

The Atlanta Scandal: Teaching in “A Culture of Fear, Intimidation and Retaliation”

by Erich Martel
Social Studies Teacher
Washington, DC Public Schools
ehmartel@starpower.net

The 800-page **Investigation Report** on the Atlanta Public Schools (**APS**) cheating scandal involving 178 named school-based principals, teachers and other staff is a riveting and chilling **anthology** of the “**culture of fear, intimidation and retaliation**” that teachers face in schools around the country when they report mismanagement and abusive administrative behavior. The **Report** repeatedly and concretely ties the years-long continuation of this scandal to this culture. Although it exists in many private and charter schools, in our public schools, it has been encouraged by No Child Left Behind and fueled by the top-down, privately-funded, “turn-around” “reforms” that blame teachers, tenure rights and union protections as the causes of educational malaise.

Until reform truly engages teachers as part of the solution, we can expect more Atlantas in our nation’s public schools. The Atlanta **Investigation Report** shows what happens when educational policy makers and governance bodies delegate broad areas of authority to celebrity or savior superintendents and then, believing that school improvement means giving their “reform leader” free rein, abdicate their oversight responsibilities.

In many Atlanta schools, teachers were disempowered and left vulnerable in the face of arbitrary and often abusive authority, including threats to their livelihoods. Teachers who cheated under great duress should not face the further injustice of being treated as if their decisions were free and wanton.

In fact, the **Investigation Report** holds principals to a higher standard of responsibility, including responsibility for the actions of their teachers, if evidence confirms they knew about the cheating OR would have known, had they followed mandatory protocols. The enormity and scope of the scandal is shocking. In 38 of the 44 schools, the principal was held responsible.

A typical “Analysis of the Evidence” following each individual school **Report** reads:

“It is our conclusion, from the statistical data and the other evidence secured in this investigation, that Principal X failed to properly monitor the 2009 CRCT [Georgia’s Criterion Referenced Competency Test] and adequately supervise testing activities and testing security. This resulted in, and she is responsible for, falsifying, misrepresenting or erroneously reporting the results of the 2009 CRCT to the Georgia Department of Education.”

In fact, 91 (84%) of the 108 teachers named in the **Report** (see Appendix A) were in schools where the principal was also named. The **Report** documents that some teachers **did** report cheating as well as the pressure to cheat. While the oversight bodies capable of intervening were asleep or in thrall to their celebrity superintendent, teachers who took the risk to perform their civic responsibilities were ignored as principals and assistant superintendents responded with threats and termination (see Appendix B):

“Throughout this investigation numerous teachers told us they raised concerns about cheating and other misconduct to their principal or SRT [School Reform Team] Exec Director (Assistant Superintendent) only to end up disciplined or terminated.”

“In sum, a culture of fear, intimidation and retaliation permeated the APS system from the highest ranks down.”

“Almost without exception, teachers and principals said that the single most important factor to this administration is ‘data.’ They said that ‘data is (sic) the driver,’ ‘data drives instruction,’ and ‘the data controls everything.’”

“But data can also be used as an abusive and cruel weapon to embarrass and punish classroom teachers and principals or as a pretext to termination. After hundreds of interviews, it has become clear that [APS Supt] Dr. Hall and her staff used data as a way to exert oppressive pressure to meet targets.”

“As a result of the APS failure to temper its drive for success with ethical guidelines, the message was: ‘Get the scores up by any means necessary;’ in Dr. Hall’s words, ‘No exceptions and no excuses.’”

For many public school teachers, the treatment of teachers in Atlanta is disturbingly familiar (see, for example, Appendix C): Fear, abuse, threats, retaliation, cover-up, nepotism, misappropriated funds, being asked, “Are you a member of my team?” discovering that your grades were arbitrarily changed, and, in each case, facing the anguishing choice that was really no choice at all: “Should I report it and risk retaliation or go along and keep quiet – while it eats away at me?”

For readers who question these experiences, just ask a public school teacher.

Where were Atlanta's oversight bodies to which teachers should have been able to turn (feel free to substitute your city or town for "Atlanta")?

- The Atlanta School Board Members?¹
- The Atlanta Mayor?
- The Atlanta city Council?
- The Georgia State Superintendent and State Education Agency?
- The U.S. Department of Education?
- The Atlanta media – before 2009?

Those who think our public schools can be improved by weakening teacher tenure and gutting union contracts, [so principals can get rid of the bad teachers](#), need only read about the toxic environments created by unprincipled principals in Atlanta - and which teachers they terminated.

Education policy makers and school governance bodies would be wise to take some advice from James Madison and stop empowering superintendents [as if they were angels](#) and begin putting effective checks and remedies in place that are safely accessible to teachers (Federalist 51).

¹ Note: The school board did not protect integrity. Under either governance form, school board or mayor, too much arbitrary authority over appropriated funds and employees is given to superintendents, who operate behind closed doors, ignore transparency laws and, in turn, are sealed off from public scrutiny by a largely fawning media that extols their "leadership" and exempts improper and even illegal policies and practices from critical review - until it's too late.

