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## Metro leaders hope schools scandal fades fast

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By [Dan Chapman](#) and [J. Scott Trubey](#) - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The convictions of 11 Atlanta Public Schools officials again thrust to the forefront an ugly chapter in the city's history – one that regional leaders now hope to leave behind.

The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, The Economist and major networks reported Wednesday's verdict. While reporting largely focused on the trial's end and children cheated of an education, the verdict was a reminder that Atlanta's global image was collateral damage.

A.D. Frazier, a prominent Atlanta private equity executive and former chief operating officer of Atlanta's Olympic Games, called it a "black eye" for Atlanta. Mayor Kasim Reed called the scandal "one of the darkest periods in the life of our city."

Many key leaders said they hope the verdict brings closure, and that the stain on Atlanta will fade.

"I frame (the convictions) as a positive, the whole concept of cleaning house and moving forward," said John Boyd, a



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national site consultant in New Jersey, who watched coverage of the case.

Mike Bowers, the former Georgia attorney general who led the state's investigation into cheating, said the judge, jury and Fulton County District Attorney's Office did the city a service.

"I think in the long run, when truth comes out it is always best," Bowers said. "You can't hide a scandal like that. You just can't do it."

Amid the international news coverage, one voice largely absent has been that of the Metro Atlanta Chamber.

The powerful business group was among the most vocal supporters of the system and the purported reforms under former superintendent Beverly Hall. The chamber and business leaders were critical of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's coverage of suspicious test scores that uncovered the cheating scandal.

### Attacking messengers

A state investigation in 2011 alleged that the business community pushed a report by a chamber-allied commission that whitewashed the scope of test cheating.

In their 2011 report that found widespread cheating on standardized tests, state investigators concluded that business and chamber leaders were more interested in attacking the "messengers" than finding the truth because they wanted to protect the Atlanta "brand."

An AJC report in 2013 found business leaders, prior to the state probe, peddled a report about cheating to parents and the public they knew was incomplete and flawed.

Much has changed at the chamber since the worst of the scandal. Former President Sam Williams, whose reputation was bruised by the APS affair and the failure of a 2012 transportation tax referendum, has retired. New leadership, including new chief executive Hala Modellmog, is in place.

The chamber declined requests for interviews about the



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organization's involvement in APS now, and how the scandal has affected business recruitment. Instead it sent this statement:

“The Metro Atlanta Chamber continues its relationship with APS through our 33-year partnership, Atlanta Partners for Education (APFE),” the chamber said. “APFE connects our business community directly with schools to improve student achievement. We remain committed to working with APS to enhance the quality of public education as we prepare our children to live and work in the 21st century.”

APFE is a nonprofit cooperative. The partnership includes many top nonprofit and corporate executives, and provides support such as executive mentoring and summer reading programs. The chamber said more than a 1.4 million volunteer hours were provided in 2013-2014, along with cash and in-kind donations of about \$2 million. That doesn't include other individual business support programs for the schools.

Certainly, the business community has played an outsized role for decades in trying to improve APS. The business community helped found the Atlanta Education Fund, and heavyweights like General Electric and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation invested millions in recent years.

### **Effect hard to know**

The AJC asked local business leaders to gauge the impact on recruiting. Though it may never be known if companies or site selection firms ever crossed the region off their lists during the crisis, the business chiefs said metro Atlanta has largely shrugged off the taint of scandal.

“We thought the same thing everyone else thought, that this would become a major problem,” said Nick Masino, head of economic development with Partnership Gwinnett. “It never really has come up.”

Frazier and Boyd agreed.

“When it first broke, we thought it would be devastating, but it's not from a business standpoint,” Frazier said.

The metro area has been on a roll lately, with Mercedes-Benz, General Motors, Worldpay US and others announcing big jobs deals. However, its post-recession economic performance has lagged many peer metro areas.

“Public education is an important site selection factor, but it’s not the overriding one out of a multitude of factors,” said Boyd, with The Boyd Company in New Jersey. “I’m not minimizing this, but it’s not an issue of great importance to the industry. That issue is now in the rear view mirror and now Atlanta is moving forward.”

In an email, the chamber’s lead communication officer, Bari Love, said: “Given the pace of recruitment this year and the number of projects in the pipeline, I think it’s safe to say it has not impacted recruiting.”

Metro Atlanta has many issues to tackle – transportation, education and water supply among them. Frazier said the business community and the chamber need to be engaged in APS, equating the city school system to critical infrastructure.

“(APS is) an important player in our community, like roads and bridges are important to our community,” he said. “The metro Atlanta business community must take an active role to make APS the best public schools they can be.”

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