

Wrong Answer

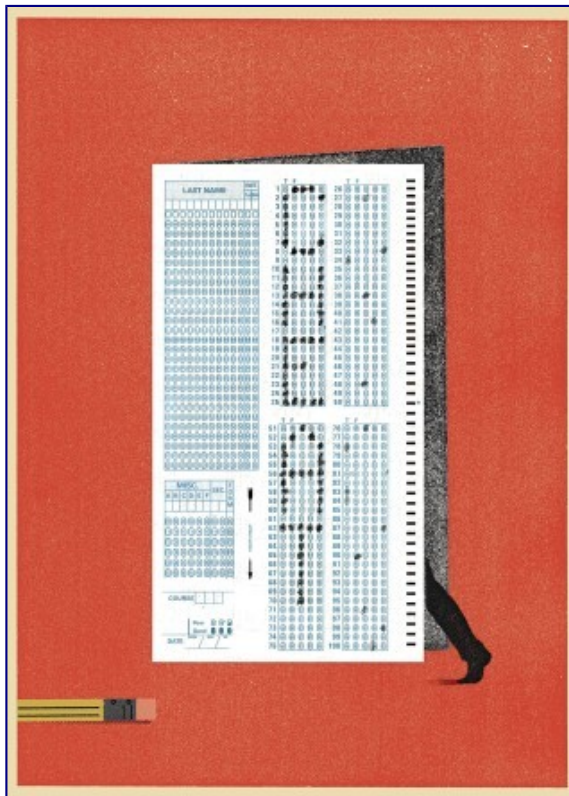
In an era of high-stakes testing, a struggling school made a shocking choice.

By [Rachel Aviv](#)

Christopher Waller, the principal of Parks, was lauded in Atlanta, and became a minor celebrity of the school-reform movement. Credit Illustration by Oliver Munday

One afternoon in the spring of 2006, Damany Lewis, a math teacher at Parks Middle School, in Atlanta, unlocked the room where standardized tests were kept. It was the week before his students took the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test, which determined whether schools in Georgia had met federal standards of achievement. The tests were wrapped in cellophane and stacked in cardboard boxes. Lewis, a slim twenty-nine-year-old with dreadlocks, contemplated opening the test with scissors, but he thought his cut marks would be too obvious. Instead, he left the school, walked to the corner store, and bought a razor blade. When he returned, he slit open the cellophane and gently pulled a test book from its wrapping. Then he used a lighter to warm the razor, which he wedged under the adhesive sealing the booklet, and peeled back the tab.

He photocopied the math, reading, and language-arts sections—the subjects that would determine, under the No Child Left Behind guidelines, whether Parks would be classified as a “school in need of improvement” for the sixth year in a row. Unless fifty-eight per cent of students passed the math portion of the test and sixty-seven per cent passed in language arts, the state could shut down the school. Lewis put on gloves, to prevent oil from his hands from leaving a residue on the plastic, and then used his lighter to melt the edges of the cellophane together, so that it appeared as if the package had never been opened. He gave the reading and language-arts sections to two teachers he trusted and took the math section home.



Flipping through its pages, he felt proud of how much material he had covered that year. “Without even reading the question, I could tell you just by the shape of the graph, ‘Oh, my kids know that,’ ” he told me. He put the test in his fireplace once he’d confirmed that he had taught the necessary concepts. But he worried that his students would struggle with questions that were delivered in paragraph form. Some of his seventh-grade

students were still reading by sounding out the letters. It seemed unfair that the concepts were “buried in words.” Lewis felt that he had pushed them to work harder than they ever had in their lives. “I’m not going to let the state slap them in the face and say they’re failures,” he told me. “I’m going to do everything I can to prevent the why-try spirit.”

The principal of Parks, Christopher Waller, knew that he had seen the questions before the test. Waller told me that Lewis was a “star teacher,” a “very hard worker, who will go the extra mile.” When the math portion of the test had been completed, Lewis said that Waller asked him how his students had done. Since Lewis had looked at the questions, it no longer seemed like a big deal to review the answers. Lewis returned to the testing office and opened up the answer sheets of a few students in his class who got average grades. He looked for a hard question and, when he saw that they’d solved it, he moved on, assuming that they had done fine. Then he said that he “piddled” in the room, wasting time. When he felt that he had been in there long enough, he told Waller that it looked as if his students had done O.K. But Waller told him to check the answers of students who weren’t in his class. This time, when he looked, Lewis saw that some of the smartest students at Parks had the wrong answers.

At the end of the testing week, Lewis went back to the testing office with Crystal Draper, a language-arts teacher. For about an hour, they erased wrong answers and bubbled in the right ones. They exchanged no words. Lewis couldn’t even look at her. “I couldn’t believe what we’d been reduced to,” he said. He tried to stay focussed on the mechanics of the work: he took care to change, at most, one or two answers for every ten questions. “I had a minor in statistics, and it’s not that hard to figure out windows of probability,” he told me. Many students were on the cusp of passing, and he gave them a little nudge, so that they would pass by one or two points.

