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A Preliminary Analysis of Atlanta's Performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress

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Abstract

The Atlanta Public Schools system has been rocked by a series of reports documenting widespread cheating on the Georgia state tests. Its reputation, and that of its leaders, has come into question. In response, former superintendent Hall asserts that, despite any cheating, the city's students made "real and dramatic" progress during her tenure and cites the district's trends on NAEP as part of her evidence (Hall, 2011). In this report, I analyze Atlanta's performance on NAEP during the 2000s to assess this contention. I use diverse indicators: district trends, national comparisons, grade equivalents, comparisons with other urban districts, and percentages of students achieving proficiency. My preliminary assessment is that Atlanta's progress has been limited and, in many cases, slowed. In spite of a decade of effort, Atlanta's students still lag 1-2 years behind national averages and vast percentages do not even reach NAEP's basic level. Less than a fourth of its 4th and 8th graders achieve proficiency, a key national goal; in some subjects and grades, it is as few as a tenth. At current rates, it will take from 50 to 110 years to bring all students to proficiency. Such findings raise profound questions about current approaches to school reform, including No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. The emphasis on targets and testing is failing and has contributed to cheating across the nation. More fundamentally, it has greatly distorted teaching and undermined authentic learning. While test tampering is a serious problem, we need to re-conceptualize what we mean by cheating. Every day, test-driven, bureaucratically controlled institutions are cheating tens of millions of students out of a genuine education. That is the real scandal.



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Editors' Note

From time to time, Critical Education will publish time sensitive and topical field reports that analyze issues challenging the existing state of affairs in society, schools, and informal education. Our first field report is Lawrence C. Stedman's analysis of student achievement in Atlanta Public Schools subsequent to the investigation that revealed widespread cheating on state tests. In spite of the findings of the investigation that cheating was widespread, then school superintendent Beverly Hall claimed schools had made significant real progress in student achievement. Stedman's field report investigates this claim.

Cheating scandals in schools have become almost commonplace. Campbell's Law is often invoked as the explanation: "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." No Child Left Behind has led American schools down a path seeking ever higher test scores, aspirations that are unreasonable and, based on the best judgment of measurement experts, unattainable. In spite of the unreasonableness and unattainability of the goals set by distant policy makers and capitalist corporate interests, educational professionals are pulled down this path and do what they can or what they are told to do to demonstrate improvement in learning. Anyone paying attention to the ever increasing importance of standardized testing as the main means of evaluating students, schools, teachers, and principals will understand how cheating could be come widespread. Indeed, the investigation of the cheating scandal in Atlanta revealed a culture of fear, intimidation, and retaliation, which created a conspiracy of silence among educational professionals fostering deniability with respect to cheating. That teachers and administrators cheat should come as little surprise when educational policy creates unreasonable demands and then holds those educators to account through threats and intimidation. Cheating of this kind is not about trying to hoodwink any one; it is entirely about seeking to avoid the wrath of a system that will assuredly blame teachers and administrators for perceived failure to perform. It is about gaming the system, not about harming children. We should be left wondering why we have an educational system that backs educators into a corner that leaves them with little choice but to engage in actions even they find unethical.

The public is outraged by cheating, especially in its obvious forms, like in Atlanta where teachers and school administrators altered student test results by changing wrong to correct answers. Most people would agree that changing answer sheets is cheating, even if there are good explanations for why it might be done. But there are softer, maybe even acceptable forms of cheating, ones that reasonable people would argue may or may not actually be cheating. Is it cheating when schools and districts manipulate the pool of test takers by excluding groups of students? Is it cheating when teachers are exhorted to focus on students who are on the cusp of moving to 'proficient' at the expense of time spent with other students, either those who are failing miserably or obviously succeeding? Is it cheating when instructional time becomes intensive test preparation? Is it cheating when the subjects that are tested push out subjects that are not tested?

What counts as cheating is contextual and necessarily dependent on our perception of who or what is being cheated. When teachers and administrators change answers it isn't students who are cheated, it is the system. (Stedman's analysis clearly demonstrates that whether the students' answer sheets were changed or not, NAEP results show a school system in which children are not doing very well.) The response to this sort of cheating is ever increasing surveillance and policing of test administration and scoring. Increased monitoring is less likely to prevent cheating and more likely to alienate teachers, principals, and students. Whether answers are changed or not, students are cheated by the much larger context of test driven teaching that limits what they know and can do. It is the test driven educational reforms and simplistic notions of what a good school is that cheat students out of a quality education.

A Preliminary Analysis of Atlanta's Performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress

Background

On July 5, 2011, under the banner headline, “Systematic Cheating Is Found in Atlanta’s School System,” the *New York Times* reported the results of a Georgia state investigation into test tampering in the city’s schools (Severson, 2011). Investigators found that cheating had “occurred at 44 schools and involved at least 178 teachers and principals, almost half of whom have confessed.” The investigation substantiated the concerns that had been raised by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*’s 2008 and 2009 statistical analyses of the district’s test scores. Its analysts had found “suspiciously high gains” on the state’s Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, n.d.; see also Voegel, 2009).

This latest report was devastating news, as the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) had been considered among the leading urban districts in the nation in improving student achievement. In a press release, Governor Deal, a Republican, outlined the investigators’ findings (Deal, 2011).

- “Cheating occurred as early as 2001.”
- “There were warnings of cheating on CRCT as early as December 2005/January 2006. The warnings were significant and clear and were ignored.”
- “The 2009 CRCT statistics are overwhelming and allow for no conclusion other than widespread cheating in APS.”
- “Cheating was caused by a number of factors but primarily by the pressure to meet targets in the data-driven environment.”
- “A culture of fear, intimidation and retaliation existed in APS, which created a conspiracy of silence and deniability with respect to standardized test misconduct.”

The *New York Times* also reported that, “At the center of the cheating scandal is former Superintendent Beverly L. Hall, who was named the 2009 National Superintendent of the Year and has been considered one of the nation’s best at running large, urban districts” (Severson, 2011). In spite of being warned about the widespread cheating as early as 2005,

Dr. Hall’s administration punished whistle-blowers, hid or manipulated information and illegally altered documents related to the tests, the investigation found. The superintendent and her administration “emphasized test results and public praise to the exclusion of integrity and ethics,” the investigators wrote.

The cheating scandal has deeply tarnished the reputation of the district and its leaders. But is that conclusion justified? Were Atlanta’s achievement gains a mirage? Or, did the test-tampering problem have more limited effects?

