



Administrators

 SEARCH

ADMINISTRATOR MAGAZINE	LEADERSHIP	STAFF DEVELOPMENT	CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION	FUNDING	TECHNOLOGY
------------------------	------------	-------------------	--------------------------	---------	------------

All Results



When Educators Cheat

High-stakes testing has pushed some schools to cross the line.

By Emily Richmond

[PRINT](#) [EMAIL](#)



MORE INFORMATION

COLLECTION

Late Fall 2010 Administrator Magazine

SOURCE



Administrator Magazine: Curriculum

Scholastic Administrator is a must-read resource for 240,000 of today's results-driven school leaders. Every issue features leadership for education executives, insight, and analysis into what's next in education, and reporting on cutting-edge technologies in real life applications.

Where It's Rampant

There's no shortage of recent reports of cheating in public schools, with high-profile incidents in Uniondale, New York, and Camden, New Jersey, among others. That's included troubling allegations of coordinated efforts by school administrators to inflate student achievement.

- **Baltimore, Maryland** After student test scores plummeted by more than 50 points in a single year at George Washington Elementary, an 18-month investigation revealed answer sheets on a later exam (in 2008) had been tampered with, to artificially inflate student achievement. In 2007, the school had won "Blue Ribbon" status from the U.S. Education Department for outstanding achievement among at-risk students.

To the teacher at the Las Vegas elementary school, it was a clever way to help students keep their eyes on their own work during a high-stakes standardized test. The students made "privacy walls"—folders cut and taped to stand upright on their desks, personalized with photos and words of encouragement from family.

But Nevada's strict test security policies forced the walls to come down. Desktops must be clear of everything except the question booklet, answer sheet, and the requisite No. 2 pencil for filling in the bubbles. "Zero tolerance means just that," says Sue Daellenbach, assistant superintendent of assessment and accountability for the Clark County School District, the fifth-largest in the nation. "If we can't honestly say that every student had the same testing environment, we don't have a level playing field."

Preventing cheating has never been more critical for school administrators like Daellenbach. The testing industry has grown into a multibillion-dollar-a-year industry. Student test scores are taking on new weight in everything from teacher evaluations to federal education grant requirements. Some states and local districts are already taking a more aggressive approach to test security.

In Nevada, following a slew of episodes involving



**WE MAKE IT WORK
SO YOU GET THE
MOST RETURN FROM
YOUR INVESTMENT.**

See how we can make IT work for you >>



• **Dallas, Texas** The Dallas Independent School District recently implemented new policies to better detect-and deter cheating—after a series by the local newspaper found evidence of organized cheating at dozens of campuses on high-stakes exams. In 2009, Lang Middle School came under scrutiny when the district reported irregularities in both math and writing test results. When the students were given a re-test, the percentage that passed the exam was cut almost in half, to 43.7 percent from nearly 80 percent.

• **Atlanta, Georgia** Atlanta Public Schools are under intense scrutiny after an initial investigation found testing irregularities on statewide exams at 58 campuses. An independent commission has since cut the number of "problem" campuses to 12, but the incident has cast doubt on Atlanta's remarkable academic progress in recent years (the district's growth on the National Assessment of Educational Progress suggested there were indeed strong gains being made).

• **Norfolk, Virginia** In a desperate bid for accreditation, the principal of Lafayette-Winona Middle School asked teachers to use overhead projectors to give students answers to questions on the Virginia Grade Level Assessment. After a teacher reported testing anomalies to the state, principal Cassandra Goodwyn attempted to have the whistle-blower fired.

misplaced testing booklets and students gaining improper access to materials, state lawmakers mandated that the education department track all instances of improprieties and submit an annual report. Nevada requires every school have a written security plan, detailing how materials will be stored and who will have access. Additionally, the state provides checklists for use before, during, and after test administrations to minimize chances that a required step will be skipped. But test security training has proved a challenge in a district like Clark County, which, until the recession hit, was hiring an average of 2,000 new teachers annually. This year, the district added just 200 new teachers, but that doesn't mean a break for Daellenbach.