A month later, when the scores came back, Waller told the students to gather in the hallway outside the cafeteria, where there was a spread of ice cream, pizza, and hot wings. A teacher announced, “You did it! You finally made it!” For the first time since the passage of No Child Left Behind, Parks had met its annual goals: the percentage of eighth graders who passed rose thirty-one points in reading and sixty-two points in math. “Everyone was jumping up and down,” Neekisia Jackson, a student, said. “It was like our World Series, our Olympics.” She went on, “We had heard what everyone was saying: *Y’all aren’t good enough*. Now we could finally go to school with our heads held high.”

Parks Middle School is three miles south of downtown Atlanta, in Pittsburgh, a neighborhood bordered by a run-down trucking lot and railway tracks fallen into disuse. Founded after the Civil War, Pittsburgh was a black working-class area until the nineteen-sixties and seventies, when residents began leaving for the suburbs. Half the homes in the neighborhood are now vacant. Lewis’s students called the area Little Vietnam and Jack City, because of all the armed robberies. Once, when Lewis stopped at a convenience store to tell his students to go home and do their homework, a prostitute approached him. “I’m, like, ‘Whoa, whoa, I’m a teacher!’ ” he said. “And she’s, like, ‘I don’t care. Teachers get down.’ ”

Lewis grew up in a violent neighborhood in East Oakland, California, in a house built by Habitat for Humanity. His father was a crack addict, and his mother supported four children by working as a bank teller; she later opened a safe house for ex-prostitutes. “She’s a real underdog-lover,” Lewis told me. On the weekends, she took Lewis to picnics hosted by the Black Panther Party. She worked so much that the neighbors helped raise Lewis: they often told him to wash his face or tuck in his shirt or put Vaseline on his chapped lips. His football coach became a father figure and encouraged Lewis to go to college in Atlanta so that he could have a “historical black experience.”

Lewis received a scholarship to attend Clark Atlanta University, which is less than three miles from Parks. He was homeless for several months and got arrested for possessing marijuana, but he still earned good grades. He was a “lightweight nerd,” as he put it. When he graduated with degrees in math and philosophy, his mother urged him to try teaching, since he’d always had a talent for simplifying complex ideas. In 2000, he started working at Parks and was immediately moved by his students’ despair. “Being born in the seventies, coming out of the civil-rights movement, amidst the Black Panther meetings in Oakland, I didn’t have limitations,” he told me. “I was raised in the generation that lost the shame of being black.”

His students, who came to school with bad breath and parkas that smelled of urine, seemed to lack the conviction that they would ever leave the neighborhood. Parks was run by an older woman who was not inclined to innovate. Homework was a joke. There was litter in the hallways, and students urinated in trash cans. A veteran teacher told Lewis that only twenty per cent of his students would grasp what he was teaching, so he should go over each lesson five times. “Please—I’m a better teacher than that,” he remembered thinking. “She was just making excuses for why she spiralled in circles.”

Atlanta’s school superintendent, Beverly Hall, who was hired in 1999, quickly became aware of the problems at Parks. A neighborhood minister repeatedly called to complain about drug dealing in front of the school. Hall, who was born in Jamaica, had spent her career in underperforming urban districts: she began as a teacher in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, in the seventies, and moved on to become a superintendent in Newark. At one of her first meetings in Atlanta, she said, someone “got up and was literally screaming, ‘Just tell us what to do. We’ve got to do something about education in Atlanta.’ ” Three-quarters of the students in the district were living near or below the poverty line—ninety per cent were black or Latino—and fewer than forty per cent graduated from high school.

Hall belonged to a movement of reformers who believed that the values of the marketplace could resuscitate public education. She approached the job like a business executive: she courted philanthropists, set accountability measures, and created performance objectives that were more rigorous than those required by No Child Left Behind, which became law in 2002. When a school met its targets, all employees, including bus drivers and cafeteria staff, received up to two thousand dollars. She linked teacher evaluations to test scores and warned principals that they’d be fired if they didn’t meet targets within three years. Eventually, ninety per cent were replaced. She repeated the mantra “No exceptions and no excuses.”

In 2001, she hired a new principal for Parks, a former college-football player named Michael Sims, whom Lewis described as the “father I never had.” Sims focussed nearly as much on building a sense of community as he did on academics: he renovated the school, hired guidance counsellors, and replaced the “P” that had fallen off the sign at Parks’s entryway. He told students that they were representing their school even when they were off campus. If they got into a fight over the weekend, they would be suspended on Monday. The school provided computer classes to parents, who had been so removed from their children’s academic lives that it was a struggle to get them to sign progress reports. “We had to trick the parents and give away this, that, and the third in order to get them into the building,” Lewis said. “Some of them looked like they were on drugs—not fun drugs but ruin-your-life drugs.”

