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EDUCATOR CHEATING ON HIGH-STAKES TESTS: STATE AND SCHOOL DISTRICT REACTIONS

At a Glance

Over the last few years, reports of educators cheating on high-stakes statewide assessments have surfaced in school districts across the country. This Information Capsule reviews the steps that states and school districts have taken to bolster the integrity of their tests. In addition, this report summarizes instances of high profile test cheating and the actions taken to prevent cheating in four school districts and one state.

Over the last few years, reports of educators cheating on high-stakes statewide assessments have surfaced in school districts across the country, including Atlanta, Baltimore, El Paso, Philadelphia, and the District of Columbia. The offenses include erasing and changing students' answers, filling in answers left blank by students, providing students with correct answers, and giving students extra time to complete tests (Forbes, 2013; Zubrzycki, 2013; Dessoff, 2011; Removits, 2011).

Experts point out that the vast majority of educators do not participate in cheating, and that testing violations are often honest mistakes rather than deliberate attempts at fraud. However, when cheating does occur, the public loses confidence in the integrity of the test results (Forbes, 2013; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2013; National Council on Measurement in Education, 2012; Richmond, 2010).

Many researchers believe that the pressure on teachers to raise students' test scores has driven a few of them to take measures that falsely inflate the results. Experts claim that basing teacher evaluations, merit pay, and school restructuring efforts on test results has created an incentive for teachers to cheat (Dorff, 2013; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2013; Zubrzycki, 2012a; Schachter, 2011; Stokes, 2011; Zhao, 2011).

The U.S. Government Accountability Office's (U.S. GAO, 2013) briefing for the Secretary of Education, *K-12 Education: States' Test Security Policies and Procedures Varied*, recommended that states adopt "leading practices to prevent test irregularities" in five areas – security plans; security training; security breaches; test administration; and protecting secure materials. The GAO researchers conducted a web-based survey of test administrators in all 50 states and the District of Columbia (100% response rate). Survey results indicated that although all states reported using at least some of the recommended best practices, 33 states still reported having confirmed instances of test cheating in the past two years and 40 states reported allegations of cheating.

States reported that they were vulnerable to cheating during all phases of testing – 40 states reported they were vulnerable to cheating before testing, 50 states reported they were vulnerable during testing, and 47 states reported they were vulnerable after student testing was completed (U.S. GAO, 2013).

Actions School Districts Take to Prevent Cheating on High-Stakes Tests

A review of the literature found that the increase in educator cheating on behalf of students has led many school districts to take steps to bolster the integrity of their tests. These steps include:

- **Providing mandatory ethics training to all educators.** Many school districts retrain their teachers and administrators on testing ethics and proper testing procedures. Training sessions provide an overview of ethical procedures, stress the importance of testing integrity, and explain how cheating incidents damage the educational reputation of students and schools. Experts have concluded that one of the best ways to prevent cheating is to help educators understand what constitutes good testing practice (Williams, 2013; Zubrzycki, 2013; National Council on Measurement in Education, 2012; Dessoff, 2011; Georgia Association of Educators, 2008).
- **Communicating the consequences of cheating to all educators.** Repercussions for guilty teachers vary by school district, but most districts terminate cheating teachers and in some cases revoke their teaching certificate and pursue criminal prosecution. The majority of states and districts publish testing ethics guidelines that clearly delineate the penalties that will be imposed on those who participate in or fail to report incidents of cheating. Districts also use ethics training sessions to ensure that staff are aware of the consequences if they are found to have engaged in conduct that threatens the integrity of the test administration and results (National Council on Measurement in Education, 2012; Zhao, 2012; Dessoff, 2011; Georgia Association of Educators, 2008).
- **Setting up hotlines.** Some school districts, including Atlanta and Norfolk, Virginia, have established confidential hotlines that allow anonymous reporting of testing irregularities and testing-related misconduct involving educators (Zubrzycki, 2013; Dessoff, 2011). According to the U.S. GAO (2013), 22 states report that they have established hotlines in order to identify cheating. The National Council on Measurement in Education (2012) recommends that multiple reporting avenues (e.g., 800 numbers, email, and web forms) be established.
- **Requiring teachers to sign an ethics form.** Some states and districts, including Pennsylvania, Texas, and Baltimore City Public Schools, require teachers to sign a document attesting to the fact that they have received test security and ethics training, understand their obligation to properly implement the testing program, and are aware of the penalties that may result from a violation of test security (Baltimore City Public Schools, 2013a; Mezzacappa, 2012; Texas Education Agency, 2012; Stokes, 2011).

