

Making the Grade

In 2015, 11 teachers and school administrators from the Atlantic Public Schools (APS) district were convicted of racketeering and other crimes connected to a standardized test cheating scandal. All were sentenced to a combination of prison, fines, probation, and community service. Prison terms ranged from 6 months to 20 years. According to prosecutors, APS superintendent Beverly Hall encouraged a corrupt testing system that financially rewarded teachers whose students achieved high test scores and punished teachers with low test scores. While this is hardly the first instance of school cheating scandals in the United States, it drew national attention because of the scale and extent of the cheating. Investigators were given extensive power by Georgia governors to scrutinize and subpoena as they saw fit.

According to the indictment, “If a school achieved 70% or more of its targets, all employees of the school received a bonus. Additionally, if certain system-wide targets were achieved, Beverly Hall herself received a substantial bonus.” The indictment continued, “When principals and teachers could not reach their targets, their performance was criticized, their jobs were threatened and some were terminated. Over time, the unreasonable pressure to meet annual APS targets led some employees to cheat on the [Criterion Referenced Competency Test].” Teachers and administrators changed, fabricated, and falsely certified test answer sheets in order to meet targeted goals for improvement of their students’ test scores.

A review by the state found that cheating took place at more than half of the district’s elementary and middle schools. Approximately 180 teachers were involved. While the main focus of the investigation was from 2005 to 2009, cheating was believed to date back to as early as 2001. This was the same year that No Child Left Behind was passed. The cheating scandal at APS brought into greater debate the effectiveness of standardized testing. As education writer Valerie Strauss noted, “How did [the APS cheating scandal] happen? No Child Left Behind, President George W. Bush’s chief education initiative, and then Race to the Top, President Obama’s central education program, placed increasingly high stakes on standardized test scores. They had to go up, or else there would be negative consequences not just for students but schools and teachers and principals.” These initiatives linked students’ test scores to teacher evaluations and pay.

Critics of the sentencing also pointed out the larger effects of inequality in Atlanta and its school system. Errin Whack, journalist and Vice President of Print for the National Association of Black Journalists, discussed the effects of inequality, “Ultimately, the two Atlantas must strike a new compromise to find solutions that don’t abandon or condemn parts of the city or



its public schools. In perception and reality, the scales must be more balanced across metro Atlanta. Otherwise, children and teachers will continue to operate in an imbalanced system tasked with achieving impossible goals.”

Black students comprise more than 80 percent of the student population at six of the nine public high schools in Atlanta. White students are mostly concentrated in two high schools near the city’s highest concentration of college-educated adults. All 11 of the teachers and school administrators convicted are black. Brittney Cooper, professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Africana Studies at Rutgers University, wrote in defense of the teachers, “Scapegoating Black teachers for failing in a system that is designed for Black children, in particular, not to succeed is the real corruption here... Black children have for generations been the primary victims of this continuing social mendacity about the national value of education.” In response to the sentencing, a mother in Atlanta stated, “Right now, it’s not going to touch white people, because this didn’t happen where they live.” She added, “The children got a sentence, too.”

Concept: Incentive Gaming

Ethical Insight:

It is human nature to respond to incentives. Unfortunately, people also sometimes “game” incentives. This is more likely to happen if the established goals are unrealistic and the pressure to meet them is high. With the rise of standardized testing in the United States, many school districts have found themselves with unrealistically high-performance goals for their students. Often, in underperforming schools, teachers and school administrators are faced with significant incentives, both positive and negative.

In the Atlanta Public Schools district, if student performance did not improve teachers would have lost bonuses, and could have lost their jobs. Schools may have been punished or even shut down if the targeted goals for students’ test scores were not met. Within this setting of rewards and punishments, it is not especially surprising that some Atlanta teachers and school administrators gamed the system by changing, fabricating, and falsely certifying test answer sheets in order to meet the established incentives.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways does the case of the Atlanta Public Schools district cheating scandal appear to be an example of incentive gaming? Explain.
2. Who are the stakeholders in this case study, and what was at stake for each party? How might these stakes have influenced the actions of the teachers and school administrators who participated in cheating? Explain.

3. What are the reasons and rationalizations that could have prompted APS teachers and school administrators to participate in raising student test scores? Do you think their actions were in any way ethically justifiable? Why or why not?
4. Do you have any sympathy for the teachers and administrators who cheated? Why or why not?
5. Inequality played a large role in the case of APS cheating. Struggling schools faced further struggles to meet increasingly difficult standards, while resources for students and teachers across the city were not distributed equally. If you were in a position of an APS district administrator, what measures would you take to encourage more equal educational opportunities? How would you negotiate these efforts with demands to meet performance and funding goals?
6. Through programs such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, incentives were not only placed on teachers to maintain their jobs, but also on schools to maintain funding. What might the people who set up this testing system have done to reduce the likelihood that cheating would occur?
7. How can a company or organization incentivize its employees to work hard and be productive without being victimized by incentive gaming?
8. A phenomenon sometimes called “altruistic cheating” arises because people are more likely to give themselves permission to cheat when it helps others than when it helps only themselves. The wrongdoing is then easier to rationalize. Might altruistic cheating have also contributed to the Atlanta cheating scandal? Explain.
9. In writing about a foreign exchange trading scandal at the National Australian Bank, Dennis Gentilin wrote: “All these variables were in play in the period leading up to the FX trading scandal at the NAB. There was an obsessive focus on reaching revenue targets, and there was the promise of lucrative rewards if this was achieved. Furthermore, the revenue targets grew significantly year on year, reaching levels which could easily be described as ambitious.” Does this toxic mix of incentives and punishments remind you of the APS system? Why or why not?
10. Tomasz Obloj has reported that once upon a time, the governor of the City of Delhi, India, in order to rid the city of a plague of snakes, began paying a very high bounty for cobra skins. The bounty was sufficiently lucrative that many citizens began farming cobras, raising the snakes so that they could skin them and then claim their bonuses. Does this sound like a classic case of incentive gaming? Why or why not?
11. This case study demonstrates the effects of a number of behavioral biases and pressures. Can you identify other behavioral ethics concepts at work in the case study? Explain and discuss their significance.

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