Parks started to feel like a place where both teachers and students, nearly all of them black, could expose their vulnerabilities. “All our little problems that we grew up hiding from the rest of the world—it became our line of communication,” Lewis said. He told students to dump their laundry into the back of his pickup truck, so that he

could wash it for them, and encouraged them to sleep at his house when their mothers were absent or high. (Few had fathers in their lives.) He became the football coach, and if practice ran late he dropped students off at their homes. Several ended up calling him Dad. He told them, “I don’t know how you feel about me, but I, at least, feel like I made it. If you want to know if you can make it, look at me.” He married a language-arts teacher at Parks, who was similarly devoted to the students. “She was a great model of what an adult woman is supposed to act like, talk like,” Lewis said.

With the help of a college-prep program called Project Grad, which Beverly Hall implemented after securing millions of dollars from donors, Parks set up after-school programs and hired tutors. A 2004 documentary called “Expect the Best” explained that Parks, which had previously functioned like “day care,” had become a “model of what a good school can and should be.” The video shows Lewis on his porch, playing chess with a student who had moved in with him. The narrator of the video explains that the student, Antonio, was living with his math teacher “because his mother is in no shape to support or care for him. This arrangement, though temporary and unusual, has done a lot to stabilize Antonio’s life.”

The school steadily improved, but students’ test scores were never high enough for Parks to make “adequate yearly progress,” a measurement defined by No Child Left Behind, a nearly utopian statute that required all public-school students to become proficient in math and reading by 2014, as judged by their test scores. The reform model, which drew on an accountability system used in Texas in the nineties, ignored less quantifiable signs of intellectual development. Schools that didn’t progress at an appropriate pace were eligible for federally funded support. They also received a series of escalating sanctions, including state monitoring, a revised curriculum, replacement of staff, and restructuring or closure of the school. LaShawn Hoffman, the head of the Pittsburgh Community Improvement Association, told me that when Parks opened, in 1966, it was a source of pride for the community, the neighborhood’s “jewel.” Now he worried about the burden of another large abandoned building in the neighborhood.

When Lewis showed up for the new school year in 2004, Parks’s principal was absent. Lewis knew that Sims would never miss the first day of school and assumed that he must have been in some sort of accident. Then a district administrator called a meeting and explained that Sims would not be returning; he had resigned after being accused of sexual misconduct in a previous job.

After a few months, Christopher Waller, a Methodist pastor who had worked in public schools for nine years, became the new leader of Parks. Waller was burly and freckled, and, at thirty-one, he was the youngest principal in the district. After a week of introductory meetings, he saw that the district prioritized testing results more than any other place he’d ever worked did. “All decisions have to be made by data—you have to be baptized in it,” he told me. “I lived it, slept it, ate it.”

He held a meeting with the faculty and explained that teachers needed to use data to drive every aspect of instruction. Lewis raised his hand and said, “I need to be excused from this meeting.” He left the room. Another administrator followed him into the hallway and tried to appease him, but he told her, “You all come in here trying to change every goddam thing we’ve been doing for years. We’ve been making step-by-step progress, and it’s working.”

The next day, Lewis said that Waller asked him to come to his office. “I hear you’re the man around here,” he told Lewis. At that point, Lewis was the football, soccer, and softball coach, the athletic director, and the founder of the chess club. As they talked, Lewis found himself impressed by Waller’s intellect and social awareness.

When Waller asked him what changes he should make, Lewis told him to bide his time. “It’s like if you get a new stepmom in the house,” he said. “If she immediately comes in and changes everything, she’ll be hated forever.”

Every fall, the district held a convocation ceremony, which was usually in the Georgia Dome, where the Atlanta Falcons play. Schools that met their performance targets were seated on the field, while schools that fell short were relegated to the bleachers. Teachers spoke nervously all year about whether they would “make the floor.” At Waller’s first convocation, in 2005, he was humiliated by his seat in the bleachers. “It’s almost like having leprosy in the Bible,” he told me. “No one wants to associate with failure.”

Waller quickly learned that principals in the district insured loyalty by working with teachers whom they had personally selected. At one of his first meetings with Beverly Hall, Waller said that he was willing to work with the school’s current teachers. Hall laughed and told him, “You will need your own team.” Waller began encouraging veteran teachers to retire early. Lewis soon found himself one of the most senior teachers at Parks. He worried that the new faculty were being deprived of the “ethical guidance that comes from listening to older teachers.”

Under Hall, four sub-superintendents oversaw different regions within the district, making sure that schools advanced toward their targets. After Waller had been at the school for a year, he received a stern memo, titled “Mid-year Review,” from Michael Pitts, the sub-superintendent who was responsible for Parks. “Please understand that no excuse can or will be accepted for any results that are less than 70% of school-based target acquisition,” Pitts wrote.