Part I: Introduction to the Data Analysis

Why NAEP Scores?

In response to the cheating scandal, and the deepening concerns over the legitimacy of Atlanta's test score gains, ex-superintendent Hall recently wrote a piece for *Education Week* titled, "The Scandal Is Not the Whole Story" (Hall, 2011). In it, she contends that city's students, in fact, made "real and dramatic" progress over the past decade. As part of her evidence, she cites their performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In essence, she is using NAEP findings to justify her approach to reform and to protect her legacy as a chief school officer.

As a scholar and researcher of national achievement trends for decades, especially NAEP findings, I thought it would be helpful to look at Atlanta's data and judge Hall's contentions. NAEP is the nation's leading barometer of student performance. It tests large nationally representative samples of students in a variety of subjects at different age and grade levels. It uses rich, diverse materials, including actual excerpts from literature and historical documents, and employs both multiple-choice and constructed-response items.

Analytical Cautions

The first observation is that Atlanta's NAEP results are part of NAEP's "Trial Urban District Assessment." The word "trial" is worth noting. While participation is growing, one assessment involved only 5 districts, and its reading and math trends come from only 11 districts. Its data run from only 2002 to 2009. In contrast, NAEP's long-term trend program has been tracking achievement since 1969; its main and state programs since the 1980s (Stedman, 2009).

The second thing to keep in mind is that quantitative data, especially school test score data, involves comparisons—and that these different types of comparisons can produce different results. (We can, for example, compare a city's scores to those of other cities, those of its state, those of the nation, or to its own performance over time.) It is not that one comparison is truer than another, but that they tell us different things. Even the same data, when looked at from different vantage points, can indicate a stronger or weaker performance. (This partly occurs because how we characterize changes varies—by % improvement, points gained or lost, gain relative to the scale, *rate* of change, etc.) In the quantitative, results-oriented era we live in, this diversity in data, indicators, and results is little recognized and even less appreciated by politicians, educators, and the public. They assume that there is a single Truth, captured by a single number. Yet, there is a host of educational achievement data—from different subjects and different grades, at different points in time, and for different groups—and we should not, at the outset, expect them all to look the same, or to tell the same tale of progress, deterioration, success, or failure. However, in many cases, on balance, across many indicators and comparisons, an overall judgment of performance can emerge.

A third key point is that minor gains, especially on NAEP, are often trumpeted as clear signs of substantial educational improvement. This has been a repeated problem with statements by administrators and proponents of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Stedman, 2009).

A fourth and crucial point: this is a *preliminary* assessment. While I have chosen an extensive set of indicators to assess Atlanta's performance, several others would be useful to round out the picture: for example, trends and gaps in gender, racial, and SES performance,

Atlanta’s scores relative to those of Georgia, Atlanta’s gaps vs. those of Georgia and the nation, and performances on other measures vs. those on NAEP. This analysis is also quantitative in nature, yet qualitative case studies of school systems are revealing and should play an important part in any comprehensive assessment of a school district’s overall educational quality.

In the case of Atlanta, we see a mixed pattern of data and results. Most comparisons indicate the gains were limited; one suggests a striking improvement; while another indicates that the progress has been so slow that several generations of students will be short-changed. Overall, the performance remains distressingly, and overwhelming, poor. In what follows, I review the NAEP data for Atlanta, discuss its implications for Hall’s contentions and the cheating scandal, assess the type of school reform policymakers have been pushing for a generation, and conclude by describing a needed alternative.

Part II: Atlanta’s Trends and Results on NAEP

We have NAEP results for Atlanta covering 4th and 8th grade in mathematics from 2003 to 2009, reading from 2002 to 2009; and science in 2009 (which means there is no science trend data). 8th grade writing was assessed twice (2002 and 2007). NAEP places the scores in math and reading on 0-500 scales, while those in science and writing are placed on 0-300 scales.

Gains

The first way of looking at the data is to consider Atlanta’s scores and gains over time.

Table 1

Atlanta’s Performance on the 2002–2009 NAEP Trial Urban District Assessments

4th grade	2002	2003	2005	2007	2009	Gain
Mathematics		216	221	224	225	9
Reading	195	197	201	207	209	14
Science					134	
8th grade	2002	2003	2005	2007	2009	Gain
Mathematics		244	245	256	259	15
Reading	236	240	240	245	250	14
Science					127	
Writing	130			145		15

Data sources: National Center for Education Statistics, 2009, pp. 32, 33 (mathematics); NCES, 2010, pp. 36, 37 (reading); NCES, 2011, pp. 38, 39 (science); and Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008, p. 22 (writing).

As Table 1 shows, the gains were from 9 to 15 points between 2002 and 2009, depending on the subject and grade. The mathematics and reading gains are relatively limited, especially when compared to the overall NAEP scale of 500 points. They are equivalent to only 2 to 3 cents on the dollar; which is not a particularly striking result. The writing gain of 15 points is somewhat better, given that the writing scale is 300.

In addition, progress has generally slowed. In the last assessment, 4th grade scores rose only 1 to 2 points while 8th grade math scores rose only 3. In fact, most of the 8th grade math gain came in just two years, between 2005 and 2007—fully 11 of the 15 points. Such sudden gains are anomalous and worth exploring. 8th grade reading scores have been progressing steadily.

Trend Graphs

Graphs of the mathematics and reading data illustrate well that, while there has been some progress, it also has been or has become sluggish.

