

## Cheating Your Way to High Test Scores: Atlanta's School Edition

By: Veronique de Rugy – April 8, 2013

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For a while, Atlanta's public schools were held up as an example of the success of the No Child Left Behind Act, based on the significant gains in student achievement the school district had seen. *The Economist* reports:

At Parks Middle School, for instance, the share of 13-year-olds who passed the test's maths section rose from 24% to 86%, and the share of those who "exceeded expectations" rose from 1% to 46%—both in a single year.

Sounds impressive right? The problem is that the improvement was an illusion and the product of cheating rather than good pedagogy or intense study.

A report issued in June 2011 by a special investigative team created by Sonny Perdue, who was then Georgia's governor, found widespread evidence of cheating dating back to 2001. Sometimes teachers gave pupils the correct answers. Sometimes they erased pupils' answers after the test and filled in the correct ones themselves. The investigative team ferretted out cheating by analysing erasure marks on test sheets. They flagged classrooms with an average number of wrong-to-right erasures more than three standard deviations above the state average. The chance of that occurring randomly is one in 370. More than half of Atlanta's elementary and middle schools had such classrooms, and many had erasures more than 20 to 50 standard deviations above the norm. Of the 178 teachers accused of having taken part in cheating, 82 confessed. Ms Hall, said the report, either knew or should have known what was going on.

On Good Friday the other shoe fell: a Fulton County grand jury returned a 65-count indictment against Ms Hall and 34 other teachers and administrators. The charges include racketeering, making false statements, influencing witnesses, conspiracy and theft (employees received bonuses when their schools met a certain percentage of targeted test improvements; the Fulton County prosecutor contends that issuing those payments based on falsified test results constitutes theft).

This is not the first documented case of cheating by school districts hoping to put their hands on more federal funding. Here are a few more cases:

A 2005 article by the Reason Foundation's Lisa Snell points to a trend in deception and misrepresentation to meet No Child Left Behind Standards. Despite 56 criminal charges including sexual offenses, assault with a deadly weapon, robberies and batteries in the 2003-2004 school year, Locke High School in Los Angeles was not labeled a "persistently violent" school.

Wesley Elementary School in Houston won several awards and was featured on Oprah for “defying the odds.” In 2004, the Dallas Morning News found that its 5th graders, who scored in the top 10 percent while at Wesley, scored in the bottom 10 percent the following year as 6th graders at a new school.

In 2003, the New York Times reported that Houston schools were misrepresenting and omitting drop-outs by listing them as transfers, among other strategies. The Houston School District found that more than half of the 5,500 students who left in the 2000-01 school year should have been declared dropouts.

In 2004, Oak Ridge High School in Orlando boosted its test scores by eliminating 126 low-performing students from its attendance roles.

And these are just some examples of the illicit actions taken by schools who fear being reprimanded by No Child Left Behind. But it is uncertain that reforms could change this trend.

The teachers and administrators involved in this fraud could be sent to jail for many years. As the article cited above asks: “Wouldn’t it just be easier to educate the kids?!”

Many argue that No Child Left Behind, which was implemented in 2001, is the true culprit here, because, by rewarding higher test scores, it can encourage schools to cheat. And indeed, as Neal McCluskey of the Cato Institute explains, NCLB has been a terrible failure, and an expensive one, that has provided the wrong incentives to school districts at the expense of taxpayers and students. (This is hardly an excuse for the behavior of the teachers engaged in this scandal, of course.)

So can we expect that the Act will be repealed? Well, what happened to the idea of getting rid of the Department of Education? The process by which federal education is being made (catering to unions and teachers rather than the kids, for instance) is at the core of the problem.