Waller told Pitts that the targets—set by the district’s Department of Research, Planning, and Accountability—were unrealistic. It took a quarter of the year just to gain students’ trust. Two students, he said, were raped in the neighborhood that year. Others lived alone, with neither parent at home, or were on the verge of being placed in juvenile detention. When a student was arrested for stealing cars, Waller went to court and asked the judge not to send him to jail. Waller told me, “The administration wanted to move kids out of poverty—I do believe that. But test scores could not be the only means.” When Waller expressed his concerns, Pitts reiterated that Hall accepted no excuses, and told him, “The way principals keep their jobs in Atlanta is they make targets.”

Waller struggled to understand his students’ success in elementary school. They had passed the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test in fifth grade, and yet when they arrived at Parks they were reading at a first-grade level. “The students and the data aren’t matching,” he told Pitts. “They’ve got to be cheating at the elementary schools. There’s no way those scores are real.” One day, when he and Pitts were walking through Parks, Waller pointed out a disruptive sixth grader who had excelled on the test the year before, even though his academic skills were dismal. He recalled that Pitts laughed and said, “Sometimes children just test well.” Then Pitts told him, “You need to keep your mouth shut.” He urged Waller to “forge stronger relationships” with the principals at the elementary schools, which Waller interpreted as a message to learn how they’d artificially boosted their scores.

Waller concluded that the school couldn’t meet its targets that year. More than half of the students were performing below grade level. The reading coordinator, Sandra Ward, told Waller that she had heard about an elementary school where teachers changed students’ answers under the pretense of erasing stray pencil marks. According to Waller and Ward, the vice-principal, Gregory Reid, informed them that he knew of another school where teachers were obtaining test questions in advance. (Reid has denied this.) Waller decided to adopt both

strategies by recruiting a “team” of teachers who could be trusted. He told himself, “We’re helping them. They’ll catch up by eighth grade.”

The first teacher he approached was Lewis, who was resistant. Lewis told him, “Fuck the test. Our students are doing hot. We know they are learning.” But after several months, Lewis said, Waller “chewed away at me.” Waller reminded him that Parks was a “sanctuary,” a “safe haven” for the community. If the school didn’t meet its targets, Waller explained, the students would be separated and sent to different schools, outside Pittsburgh. Lewis said he felt that “it was my sole obligation to never let that happen.”

In 2006, Tameka Grant, a sixth-grade teacher at Parks, sent a letter to Beverly Hall. She wrote that Waller was attempting to persuade teachers to cheat by describing how the teachers at elementary schools did it. “If you can’t beat them, join them,” she heard him say. She also noted that he often asked teachers how many of their students would pass the test, and when they equivocated he said, “Are you a team player? Are you on my team?”

The president of the Atlanta Federation of Teachers sent a letter to the district’s central office, reporting that “Mr. Waller frequently intimidates the staff by telling them that the school will either be closing, or will be taken over.” The letter described an “us/them mentality among staff where Mr. Waller works with new staff and not old and is trying to divide and conquer the seasoned staff.” Lewis and other favored teachers were part of what became known as “Waller’s circle.” Some had their own reserved parking spaces.

After learning of the complaints, Pitts, the sub-superintendent, attended a faculty meeting at Parks. Teachers remember him saying, “Stop writing letters about Waller, because he is not going anywhere. There is nothing you can do to make us think negatively of Principal Waller.” Lewis said he admired Tameka Grant for writing the letter, and he found it confusing that Pitts seemed to view her complaints as a low form of snitching. “I was, like, Damn, I thought that was kind of our obligation,” he said.

At the request of the district’s Office of Internal Resolution, a private investigator, Reginal Dukes, looked into the reported problems and, in March of 2006, concluded that teachers at Parks had cheated on the Georgia Middle Grades Writing Assessment, leaking the essay prompt to students. Dukes presented his preliminary findings to Hall at a lunch meeting with her senior staff and was shocked by her apparent lack of interest. “I expected her to take definite action,” he told me. Instead, he was informed that he couldn’t hire any additional investigators. Hall asked few questions. The only one he remembered was “Is there any more evidence?” “That question floored me,” Dukes said. “I’d just gone through this litany of violations.”

Waller was never reprimanded, and he said he never heard anything about the outcome of the investigation. The next year, Tameka Grant was transferred against her will to Long Middle School, known at the time as one of the most dangerous schools in the district.

In 2007, Parks had to score even higher to surpass its falsely achieved scores from the previous year. According to statements later made by teachers and administrators (obtained through Georgia’s open-records act), the cheating process began to take the form of a routine. During testing week, after students had completed the day’s section, Waller distracted the testing coordinator, Alfred Kiel, by taking him out for leisurely lunches in downtown Atlanta. On their way, Waller called the reading coordinator to let her know that it was safe to enter Kiel’s office. She then paged up to six teachers and told them to report to the room. While their students were at recess, the teachers erased wrong answers and filled in the right ones. Lewis took photographs of the office with his cell phone so that he could make sure he left every object, even the pencils on Kiel’s desk, exactly as he’d

found them.