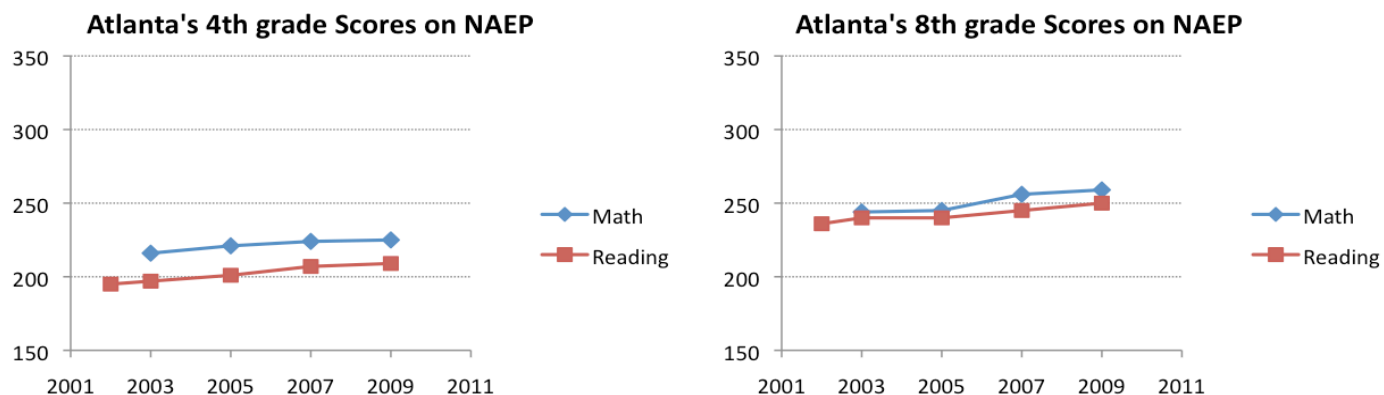


Figure 1. Atlanta's trends on the NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment. In many presentations of NAEP results, the y-axis scale is improperly truncated (i.e., showing only 30-50 points of the 500-point scale), thereby greatly exaggerating upward trends. While a 0-500 scale would be unrealistic (no city or group scores at such low or high levels), I use here the fairer and more realistic scaling of ± 2 standard deviations around the mean. It shows well how much more there is to achieve as well as depicts the trend lines more accurately. Data sources are given in Table 1.

Compared to the Nation

This is the most impressive indicator of Atlanta's gains. In 2002 and 2003, there were sizable gaps between Atlanta's students and the nation's in reading, writing, and mathematics. By 2009, Atlanta's students had made up much of the difference, closing the gaps by about half in reading and 41% in writing (see Table 2). In math, however, the district reduced the gaps by only about a fourth over the decade (see Table 3). (Had the nation not improved, those reductions also would have been about half—cf. the 9-point gain at 4th grade vs. the original 18-point gap.)

Table 2

Atlanta's Literacy Performance Relative to the Nation, 2002-2009

		Reading					Gap Reduction
		2002	2003	2005	2007	2009	
4th grade	Nation	217	216	217	220	220	50%
	Atlanta	195	197	201	207	209	
	Gap	22	19	16	13	11	
8th grade	Nation	263	261	260	261	262	56%
	Atlanta	236	240	240	245	250	
	Gap	27	21	20	16	12	
		Writing					Gap Reduction
		2002	2003	2005	2007	2009	
8th grade	Nation	152			154		41%
	Atlanta	130			145		
	Gap	27			16		

Data sources for Table 2 and all subsequent tables are given in Table 1.

Table 3**Atlanta's Mathematics Performance Relative to the Nation, 2002-2009**

		2002	2003	2005	2007	2009	Gap Reduction
4th grade	Nation		234	237	239	239	
	Atlanta		216	221	224	225	
	Gap		18	16	15	14	22%
8th grade	Nation		276	278	280	282	
	Atlanta		244	245	256	259	
	Gap		32	33	24	23	28%

Percentile Comparisons

However, Atlanta still has some distance to go to catch up. Depending on the subject and grade, its students are scoring at only the 25th to 36th percentiles nationally. The performance relative to the nation is also poorer at the higher grade. (Percentiles were not reported for writing.)

Table 4**Atlanta's Performance Expressed in National Percentiles, 2009**

	4th grade	8th grade
Mathematics	30 th	26 th
Reading	36 th	33 rd
Science	32 nd	25 th

Compared to Grade Differences

Another way of gauging academic performance is in terms of the differences between grades. This is fraught with problems, however, if the growth between grades on the test is slow or the performance of the higher grades is weak. In such cases, minor gains will appear large when expressed as “grade equivalents.” Grade equivalents or “years of growth” are thus often misleading indicators. (There are also technical reasons pertaining to scales and academic development that mean a simple linear extrapolation of performance between grades is generally not justified. However, given that such comparisons are often made, they are worth looking at.)

As can be seen in Table 5, Atlanta's 8th graders fall between the nation's 4th and 8th graders. In reading, in 2002, they were closer to the nation's 4th grade level than its 8th grade one (236 vs. 217 and 263). They were essentially performing below the level of 6th graders (grade equivalent was 5.7). By 2009, they were achieving at nearly the 7th grade level, a striking gain.

Table 5**Atlanta's Reading Performance and Grade Equivalents, 2002-2009**

		2002	2003	2005	2007	2009
Nation	8th grade	263	261	260	261	262
	4th grade	217	216	217	220	220
Atlanta	8th grade	236	240	240	245	250
	Grade Equivalent	5.7	6.1	6.1	6.4	6.9

Making a similar comparison, we find that Atlanta's 4th graders improved from the 2nd to 3rd grade level (see next page). (Such extrapolations, however, are questionable, as the lower grades were not tested.) At both grades, Atlanta's students remain a year behind in reading.

		2002	2003	2005	2007	2009
Atlanta	4th grade	195	197	201	207	209
	Grade Equivalent	2.1	2.3	2.5	2.7	3.0

In mathematics, the picture has not been as good. Atlanta's 8th graders were performing at only the 5th grade level in 2003. They dipped to a grade equivalent of only 4.8 in 2005, before recovering and rising to about the 6th grade level by 2009. Still, they lag behind the nation's students by over 2 years. Atlanta's 4th graders, in spite of their math gains, are still performing at 2nd grade levels. One must also keep in mind that, if national performance is poor, being average or reaching national grade levels would still be an inadequate performance.

Table 6

Atlanta's Mathematics Performance and Grade Equivalents, 2002-2009

		2002	2003	2005	2007	2009
Nation	8th grade		276	278	280	282
	4th grade		234	237	239	239
Atlanta	8th grade		244	245	256	259
	Grade Equivalent		5.0	4.8	5.7	5.9
Atlanta	4th grade		216	221	224	225
	Grade Equivalent		2.3	2.4	2.5	2.7

Note: Even though Atlanta's 8th grade math scores rose a point between 2003 and 2005, their grade equivalent declined because the nation's students improved more. This reinforces the point that quantitative data analysis involves comparisons and that different ways of looking at the data can produce different judgments.

Large City Average and Other Urban Districts

In its Trial Urban District Assessment program, NAEP uses a "large city" average as one of its benchmarks of performance. It comes from students in cities of 250,000 or more, not just those in the districts participating in the urban assessment (NCES, 2010, p. 1). Although Atlanta has improved relative to this benchmark, it still lags a distance behind it in 8th grade math (see Figure 2). The sudden jump in 8th grade math scores (2005-2007) also remains unexplained. Its 4th grade math scores parallel those of large city students and have leveled off. In reading, though, Atlanta has virtually closed the gaps at 4th and 8th grade. In writing, in 2007, Atlanta matched the "large central city" average (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008, p. 20).

