

Atlanta school cheating trial scapegoats teachers

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Jury selection began this week in a trial arising out of the school test cheating scandal in Atlanta, Georgia that first surfaced three years ago. The current court case, involving 12 former teachers and administrators accused of cheating to inflate test scores, is expected to last up to six months. Jury selection itself may take two to four weeks.

The defendants are being used as scapegoats in this scandal, which has exposed the fraud of the school “reform” movement based on standardized testing, so-called “accountability” and the use of incentives and punishments to demonize teachers and attack public education as a whole.

The trial is the outcome of a 2011 investigation by the state of Georgia, after reports of suspiciously high test scores and improvements in many Atlanta schools. The Georgia capital, with a total student population of 50,000, is one of the largest metropolitan areas in the southeastern United States. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation found that 44 out of Atlanta’s 100 public schools were involved.

The teachers are being charged, unusually, under the state’s Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO), a statute usually associated with action against organized crime. Accused of encouraging cheating through various methods, as well as actually changing test scores through so-called “erasure parties” in which they stayed after school to improve student scores, they have already lost their jobs and now face long prison terms.

Of the 185 teachers and administrators implicated in the 2011 investigation, 33 have been cleared and one-third of the total have received other punishments, according to the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. Eighty-nine cases are pending, however, in many instances because teachers have appealed sanctions and are awaiting hearings or trial. The most prominent figure in the scandal, former Atlanta Schools Superintendent Beverly Hall, is suffering from

late stage breast cancer and her trial has been postponed.

Hall became a celebrity in the nationwide blitz to advance high-stakes testing and other methods associated with Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, including bonuses for meeting test targets and the firing of principals who did not meet such quotas. She was named “Superintendent of the Year” in 2009, just a few years before the scandal was revealed.

Thirty-three teachers and administrators were eventually charged in April 2013, but 21 of them entered guilty pleas, avoiding the threat of jail. Some of these may testify against the defendants in the current trial.

The rank-and-file teachers who have been accused are guilty at most of succumbing to the enormous pressure to conform to the expectations generated by the school testing frenzy set in motion by the NCLB legislation and continued under Barack Obama’s Race to the Top (RTTP) program.

Many of the teachers have stated in their defense that the policy set by Hall and other top administrators made it almost impossible for them to continue in their jobs without going along with the test cheating.

A recent article in *The New Yorker* quotes the state’s 2011 report concluding that a “culture of fear, intimidation and retaliation has infested the district” for years, and explaining that teachers were threatened with humiliation, demotion or possible firing if they did not meet the targets for improvement among their students at all costs. The article reports, “At one elementary school, during a faculty meeting, a principal forced a teacher whose students had tested poorly to crawl under the table.” When one teacher wrote to Hall in 2006 to complain, the response from top bureaucrats was to pressure her to shut up.

The *New Yorker* focuses on one teacher, Damany Lewis, who became the first of the 178 educators named in the 2011 report to be fired. The article, by Rachel Aviv,

is successful in depicting the dedication of teachers like Lewis. He was born in Oakland, California, grew up in poverty, succeeded in obtaining a college degree, and began teaching at Parks Middle School in Atlanta in 2000.

Lewis, so devoted to his students in one of Atlanta's poorest areas that he helped them with their laundry and allowed some to sleep at his home when family problems erupted, was inexorably sucked into the atmosphere of corruption. By 2006 he was shamefacedly participating in altering test scores. The motive was not money or career advancement, but simply the fear that his school would be closed, and that he would lose his job and his connection to students he saw himself as trying to help under the most trying of circumstances. After he lost his job, the loss of his home and car followed. After a period of unemployment he was able to find something in a field having nothing to do with his background.

Lewis did not comprehend the larger forces involved. When his school won a "Dispelling the Myth" award in 2009 and he attended a ceremony at which Secretary of Education Arne Duncan gave the keynote speech, Lewis concluded, "I swear to God, I need to write that man, Duncan, a letter of apology. I stood in his court and acted like I was doing something I wasn't."

Of course it is Duncan who owes the apology, and much more. He, along with Obama and the rest of the bipartisan political cabal behind the whole "reform" movement are the true criminals.

The Atlanta scandal is the predictable outcome of the preposterous and reactionary claim that the schools are the key to solving the social problems that are the product of decaying capitalism. Just as ordinary workers pay for the crisis caused by the bankers who rake in ever more obscene bonuses, so teachers are blamed for the crisis in education while the Democratic and Republican politicians and the hedge fund executives who lavishly fund the "reform" movement are presented as crusaders for better schools. When the Atlanta scandal was first exposed, Duncan had the nerve to proclaim, "The existence of cheating says nothing about the merits of testing," a lie that teachers everywhere can see through.

The teachers on trial in Atlanta are not "bad apples," and Atlanta is far from the only city affected by this crisis. A series of articles in *USA Today* several years ago, as reported by the Slate web site, documented 1,610 cases of test score manipulation in six states and Washington DC.

The *New Yorker* article concludes that the NCLB was "utopian" legislation. This could not be more wrong. The education legislation enacted under both the Bush and

Obama administrations is part of a many-pronged and quite conscious assault on the working class. The campaign for school "reform" acts as a political diversion, heaping responsibility for the crisis onto the teachers, who are in fact among its victims.

Sharing fully in responsibility for these attacks are the leaders of the main teachers unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association. They have both signed on to the "reform" program, quibbling about aspects of it only to safeguard their own privileged position.

Meanwhile, the demonization of teachers is used to tar all public employees and advance attacks on wages, health care and especially pensions across the country.

Through the role of school officials like Beverly Hall, former Washington DC schools chief Michelle Rhee and others, a petty bourgeois layer, making use of identity politics, is also being cultivated. This goes hand in hand with an ideological campaign on behalf of a corporate model of education. Frenzied competition is used to advance the pipe dream that "anyone can succeed" under capitalism, while attacking class consciousness and the fight for social equality.

All of this feeds into the escalating attack on public education itself. The progressive reform of free public education, won nearly 150 years ago, is now considered the problem, as hedge fund vultures and others seek to use the crisis to privatize the school system and turn it into a new money-making venture for the super-rich, at the expense of teachers and students alike.



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