Lewis dreaded the process. It felt to him like “a bad date where you’ve had too much to drink.” He woke up the morning after erasing answers and thought, I shouldn’t have gone that far. He worried that, because of the cheating, students wouldn’t develop “the feeling you get when you take a test and know whether you did all right or whether you knocked that shit out of the park,” he said. He also felt guilty that other teachers were deprived of feedback. Lewis never told his wife that other teachers were correcting her students’ answers. One year, she got the highest scores in the building. Lewis said, “I wasn’t going to burst her bubble. I was, like, ‘Good job. Keep going strong.’ ”

At happy-hour drinks, he and other teachers complained that the legislators who wrote No Child Left Behind must never have been near a school like Parks. He felt as if he and his colleagues were part of a nationwide “biological experiment” in which the variables—the fact that so many children were hungry and transient, and witnessing violence—hadn’t been controlled. David Berliner, the former dean of the school of education at Arizona State University, told me that, with the passage of the law, teachers were asked to compensate for factors outside their control. He said, “The people who say poverty is no excuse for low performance are now using teacher accountability as an excuse for doing nothing about poverty.”

Hall’s targets required that the number of students who met standards rise by nearly three per cent annually; in addition, a group of students had to “exceed” standards each year. Later, when asked by a state investigator how she had arrived at those figures, she acknowledged that there were no studies supporting that rate of improvement. According to Waller, the district became increasingly “corporate,” with every school focussed on the “bottom line.” He wrote teachers’ targets in marker on the floor of the entryway to their classrooms, in view of the students. He instructed the teachers, “I need those numbers,” and, “You need to teach to the test. Do what you’ve got to do.”

A 2007 report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, titled “Beating the Odds at Atlanta’s Parks Middle School,” attributed its unlikely progress, in part, to its “relentless focus on data.” The report noted that Waller kept an index card in his pocket listing all the school’s achievements, which he read aloud to parents and students. “Even the kids know their data,” Waller said. Kiel, the testing coordinator, told the foundation that data is a “passion, it’s a love, because it tells the truth: it’s not what I think—and what I feel, and what ought to be, and how I perceive it—but how it actually is.”

Lewis was initially enthusiastic about judging teaching by what appeared to be an objective metric. Since college, he had found himself devising mathematical equations to make sense of events in his own life. He was no longer as disappointed when his father, who was in and out of rehab, didn’t return his calls, because he saw the situation in terms of mathematical probability: if he assigned a zero to every day that his father hadn’t called and a one to every day that he had and added all the digits and divided them by three hundred and sixty-five, he saw that the probability that his father would call on any given day was about zero. His calculations “gave me back my sense of control,” he said.

But Lewis began to worry that mathematics had assumed an unhealthy role in the district. “Data” and “accountability” had become almost magic words: if administrators repeated them enough, it seemed they believed that scores should rise, even if there hadn’t been significant enhancements in instruction. Lewis welcomed the district’s new emphasis on reading—teachers got specialized training and taught reading more intensively—but many of the other reforms were oriented around deadlines and time frames. Lewis said, “We

had two weeks to teach percentages, and if you're still on percentages at week three, because your kids don't get it yet, they'll say, 'You don't teach well enough!' Well, come, now, we are dealing with human brains." He continued, "I sincerely believe that demographics does not determine destiny. But you have to be patient."

Lewis felt pressure not only to make testing targets but to meet more ambitious attendance goals. After two years of improvement, teachers began taking attendance later in the day so that students had more time to get to school. Eventually, Lewis recalled, the teachers ceased marking absences altogether. In a letter of complaint, the school secretary, who refused to delete absences from the records, informed the district's central office that her attendance duties had been taken away and "given to someone whom my principal calls a team player." "I am lying low because I feel my job is on the line," she wrote. "I am so overwhelmed by what I'm seeing."

Waller said that he had never experienced so much pressure in his life. Although administrators throughout the district knew that there was cheating, he said that "nobody wanted to talk about it." "We'd been cultivated in so many untruths throughout the years," he told me. In 2008, he decided to resign, but Hall worked with the Casey Foundation to give him an "incentive award grant" of fifteen thousand dollars. He agreed to stay, believing that soon he would have the strength to tell the district that its targets couldn't continue to rise.

By 2008, there were nine teachers on Waller's team, and cheating had become a "well-oiled machine," as he put it. A principal at an elementary school in southeast Atlanta e-mailed Waller charts detailing the number of questions students in each grade needed to answer correctly in order to get a passing score—information that the state's Department of Education does not publish. The teachers now changed answers in the chorus room, because they didn't want to raise the suspicions of the testing coordinator, who noticed that someone had been in his office and had changed the lock. (A day later, Lewis found a copy of the new key in his school mailbox.) The room was so crowded that two teachers placed test booklets in a cooler and took them to another room. "It went from a two-man show to out of control," Lewis said. A sixth-grade teacher, who asked that his name not be used, told me that he got involved only because he respected Lewis, whom he described as the "alpha male of the building" and a "humanitarian." "I don't think Waller could have run the school without him," he said. "It's kind of like every king has to have a general, and the general gets his hands way dirtier than the king does."