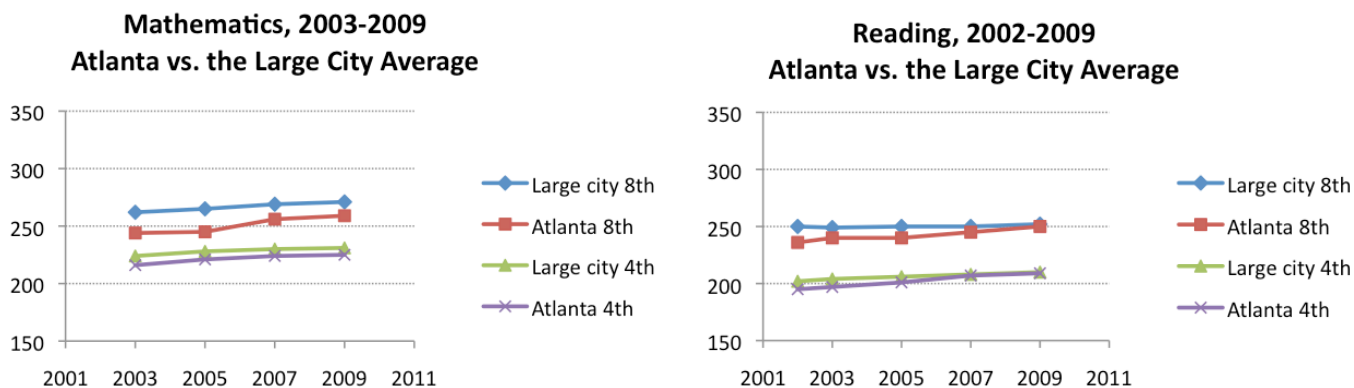
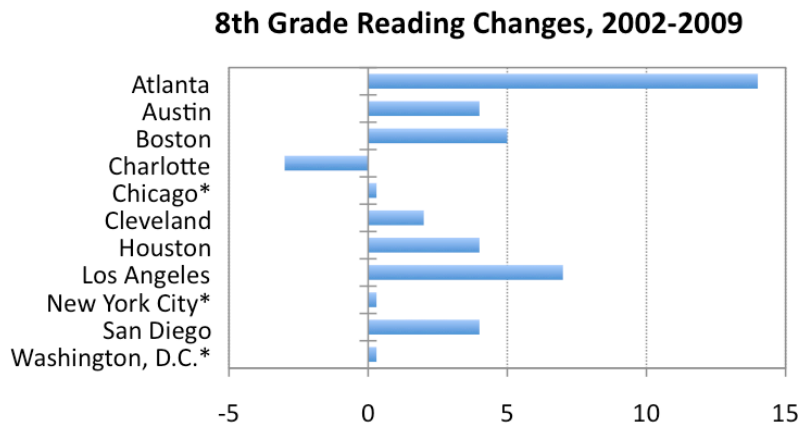


Figure 2. Atlanta's trends on the NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment compared to the large city average. Data sources: National Center for Education Statistics, 2009, pp. 8, 20 (mathematics); NCES, 2010, pp. 8, 22 (reading).

There are problems with such comparisons, however. Large city or urban district averages set a low standard of performance, something that educators realized decades ago when they first examined large-scale national data sets and when they found that many so-called “effective” schools actually had low achievement (Stedman, 1987). Furthermore, large, poorer-performing districts, such as Detroit, Milwaukee, and Washington, D.C., can drag down large city averages. In the 2009 science assessment, Baltimore, Detroit, and Philadelphia also helped depress the urban district average with their lower scores (NCES, 2011, p. 22).

While it would be useful to compare Atlanta's performance to that of urban districts with similar demographics and conditions, it is unclear that this particular “large city” average is the appropriate benchmark as it comes from a large, diverse set of cities (pop. 250,000+) with markedly varying populations and circumstances.

In any case, Atlanta's 8th grade reading gain is worth examining more closely. It was strikingly different from that of the other districts that have been participating in NAEP's Trial Urban District Assessment (see Figure 3). Several districts have failed to improve at all; one even lost ground. Another (Cleveland) gained a marginal two points, while others gained only 4-5 points. In contrast, Atlanta's reading gain was over six times as large as that of the other urban districts (they averaged a gain of only 2.3 points). It was double that of the city with the next largest gain, Los Angeles, but that district also has been embroiled in a cheating scandal (Zhao, 2011). Without L.A. in the mix, Atlanta's gain was nearly 8 times as large as that of the other districts (1.8). All this clearly indicates that something unusual was going on in Atlanta. Instead of genuine learning, such extraordinary gains may well reflect the success of highly regimented test-drilling (including practice on released NAEP items).



*After up and down fluctuations of a point or two, Chicago, New York City, and Washington, D.C. ended up with no gain in reading scores. Instead of 0, this is represented by +.3 on the graph, so that a bar would be displayed.

Figure 3. Trends on the NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment. Data source: NCES, 2010, p. 22. Austin's data are for 2005-2009. Data for Atlanta, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Houston, and Los Angeles are from 2002-2009. The other districts' data are from 2003-2009.

Nevertheless, in spite of its gain, Atlanta's 8th graders still did not quite reach the reading average of these other urban districts and ended up only 1 point above that of the expanded set of the 18 districts in the 2009 urban assessment (NCES, 2010, p. 23). In science, Atlanta scored slightly below the 8th grade average of the 2009 participating urban districts, which itself was a low bar (NCES, 2011, p. 22). In mathematics, Atlanta's 8th grade performance has been poorer, falling below both the urban district and large city averages—and lagging behind that of several

major urban districts (see Figure 4). Atlanta performed similarly in math to Baltimore, Cleveland, and Los Angeles, but was outperformed by Boston, Houston, Miami, New York City, and Philadelphia, as well as several other districts.

