

Pittsburgh teachers accused of fixing test scores

Phyllis Scherrer
14 January 2013

Two Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania teachers have been reprimanded after being accused of changing student answers to boost scores on state examinations. The action is part of an investigation ordered by the state into alleged “testing irregularities” on Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) tests administered to grade 3-8 and 11 students in 2009, 2010, and 2011.

The district reportedly investigated 19 Pittsburgh teachers for excessive erasure marks on the tests. In addition, to the reprimand of the two unnamed teachers, instructors at 11 schools are to receive “training” in testing methods.

Pennsylvania is part of a growing roster of states investigating teachers for allegedly cheating on standardized tests. In Pennsylvania, the probe involves 10 school districts. In the Pittsburgh alone, there are 53 schools under investigation. An unknown number of teachers in other districts, including Philadelphia, could still face disciplinary measures as a result of the ongoing investigation.

As in other states, the PSSA tests are used to measure so-called adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act, the Bush-era measure continued under the Obama administration. Teachers are well aware that poor results could mean the loss of their jobs and the shutting down of their schools.

The events in Pennsylvania comes on the heels of the first widespread accounts of cheating in Atlanta in 2011, and more recently in the District of Columbia and Oklahoma City, and Ohio. In El Paso, Texas a former superintendent was recently imprisoned for manipulating test scores.

In Columbus, Ohio school officials are accused of withdrawing students and re-enrolling them so they could claim that there was not full participation, so

their scores weren’t counted on state tests.

In Lockland, Ohio, Superintendent Donna Hubbard was allegedly doing the same thing, and Toledo schools are facing similar allegations, according to local newspapers.

While the media and authorities feign shock and indignation over these revelations, they are the inevitable consequence of the Obama administration’s use of high stakes tests. These are not tests to provide teachers with an objective measure of their students’ progress and provide them with the needed resources to help them. On the contrary, such tests have been used to scapegoat teachers for the enormous growth in social and economic inequality—and the impact of decades of school cuts—in order to close schools, fire teachers en masse like in Rhode Island and replace public schools with for-profit charters.

There is deep opposition among teachers and parents to punitive testing, which is well known to have a destructive impact on students as well. One superintendent in Monroe County, New York, testified that in the first two months of school, more than 20,000 pretests were administered to 4,000 students. Teachers from Florida explained that their schools have some form of standardized testing 80-90 out of the 180 school days a year. In Texas, up to 45 days each school year are spent on testing activities.

Privately run charter schools are not held to the same accountability guidelines as public schools. Several studies have shown that test scores place just as many, if not more, charter schools within the category of “failing” despite selecting their own students and educating far fewer special needs students.

Moreover, the punishment is determined by who does the alleged cheating. Last week, the Public Broadcasting Service’s (PBS) *Frontline* program aired

a special on the suspicion's surrounding Michelle Rhee's exoneration by the Obama's Department of Education (DOE) after accusations of widespread cheating during her term as chancellor of the Washington, DC public schools.

Adell Cothorne, the principal of one of DC schools, was reportedly reduced to tears and hounded out of her job after she reported cheating at her Northeast Washington campus. Cothorne also filed a federal complaint against city officials in May 2011, alleging that the "Blue Ribbon" awards the school system had won had been obtained fraudulently by faking test scores. That lawsuit, in the US District Court for the District of Columbia, was unsealed in December and was publicly reported at the beginning of the month, after the US Education Department and the Justice Department decided against joining the lawsuit.

Rhee is a vicious opponent of a public education and closely aligned with the Obama administration's reactionary "school reform" agenda of scapegoating teachers and expanding charter schools.

The same week the two teachers in Pittsburgh were reprimanded, the district announced it would be the first in the state to seek approval for a new teacher evaluation plan under a new state law taking affect in the 2013-2014 school year. Teachers will be deemed "distinguished," "proficient," "needs improvement" and "failing" based on the evaluations.

School Board members will vote on the plan on January 23. Historically, school districts have based teacher evaluations on classroom observations by an administrator. The new law requires half of a teacher's evaluation to be classroom observations. The other half would be five percent for building level results, 30 percent for teacher-specific data, i.e., student test scores, and 15 percent from elective data to be student surveys of individual teachers.

These measures, agreed to by the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers in their June 2010 contract, places the responsibility for the cuts in education and the growing social inequality—the real obstacles to student development—on the backs of teachers. By law teachers must give state mandated tests such as the PSSA and the new Common Core test. If they do not give the test, they risk job loss. If they give the test, and their students score poorly due to factors outside of their control, they face the loss of their livelihoods.

Last year's drop in test scores, for example, cannot be separated from the devastating impact the \$1 billion reduction in education funding overseen by Republican Governor Tom Corbett. This has resulted in the layoffs of thousands of teachers across the state in every one of the state's 500 districts and the closure of schools.

Far from opposing the attack on teachers, the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers collaborated in the investigation that led to the disciplining of the two teachers. This follows a national trend of such betrayals. Last summer, the Chicago Teachers Union sabotaged a strike by 26,000 teachers and accepted a deal, which expanded high stakes tests and accepted the shut down of more than 100 schools.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact