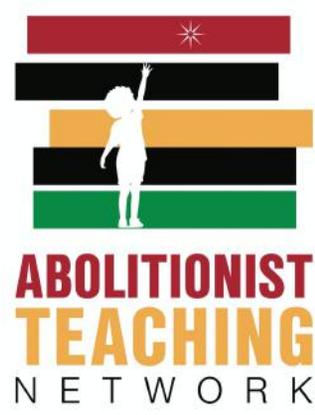


# A Timeline: How Politicians, Developers, Education Policy, and Public-Private Partnerships Cheated the Kids of Atlanta Public Schools

By Ruth Boyajian



1906

## Atlanta Race Massacre

White mobs kill dozens of Black Georgians during the Atlanta Race Massacre. Response to the riots marks the duality of Atlanta politics in which Black elite community members and White politicians work together to protect the city's reputation, creating a facade of economic and social equity.<sup>4</sup>



1959

## Creating Atlanta's Brand

Mayor Hartsfield dubs Atlanta "the city too busy to hate" to attract capital investment and brand the city as peaceful despite white violence in response to desegregation.<sup>5</sup>



Photo from 1987, homeowner William Jenkins put this sign outside his home.<sup>6</sup>



1961

## Response to Desegregating Schools

Atlanta Public Schools (APS) follows the court-order to desegregate schools; local officials work to ensure the media does not report on the white mobs who exhibit hostile acts.<sup>7</sup>



1983

## Foundation for Standards-Based and Testing School Reform

The Reagan administration publishes the *A Nation at Risk* report, declaring public education in crisis and placing responsibility for improvement on schools. The report details concerns with test scores, graduation rates, and literacy, especially for minority students.



1990

## Citywide Housing Revitalization

Atlanta learns it will host the Olympics in 1996. This motivates partnerships between Black city officials and White business elites to create urban renewal and gentrification policies.



Photo from article by Adam Talbot published on Feb. 1, 2016 in *Rio On Watch*.



1990

## High-Stakes Testing on the Rise

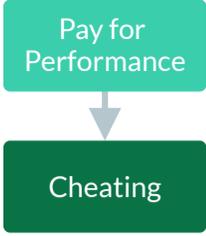
Texas Education Agency begins rating schools using standardized test scores.<sup>9</sup>



Photo from article in the September 2014 issue of *Teach* magazine.



1992



## Cheating in Georgia Begins

Georgia legislature implements a “pay for performance” program that rewards test scores with school bonuses. Several allegations of cheating begin to surface.<sup>10</sup>



1995



## Whittling Away at Public Housing

Atlanta Housing Authority suspends requirements to replace all demolished public housing units with an equal number of new units. Immediately following, approved permits set the demolition of 1,195 public housing units by Centennial Olympic Park into motion, reserving only 360 units for public housing.<sup>11</sup>



1995



## East Lake Revitalization Project

Real estate developer Tom Cousins creates the East Lake Foundation to redevelop East Lake Meadows and revitalize the affordable housing project by replacing it with a mixed-income housing complex, Villages of East Lake.<sup>12</sup>



1998



## The So-Called Texas Miracle

Houston test scores rise drastically and dropout rates plummet under George W. Bush’s governorship, proclaimed as the “Texas Miracle.” Journalists subsequently report evidence of widespread cheating.<sup>13</sup>



1999



## For-Profit Charters Begin in Atlanta

APS school board approves the first charter, Drew Charter School, in conjunction with the rebranded Villages of East Lake.<sup>14</sup> The school is projected to earn the for-profit company, Edison Schools, over \$17 million in its first 5 years.<sup>15</sup>

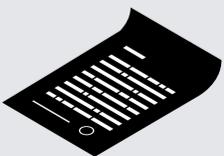


1999



## City Diverts School Dollars through "TADs"

APS joins the City of Atlanta and Fulton County in the first Tax-Allocation District (TAD) agreement in Georgia. APS diverts half of the TAD’s \$76.5 million in public funding to create Atlantic Station, using education funds to establish the IKEA, condos, and other private mixed-use development.<sup>16</sup>



2001



## High-Stakes Testing Becomes Federal Law

No Child Left Behind becomes law under President Bush Jr., introducing federal high-stakes testing based on the Texas model. It stipulates that if schools fail to exhibit Adequate Yearly Progress for five years, they can be converted to charters or taken over by the state.<sup>17</sup>