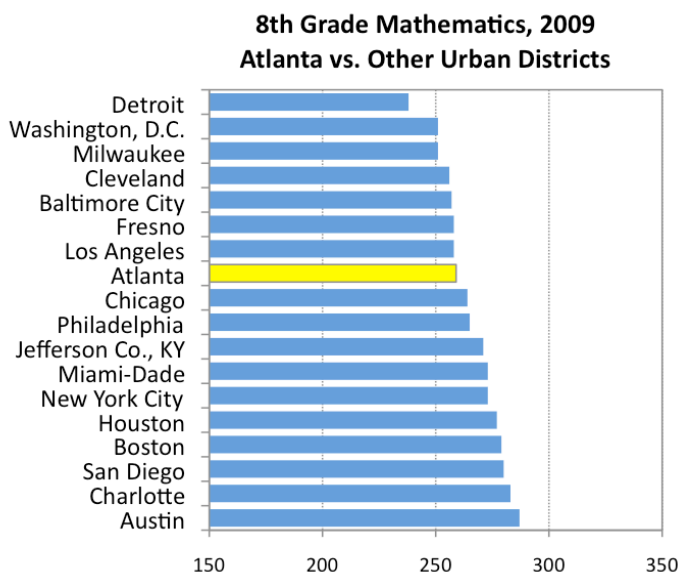


Figure 4. Performance on the NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment in 2009. Data source: NCES, 2009, p. 21.

Proficiency Trends

The real litmus test, however, in the Goals 2000 and No Child Left Behind era has been proficiency. NCLB calls for all students to achieve proficiency on state tests by 2014. Many consider NAEP results a better barometer of this than state indicators, which have been affected by the dumbing down of tests and the lowering of proficiency cut scores to inflate results. NAEP reports results by the percentages at different levels: basic, proficient, and advanced.

How has Atlanta done? In spite of some improvements, less than a fourth of Atlanta's students are proficient, and in some subjects and grades, only 10-11% are (i.e., 8th grade math and science). Such results point out the depth of the city's educational achievement problems.

Table 7

Percentages of Atlanta's Students Achieving Proficiency, 2002-2009

4th grade	2002	2003	2005	2007	2009
Math		13	17	20	21
Reading	12	14	17	19	23
Science					19
8th grade	2002	2003	2005	2007	2009
Math		6	6	11	11
Reading	7	11	12	13	17
Science					10
Writing	9				19

Now, one could look at this data and proclaim that Atlanta's proficiency rates have generally doubled (e.g., the percentage of proficient writers rose from 9 to 19). While true, it is also the case that small numbers and percentages are relatively easy to double. Given how few

students are proficient, however, the question really should be, “At current rates, how long will it take Atlanta to achieve the national goal of having 100% of its students be proficient?”

As an illustration of how to determine this, consider the percentage of proficient 4th grade math students. It rose from 13% to 21% between 2003 and 2009. That is an 8-percentage point gain in 6 years, for a rate of only 1.33 points a year (8/6). At that rate, it will take Atlanta nearly 60 years before all of its students are proficient! (79% are currently not proficient. $79/1.33 = 59.3$ years.) As Table 8 shows, at its current rates of progress, it will take Atlanta from about 50 to 110 years to achieve proficiency with all its students. To be sure, proficiency can be hard to achieve, especially in major urban districts where educators face a diverse array of challenging social and economic conditions, but this is much too long a time to wait. Too many generations of students will have been lost.

Table 8

Atlanta's Rates of Achieving of Proficiency, 2002-2009

4th grade	2002	2003	2005	2007	2009	2002-2003 to 2009			Years to Achieve 100% Proficiency
						Gain	Years	Rate	
Math		13	17	20	21	8	6	1.3	59
Reading	12	14	17	19	23	11	7	1.6	49
8th grade									
8th grade	2002	2003	2005	2007	2009	Gain	Years	Rate	Years to Achieve 100% Proficiency
Math		6	6	11	11	5	6	0.8	107
Reading	7	11	12	13	17	10	7	1.4	58
Writing	9				19	10	10	1.0	81

Proficiency Graphs

Graphs of Atlanta's trends in achieving proficiency suggest some improvement. 4th grade progress was steady in both math and reading, albeit at slow rates (see Figure 5). 8th grade progress was more chaotic with smaller gains. (Science performance is marked by only one point in the graphs, as it was tested only in 2009. Writing appears only in the second graph, as only 8th graders were tested and only in 2002 and 2009.) One can readily see how far away from 100% the school system is (the white space in the graph above the lines). One can also see that, by projecting these trends into the future, it will indeed take decades to achieve 100% proficiency.

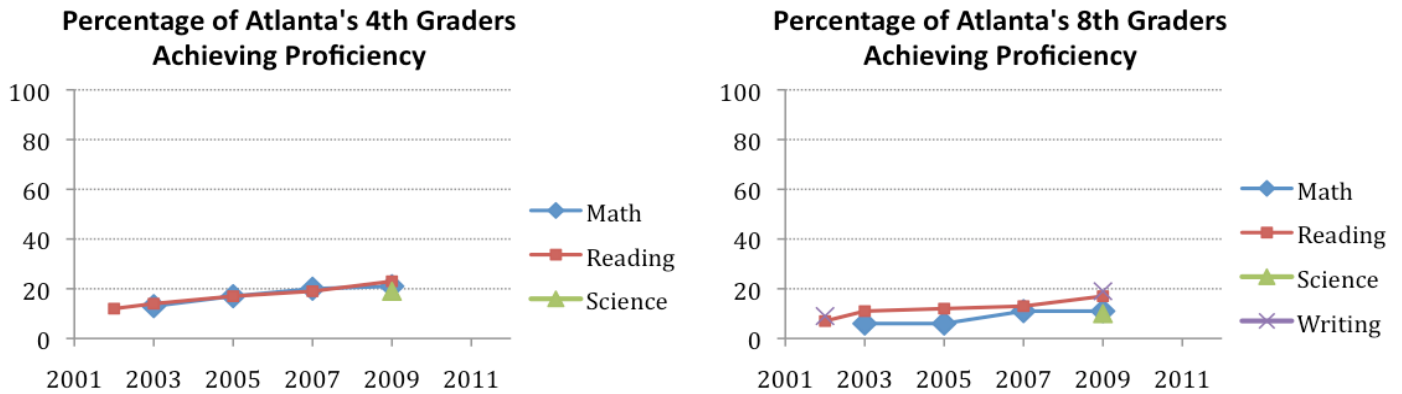


Figure 5. Atlanta's trends in achieving proficiency on the NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment. Data sources are given in Table 1.

Part III: Additional Concerns

Low Standards

Elsewhere (Stedman, 2010), I have documented that NAEP's proficiency standard is actually a low one. Students need only answer correctly 65-74% of the test items at the proficient level to be considered "proficient." This means that many students who are labeled "proficient" are not. Close examination of student performance on NAEP items has shown, for example, that many of the so-called proficient 8th graders struggle with basic math. They have problems with percentages, areas, and simple formulas. Their problems also appear in the international assessments. This makes the low percentages at the proficient level even more serious.

