

# **ATLANTA SCHOOLS TESTING SCANDAL AND WHAT IT TELLS US**

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DOES  
HIGH STAKES  
TESTING LEAD TO  
HIGH STAKES  
CHEATING?

# **CAMPBELL'S LAW**

1976

**“The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor...”**

**Donald T. Campbell**



**“... achievement test may well be valuable indicators of general school achievement *under conditions of normal teaching aimed at general competence.* But when test scores become the goal of the teaching process, they both lose their value as indicators of educational status and distort the educational process in undesirable ways.”**

**Donald T. Campbell**



“The cardinal rule of psychometrics is this: a test should be used only for the purpose of which it is designed. The tests are designed to measure student performance in comparison to a norm; they are not designed to measure teacher quality or teacher performance.”

Reign of Error by Diane Ravitch

**CRCT SCORES SURGE  
MIRACLE OR MASQUERADE?**

# Exam results raise red flag

By **HEATHER VOGELL** [hvogell@ajc.com](mailto:hvogell@ajc.com)  
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A miracle occurred at Atherton Elementary this summer, if its standardized math test scores are to be believed.

Half of the DeKalb County school's fifth-graders failed a yearly state test in the spring. When the 32 students took retests, not only did every one of them pass — 26 scored at the highest level.

No other Georgia fifth grade pulled off such a feat in the past three years. It was, as one researcher put it, as extraordinary as a snowstorm in July. In Atlanta.

# Student success doesn't add up

By **Alan Judd**  
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and **Heather Vogell**  
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Thousands of high school students vanished from the rolls of Atlanta Public Schools in the past eight years, often with few hints to where they went.

Schools recorded many of them as "transfers" to other systems, at times without proof that the students hadn't

dropped out altogether. In 2008, a consultant to the district estimated recently, school officials couldn't document the whereabouts of more than one-third of the district's departed students.

The mass exodus from Atlanta's high schools may be the primary reason for one of the district's proudest academic achievements: a dramatic increase in its graduation rate, an investigation by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution shows. District officials boast that the

rate of students getting diplomas within four years has risen 30 percentage points since 2001.

But the rate's only surge, from 43 percent to 72 percent, came between 2003 and 2005, the Journal-Constitution's analysis of state data found. During that time, the district removed from its rolls about 30 percent of all pupils in grades nine through 12 — roughly 16,000 students.

**Graduation rate** continued on A16

# Drastic test swings valid?

An AJC analysis finds  
questionable changes in  
test scores at 19 schools.

By **Heather Vogell**  
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and **John Perry**  
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Statistically unlikely state test scores are showing up in more classrooms, suggesting the cheating investigation that has engulfed four schools might be about to widen.

were in Atlanta.

In West Manor and Peyton Forest elementary schools, for instance, students went from among the bottom performers statewide to among the best over the course of one year. The odds of making such a leap were less than 1 in a billion.

This summer, state officials found strong evidence of cheating at four schools statewide in an investigation that followed a December AJC story about improbable gains on state tests.

In the most recent analysis, the AJC again used statistics to



Tuesday, August 17, 2010

**Critics: E-mail Proves  
[Blue Ribbon Commission]  
Cheating Probe Was Tainted**



Wednesday, July 20, 2011

## **Calls for ouster of Chamber President in cheating scandal**

Friday, July 22, 2011

## **Chamber president defends role in CRCT investigation**

[my foxatlanta.com](http://my.foxatlanta.com)

Wednesday, July 20, 2011

## **Lawmakers, Group Call for Atlanta Chamber President to Step Down**



**The Atlanta  
Journal-Constitution**

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Sunday, April 21, 2013

## **Business leaders pushed pro-APS report despite flaws**

Saturday, April 27, 2013

### **SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT:**

As various leaders continue the hard work of dealing with the APS scandal, it's time for the Metro Chamber to fully explain its action in and around this mess.

- Core Team of 11 attorneys, paralegals, and investigators
- Over 65 state agents, attorneys and paralegals
- Year-long investigation
- More than 2,200 Interviews
- Over 850,000 documents
- 56 schools investigated