Appendix A. Breakdown of the 178 Educators

The investigators visited 56 schools with statistical anomalies. In 44, they concluded that 178 APS educators were involved in cheating to one degree or another. In the remaining 12 schools, where there was evidence of cheating, there was insufficient evidence of who was responsible. Likewise, in many of the 44 schools, many of the reports state that more staff was probably involved, but they deemed the evidence inadequate. The 178 educators fall under the following categories.

[detailed tables can be found in [the attached Excel workbook](#)]

School Assignment	Total	# in schools where principal IS accused	# in schools where principal NOT accused	Confessions
Classroom Teachers	108	91(84%)	17(16%)	74(69%)
Principals	39	[39]	[39]	2(5%)
Asst. Principals/ Coordinators	4	4	0	0
Test Coordinators	18	18	0	1
Support Staff or Proctors	5	5	0	3
Instructional Coaches	4	3	1	1
TOTAL	178	121/139	18/139	81

(* includes one ex-principal: 2 principals are cited at Dunbar ES)

This breakdown shows that the vast majority of teachers accused of cheating were in schools where the principal and often another non-teacher staff member was accused of cheating.

Appendix B. Websites Related to the Atlanta Scandal

<http://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta/interim-chief-takes-first-1003572.html>

<http://news.yahoo.com/americas-biggest-teacher-principal-cheating-scandal-unfolds-atlanta-213734183.html>

On the left side of this *New York Times* page are the links to the four volumes of the Atlanta Public School Investigation Report:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/06/education/06atlanta.html?scp=1>

These are the four **Atlanta Public School (APS) Investigation Report** documents:

<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/us/Volume-1.pdf>

<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/us/Volume-2.pdf>

<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/us/Volume-3.pdf>

<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/us/Exhibits-to-Report.pdf>

Appendix C. Whistle-blowing Reports in the DC Public Schools

1. 2002-03 Contracted Student Records Audit

The 2002-03 “agreed-upon procedures” audit of **all DCPS high schools and of Wilson HS 15 seniors** in the Class of 2002 I reported as ineligible. The auditors confirmed that 12 were ineligible and that all high schools maintained student records in a manner that made tampering a likelihood. The report excluded the possibility of external tampering, i.e. possible tampering was all internal. DCPS continued to deny the report's conclusion and refused to post it on the DCPS website: <http://www.dcpswatch.com/dcps/030922b.htm>

2. 2006-07 audit of the DC Inspector General of the Wilson HS class of 2006.

<http://tinyurl.com/2nukmj>

420 seniors were listed as graduates on the June 2006 graduation day program, but only 311 were on the list sent to the superintendent. Of the 311 June 2006 graduates, the IG reviewed the records of 93 students I had cited as ineligible for the diploma for reason of missing one or more mandatory credits.

Summary of the 2002 and 2006 exposes in the *American Educator* quarterly:

<http://www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/winter0607/martel.cfm>

Retaliation by the principal of Wilson HS: <http://tinyurl.com/5sovnwq> or http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/12/AR2006091200709_pf.html

3. Credit Recovery & Summer School

How Michelle Rhee increased graduation rates.

Erich Martel: **“A for effort shouldn’t count: Just say no to credit recovery.”** (Fordham Institute, “Education Gadfly” weekly e-journal):

<http://www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/gadfly/national/gadfly091610.html>

4. Facing Retaliation: An Involuntary Transfer

An involuntary transfer from Wilson HS to Phelps HS in August 2010, because of “significant philosophical differences” with the Wilson HS principal

a. Are measures to prevent student cheating “creating an expectation that students will cheat”? My principal thought so: http://voices.washingtonpost.com/class-struggle/2010/03/principal_teacher_clash_on_che.html

b. Transcript of a surprise visit from “Instructional” Superintendent John Davis (note: Always have a witness and take notes!): <http://www.dcpwatch.com/martel/100621.htm>

Or (generously posted by the parent of a former student):

<http://www.citizen.org/documents/Transcript1.pdf>

c. Involuntary Transfer Order: <http://www.dcpwatch.com/martel/100730.htm>

d. The Involuntary Transfer: Retaliation Denied
i. <http://tinyurl.com/29blt7z> or http://voices.washingtonpost.com/dcschools/2010/08/wilson_teacher_charges_retalia.html

ii. <http://tinyurl.com/2b32w9j> or http://voices.washingtonpost.com/class-struggle/2010/09/teacher_transferred_for_disagr.html

iii. <http://www.wusa9.com/video/default.aspx?bctid=605312818001>

iv. Michelle Rhee explains to a teacher why my involuntary transfer was not retaliation: <http://www.dcpwatch.com/martel/100908.htm>

e. Reporting Problems at Phelps ACE HS:
Testimony before the DC City Council on Problems with the Phelps HS Career Tech Program. I also read from two letters from Phelps teachers who resigned (6/16/2011) http://oct.dc.gov/services/on_demand_video/channel13/June2011/06_16_11_COW_1.asx

My testimony begins at 2:40 (2 hours and 40 minutes into the hearing). Just place the cursor over the tiny sphere below the screen and move it to the right until it shows 2:40.