- **Monitoring test sessions.** The U.S. GAO's (2013) survey found that 36 states reported that they used monitoring visits to ensure the integrity of high-stakes tests. Some districts, including New Orleans and Philadelphia, have recently increased the number of testing monitors in schools and provided the monitors with extra training so they are more easily able to identify testing infractions (Williams, 2013; Zubrzycki, 2012b). Baltimore City Public Schools (2013a) hired external monitors from outside of the school district to monitor testing at its schools. The National Council on Measurement in Education (2012) recommends that assessments be monitored by state education agents to help assure testing integrity.

Examples of Test Cheating Incidents and Actions Taken to Protect the Integrity of Tests

Instances of high profile test cheating and the actions taken to prevent further incidents in four school districts are summarized below. New York State's efforts to protect the integrity of its tests are also summarized.

Atlanta Public Schools

An investigation by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation into Atlanta Public Schools (APS) found evidence that teachers and principals had erased and corrected answers on students' Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT). A pattern of very large test score gains in one grade, followed by an equally dramatic drop in scores the following year was uncovered by the state's investigators. Investigators determined that 178 educators (82 of whom confessed) at 44 of the district's 56 schools engaged in cheating from 2005 to 2010. In 2011, most of the 178 teachers named in the cheating scandal resigned or retired. Others were fired and had their licenses revoked (Forbes, 2013; Mulholland, 2013; U.S. GAO, 2013; Zhao, 2012).

In March 2013, an Atlanta grand jury indicted former school superintendent Beverly Hall and 34 other teachers and administrators on one count of violating Georgia's Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act. Erroll B. Davis, Jr. was named superintendent of APS in July 2011, following the exposure of the cheating scandal and the resignation of Beverly Hall (DeNisco, 2013; Forbes, 2013; Stanford, 2013). APS has since implemented the following additional test security measures:

- Educators must attend yearly ethics training as a condition of ongoing employment.
- The district established a 24-hour tip line that allows for the anonymous reporting of unethical or fraudulent acts.
- An outside testing company was hired to administer standardized tests.
- An "ethics advocate" is stationed at every school to help employees resolve ethical issues and ensure that ethical concerns are brought to the attention of central office staff.
- Double-locked "safe rooms" were created at every school for storing testing materials, accessible only to principals and testing coordinators and monitored by video surveillance.

- Students place their completed answer sheets in envelopes with time stamps at the conclusion of testing sessions.
- The district set trigger points that will result in automatic investigations of schools where test scores show larger-than-expected year-to-year changes (Atlanta Public Schools, 2013; DeNisco, 2013; Mulholland, 2013; Scott, 2013; Resmovits, 2011).

Baltimore City Public Schools

In 2010, a Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) elementary school was found to have cheated on the Maryland School Assessment (MSA). In 2011, widespread cheating on the 2009 and 2010 MSA was uncovered at two additional BCPS elementary schools. An investigation conducted by the Maryland Department of Education found that educators had tampered with test booklets and changed a large number of answers from wrong to right (Green, 2011; Schachter, 2011).

BCPS has taken the following steps to prevent further cheating incidents:

- Expanded test security training began in the 2010-2011 school year. Mandatory district-wide training is conducted for all principals and school test coordinators. In addition, principals are required to sign an affidavit indicating that they will ensure that their schools adhere to state guidelines for testing.
- Former BCPS CEO Andrés Alonso made an appeal to educators in his district, recording a video in which he emphasized personal integrity in the testing process. “If there is anyone who is thinking about any kind of irregularity,” Dr. Alonso said in his presentation, “They better understand that their entire professional livelihood is on the line. We are not talking about termination. We are not talking about a transfer. We are talking about losing potentially a professional license.” The video is posted on the district’s web page and was shared with all principals and school test coordinators.
- BCPS’ Office of Achievement and Accountability hired 157 external monitors from outside of the school district to monitor the testing process at every school.
- BCPS’ Office of Achievement and Accountability runs statistical analyses when warranted, examining cohort performance in classrooms with larger-than-expected gains to determine if there are patterns of erosion in performance the following year. As appropriate, the office also examines test answer sheets for possible irregularities, such as a large number of erasures (Baltimore City Public Schools, 2013a; Baltimore City Public Schools, 2013b).