# STANDARD DEVIATIONS CHART

**STANDARD DEVIATIONS**

**CHANCE OF OCCURRING  
RANDOMLY**

**3**

**1 / 370**

**4**

**1 / 15,788**

**5**

**1 / 1,774,278**

**6**

**1 / 560,800,000**

**7**

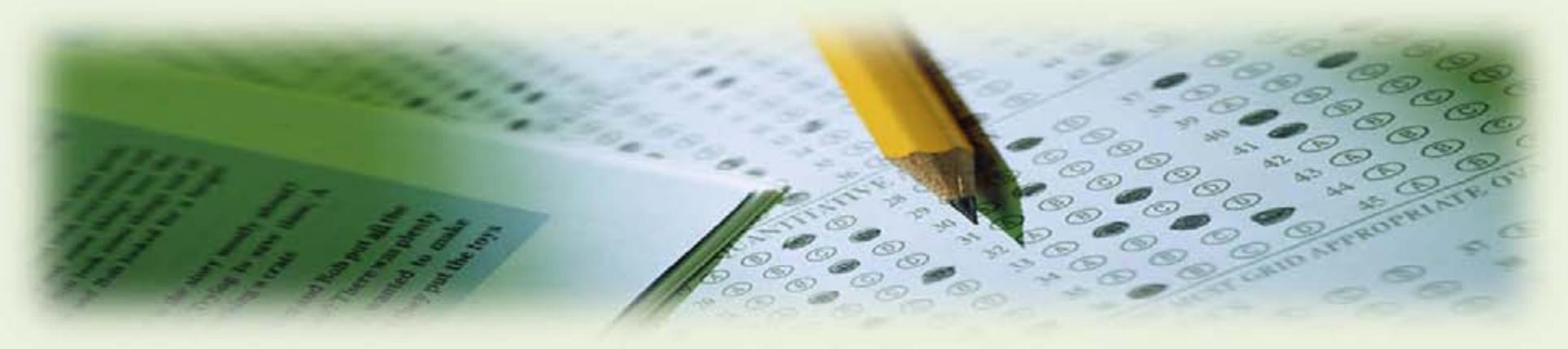
**1 / 390,600,000,000**

- Cheating back to 2001
- Cheating found in 44 schools
- 189 educators found to be involved
- 38 principals involved
- In 30 schools, 82 principals and teachers confessed
- Two to three times more estimated to be involved

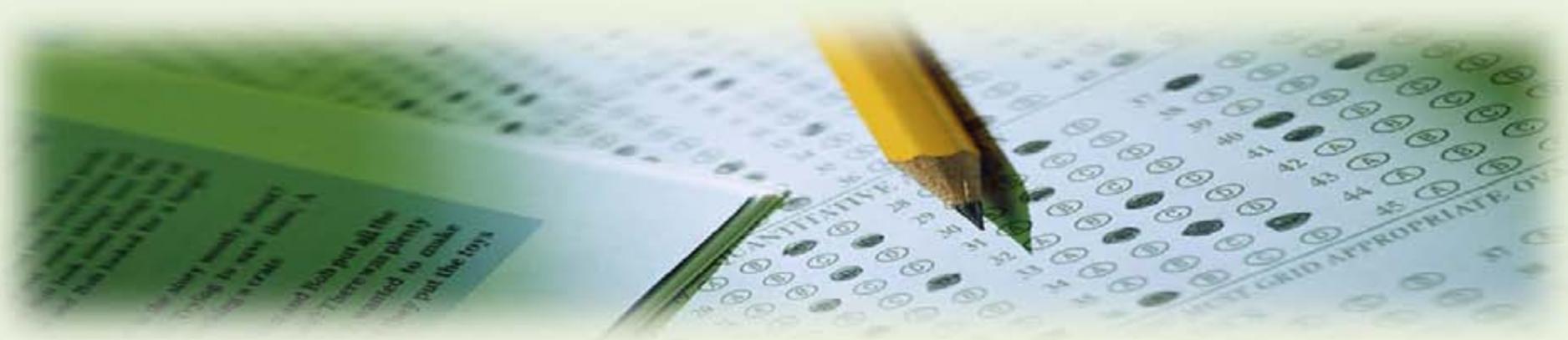


“I told my principals, ‘You have three years to meet targets or I will find someone who will. There will be no exceptions and no excuses.’”

APS Superintendent



Created Targets Beyond NCLB  
+  
Imposed Pressure to Achieve  
(Both Positive and Negative)  
=  
**DISASTER**



# Whistle-blowing teachers targeted

AJC probe finds those who told of cheating were punished.

APS, however, states reprisals are prohibited.

By **Alan Judd**  
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and **Heather Vogell**  
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His bosses had no trouble dismissing Ryan Abbott's report of cheating on standardized tests in an Atlanta school. They simply cast him in a self-fulfilling role, Abbott says: "disgruntled teacher."

## **ajc** Investigation

classrooms. Yet he had the audacity to level charges against a popular colleague. After word of Abbott's allegations spread through the school, Benteen's principal opened an ethics case – against him.

"It's put me in a very difficult spot," said Abbott, whose job security remains tenuous even though state authorities corroborated his claims of cheating at Benteen. "It's a tough place to be."

Abbott's experience illustrates the perils that befall Atlanta Public Schools teachers who report cheating or other wrongdoing, an investigation

# Atlanta schools soft on cheats?

Other metro districts treat cases differently.

Analysis finds more complaints here but fewer disciplinary steps.