When teachers panicked about what they'd done, Lewis reminded them that the school had already gone through three principals in five years. "Calm down," he told them. "Waller's going to be gone in a minute. Let's just survive until he's gone." He tried not to reflect on the cheating process at all. "Cheating was just something we did in April, when the tests were in the building," he said.

In the spring of 2008, Parks's scores were almost as high as those of a middle school in Inman Park, a gentrified neighborhood with yoga studios, bike paths, and million-dollar houses. Waller thought the results seemed obviously false, and he called his supervisor, Michael Pitts, to warn him. Pitts gave Waller the cell-phone number for Lester McKee, the executive director of the district's Department of Research, Planning, and Accountability. When Waller explained that Parks's results were unusually high, he said that McKee responded, "Shit happens, and sometimes when it happens it's not always bad. Let's see if anyone else says something." The district took no action to investigate the improbable scores. (McKee, who could not be reached for comment, was not charged with any wrongdoing.)

Morris Johnson, the president of the parent-teacher association at Parks in 2009, told me that he never "questioned those test scores—not for one minute." He was in the school nearly every day, and he saw administrators and teachers giving "a hundred per cent plus" and instilling in students a "winning attitude." Both

the football and the basketball teams were nearly undefeated. Using money from fund-raisers and donations, students took field trips to Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and New York. “I was so impressed,” Johnson said. “Mr. Waller wanted to expose these kids to other parts of life. They were finally escaping their Zip Code.”

Waller was lauded by the district, and became a minor celebrity of the reform movement. Hall invited him to attend the Harvard Leadership Conference with her, and she arranged a “Tour of Georgia” bus ride for civic leaders which made a stop at Parks, where Hall gave a speech. Once, at a meeting, when the principal of a middle school said that the targets were out of his students’ reach, Hall responded, “You have to make your targets,” and then pointed to a chart with data from Parks, explaining, “Parks did it.” Waller thought it would have been “evident even to a blind man that the scores were not legitimate.”

Parks attracted so many visitors who were eager to understand the school’s turnaround that teachers had to come up with ways to explain it. At Waller’s direction, they began maintaining what they called “standard-based mastery folders,” an index of all the objectives that each student needed to grasp in order to comprehend a given lesson. Lewis, who was taking night classes at the School of Education at Clark Atlanta University, wrote his master’s thesis on the technique. “It was a wonderful system,” he said. “But we only put it in place to hide the fact that we were cheating.”

Lewis took pride in the attention that Parks was receiving, and he liked the fact that his students had developed egos about their education. A few tattooed the number of the school zone on their arms. The only time an accolade made him uncomfortable was when Parks won a 2009 Dispelling the Myth Award. He and other teachers were sent to Arlington, Virginia, for a ceremony in the ballroom of a Marriott hotel. Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education, gave the keynote speech. “I swear to God, I need to write that man, Duncan, a letter of apology,” Lewis told me. “I stood in his court and acted like I was doing something I wasn’t. He held us at the tip-top of education.”

On September 8, 2009, the Atlanta city council declared that the date should be known as Dr. Beverly L. Hall Day. Hall had just been named Superintendent of the Year by the American Association of School Administrators, and the city held a ceremony to honor her for making the district one of the highest-performing urban school systems in the nation. Under her leadership, the district had received more than forty million dollars from the G. E. Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. When she began as superintendent, fewer than fifty per cent of eighth graders met the state’s standards in language arts. By 2009, ninety per cent of eighth graders had passed the exam.

A month after the dedication, Heather Vogell and John Perry, of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, reported that there were statistically improbable testing gains at several schools in Atlanta. Hall’s deputy superintendent told the paper, “I don’t have any reason to look at that.” The paper’s reporting prompted the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement to conduct its own analysis of testing improprieties, not only in Atlanta but throughout the state. In early 2010, the office found that one in five schools exhibited an abnormal pattern of erasure marks, in which a wrong answer had been corrected. At Parks and at one of its feeder schools, there were suspicious erasure marks on tests from more than seventy-five per cent of the classrooms.

At the instruction of the governor, Sonny Perdue, Atlanta’s Board of Education formed a panel to investigate the erasures. Although the investigation was supposed to be independent, it was run by civic leaders who had invested in the district and touted its success, and Hall’s administrators sat in on interviews. The panel concluded that there had been no coordinated effort to manipulate test scores, a finding that Perdue called “woefully

inadequate.” He decided that Atlanta was incapable of investigating itself. In August, 2010, he issued an executive order that granted authority to the former state attorney general, along with a prosecutor and a special investigator, to conduct a more thorough investigation.

