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Effects of APS cheating linger, some hard to gauge

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In recent years, national conferences for education experts often included a sober warning about the dangers of high-stakes testing in schools, and that warning typically involved this city.

“Nobody wanted to be the next Atlanta,” said Greg Cizek, a professor who measures student learning and was an expert witness in the Atlanta Public Schools test-cheating trial. “People start off by saying, ‘As we all know, what happened in Atlanta’”

The scandal tarnished Atlanta’s national image, with unknown effects on the city’s attractiveness to businesses and potential residents. Some, though, including a former official who helped expose cheating, have so much confidence the school district is rehabilitated they are willing to move their kids into it.

Chandra Gallashaw, a parent and community activist, lives across the street from the old Parks Middle School (background), which was renamed after the allegations of widespread cheating there. She says the investigation and prosecution of cheating in Atlanta schools is only a “Band-

Aid” covering an ineffective system that is still failing to educate, especially poor kids.
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After four months of testimony by Cizek and 130 other witnesses, the prosecution finally rested its case Wednesday. The defense is expected to draw attention for another couple months, but the trial and the scandal have already influenced a national conversation about testing in schools.

U.S. Rep. Buddy Carter, a Republican from southeast Georgia, is on the committee that is rewriting the federal law that enabled high-stakes testing. He said a lot of the nationwide backlash against exams is driven by fatigue with the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act, but he said he’s “sure the public cheating scandal had some effect on the thought process.”

He told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution he wants to take educational goals and measures “away from the federal government and get it back to the states and get it back to the local level where it belongs.”

The scandal is not a big topic among business leaders.

Education is said to be crucial for economic development, and by some measures [Atlanta has fallen behind](#) peer cities in the competition for growth. Yet the metro area recently bagged a coveted corporate resident when [Mercedes-Benz USA announced](#) it would move its U.S. headquarters from New Jersey to Sandy Springs.

Experts in corporate relocation say education is important, but not a priority like labor or transportation.

“The number one focus has been about the workforce and talent pipeline,” said Eloisa Klementich, a managing director at Invest Atlanta, an organization that recruits companies. “There has been no conversation with us about APS,” she said.

By the time Invest Atlanta gets involved, companies on the move have usually put the city on their short list, and they’re weighing the relative merits of a handful of destinations. It’s possible the cheating scandal has caused other CEOs to write off Atlanta far earlier in the process, but consultants who advise companies on this sort of thing also say the scandal has not been a big issue.

“It’s a stretch to link that trial to corporate relocations and Atlanta’s ability to attract high-end companies,” said John H. Boyd, the founder of a company in Princeton, N.J. that has been counseling companies for 40 years.

He said his clients who have considered Atlanta never mentioned the scandal, or if they did it was with indifference. Far more important, he said, have been concrete issues like roads and traffic, or Atlanta’s world-class airport. He said executives can always turn to private schools and that the crackdown on Atlanta teachers suggests an intolerance for corruption.

“I would view it as Atlanta taking a step forward and addressing a problem ... righting the ship,” he said. “A thoughtful person will look at this trial and see it as a new beginning.”

Even a former official who was instrumental in exposing the cheating says she is confident in the Atlanta Public Schools now.

Kathleen Mathers was executive director of the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement when suspicions about cheating were raised by articles in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. She oversaw an “erasure analysis” that identified classrooms where wrong answers were erased and replaced with correct answers at statistically unlikely rates.

Mathers, who testified in the trial, no longer works for the state and is among the leaders of a group of DeKalb County residents who hope to have Druid Hills and surrounding areas annexed into Atlanta. She and other parents in that group prefer the Atlanta schools for their children.

“Children were hurt. They were certainly cheated out of their right to a public education,” by the test cheating, Mathers said recently.

So why would she want her family to be a part of APS?

Atlanta spends more money per child than DeKalb, she points out, with smaller classroom sizes and other benefits. There are also non-educational motivators, such as a city governance structure that is closer to the people and less ethically tainted as of late. And the cheating scandal is in her rearview mirror.

The system is run by new leaders. The school board has mostly turned over, and Superintendent Meria Carstarphen is removed from the scandal, coming after Erroll Davis, who tossed out teachers implicated in cheating when his predecessor Beverly Hall led the school system. (Hall was indicted but is not on trial for now because of her advanced cancer.)

“We’re talking about the APS of tomorrow,” Mathers said, “and not the APS of yesterday.”

Some parents have a different view, especially where the cheating was most pervasive.

No schools in high-rent parts of Atlanta were accused of pervasive cheating like what occurred at Parks Middle School near Turner Field. The school system has since obliterated the Parks name, rebranding the school as Sylvan Hills Middle after merging it with another school in the old Parks building.

Chandra Gallashaw lives across the street. One of her daughters who attended Parks continues to struggle academically, said Gallashaw, who remains unimpressed with the level of instruction in area schools. She says teachers rely on worksheets instead of books; the emphasis is on test preparation instead of learning through exploration. “I just found out my daughter has not had a project all year,” she said. “They just don’t have time to learn.”

Despite the public assurances from both Davis and Carstarphen that students whose test scores were altered have gotten remedial attention, Gallashaw thinks city leaders and opinion makers are more interested in burnishing Atlanta's image to encourage development than they are in educational reform.

"Nobody still is doing anything about these children since this cheating scandal happened," she said. "I think they've put a Band-Aid on everything and they haven't fixed anything."

Gallashaw has been an active community leader for years, and said her conversations with parents and educators, including the former Parks principal who pleaded guilty and testified in the trial, led her to believe that cheating in Atlanta schools spanned decades.

Mike Bowers, the former state attorney general who was tapped by former Gov. Sonny Perdue to lead the investigation into cheating, also suspects that generations of children were affected.

Bowers said he interviewed hundreds of low-level employees, including single moms who were clinging to their teaching jobs and telling him it was the best work they could hope to find.

"It was a very sad thing," he said. "I can't get over it. I've watched 20-odd people get executed, but I can't get over this."