Continuing coverage Cheating allegations

# APS suppressed scandal

AJC finds Atlanta Public Schools superintendent, aides meddled in probe.

By **Heather Vogell**  
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and **Alan Judd**  
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Atlanta Public Schools officials, including Superintendent Beverly Hall, carried out a broad campaign over two years to suppress mounting allegations of widespread cheating on standardized tests, an investigation by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution has found.

Hall, who built a national

reputation on raising urban students' test scores, worked with top aides and prominent supporters to minimize or conceal evidence that some of the district's much-vaunted gains were not legitimate.

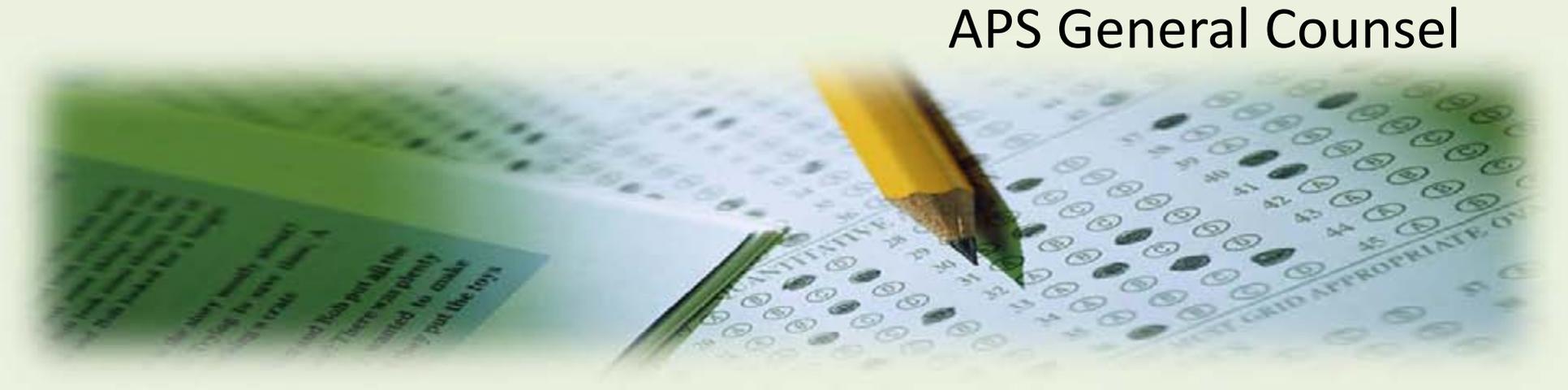
Public documents recently

**Cheating** continued on A20

**This is the latest in a series of** AJC investigative reports on possible cheating in Atlanta Public Schools. Since the AJC began investigating in 2008, state officials and independent experts have confirmed the AJC's findings, leading to ongoing criminal investigations into testing practices.

“My primary responsibility is to  
give the Superintendent  
deniability”

APS General Counsel



# Unethical behavior across every level

## Key findings in state's investigation



**Superintendent Beverly Hall** "failed in her leadership."



**Kathy Augustine**, deputy superintendent, made false statements.



**Millicent Few**, human resources director, ordered destruction of documents.



**Veleter Mazyck**, general counsel, manipulated internal inquiry.



**Tamara Cotman**, area superintendent, lied about "go to hell" memo.



**Michael Ditts**, area superintendent, "aided and abetted" cheating.



**Sharon Davis-Williams**, area superintendent, punished whistle-blower.

Fulton, DeKalb, Douglas DAs will determine whether to prosecute.

By **Heather Vogell**  
hvogell@ajc.com

Across Atlanta Public Schools, staff worked feverishly in secret to transform testing failures into successes.

Teachers and principals erased and corrected mistakes on students' answer sheets.

Area superintendents silenced whistle-blowers and rewarded subordinates who met academic goals by any means possible.

Superintendent Beverly Hall and her top aides ignored, buried, destroyed or altered complaints about misconduct, claimed ignorance of wrongdoing and accused naysayers of failing to believe in poor children's ability to learn.

For years — as long as a decade — this was how the Atlanta school district produced gains on state curriculum tests. The

“Thousands of school children were harmed by widespread cheating in the Atlanta Public School System (APS). In 30 schools, educators confessed to cheating. ... [We] uncovered organized and systemic misconduct within the district as far back as 2001. Superintendent Beverly Hall and her senior staff knew, or should have known, that cheating and other offenses were occurring. Many of the accolades, and much of the praise, received by APS over the last decade were ill-gotten.”

From the overview of the state's report

State report depicts Parks Middle as example of problems in district.

By **Alan Judd**  
ajudd@ajc.com

Christopher Waller worked miracles.

Or so Beverly Hall seemed willing to believe.