Norfolk (Virginia) Public Schools

A state investigation into allegations of cheating found that teachers provided improper assistance to English language learners and students with disabilities to ensure that they would obtain passing scores on the Virginia Grade Level Alternative (VGLA) assessment at

a Norfolk middle school during the 2008-2009 school year. The investigation determined that teachers used overhead projectors to give students answers to test questions. Investigators concluded that the school's principal coerced teachers into fabricating students' work. The principal also lied to get a teacher fired. The teacher had reported the testing irregularities to district and state personnel and refused to go along with the cheating scheme (Dessoiff, 2011; Jeter et al., 2010).

The following steps were taken by administrators at Norfolk Public Schools to strengthen the integrity of district-wide testing procedures:

- District-wide training for the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) assessment was revamped. Instructional staff were required to attend training sessions that outlined the expectations for staff and the specific consequences of failing to comply with regulations and procedures for high-stakes testing.
- School district personnel involved with administration of the VGLA assessment were required to attend specialized training.
- The district established a dedicated telephone line for staff members and parents to report testing concerns directly to the central office's testing department.
- A Testing Resource Center was added to the district's website, with links to information about testing in Norfolk Public Schools and resources for parents, students, and teachers (Norfolk Public Schools, 2010).

El Paso (Texas) Independent School District

In June 2012, former El Paso Independent School District (EPISD) Superintendent Lorenzo Garcia pleaded guilty to two counts of fraud – manipulating student enrollment to boost scores on state tests and awarding a \$450,000 consulting contract to a woman with whom he had a personal relationship. Garcia directed EPISD staff to reclassify students in struggling schools so they would not take the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), since administrator bonuses and Adequate Yearly Progress were based on TAKS results. For example, all high school transfer students from Mexico were placed in ninth grade, even if they had sufficient credits for the tenth grade, to prevent them from taking the tenth grade TAKS. Course credit recovery programs were created to help intentionally held-back students catch up before graduation (Chávez, 2012; Zubrzycki, 2012a).

Garcia was sentenced to three years in federal prison in October 2012, fined \$56,600 (the amount of the performance bonus he received), and ordered to pay \$180,000 in restitution for the contract fraud (Chávez, 2012; Torres, 2012; Zubrzycki, 2012a).

The following actions were taken by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) following the EPISD cheating scandal:

- A monitor appointed by the TEA visits EPISD regularly to determine whether the district is making progress in correcting system-wide failures that led to its cheating

scandal. The monitor submits reports on the district's progress to the TEA at the end of every month.

- An independent company was hired to train district officials on test security and ethics policies and procedures.
- An outside organization was hired to oversee administration and security of all standardized testing (Cronin, 2012; Zubrzycki, 2012a).

New York State

The New York State Education Department (SED) is taking steps to protect the integrity of its assessments. SED Commissioner John B. King, Jr. stated, "We're developing the investigative and deterrence capacity to protect our teachers, administrators and, most importantly, our students from the kinds of testing scandals that have occurred in other states" (New York State Education Department, 2013). Enhanced test security measures include:

- Creation of a specialized Test Security Unit (TSU), staffed with legal and investigative personnel. The TSU investigates allegations of improprieties on state assessments, pursues discipline for misconduct, and provides training on proper testing practices.
- Establishment of a Test Security and Educator Integrity website in February 2013. The website includes ethical testing guidelines, policies and procedures for improving the security and integrity of test administrations, and an electronic tip line for reports of test-related misconduct involving educators.
- Expanded requirement that teachers and administrators certify in writing that they have received and will follow all security protocols on state assessments.
- Additional forensic measures to detect test fraud, including in-depth erasure analysis of test results, made possible by the Board of Regents' approval of a SED budget request for an additional \$500,000 (New York State Education Department, 2013).

Summary

Reports of educators cheating on high-stakes statewide assessments have recently surfaced in school districts across the country. This Information Capsule reviewed the steps that states and school districts have taken to bolster the integrity of their tests, such as providing mandatory ethics training to all educators, clearly communicating the consequences of cheating to educators, establishing hotlines for anonymous reporting of testing misconduct and irregularities, and hiring external test monitors.

Instances of high profile test cheating and the actions taken to prevent further incidents in four school districts were summarized: Atlanta Public Schools, Baltimore City Public Schools, Norfolk Public Schools, and El Paso Independent School District. New York State's efforts to protect the integrity of its tests were also summarized.

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