Because of budget cuts, numerous school administrators have been reassigned to new positions at different grade levels—moving from elementary school assistant principal to a secondary dean, for example—which means having to get up to speed quickly on a complex new set of test security expectations. "It's a continual challenge," Daellenbach says. "But we need to protect the integrity of the testing process."

"The high-stakes testing venture as a magic bullet to improve educational quality is a failure," argues Robert Schaeffer, spokesman for FairTest, a Boston-based nonprofit organization that lobbies against the overuse of standardized testing. "It has undermined the ethical quality of teaching and learning." The federal No Child Left Behind Act, now in its eighth year, has new demands on schools to show student gains on standardized tests or face penalties. As the stakes increased, so did incidents of cheating, researchers and educators say.

And the feds' new Race to the Top competition has only exacerbated the pressure, Schaeffer says, because states must allow test scores to be used in teacher evaluations in order to qualify for the grants. "The whole system is now constructed in a way that encourages misbehavior," Schaeffer asserts. "When people's livelihood and reputation depend on test scores, some of them will get the scores they need by hook or by crook."

How Schools Are Responding

In the wake of cheating allegations in Atlanta, the board of education appointed an independent commission to investigate, and hired Caveon Test Security to review the exams. The Utah-based company uses "erasure anomalies"—patterns where answer sheets show a wrong answer erased and replaced with the correct one—as one measure of potential trouble. Caveon, the nation's largest test

security firm, also interviewed hundreds of employees at dozens of Atlanta schools, and reviewed more than 50,000 e-mails.

According to an August report, the commission's five-month investigation found evidence of cheating at just 12 campuses, compared with the 58 previously identified as having suspect scores. "I liken this to flipping two coins and having the first land and stay on its edge and the second landing and staying on the edge of the first," says Caveon's president John Fremer.

However, the district had already decided to include all of the original campuses in its planned interventions in the wake of the crisis, says Atlanta Public Schools spokesman Keith Bromery. Any student who did not have a satisfactory score on either the original test or the summer makeup exam was enrolled in a 12-week accelerated academic recovery program to make sure they had mastered the requisite material. Additionally, Caveon made recommendations for improving test security, particularly safeguarding the actual materials, which were put in place in time for the spring and summer exams, Bromery says. As for the administrators and teachers who have been implicated, the plan was to reassign some staff to alternative assignments until the investigation is complete, Bromery explains. "We want to have due process. We're not going to rush to judgment on our employees."

While not considered proof of cheating, erasure anomalies are one way of looking for suspect activity. But in a district where nearly 80 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price meals, many students "are not confident test takers," Bromery says. That means teachers have long told students if they are struggling with a particular question to flag it on their answer sheet, move on, and go back and try again if there's remaining time. "We tell our students if you come back to a question and think you have a better answer, feel free to change it," Bromery says. "Now we find out that one of our testing strategies might send up a flag as a potential cheat situation. So we'll have to figure out another way."

Caveon found no evidence that Atlanta's central office or district administrators had attempted to manipulate test results. The percentage of testing irregularities that were found is consistent with industry averages for education, which run about 1 to 2 percent, says John Fremer, Caveon's president. But "it's troublesome when even a single individual student is cheating," Fremer says. "It's much more unacceptable when it's educators, whom we entrust to teach our children ethical standards, who are doing it themselves."

What Cheating Looks Like

In many Caveon investigations, testing violations are often "honest" mistakes rather than a deliberate attempt at fraud, Fremer explains—such as special education students being given extra assistance by well-meaning proctors.

The teacher errors typically include giving students too much or too little time to complete the exam, offering translation help to ELLs and leaving test materials in unsecured areas. At one particular school (Fremer declined to identify the district), a teacher told a Caveon investigator that she was giving her students a high-stakes math exam when she realized she hadn't yet covered a section they were expected to know. She stopped the test, collected the material, and then taught them the subject matter. She then let the students complete the exam.

