

Atlanta School Workers Sentenced in Test Score Cheating Case

By RICHARD FAUSSET and [ALAN BLINDER](#) APRIL 14, 2015



Angela Williamson, an elementary teacher, leaving court after being sentenced to two years. *Credit Pool photos by Kent D. Johnson*

ATLANTA — In an unexpectedly harsh sentence after a polarizing six-year ordeal, eight of the 10 educators convicted of racketeering in one of the nation’s largest public school cheating scandals were sentenced to prison terms of up to seven years Tuesday after they refused to take sentencing deals that were predicated on their acceptance of responsibility and a waiver of their right to appeal.

As a result, the sentences, meted out after a raucous court hearing, offered a conflicted, inconclusive coda to a scandal that has brought shame and soul-searching to Atlanta and its 50,000-student public school system. Some were furious with the sentences, and some were pleased.

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And as some of the defendants vowed to appeal, it ensured that this city would continue to grapple with two harrowing and interrelated questions: How much mercy should be due a roster of educators with otherwise spotless records? And what kind of justice is due the thousands of students, most of them poor minorities, whose falsely inflated standardized test scores obscured their academic shortcomings?



Tamara Cotman, a regional director, received seven years. Credit Pool photo by Kent D. Johnson

Many here, amid widespread calls for leniency before the sentencing, were shocked at the severity of the sentences handed down by Judge Jerry W. Baxter, who had seemed to indicate on Monday that he wanted to avoid prison terms. But after the deals fell through, and while declaring the cheating scandal “the sickest thing that’s ever happened in this town,” he imposed sentences that

appeared to be more harsh than those in similar cheating scandals elsewhere and that exceeded what criminals sometimes receive for violent crimes.

The racketeering charges carried a 20-year maximum sentence, and some defendants were also found guilty of lesser crimes. Prosecutors said the teachers had participated in a wide-ranging conspiracy to artificially inflate students’ standardized test scores and give a false sense that struggling schools were improving, all within a system led by a superintendent, Beverly L. Hall, who demanded that administrators meet ambitious testing targets.

A 2013 grand jury indictment named 35 Atlanta Public Schools employees, including Dr. Hall. Prosecutors said the educators who engaged in the conspiracy did so to win bonuses, protect their jobs or please their superiors.

Most of the accused took plea deals and avoided trial, and two other defendants, including Dr. Hall, died before they could have a day in court.

Some Atlanta residents said Tuesday that they were shocked at the severity of the punishment.

“I know a lot of people who do illegal things every day, and maybe they get like a month,” Malik Andrews, 19, said near the courthouse. “So I think they went overboard.”

But the judge also ordered all of the educators released on bond from county jail, where they had been held since their April 1 conviction. Lawyers said that those ordered to prison would probably remain free unless their convictions were upheld in the appeals process, which could take months or years.

Episodes of misconduct by educators elsewhere in the United States previously led to short terms of incarceration. In Ohio, for instance, a former administrator in Columbus’s public schools served 15 days in jail after pleading no contest to attempted tampering with records.

Erica O. Turner, an assistant professor of educational policy studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, called the Atlanta sentences “entirely unprecedented.”

“In other places, I haven’t seen quite the same resources and the same desire to prosecute educators for

cheating,” she said.

Along with pleas for lenience here, there was acknowledgment that the real victims were the children whose education was tainted by falsified test scores that misrepresented what they had learned.

Fani T. Willis, a trial prosecutor, said the outcome showed that the poor African-American children who were the real victims “have dignity, and they matter.”

“That, I think,” she said, “is what Atlanta should be proud of.”

Among those declining deals were three higher-level administrators: Sharon Davis-Williams, Michael Pitts and Tamara Cotman, all regional directors at Atlanta Public Schools. Judge Baxter sentenced each of them to seven years in prison.

These sentences exceeded prosecutors’ recommendations. Also sentenced after refusing a deal were Angela Williamson, an elementary teacher, and Tabeeka Jordan, an assistant principal, who each received two years in prison. Three other defendants received one year in prison each: Dana Evans, a principal; Diane Buckner-Webb, a teacher; and Theresia Copeland, a testing coordinator.

Two educators accepted sentencing deals: Donald Bullock, a testing coordinator, was ordered to spend six months of weekends in county jail and five years on probation, and Pamela Cleveland, a teacher, was sentenced to five years’ probation and one year of home confinement in the evenings.

All 10 educators were also fined and sentenced to probation and hundreds of hours of community service, and in some cases directed to give remedial instruction to the students whose scores had been altered.

All of them were also sentenced under a “first offender” statute that allows them to have the convictions removed from their records once the terms of their sentences have been satisfied. But arriving at this and other terms of the sentences proved to be an ugly process Tuesday as defense lawyers sparred with an exasperated Judge Baxter, who bellowed at them numerous times and threatened to throw one lawyer in jail in an effort to quiet him.

Judge Baxter, who presided over the complex six-month trial, was angry that some of the defendants would not stand before the court and take responsibility for what they had done.

“She didn’t need to apologize to me; she needed to apologize to this community and these children,” the judge said to lawyers for Ms. Buckner-Webb, who had questioned the prosecutors’ demand that she make such a statement. “I want the community to have the apology, and I want these children who were shortchanged and cheated to have the apology.”

At a news conference after the hearing, the Fulton County district attorney, Paul Howard, was joined by the Rev. Bernice King, the daughter of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who said she would serve on the board of an “Atlanta Redemption Academy” offering remedial help for students harmed by the inflated scores.

Mr. Howard introduced Colleen Banks, a woman whose daughter attended a school where cheating took place; the daughter later had to repeat seventh grade twice.

“I felt like justice was somewhat served,” Ms. Banks said, adding: “I have no pity for what happened to them today, because it is what it is. I’m sorry.”

Outside the courtroom, some family and other supporters of the defendants were livid over the outcome. Some said that the practice of granting a pass to struggling students had never been criminalized before.

“Social promotion has been around since we were children,” said Barbara Holly-Lutalo, 53, a friend of Ms. Evans who had appeared as a character witness for her in court Monday. “So why is it that social promotion is on trial for these educators?”

Ms. Holly-Lutalo said she believed that racism played a role in the treatment of the educators, noting that all of the defendants were black. (Later, Mr. Howard, who is black, as are several members of his team, responded by simply saying, “Look around you.”)

Shani Williams, an elementary teacher, was also found guilty of racketeering April 1, but she was not sentenced because she gave birth to a boy over the weekend. On Tuesday night, Patrice Williams, her sister, was spreading the word of a rally at a church to show support for the 11 defendants.

“We are thrilled that they’re able to come home and they didn’t fall into the trap of taking a plea deal and admit to something they didn’t do,” she said. “It has been a lot of coercion: Do what the D.A. says, or you might not go home.”

Correction: April 15, 2015

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misstated the sentence that Angela Williamson received. It was two years, not seven.

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