Basic Level

Of further concern, large percentages of Atlanta's students are still unable to achieve even the *basic* level on NAEP tests (see Table 9). This is particularly dismaying, as this NAEP level requires only the *partial* mastery of fundamentals. In 2009, typically half or more of Atlanta's students did not reach this level. In science, for example, over two-thirds of Atlanta's 8th graders fell below the basic level (67%). In reading, 40% did not make the basic level, while over half did not make it in mathematics. From 37% to half of the 4th graders also did not reach the basic level.

Table 9

Percentages of Atlanta's Students Failing to Achieve the Basic Level, 2002-2009

4th grade		2002	2003	2005	2007	2009
	Math		50	43	39	37
	Reading	65	63	59	52	50
	Science					48
8th grade						
	Math		70	69	59	54
	Reading	58	53	54	47	40
	Science					67
	Writing	32			17	

To be sure, Atlanta has made strides in reducing these percentages, but at the current rates of improvement, it will take anywhere from 11 to 50 years before all of its students reach the basic level. (These calculations are based upon the data in the table; note that the rate of progress slowed considerably at 4th grade from 2007-2009.)

No High School or Social Studies Data

NAEP has not tested Atlanta's high school students separately, yet their performance is needed to truly gauge the achievement quality of the entire K-12 schooling experience. Nor has it tested urban districts separately in such important social studies subjects as civics and U.S. history. Other indicators, such as academic course enrollments, reading habits, and drop out rates, also would be needed to fully assess the overall academic quality of the system.

Trade-offs

The No Child Left Behind mandates have focused on reading and math to the exclusion of most other subjects. (Science is included, but testing is not required in every grade, 3-8, as it is in reading and math.) One must consider what is being sacrificed at the altar of higher test scores. Atlanta's exceedingly dismal performance in science is suggestive, with more than 2/3 of the students performing below the basic level. Although NAEP tests the nation regularly in the arts, economics, U.S. history, civics, geography, etc., it has not incorporated those subjects into its urban district assessment program. Thus, even if one contends Atlanta has gained in reading and math, there is no corresponding NAEP evidence about what is happening in other subjects. Nationally, there is growing evidence that schools and districts have short-changed these other areas as they try to produce high reading and math test scores (Stedman, 2010, 2011).

Summary of the Preliminary Data Analysis

My preliminary assessment is that Atlanta's improvement over the past decade has been limited and that, in many cases, progress has slowed. The gains seem particularly small when compared to NAEP's scale of 500 points. In some cases, Atlanta's performance on NAEP worsens as students go through the system (see tables and compare 4th and 8th grade performance). Atlanta has done better, however, compared to the national average in literacy, closing the gaps substantially in reading and writing during the 2000s. Even there, though, the 8th grade reading gain was so much greater than that of other urban districts, it raises questions about how it was achieved.

One thing worth watching out for is that, in many presentations of NAEP results, the y-axis scale is improperly truncated (i.e., showing only 30-50 points of the 500-point scale), thereby greatly exaggerating upward trends. This has been the case for graphs of Atlanta's performance, making it seem as if there has been much more progress than there really was.

Of particular concern is that vast percentages of Atlanta's students do not even reach NAEP's basic level, yet that requires only partial mastery of fundamentals. In some subjects and grades, a *majority*, even over two-thirds, do not reach this level in spite of a decade of effort.

Compounding the problems, Atlanta has failed to bring many students to proficiency, a key national goal. This is a serious matter. Less than a fourth of Atlanta's 4th and 8th graders achieve proficiency, while, in some subjects and grades, it is as little as a tenth. The progress also has been slow—at current rates, it will take from 50 to 110 years to bring all 4th and 8th graders to proficiency! That alone should be enough to tell us that the current approach to school reform is not working. (Making the results even worse, the proficiency standard is a low one.)

Part IV: Implications of the Findings

Who—or What—is Responsible for the Poor Performance?

The failure of Atlanta to have made greater progress and produced widespread, high levels of achievement cannot and should not be blamed on Atlanta's teachers, staff, or unions. Although it has become popular to scapegoat teachers and their unions, that would be folly. The depths of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, inadequate resources, decaying and antiquated schools, overcrowded classrooms, and family and community struggles in urban districts cannot be ignored. Furthermore, a mindless fixation on test scores imposed by state and federal

authorities is complicit in any academic deficiencies. Bureaucratic management systems and excessive focus on standardized test results are corrupting education and learning throughout the nation. Indeed, the current approach to schooling has undermined the teaching profession, demoralized quality teachers, and driven out dedicated instructors that we can ill afford to lose from the nation's schools. We have thousands of unheralded, hard-working teachers who are putting up with, but being burned out by, a range of state and federal bureaucratic regulations, especially testing mandates, that interfere with their teaching and their students' learning.

The failure to make real progress, and to achieve genuine learning with students, can be laid at the doorstep of the standards-accountability movement, which has proven itself to be an ineffectual and unjustified approach to school reform. I have written at length elsewhere on this, including in *Critical Education* (Stedman, 2010, 2011).

Multiple Goals of Education

How quickly we all forget that schooling has more goals than merely raising test scores (Stedman, 2010, 2011). Test scores themselves inadequately measure achievement—and cannot capture well understanding, deep knowledge, and wisdom. Yet, we also have goals beyond achievement, including personal and social development, artistic and aesthetic sensibilities, civic participation, tolerance, multi-cultural learning and understanding, political awareness, etc. These are goals worth attending to, but have been lost in the onslaught of targets and test results.

Legitimacy of the NAEP Gains

While the cheating scandal has brought Atlanta's results on *state* tests into question, similar misdeeds should not have affected its NAEP scores. It is a separate, nationally-organized program, with strict administrative controls. The concerns about possible cheating on NAEP, however, have grown sufficiently large that the Commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, Jack Buckley, recently gave a PowerPoint presentation on the matter to the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), the board that oversees NAEP (Buckley, 2011). In it, he systematically rebuts, if not refutes, each of the alleged ways cheating could have happened on NAEP. In spite of his presentation, however, the former governor of Georgia, Sonny Perdue, who sits on the NAGB, and who appointed the state commission that investigated Atlanta's cheating, remained skeptical. Notwithstanding NAEP's purported controls, Governor Perdue has alluded to evidence about irregularities in student sampling that the investigators have uncovered (Gewertz, 2011). Presumably, this involved the screening of students to select which ones would be permitted take the NAEP tests and which ones would be excluded. If this were true, it would be devastating to the trial assessment and its results. (Officially, according to the NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment reports, only a small percentage of Atlanta students were excluded from NAEP testing due to language, disability, or special education issues. See, e.g., NCES, 2009, pp. 68-76 and Buckley, 2011.) One issue that Buckley inadequately rebutted, and certainly did not refute, was the concern that the NAEP test proctors can be former Atlanta Public Schools staff who would want to ensure good test results.