There have been accounts of widespread cheating in dozens of cities, including Philadelphia, Toledo, El Paso, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Houston, and St. Louis. According to a 2013 report by the Government Accountability Office, forty states detected instances of cheating by educators in the previous two years. But Atlanta is one of the few districts in which educators have been subpoenaed. “It’s hard to find anyone in the system who wants to look under the rock and see what’s there,” Jennifer Jennings, a sociology professor at N.Y.U. who studies standardized tests, said. She noted that even in Texas, whose reform model inspired No Child Left Behind, scholars doubted whether students had progressed as rapidly as the data suggested—administrators exempted low-performing students from taking the test and underreported dropouts. Jennings worries that one consequence of cheating and other forms of gaming the system is that it interferes with the “policy-feedback loop,” the conclusions we draw about student learning and the narratives we tell about reform. Given what happened in Texas, she said, the cheating in Atlanta “should have been very easy to anticipate.”

In October, 2010, fifty agents with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation visited Parks and other Atlanta schools. They ate in school cafeterias, handed out their business cards, and befriended teachers in the doorways of their classrooms. As soon as Lewis learned of the investigation, he was ready to confess. Occasionally, in the middle of teaching a lesson, he had to step outside the classroom and lean silently against the wall, closing his eyes. He and his wife had separated—they shared custody of a young daughter—and he found himself lying in bed, startled awake by nightmares. In one, he heard a knock at his door, and when he opened it one of his former students shot him.

His first meeting with investigators was in Waller’s office. He wondered if Waller was clever enough to bug the room and told the agents, “I’d feel a lot more comfortable at your office.” A few weeks later, he and several other teachers met at the downtown law office of Balch & Bingham, which was assisting with the investigation. The agents told the teachers that anyone who cooperated would be granted immunity from criminal prosecution. A social-studies teacher asked, “Can we all huddle for a minute?” When the agents left the room, Lewis told everyone, “The jig is up. I’m not letting this shit drive me crazy.” He urged his colleagues to blame the cheating on him, but they refused.

They all decided to tell the truth. Righton Johnson, a lawyer with Balch & Bingham who sat in on interviews, told me that it became clear that most teachers thought they were committing a victimless crime. “They didn’t see the value in the test, so they didn’t see that they were devaluing the kids by cheating,” she said. Unlike recent cheating scandals at Harvard and at Stuyvesant High School, where privileged students were concerned with their own advancement, those who cheated at Parks were never convinced of the importance of the tests; they viewed the cheating as a door they had to pass through in order to focus on issues that seemed more relevant to their students’ lives.

Waller initially refused to acknowledge to the agents that he’d cheated. He told himself that, since he hadn’t physically handled the tests himself, he hadn’t committed the act. Hoping to extract more information, the agents asked Latasha Smiley, a teacher who had already confessed, to surreptitiously record a meeting with Waller at a Panera Bread. Waller seemed flustered and suspicious when he spoke with her. “It’s messy—it’s messy,” he said. “We’ve worked too hard . . . all kids can learn. . . . I don’t have—a lot of people kick a dog when they down.”

When Smiley, who had transferred to a different school, told Waller that she missed Parks, he responded, “That school is going to hell.”

After more than two thousand interviews, the investigators concluded that forty-four schools had cheated and that a “culture of fear, intimidation and retaliation has infested the district, allowing cheating—at all levels—to go unchecked for years.” They wrote that data had been “used as an abusive and cruel weapon to embarrass and punish.” Several teachers had been told that they had a choice: either make targets or be placed on a Performance Development Plan, which was often a precursor to termination. At one elementary school, during a faculty meeting, a principal forced a teacher whose students had tested poorly to crawl under the table.

The investigators’ report didn’t conclude that Hall had directed anyone to cheat, but it did recount a number of episodes in which she ignored or minimized evidence that scores had been falsely achieved. In one instance, her staff had ordered an administrator to shred a draft of a report that described cheating at an elementary school. But in an eight-hour interview with investigators Hall insisted that there was no reason to doubt students’ scores, because other metrics showed the same trajectory. During her tenure, the graduation rate in Atlanta rose by thirty percentage points. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress test, which is less susceptible to tampering, Atlanta’s reading scores rose more rapidly than those of the other nine cities where students took the test. (Critics have suggested that the gains may be partly the result of a demographic shift, but it appears that there was also authentic improvement.)

To explain the improvement in scores, Hall told the investigators that “an effective teacher three years in a row will completely close the gap between a child born in poverty and a child born to a middle-income family.” This theory, in its earliest form, derives from a study by William L. Sanders, a statistician formerly at the University of Tennessee, but the findings, which have contributed to a nationwide effort to rate teachers rigorously, have been overstated to the point of becoming a myth. According to a recent statement by the American Statistical Association, most studies show that teachers account for between one and fourteen per cent of variability in test scores.

