

Atlanta teachers, principals convicted in cheating scandal

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Eleven Atlanta, Georgia teachers, principals, and administrators were found guilty of felony racketeering charges Wednesday in connection with a city-wide test cheating scandal. The conviction on wildly overblown charges is part of an ongoing attempt, spearheaded by the Obama administration, to scapegoat teachers for the crisis created by decades of attacks on public education.

The racketeering charges carry a maximum penalty of twenty years in prison, plus five to ten years for each additional felony count that the defendants were charged with. Those found guilty were taken to jail immediately.

Prosecutors claimed that Atlanta Public Schools (APS) teachers and administrators re-wrote students' answers on standardized test forms in order to boost scores for their schools and the district as a whole.

The teachers and administrators were found guilty of violating the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, enacted as part of the Organized Crime Control Act of 1970. Defense attorneys for the teachers noted the absurdity of charging educators under a law that had previously been used to obtain convictions against the Gambino crime family and other mafia outfits.

The educators on trial included five teachers, two principals and three central office administrators. Of the twelve who stood trial, eleven were convicted and are scheduled to be sentenced within two weeks.

District Attorney Paul Howard said that the racketeering charges were justified on the grounds that teachers' annual bonuses were tied to the performance of their classes, claiming that teachers had inflated test scores for their personal financial enrichment.

In reality, an investigative report published in July 2011 by the Georgia governor's office made clear that the teachers would be fired unless they complied with

the cheating regime overseen by former APS Superintendent Beverly Hall.

The report found that "employees of APS who failed to satisfy targets were terminated or threatened with termination... The message from Beverly Hall was clear: there were to be no exceptions and no excuses for failure to meet targets."

It added, "Over time, the unreasonable pressure to meet annual APS targets led some employees to cheat on the CRCT [Criterion Referenced Competency Tests]. The refusal of Beverly Hall and her top administrators to accept anything other than satisfying targets created an environment where achieving the desired end result was more important than the students' education."

Between 2002 and 2009, fourth graders and eighth graders in Atlanta improved their standardized test scores by 14 points, more than any other city in the country.

As a result, Hall was feted and praised, and named national superintendent of the year in 2009 by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). Due to her extraordinary "performance," Hall received \$400,298 in pay and perks in 2009 alone. She never went to trial because she was too ill, and died of breast cancer a month ago.

One hundred and seventy educators were ultimately fired in the aftermath of the 2011 report. Thirty-three were subsequently charged, and 21 entered guilty pleas, with twelve going to trial.

When the teachers and administrators were originally indicted, American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten lined up behind their scapegoating declaring, "We do not condone cheating under any circumstances." She added, "Academic achievement can never be separated from academic integrity, which

is why the Georgia Federation of Teachers was the first whistle-blower to expose Atlanta testing irregularities.”

When the Atlanta cheating scandal first emerged in 2008, it was an indictment of the drive to tie school funding to students performance on standardized tests. Hall had been a poster child of the school “reform” movement, and Atlanta had been touted as a nationwide example of the efficacy of standardized testing and tying teachers’ pay to students’ test scores.

These policies have been a hallmark of the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind program. They were extended under the Obama administration’s Race to the Top program, which tied school funding to students’ test scores, creating a mechanism for systematically de-funding schools in poor and working-class areas, while putting the blame on teachers for “underperforming” schools.

Since the Obama administration took office, hundreds of thousands of public education workers have been laid off, thousands of schools have closed and state education funding has been slashed.

The real criminals are not the teachers and principals who were coerced into complying with a cheating scandal, but the big business politicians, Democrat and Republican alike, who have systematically de-funded education, laid off teachers and closed schools in the name of rewarding “performance.”



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