Whether any of that proves true, my concerns about the legitimacy of the NAEP gains run deeper and arise from a different source. I am concerned that the testing, skill-drill culture that the nation's schools are enmeshed in has become so pervasive that even NAEP results have been corrupted. NAEP scores may go up, but that can now reflect extensive drilling and test preparation rather than genuine learning. In addition, NAEP itself is being *directly* affected by

teaching-to-the-test. During the past two decades, there has been a massive increase in attention to NAEP and its test items, as the program expanded to state and district testing, and as NCLB and states required schools and districts to participate in its assessments. NAEP itself provides tools to “supplement classroom instruction” and makes over 2,000 test items readily available to the public and school officials via the Internet (NAEP, 2011). State departments of education have set up web pages devoted to NAEP, provide advanced guidance to schools that will be participating in NAEP, and have actively promoted the use of NAEP items in classroom instruction and assessment (NAEP, 2011; Stedman, 2010). This includes Georgia, so it would be worthwhile investigating its influence on Atlanta's instruction and test preparation activities.

In general, the marginal gains we see around the country, and on NAEP, have not reflected authentic, in-depth learning. At the high school level, scores have generally stagnated.

The Real Cheating Scandal

While the cheating that occurred in Atlanta is troubling, it is to be expected in high-pressure testing situations. I am more concerned about a different type of cheating that is going on—one that is far worse and more widespread than what happened in Atlanta. Every day, No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top are cheating the children of America out of a quality education. Test-drilling has substituted for bona fide teaching and real learning. The focus on test scores has substituted for engaging students and developing their understanding, imaginations, deep knowledge, and passion for learning. We want students who read well and are well read, not just those who can score high on standardized reading test. What makes this type of institutionalized cheating truly dismaying is that it is system-wide and legislated; it is considered cutting-edge reform, yet we have a century of experience showing its failure. It involves not just hundreds of students as the usual cheating scandals do, but tens of millions of students all across the country. Drilling students for tests cheats them of a genuine education surely as much as cribbing, changing or providing answers, or inflating scores does.

The Obama-Duncan-Rhee-Gates approach to school reform is undermining good education. It is producing authoritarian, bureaucratically-controlled, and test-driven institutions that do not teach students well and cannot prepare students properly for democracy. Bloated controlling bureaucracies; interfering state legislatures; unwarranted mandates; and technocratic intrusions are responsible for poor school performance; not the teachers' unions. In addition to my recent *Critical Education* articles (Stedman, 2010, 2011), I refer interested readers to Diane Ravitch's latest book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* for further information on the problems with the current approach to school reform, including evaluating teachers via test scores and blaming teachers and the unions for school problems (Ravitch, 2010).

Implications for Hall's Assertions

Overall, the NAEP results show that the school system's leadership and approach have *not* produced “real and dramatic” improvements in students' learning. Atlanta's gains on NAEP generally have been insubstantial and of marginal quality. The few changes that, at first glance, appear dramatic prove less solid on further analysis. Vast percentages of students remain below the basic level and achieving proficiency remains a long way off, even several generations away. In addition, in the current testing era, NAEP gains themselves are now questionable. Where we have seen gains in the past decade in the country, they typically have been small and largely artificial, produced by teaching-to-the-test and drilling on a narrow, mechanical curriculum

(Stedman, 2010). We know that the problem is especially bad in urban districts desperate to show gains. In *The Shame of the Nation*, Kozol offered a chilling portrait of what is happening major urban school systems across the country, including Atlanta's. He found pervasive segregation and institutions devoted to scripted instruction, "Skinnerian approaches," and the "pedagogy of direct command" (p. 64). Administrators have become obsessed with rules and standardization. There is a "fanatical insistence" on uniformity and time management (p. 64). As part of the mania for control, schools have instituted silent lunches and even imposed silent recesses. Many, including Atlanta, dropped recess all together. Under such conditions, any score increases that occur have little meaning and come at too great a cost.

By her own account, Hall's approach was different: emphasizing after-school programs, school social workers, and staff development with common preparation time, as well as designating master teachers and having principals be instructional leaders (Hall, 2011). Yet, by her own admission, the Atlanta system also emphasized standards, benchmarking, and testing: "We used state curriculum standards as guides and set performance targets for individual schools, based on each school's performance the year before. Those targets were intentionally aggressive, but not unrealistic" (Hall, 2011). In this new era, unfortunately, "instructional leaders" have often become data pushers and test promoters; "intentionally aggressive targets" have taken over schooling and fundamentally distorted teaching; and "professional development teams" have been degraded by administrators into "data huddles" singularly focused on raising test scores and improving the *numbers* (Stedman, 2011). In spite of her broader social service interests, Hall's stewardship was apparently consumed by the focus on testing and targets and that led directly to the excesses. This is covered in depth in the Georgia state investigators' report (Bowers, Wilson, & Hyde, 2011), detailed newspaper reporting of Atlanta's practices (Voegel, 2011; Winerip, 2011), and political fact checking assessments (Willoughby, 2011). Strauss (2011) recently summarized the Georgia state report on Atlanta's cheating:

The results confirmed the suspicions and then some: The report said that cheating on 2009 standardized tests in Atlanta Public Schools was widespread and didn't start that year, "significant and clear" warnings were ignored by top administrators, an environment of fear and intimidation ruled the system, and thousands of students were harmed. The cheating resulted primarily from "pressure to meet targets" in the data-driven system, it said.

At a fundamental level, however it is the test-focused, data- and results-driven regimen that is the problem, whether or not old-fashioned type cheating is taking place. National gains on NAEP are now suspect due to all the test-drilling. The shallowness of the learning is becoming clear. Any gains we see nationally in math at the younger ages wash out; they do not show up in high school math and science performance, where achievement has stagnated (Stedman, 2010). We anticipate the same would be true in Atlanta had NAEP tested its 12th graders. Had students really learned the math well at younger ages, or had a test-driven accountability system such as No Child Left Behind really been the solution, high school NAEP scores should have improved.