2002



## "Texas Miracle" Exposed as Fraud

Houston high school Assistant Principal, Robert Kimball, blows the whistle on the "Texas Miracle," pointing out underreported dropouts and artificially inflated test scores by preventing low-scoring students from taking the tests.<sup>18</sup>



2002-  
2008



## Education Budget Cuts

Governor Sonny Perdue cuts \$1.5 billion from the state's K-12 education budget.<sup>19</sup>



2008



## GA Supreme Court Rules TAD Unconstitutional

Georgia Supreme Court raises issue with the Atlanta City Council's TAD with APS for the Beltline, which takes \$800 million from city and county property taxes and \$850 million in school taxes. The Supreme Court rules it violates the state constitution by using school funds for non-school operations.<sup>20</sup> Just days after the ruling, Kasim Reed (soon to be mayor of Atlanta) sponsors a statewide referendum<sup>21</sup> to amend the constitution to allow the use of school funds for non-education projects.



2008



## Educator Arrests Begin in Atlanta

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* flagged the 2008 CRCT tests for grades 3-8. The same week, two DeKalb County school administrators are arrested.<sup>22</sup>



2009



## Change to RICO Sets Stage for Cheating Trial

The US Supreme Court sets a new precedent for the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO)<sup>23</sup> law that later allows for the indictment of 35 educators in APS, making it possible to claim a defendant's involvement in an enterprise, regardless of whether there was a formal organization behind the activity.<sup>24</sup>



2009



## Public Housing Demolished

After becoming the first city in the nation to build public housing, Atlanta becomes the first city to demolish it all.<sup>25</sup>



Photo by Tim Huber in an article published on Mar. 24, 2020 in *Bitter Southerner*.



2009



## East Lake Revitalization Model

Tom Cousins partners with Julian Robertson and Warren Buffet to create Purpose Built Communities which would replicate the East Lake model of revitalization through housing and charter schools.<sup>26</sup>



2010



## Scandal Aftermath: Cheating Misdemeanor Law

Kathleen Mathers, the right-hand woman to Governor Perdue and director of the Governor's Office of Student Achievement, introduces a bill that makes cheating on a test a misdemeanor in the state of Georgia.<sup>27</sup>



2010



## GA Uses Inflated Test Scores For Funding

As Mathers' cheating bill is pending, she and Perdue head to DC to promote their application for \$400 million from Race to the Top using the inflated 2009 test scores. They receive the grant.<sup>28</sup>



2010



## State Budget Slashes APS Funds by 11%

APS Superintendent Beverly Hall announces that the upcoming education budget will be reduced by 11%,<sup>29</sup> further implementing austerity alongside Perdue's \$1.5 billion cut just a few years before.



2010



## \$3 Million Criminal Investigation Launches

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) begins their formal investigation, spending nearly \$3 million on the investigation into Georgia teachers.<sup>30</sup>



2011



## GA Education Defunding Escalates

Governor Deal is inaugurated and begins to underfund K-12 education by approximately \$1 billion a year.<sup>31</sup>



2011



## GBI Investigation Concludes

The GBI publishes its report stating "a culture of fear and a conspiracy of silence infected this school system" because of Beverly Hall's leadership.<sup>32</sup> It ignores the fact that the Georgia legislature created "pay for performance" programs in the 90s and No Child Left Behind implemented high-stakes testing for all schools,<sup>33</sup> alongside an ever restricting education budget implemented by Georgia's governors.



2013



## Similar Cheating Scandal in DC Ends Quietly

US Department of Education drops cheating allegations in DC after a scandal on par with Atlanta's. A DC elementary school principal filed a lawsuit against the district for fraud after they used inflated test scores to get a \$75 million dollar Race to the Top grant (the same federal funding that Georgia received), causing the scandal to be swept under the rug.<sup>34</sup>



2013



## Setting the Stage for RICO

The statute of limitations period runs out on misdemeanors. The only way to charge the APS educators is with serious felony offenses.<sup>35</sup>



2013



## The Indictment

Thirty-five educators are indicted, none of whom are white even though 76.5% of the state's teachers are white.<sup>36</sup> Of the forty-four schools named in the GBI report, the indicted educators came from just seven schools; they all happened to be in or by TADs in the poorest neighborhoods in west and south Atlanta.<sup>37</sup>

Photo from article published in *Aubrey Daniels International*.