"In one sense, that's noble—you only want to test students on material they've been taught," Fremer says. "But you can't deal with that on the day of the test." It's also one of the reasons why Caveon recommends independent proctors—rather than regular classroom teachers—administer high-stakes tests.

Kids and Cheating

To be sure, collusion by teachers and administrators is just one facet of the problem—there are still plenty of students who try to cheat. Whereas cheating once meant sneaking in a calculator during a math test, cell phones and iPods are now the scourge of security officers. As devices continue to add new applications, students continue to come up with

new ways to cheat. Until a few years ago, many testing centers administering exams had yet to ban iPods, because the facilitators didn't realize it was possible to store visual images and text along with the expected audio files, Fremer notes. "We haven't done the best job keeping up with the technology in the past," he adds. "But we're getting much better."

Schools should encourage students to speak up when they see cheating, Fremer recommends. Districts should have anonymous tip lines to which students are encouraged to report any suspicious activity. And there should be regular reminders that honesty is indeed the best policy. "It should be everybody's responsibility to make sure we have fairness in testing, including the students," Fremer says. "If we've done a good job of reminding them that we expect them to work on their own and behave honorably, they tend to do it more reliably."

Clearly, there's work to be done to spread that message. In a national survey last year by Common Sense Media, a San Francisco-based education company, more than a third of teens said they had used their cell phone during an exam to look at stored notes or to send a text message to classmates about answers. And nearly one in four middle and high school students said they didn't believe such activities constituted cheating.

But most students know cheating is inherently wrong, says Carl Pickhardt, a child psychologist in Austin, Texas, who writes a blog for *Psychology Today*. "There's a notion that somehow schools have to tell kids cheating is wrong and that will change the behavior," he says. "Kids know that cheating is wrong, just like adults—that's why they have excuses to rationalize the behavior: 'everyone does it' or 'there's so much pressure.'"

The challenge for educators dealing with adolescents is to convince them that cheating is not in their own best interest. "It's a very self-centered age," Pickhardt says. "To say to a kid that cheating in some way harms the school or the school system probably isn't a very powerful argument." Pickhardt says he doesn't believe there's more cheating among "average" students versus those who are already struggling.

Cheating often requires more effort than simply doing the work. It's the already high-achieving students who are increasingly anxious about their own academic prospects, and they may well be responding to external pressure to succeed. That's why schools have to establish an ethical bar for behavior, and combine that with supervision to make sure everyone—including teachers and staff—are following the rules, Pickhardt says. "You want to help the kids understand the self-defeating aspects of this behavior—people who cheat have lower self-esteem, because they know they were unable to do what was demanded of them," Pickhardt notes. "How they treat themselves now is going to carry over into their adult life. If they cheat now, they're more likely to cheat later."

RELATED ARTICLES

[21st-Century Cheating](#)

Today's technology makes it easier than ever for kids to cheat, copy, and steal. Find out how you can help your child learn right from wrong. Also discusses peer pressure to cheat.

[The Art of Testing the Ice](#)

When artist Kadir Nelson began his illustrations of the book *Testing the Ice*, his goal was to "tell the story with pictures." His challenge was to do that in a way that went beyond turning words into drawings.

[Book Review: Testing the Ice](#)

Kid Reporter NAME reviews *Testing the Ice* by Sharon Robinson and Kadir Nelson.

RELATED RESOURCES

[Set the Stage for Testing Success](#)

3/9/2011

When Educators Cheat | Scholastic.com



**LESSON
PLAN**

First year teachers, take the mystery out of standardized test success by teaching students problem solving. This article also covers strategies...

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Scholastic.com Home](#)

[Customer Service](#)

[About Scholastic](#)

[Careers](#)

[Investor Relations](#)

[International](#)

[Scholastic en Español](#)

TM® & © 2011-1996 Scholastic Inc. All Rights Reserved.