



**“Challenging People to Shape
a Better Future Now”**

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Busted for ‘Cheating to the Test’

Eleven Atlanta teachers have been convicted of altering student test scores on standardized tests. They are charged with racketeering and conspiracy. The much-celebrated Superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools Beverly L. Hall was among the indicted but was too ill to stand trial. She died March 2.

Another group of teachers, principals and administrators took plea bargains. A total of 178 people were accused of taking part in the cheating “scam” and in 2011 Hall reminded observers that “we have over 3,000 teachers in Atlanta,” and just a few were part of the cheating scandal. She also denied having any knowledge of the cheating. Until her illness, she insisted that she wanted to stand trial and clear her name.

In what was described as the largest cheating scandal in the nation’s history, District Attorney Paul L. Howard Jr. prosecuted the educators under a law originally designed to snare organized crime figures. Of the 12 defendants, 11 were convicted of racketeering, a felony punishable up to 20 years. One defendant, Dessa Curb, a former elementary school teacher, was acquitted.

Those 11 convicted were taken straight from the courtroom to jail. Sentencing should take place this week. On top of the 20 years maximum sentence for racketeering, they could be convicted on other charges including making false statements. It is interesting to note that most of these teachers are African American.

You can serve as few as 15 years for second-degree murder in Georgia, and as little as a year for involuntary manslaughter. Further,



**BENNETT
COLLEGE**

Julianne
Malveaux

most convicted offenders get a day or even months to go home and straighten out their affairs before reporting to prison. But not this group of educators.

These Atlanta teachers aren’t the only teachers involved in similar cheating scams. A year ago, 130 Philadelphia educators were

pressure that many face when federal laws mandate the use of standardized tests to “prove” that teachers and schools are doing their jobs.

In some districts, including Atlanta, teachers are given bonuses when their students do well on tests, and may be terminated when students do not. Even now, after revisions in teacher evaluation, half of teacher performance is based on standardized tests. Teachers can be reassigned, or schools can be closed if there are too many poor-performing students enrolled.

It makes sense to look at the many ways that the system

they cheating to the test? I’m not referring to the multiple erasures that investigators found on some of the Atlanta tests, or schemes that excluded poor-performing students from testing so average grades could be higher.

I’m referring to teachers who choose to teach content that they know will show up on the test, or those who spend tens of hours in “practice sessions” with old copies of tests used as drills. From my perspective students are being cheated when there is too much emphasis placed on standardized testing.

One might ask how teachers and students can be evaluated without standardized tests, but there is an extensive body of research that suggests other methods of evaluating teachers, including classroom observation and curriculum review. Interestingly, an increasing number of colleges do not use standardized tests to evaluate students for admissions because they recognize such tests are flawed.

Obviously, there must be some way to measure progress among students, and proficiency among teachers. Still, standardized test results should not be tied to teacher compensation, or to threats of school closings. If standardized tests are one way to measure results, they must be combined with other measures to ensure fairness.

It makes sense, though, to ask if there is a racial dynamic to leading nearly a dozen teachers, mostly African American, out of a courtroom in handcuffs. And it makes sense to wonder if the charge of racketeering is being applied too harshly for what is clearly illegal misconduct.

District Attorney Paul L. Howard Jr. prosecuted the educators under a law originally designed to snare organized crime figures

accused of cheating. In September, several were ordered to stand trial.

Why have those who chose a low-paid and little-regarded profession stoop to cheating on standardized tests? Are they judged by the number of students who pass these flawed tests, and the number who fail? Is there a culture of cheating in too many of our nation’s schools? Is there a culture of “teaching to the test”?

There is no excuse for the cheating in Atlanta, or Philadelphia, or in El Paso, where the school superintendent was imprisoned for reporting faulty test scores.

While there is no excuse, it would be foolhardy to ignore the

encourages teachers to manipulate, if not outright cheat, when they administer standardized tests. Some schools spend days preparing students to take the tests.

They aren’t spending days teaching the material students must learn, just the rote material needed to pass standardized tests. Passing a test in English and grammar may prove some proficiency, but does it prove that a student can write a paragraph or an essay, or engage in critical thinking?

When teachers spend too much time focused on standardized testing and not enough on course content, are they cheating students? In teaching to the test, are

Watch Out for ‘Religious Freedom’ Scams

Pity the poor, put-upon anti-gay bigots.

Worried by recent steady march of federal court decisions advancing the right of gays and lesbians to marry, they tried to copy the Supreme Court majority’s flim-flam maneuver of last year in the Hobby Lobby case: By asserting a business is a “person,” they intended to enable business owners to discriminate against gay and lesbian prospective customers, and anyone else under the cover of “religious belief.”

The blowback from corporate giants, religious denominations, cities and states, associations and organizations, and prominent entertainment and literary figures produced a thunderous roar succinctly expressed by the headline of the March 31 front-page editorial of the Indianapolis Star newspaper. In huge letters, it blared: “Fix This Now”

Suddenly, faced with the likelihood of devastating economic boycotts, the two states’ governors and state legislatures quickly complied. By week’s end last week they had amended those particular so-called religious freedom restoration laws to declare they couldn’t be used to discriminate against someone because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. (However, neither did either legislature enact specific



**LAST
CHANCE**

Lee A.
Daniels

statutes barring discrimination against, gays, lesbians and transgendered people.)

But no one on the right side of history should think this ends the anti-gay rights campaign. Nor should they forget this episode’s lessons.

affirmation of same-sex marriage by the federal judiciary.

Secondly, these wolf-in-sheep’s-clothing laws offer further proof that the GOP down to its very roots in state and local communities has devolved from a political party ruled by the old traditions of give-and-take politics crucial to the functioning of a democratic society. It’s become one driven by an unceasing winner-take-all attitude that’s only barely concealed beneath a thin veneer of ultra-conservative religious dogma.

Further, we should remember that the justifications for these laws are classic examples of the

action” in forcing them to accept gays and lesbians as customers of their businesses.

One doesn’t have to be that well-versed in the Southern massive-resistance campaign against the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s to note the tawdry similarity: That region’s politicians also vociferously claimed that they were defending white citizens’ against attack by the federal government. And, as numerous other commentators have noted, many Southern Christians cited Biblical passages to justify their racism.

The rationales for today’s anti-gay laws are just as despicable. Their advocates claim they’re needed because, as Eric Miller, executive director of the conservative group Advance America, said they could help Christian bakers, florists and photographers avoid punishment for “refusing to participate in a homosexual marriage.”

Got that? Miller contends that any business owner who sells an item to or performs a service for a customer thereby becomes a “participant,” and “involved” in whatever it is the customer proceeds to do with the item. If you think that’s silly, look up some of the segregationists’ rationales for all the grand and petty laws of Jim Crow for further proof that bigotry is impervious to logic.

Those who want to discriminate against a particular group claim it’s that group, backed by ‘the government’ who are ‘victimizing’ them

For one thing, it’s underscored the true purpose of these “religious freedom” laws, which now exist in 19 other states and are being considered in an additional 14. That purpose, with the U.S. Supreme Court set to rule on same-sex marriage by this June, is to provide the anti-gay forces a means of escaping compliance with the seemingly inevitable

“hustle” used to pretend bigotry is not bigotry: those who want to discriminate against a particular group claim it’s that group, backed by “the government” who are “victimizing” them.

So, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence could assert, shortly after he signed the original state law, that “many feel their religious liberty is under attack by government