishes the 12-year tenure of Superintendent Beverly Hall, who was named US Superintendent of the Year in 2009 largely because of the school system's reported gains – especially in inner-city schools. She has not been directly implicated, but

investigators said she likely knew, or should have known, what was going on. In her farewell address to teachers in June, Hall for the first time acknowledged wrongdoing in the district, but blamed other administrators.

The Atlanta cheating scandal also offers the first most comprehensive view yet into a growing number of teacher-cheating allegations across the US, reports of which reached a rate of two to three a week in June, says Robert Schaeffer, a spokesman for the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, which advocates against high-stakes testing.

It's also a tacit indictment, critics say, of politicians putting all bets for improving education onto high-stakes tests that punish and reward students, teachers, and principals for test scores.

SOUND OFF: What should happen to these teachers and administrators? How will this scandal affect the students?

"When test scores are all that matter, some educators feel pressured to get the scores they need by hook or by crook," says Mr. Schaeffer. "The higher the stakes, the greater the incentive to manipulate, to cheat."

Cheating in Atlanta Public Schools

The 55,000-student Atlanta public school system rose in national prominence during the 2000s, as test scores steadily rose and the district received notice and funding from the Broad Foundation and the Gates Foundation. But behind that rise, the state found, were teachers and principals in 44 schools erasing and changing test answers.

One of the most troubling aspects of the Atlanta cheating scandal, says the report, is that the district repeatedly refused to properly investigate or take responsibility for the cheating. Moreover, the central office told some principals not to cooperate with investigators. In one case, an administrator instructed employees to tell investigators to "go to hell." When teachers tried to alert authorities, they were labeled "disgruntled." One principal opened an ethics investigation against a whistle-blower.

Investigations by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC) and state investigators found a pattern consistent with other cheating scandals: a spike in test scores in one critical grade would be followed by an equally dramatic drop the next year. A USA Today investigation in March found that erasure data in six states and the District of Columbia showed these "abnormal patterns," according to testing expert Thomas Haladyna at Arizona State University.

The Atlanta testing allegations led to the first major law enforcement investigation of teacher cheating. Scandals in other states have typically been investigated by state officials. In response to recent teacher cheating allegations in Baltimore, Michael Sarbanes, the district's community engagement director, told District Management Journal, an industry publication for school administrators, that manipulating a test is "inherent in human nature, [although] we think people who do that are outliers."

The high stakes for teachers

Ten states now use test scores as the main criterion in teacher evaluations. Other states reward high-scoring teachers with up to \$25,000 bonuses – while low scores could result in principals losing their jobs or entire schools closing. Even as the number of scandals grows, experts say it remains fairly easy for teachers and principals to get away with ethical lapses.

"I think the broadest issue in the [Atlanta scandal] raises is why many school districts and states continue to have high-stakes testing without rigorous auditing or security procedures," says Brian Jacob, director of the Center on Local, State and Urban Policy at the University of Michigan. "In some sense, this is one of the least worrisome problems in public education, because it's fairly easy to fix. The more difficult and troubling behavior would be teaching to the test, which we think of as a lesser form of test manipulation, but which is much harder to detect, and could warp the education process in ways that we wouldn't like."

In response to cheating scandals, some states and school districts have instituted tougher test-auditing standards, employing software that analyzes erasure rates and patterns. Meanwhile, the Obama administration is reforming NCLB to reduce pressure on teachers and principals. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said in June that NCLB "is creating a slow-motion train wreck for children, parents, and teachers." On the other hand, an Obama administration proposal – to pay bonuses to teachers who improve test scores in their classes – may shift the stakes without lowering them.

"The [Atlanta] teachers, principals and administrators wanted to prove that the faith of the Broad and Gates Foundations and the Chamber of Commerce in the district was not misplaced and that APS could rewrite the script of urban education in America and provide a happy, or at least a happier, ending for its students," writes the AJC's education columnist, Maureen Downey.

"And that's what ought to alarm us," adds Ms. Downey, "that these professionals ultimately felt their students could not even pass basic competency tests, despite targeted school improvement plans, proven reforms, and state-of-the-art teacher training."

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