2013



## Teachers Outside Atlanta Face No Charges

Georgia Dougherty County District Attorney Greg Edwards announces he will not prosecute the forty-nine educators accused of cheating.<sup>38</sup>



2013



## APS Educators Seek "Out"

Lisa Terry becomes the first APS educator to take a plea deal.<sup>39</sup>



2014



## The Trial Begins

The criminal trial begins with the 13 educators who did not take plea deals.<sup>40</sup>



2014



Photo from article published on Apr. 1, 2015 on *NPR.org*

**Judicial Misconduct**  
Judge Baxter, the judge on the case, tries to aid a witness in identifying a defendant, a serious act of judicial misconduct.<sup>41</sup>



2014



## "Perjury is being committed daily" during trial

Defense attorneys ask Judge Baxter to strike the testimony of conflicting witnesses stating "a conviction cannot rest upon perjured testimony," to which he replied "perjury is being committed daily here".<sup>42</sup>



2014



## Trial Exposes Unethical GBI Interviews

GBI director Vernon Keenan provides testimony during the trial. He admits to several complaints of abuse and intimidation from GBI agents during the investigation into teachers. Later, defense attorneys expose that the investigation encouraged false confessions in exchange for criminal immunity.<sup>43</sup>



2015



## 11 of 12 Educators Found Guilty

Trial concludes, all educators are found guilty of RICO except one, Dessa Curb, who was acquitted on all counts. Superintendent Beverly Hall passed away with breast cancer prior to the end of the trial.<sup>44</sup>

Photo by David Goldman in article published on Apr. 25, 2022 on *Capital B Atlanta*



2015



## Judge Issues Higher Sentences

Judge Baxter begins issuing sentences higher than what the DA recommended, stating “there were thousands of children who were harmed” and the scandal was “the sickest thing to ever happen in this town”.<sup>45</sup>



2015



## Educators' Responses to Verdict

Two of the convicted educators enter plea deals, waiving their appellate rights. The remaining nine educators chose to appeal their case and stay out of prison on appeal bond.<sup>46</sup>



2018



## First Rejected Appeals

Two APS educators' appeals are rejected and they report to prison.<sup>47</sup>



Photo in article published on Oct. 9, 2018 on *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*



2020



## False Hope of Sentence Modification

Fulton County DA, Paul Howard, tries to reduce sentences for the seven remaining educators. It becomes apparent that this was a political choice during a reelection runoff against Fani Willis, a lead prosecutor in the cheating scandal trial. Willis states that if the educators will not admit guilt and apologize for “harming” the kids, she does not plan to request a sentence modification.<sup>48</sup>



2022



## The Case Drags On...

The seven remaining educators have been on appeal bond for seven years.<sup>49</sup>



2022



## Atlanta Recognized as Champion of Revitalization

Atlanta Mayor Dickens named Chair of the US Conference of Mayor's new Public-Private Partnership Task Force.<sup>50</sup>



2022



## Judge Drops Prison Time for Dana Evans

Judge Jerry Baxter agrees to modify Dana Evans's sentence, dropping all prison time and revising her sentence to five years of probation. He also cuts her community service in half. Upon completion of 500 community service hours, her probation will end.<sup>51</sup> The remaining six await decisions on their appeals...

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<sup>1</sup> Shani Robinson and Anna Simonton, "None of the Above: The Untold Story of the Atlanta Public Schools Cheating Scandal, Corporate Greed, and the Criminalization of Educators," *Beacon Press*, 2019, p. 218.

<sup>2</sup> TADs are redevelopment agreements in which participating governments sell municipal bonds to private developers who benefit from the proceeds. These revitalization projects predict increased property tax revenue, but the participating government does not collect the new revenue until the TAD expires, usually within twenty-five years. While the TAD is current, the tax revenue is put in a special fund used to pay back the bond debt and finance additional development projects.

Georgia Redevelopment Powers Law O.C.G.A § 36-44-1 through 36-44-23.

<sup>3</sup> Shani Robinson and Anna Simonton, 2019, p. 196.

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