

Atlanta testing scandal exposes fraud of anti-public school “reform”

By Andre Damon and Barry Grey
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The school test cheating scandal in Atlanta, Georgia, has exposed the reactionary character of the so-called school “reform” policy being spearheaded by the Obama administration. It has highlighted the pervasive use of standardized tests to justify the closing of schools and firing of teachers, as part of a drive to privatize education and transform the school system into one based openly on class.

As the events in Atlanta have underscored, the agenda being pursued by both political parties and major corporate interests, with the collaboration of the teachers’ unions, has nothing to do with improving education for the vast majority of American youth. Rather, it is aimed at carving out from the ruins of the public school system a lucrative source of profit for charter school investors and directly subordinating education to the demands of corporate America.

On Tuesday, 35 Atlanta school administrators, principals, and teachers turned themselves in to face charges of participating in the widespread falsification of school test results. Of these, 13 are teachers, 6 are principals, 2 are assistant principals, 6 are testing coordinators, 3 are school resource team executive directors, 1 is a school improvement specialist, and 1 is a secretary. The others are executive administrators.

A grand jury indicted the school employees on charges of racketeering, making false statements and theft. Most of the teachers’ bonds were originally set at astronomically high levels—in the hundreds of thousands of dollars—but were subsequently reduced to between \$50,000 and \$60,000.

Former Atlanta Public Schools superintendent Beverly Hall, accused of masterminding the manipulation of standardized test results, had her bail set at \$200,000, reduced from \$7.5 million. She faces charges of racketeering, theft, influencing witnesses, conspiracy and making false statements. If convicted, she could face up to 45 years in prison.

Indicted teachers face substantial fines and between 5 and 40 years in prison if found guilty.

The indictment makes clear that Hall used threats and firings to coerce teachers and administrators into falsifying

test scores in order to keep their jobs and prevent their schools from being closed down. The media has made little distinction between Hall and other top officials, on the one hand, and ordinary teachers caught up in the scandal, on the other.

Instead, the case is being used to further scapegoat and demonize teachers, who are being depicted as the major obstacle to educational “progress.” Over the past several years, hundreds of schools have been closed and hundreds of thousands of teachers laid off across the US. Since 2008, funding for US public schools by state governments has declined by nearly a third.

President Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, have championed the victimization of teachers. In 2010, Obama applauded the decision by school authorities in Rhode Island to fire the entire teaching and support staff at Central Falls High School after they rejected a “turnaround” plan that would have torn up their contract and forced them to work longer hours without additional pay.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), the two major teachers’ unions, have played a politically criminal role in facilitating the assault on public schools and their own rank-and-file members. They have embraced the phony school “reform” agenda, including the spread of privately owned and operated charter schools, while seeking to uphold their own financial and institutional interests and maintain the flow of union dues. Their efforts include pushing through concessions contracts and establishing their own charter schools.

On Tuesday, AFT president Randi Weingarten lined up uncritically behind the criminal indictments, offering no criticism of the testing regime or the virtual reign of terror imposed by ex-superintendent Hall. “We do not condone cheating under any circumstances,” Weingarten declared. “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.”

Hall, the Atlanta public school superintendent for more than a decade, was widely lauded as a promoter of education reform. According to the indictment, she led a plot to manipulate standardized test scores in the district, giving Atlanta the highest performance improvement of any city in the country.

The indictment states: “Principals and teachers were frequently told by Beverly Hall and her subordinates that excuses for not meeting targets would not be tolerated. When principals and teachers could not reach their targets...their jobs were threatened and some were terminated.”

The prosecutor alleges that, to satisfy the extraordinarily high performance requirements set by Hall, “test answer sheets were altered, fabricated, and falsely certified” by administrators and teachers, who were fired if they did not bring up their scores. According to the *New York Times*, Hall fired 90 percent of principals under her jurisdiction.

An investigative report published in July 2011 by the Georgia governor’s office named 178 teachers, administrators and principals in the scandal, all of whom lost their jobs or quit as a result. Eighty-two of those named confessed to falsifying test sheets.

The report noted, “As part of the conspiracy, employees of APS [Atlanta Public Schools] who failed to satisfy targets were terminated or threatened with termination, while others who achieved targets through cheating were publicly praised and financially rewarded.”

The report added, “A culture of fear and a conspiracy of silence infected this school system, and kept many teachers from speaking freely about misconduct.” When teachers sought to report the widespread abuse, they were fired, while those who were guilty of cheating were only reprimanded. “The message from Beverly Hall was clear: there were to be no exceptions and no excuses for failure to meet targets.”

Between 2002 and 2009, fourth graders and eighth graders in Atlanta improved their scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress by 14 points, higher than any other city in the country. The rest of the state had only a three-point improvement among fourth graders and no improvement among eighth graders.

The next-best-performing school system, Washington, D.C., faces allegations of widespread cheating of a similar character to those in Atlanta. Michelle A. Rhee, the former chancellor of the D.C. public school system, is another celebrated champion of the education “reform” movement, making the cover of *Newsweek* magazine in 2010.

In 2009, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) named Hall as national superintendent of the year, noting Atlanta’s “significant

gains in student achievement over the past 10 years.”

“Children in the housing projects are performing just as well as those living in homes worth \$500,000 to millions of dollars,” LaChandra Butler Burks, then-chair of the Atlanta Board of Education, told the AASA for its official profile of Hall.

The profile added, “Corporate donors have jockeyed for spots in the superintendent’s ‘kitchen cabinet,’ buoyed by the chance to invest princely sums in system-wide reforms they believe will pay off handsomely.”

“She speaks our language,” John G. Rice, vice chairman of General Electric, which made a \$22 million grant to the district in 2007, told the AASA. “She understands investors have choices. She wants to deliver a return, in our language, and help us to understand the language of public education.”

Hall was paid handsomely for securing this level of corporate sponsorship. In 2009, she took home \$400,298 in pay and perks, including a car and a performance bonus of \$78,115 on top of her \$279,985 salary. Her total pay that year was more than 30 times the amount the district spends per student each year.

In 2011, responding to the findings of the governor’s report, Hall told the *Huffington Post* that her greatest concern was that the cheating scandal would set back the campaign for testing and merit pay.

In fact, the type of practices exposed in Atlanta are the inevitable outcome of the reactionary drive to dismantle public education in the name of “reform.” For decades, the most right-wing sections of the US ruling class have targeted the public schools for destruction, in large part because free public education was historically bound up with the struggles of the working class and the fight of progressive, democratic and socialist forces for a more egalitarian society.

The anti-public school agenda, once largely the province of the Republican Party, is now, under Obama and the Democrats, being implemented more aggressively and ruthlessly than ever before.

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