While it is important to ask, "How legitimate were the test gains?" (which were not that big in any case on NAEP), the more fundamental question should be: "Are we providing a quality education, in an environment that is good for both teachers and students and in a way that enhances our democracy?" Nationally, as well as in Atlanta, the answer to that is clearly no (Kozol, 2005; Ravitch, 2010; Stedman, 2010). *It is time to leave this type of centralized, test-driven school reform behind.*

An Alternative Approach to School Reform

The current social control and transmission approach to schooling is part of what is known as the “neoliberal reform project” (Stedman, 2011). Intertwined with the forces of modern capitalism, it serves a bureaucratic and corporate agenda that seeks to control teachers, students, and workers and delegitimize both unions and popular movements. Ravitch (2010) has documented well how powerful conservative foundations have shaped the current technocratic reform to school reform. We need to replace it with a dialogic, experience-based pedagogy and schooling that involves authentic learning, makes caring a central part of competence and the curriculum, respects student autonomy and teacher professionalism, and embraces intervention in the world (Stedman, 2011).

We should be educating through vibrant, democratic communities, where students and teachers work together to solve real social problems. We need to forcefully remind politicians that education is about more than high test scores and meeting bureaucratic standards. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938, p. 49) rightly—and pointedly— deconstructed the traditional conception of academic preparation:

What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur?

In an increasingly diverse society, we need students who relate well to others and know well the people, struggles, and literary works that have shaped our multicultural nation. We will serve democracy, the nation, and the planet much better by designing schools to turn out well-informed, imaginative, and socially-dedicated graduates than by continuing to rely on encyclopedic curricular training and traditional, textbook- and test-focused classes. As global warming transforms the Earth, we should aim for a scientifically-literate people who will confront the self-serving arguments of economic interests and fashion creative solutions. In an era when civil liberties have been subverted in the name of homeland security, we need a constitutionally-literate and activist public who will work to overturn the Patriot Act and restore basic democratic principles.

Habits of mind, tolerance, literary activity, and civic participation, however, cannot be commanded; they must be nurtured. We need to make schools places where students and teachers want to be. Large, modern high schools are characterized by anonymity and powerlessness, yet spaces for learning should embody democratic values and be inviting to their participants. We need a school culture that is intellectually engaging and personally supportive. School reforms and accountability systems that do not centralize such matters are doomed to failure. If we continue pushing testing and mindless standards instead of restructuring schools, reconceptualizing curricula, and humanizing classrooms, we will worsen education. We may superficially raise some test scores, but we will not develop the type of schools, teachers, and students we hope for and truly need.

Postscript: Secretary Duncan and the Cheating Scandal

Superintendent Hall is not alone in her use of NAEP to proclaim Atlanta's success. Just last October, in the midst of the emerging scandal, President Obama's Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, praised Superintendent Hall and her district's results.

In the end, if wrongdoing is revealed, I trust those individuals will be held accountable. However, it cannot be ignored that under Dr. Hall's leadership, Atlanta students have recorded notable gains in reading and mathematics on the separate National Assessment of Educational Progress. In fourth- and eighth-grade reading, Atlanta's results have increased 14 points from 2002. This is more growth than any other participating urban district. In eighth-grade mathematics, Atlanta's results have increased 15 points from 2003. Whatever the outcome of the state investigations, these accomplishments should not go unrecognized. (Duncan, 2010)

Extolling test score gains uncritically and using them to tout one's educational policies is standard Washington practice, but it needs to stop. Secretary Duncan should know better. His predecessor, Secretary of Education Spellings, under President Bush, touted truly marginal gains on NAEP as "proof" that NCLB was working (Stedman, 2009). The evidence clearly indicated otherwise (Stedman, 2009, 2010). In this case, "More growth than any other participating urban district" should have been a red flag to Secretary Duncan. Atlanta's 8th grade reading gains were so extraordinarily different as to raise questions about their validity. Most of the math gain occurred in an unusual two-year spurt. Furthermore, growing evidence suggests that NAEP results themselves are being corrupted by test-prep and skill drilling,

My purpose in this report was to evaluate Atlanta's NAEP performance rather than the cheating scandal itself. But it is hard to escape commenting upon it. The Georgia state investigators unearthed rampant test tampering, with coordinated efforts to erase answers and pressure teachers to participate. Their phrase—"a culture of fear, intimidation and retaliation"—is a powerful one, yet cannot be fully grasped until one learns the specifics of what was going on. Anyone reading the details will be shocked and dismayed. For that, see the report itself (Bowers, Wilson, & Hyde, 2011) and some of the leading newspaper stories about it (e.g., Voegel, 2011, Winerip, 2011). They bring the district's practices to life and show why the investigators chose such a strong and highly-charged phrase.

In light of what had already been widely reported, it is surprising that Secretary Duncan now says that he was "stunned" by the cheating. As Zhao (2011) has pointed out, this seems disingenuous given the "numerous reports of suspected and confirmed cheating incidents in the nation's schools, including but not limited to places such as [Boston](#), [Baltimore](#), [Houston](#), [Los Angeles](#), [Philadelphia](#), [Washington DC](#), and [Chicago](#), where he served as its education chief."

Secretary Duncan also asserted that, "I know" that Superintendent Hall is "deeply committed to what is best for the children of Georgia" (Duncan, 2010). Aggressively pushing test targets, however, whether for NCLB or Race to the Top, or promoting them as Secretary of Education, is not what is best for the children of Georgia or the nation. Using high-stakes test scores to evaluate schools and teachers is corrupting U.S. education (Ravitch, 2010). We need to adopt alternative, progressive approaches to school reform, ones that will ensure both teachers and students are fully engaged and that the environment is a good one for all involved.

Notes

Some material in this report was adapted from my recent articles in *Critical Education*. The final paragraphs come directly from Stedman (2011).

The Georgia state investigators' three-volume report on the cheating scandal and accompanying exhibits (Bowers, Wilson, & Hyde, 2011) are available as PDF downloads from the *New York Times*. (See Bowers et al. for direct links or Severson, 2011.) Voegel (2011) of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* provides one of the most thorough descriptions of the report and what was going in the schools. Winerip (2011) of the *New York Times* reports on how the investigators cracked the case and highlights staggering information on school practices and the cheating—erasures, the use of gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints during the test tampering, how principals and teachers were humiliated and coerced into improper actions, and so forth.

As explained in the text, however, the real concern is not that a system of high-stakes testing and accountability leads to cheating, but that, by its very nature, it cheats students out of a genuine education.

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