As principal of Atlanta's Parks Middle School, Waller awed his bosses with the most dramatic of school transformations. Before Waller took charge, 1 percent of Parks' eighth-graders exceeded expectations on the state's curriculum test. In Waller's first year, 46 percent reached that level.

As superintendent of the Atlanta Public Schools, Hall needed results that validated the reform narrative she had crafted. She not only accepted Waller's achievements without skepticism, she held them up as a model for others. Five years later, Hall would say she had never heard anything bad about

3 bonus pages inside

Updates on [ajc.com](http://ajc.com)

# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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**EXCLUSIVE AJC INVESTIGATION  
CHEATING OUR CHILDREN**

## SUSPICIOUS SCORES ACROSS THE NATION

**First in a series:** Three years after an Atlanta Journal-Constitution analysis exposed the likelihood of cheating in Atlanta Public Schools, our investigative reporters applied a similar method nationwide. This unprecedented, seven-month examination of testing data – 1.6 million records from 69,000 U.S. schools – found indications of cheating in school systems from coast to coast. Our exclusive investigation calls into question the integrity of standardized testing in America.

SEPT. 30, 2012

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\$3 in some areas outside metro Atlanta \$2.50  
FINAL

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**EXCLUSIVE AJC INVESTIGATION  
CHEATING OUR CHILDREN**

## HIGH-STAKES TESTS, LOW-LEVEL SECURITY

**In this series:** For more than 10 years, the nation has used standardized tests to tell whether public schools are doing their jobs. But widespread cheating in Atlanta and in districts across the country is distorting the results of those tests. There are no national standards on test security, and the federal government doesn't intend to issue any. Instead, officials say, it's up to the states and local districts to secure their tests. A new AJC investigation looks into how well that's working. In some states, it isn't.

SEPT. 23, 2012

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**EXCLUSIVE AJC INVESTIGATION  
CHEATING OUR CHILDREN**

## INVESTIGATIONS LAX IN CHEATING CASES

**In this series:** The Atlanta Journal-Constitution found suspicious test scores in the Atlanta Public Schools in 2008, almost three years before state investigators documented widespread cheating. Throughout 2012, as the newspaper has examined scores nationwide, another fact emerged: Atlanta was not an isolated case. In March, we reported that 196 school districts had patterns of suspicious scores that closely resembled Atlanta's. New reporting finds that officials elsewhere often do what officials in Atlanta did when confronted with cheating allegations: minimize, contain and gloss over glaring improprieties.

# WARNINGS

- \* **Significant increases in scores**
- \* **Significant decreases in scores**
- \* **Unusual answer patterns**
- \* **High Wrong-to-Right Erasures**
- \* **Report of Suspicious Conduct**
- \* **Report of Cheating**



# FUNDAMENTALS

- \* Ignore Nothing – All Concerns are Important
- \* Vigorously Inquire
- \* Interview Everyone Who Might Know Anything:
  - Administrators
  - Teachers
  - Staff
  - Parents
  - Students
- \* Consult Experts
- \* Re-Interviews
- \* Polygraphs



# **A FEW THINGS WE LEARNED**

- 1. It is imperative that tests be more about children than adults;**
- 2. School System leaders should surround themselves with people who will speak honestly and the leaders should be willing to listen to what they are told;**
- 3. School system leaders should be more involved at the school level – not insular;**
- 4. If possible, teachers and paraprofessionals should not test their own students on state mandated standardized tests;**
- 5. Administrators must be vigilant in ensuring test protocols are followed and heed warning signs indicating they may have been breached;**

- 6. School systems should foster a culture that encourages the reporting of inappropriate or suspicious activity in relation to tests without fear of retaliation;**
- 7. School systems should thoroughly look into all reports of testing misconduct;**
- 8. School administrators should seek the advice of the system's legal counsel when addressing issues of possible cheating;**
- 9. School system attorneys should strictly adhere to ethical standards so as to maintain their independence and give their clients the best advice possible – not just tell the client what they want to hear; and**
- 10. If the school system is investigated by a duly authorized agency in relation to alleged test cheating, it should cooperate, cooperate, cooperate!**

“Using student tests results to rate teachers “largely reflect whom a teacher teaches, not how well they teach.”

**Linda Darling-Hammond**

**Professor, Stanford University**

“As the current national obsession with testing intensifies, we can expect to see more testing, more narrowing of the curriculum, more narrowing of instruction to only what is tested, more cheating, and less attention to teaching students to think, to discuss, to consider different ways to solve problems, and to be creative.”

Reign of Error by Diane Ravitch

DOES  
HIGH STAKES  
TESTING LEAD TO  
HIGH STAKES  
CHEATING?

YES!

**“Everyone has a plan  
‘till they get punched  
in the mouth!”**

**Mike Tyson**



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