

Atlanta's educators and the cheating scandal blame game

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The country has been shocked by news that the award-winning Atlantic Public [School](#) system achieved its students' high test scores via nearly a decade of systematic cheating by teachers and administrators.

While the Atlanta testing scandal is shaping up to be one of the largest instances of institutionalized cheating the country has seen, the phenomenon is not unusual.

In recent years officials and whistle-blowers have revealed numerous instances of teachers altering answers, failing to adhere to test requirements, and/or silencing dissenters in Maryland, Indiana, Massachusetts, Nevada, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

With the relatively high [rate](#) of cheating and cheating allegations throughout the country, many are pointing to the fact that tests now carry greater consequences than they did before. Some say that with the stakes so high, cheating is to be expected.

"Few who have paid attention in the education era of high-stakes testing will be surprised at this," Valerie Strauss [wrote](#) in The Washington Post last week. "And the stakes are only getting higher for teachers and principals, who are increasingly being evaluated and paid according to how well their [students](#) do on standardized tests, despite research showing that test-driven reform hasn't made an impact in the last decade on student achievement. "

Atlanta Public Schools Interim Superintendent Erroll Davis has argued, however, that cheating is less about the stakes and more about the climate which allowed the epidemic to fester.

"I do not accept a focus on performance causes people to cheat," Davis said to [reporters](#), "What motivates people to cheat ... is a climate that allows cheating to occur without consequences."

Nevertheless, the prevailing sentiment among teachers and pundits is that with teachers' evaluations tied to test performance, cheating is understandable.

"I am convinced you'll see more [cheating]," DeKalb County teacher Laura Pittman, [told](#) the Atlanta Journal Constitution. "Anybody whose job is tied to performance, it is a setup."

Indeed, many charge that the teachers are not to blame, but rather that the 2001 bipartisan "No Child Left Behind" education law is the true culprit.

"Everyone here is pointing the finger at No Child Left Behind, the federal policy that made test scores king, closing schools with low scores, and rewarding schools with high ones," explained ABC correspondent Steve Osunsami on World News. "This former superintendent is accused of encouraging the cheating. She received hundreds of thousands of dollars in bonuses tied to improved test scores. I'm personally friends with a good number of teachers in this community who tell me that they're under tremendous pressure. They say that the same [parents](#) who are angry about all the cheating would be even more furious if the schools started reporting lower test scores."

While the debate centers on whether tying teacher performance to testing is unfair, there are some who advise that throwing the baby out with the bathwater is one of the worst ways to solve the problem.

"[U]nions blaming testing for teachers cheating is reminiscent of the 'community organizers' in Washington, D.C., who [stated](#) that they were

afraid the arrival of Walmarts would tempt young people to steal, so we shouldn't build them at all," said Sarah Longwell, communications director at the Center for Union Facts.

Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, told TheDC that the underlying lesson to take away from the cheating is that government-run institutions are no more accountable than private ones.

"It seems to me that the big lesson here is not really about high-stakes testing, but it's a great example that just because government runs something doesn't make it accountable," said McCluskey. "In fact, all of No Child Left Behind encouraged states not necessarily to cheat illegally like seems to have happened here, but to cheat legally by setting very low proficiency definitions, making tests easier, things like that."

Despite speculation, according to the state's report, there were three main reasons for the cheating: The district's score goals were unrealistic, there was a "culture of fear and intimidation," and Hall and her administrators put praise and scores over integrity.

In an ironic twist, in June 2010 The New York Times [quoted](#) then-Atlanta Superintendent Beverly Hall (who stepped down from her position on June 30, 2011, just days prior to the release of the damning cheating report) about a cheating in American schools. She said then that teachers are nothing but honest.

"Teachers over all are principled people in terms of wanting to be sure what they teach is what students are learning," she said.

The state cheating report notes that that Hall and her senior staff "knew or should have known" about the systemic cheating.

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