John Ewing, who served as the executive director of the American Mathematical Society for fifteen years, told me that he is perplexed by educators’ “infatuation with data,” their faith that it is more authoritative than using their own judgment. He explains the problem in terms of Campbell’s law, a principle that describes the risks of using a single indicator to measure complex social phenomena: the greater the value placed on a quantitative measure, like test scores, the more likely it is that the people using it and the process it measures will be corrupted. “The end goal of education isn’t to get students to answer the right number of questions,” he said. “The goal is to have curious and creative students who can function in life.” In a 2011 paper in *Notices of the American Mathematical Society*, he warned that policymakers were using mathematics “to intimidate—to preempt debate about the goals of education and measures of success.”

In July, 2011, the district placed a hundred and ten teachers who had either confessed to having cheated or been accused of it on administrative leave. Lewis received a letter that read, “Your actions and inactions brought embarrassment, suspicion, scorn, and disrepute upon APS”—Atlanta Public Schools. The district intended to fire him unless he could prove at a hearing that he was innocent of the charges. His colleagues at Parks got similar letters and wanted to resign, but Lewis felt that they should express their devotion to Parks by “standing arm in arm before the firing squad.”

A woman from Oakland who had dated Lewis on and off since middle school saw his name in the news and

called him, and said, “Tell me you didn’t cheat. You were the smartest guy I knew. Tell me that guy didn’t change.” He invited her to Atlanta so that he could explain himself in person. In the fall of 2011, they were married. Lewis was comforted by the fact that “she knew me as a child and could hold me to the character that my mom instilled in me.” To his mother, his decision to cheat was an act of civil disobedience. She told him that as soon as she heard about cheating in Atlanta she thought, “I bet my son was part of that.”

His termination hearing was held in March, 2012, at the district’s headquarters. It was the first hearing to arise from the cheating investigation; many of the other teachers in the district who had been implicated resigned. Three former educators, appointed by the school board, served as the jury. Lewis wore a gray striped button-up shirt, untucked, and sat with his chin resting on his hand, looking down. He waived his right to an attorney, thinking, he said, “I did this shit—I brought it onto myself—and I’m going to take it in the face.” When the hearing officer asked him to give an opening statement, he said, “I think the evidence will prove that there was a systemic problem in the Atlanta public schools. That’s my statement.” An agent from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation served as a witness for the district, and, after detailing Lewis’s wrongdoing, explained that he “seemed to be well liked by the school and the teachers that were there. They kind of looked up to him.”

When Lewis was questioned by the district’s lawyer, he repeatedly invoked the Fifth Amendment, taking care not to incriminate anyone else. He didn’t speak at length until his closing statement, at which point he stood up and began reading, through tears, from a long speech that he had written about his eleven years at Parks. He described how Parks had made incremental progress each year, but its test scores “cast a cloud of doubt over whether Parks Middle School even deserved to exist at all.” Soon, data became the “underlying force behind everything we did.” He described the resilience of the students, who were “down but never out, losing but never lost.” He told the panel, “You may wonder why I haven’t resigned. It’s because the morality that resides within me are the same morals I taught my students for years; that is, whenever you are persecuted or face challenges or circumstances rise against you, you must see things through to the end.”

Of a hundred and seventy-eight educators named in the cheating investigation, Lewis was the first to be fired. “I felt like someone had hit me with the butt end of an axe,” he said. He shaved off his dreadlocks, which, in Rastafarian tradition—a culture with which he sporadically associated—signalled the loss of a child. What troubled him most, he said, was that “I was fired for doing something that I didn’t even believe in.”

He applied for jobs at charter and alternative schools, community centers, and jails, but he didn’t get any of them. “Education let me go,” he finally concluded. He broadened his search, applying for positions that required manual labor. In interviews, he promised employers that he had the “persistence and tough skin of a middle-school teacher to bring to the workforce.” He applied for a job installing cable, and, after getting a nearly perfect score on the applicant test, he daydreamed about how he would use his teaching skills to help employees streamline the process. But a few days later the company told him that he didn’t have enough experience.

His house was foreclosed on and his car was repossessed. Old friends came to him with alternative methods of earning money. “They had some of the most illegal propositions,” he said. “They were, like, ‘Man, remember when we used to take that trip to St. Louis? Don’t you want to take over that run?’ ” He supported his wife, their newborn son, and his daughter from his previous marriage by working as an auto mechanic.

At first, he was glad to see the district attorney bring charges against Christopher Waller, Beverly Hall, and thirty-three administrators and teachers, but he became troubled by the portrayal of their crimes as mercenary. On April 2, 2013, on the evening news, he watched his colleagues, nearly all of them black, report to the Fulton

County Jail in an event that was described in the media as a “perp walk.” They were charged under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations statute—used to apprehend criminal organizations like the Mafia—and accused of conspiring in order to receive the bonuses tied to high test scores. Hall, who earned more than five hundred thousand dollars in bonuses, faces up to forty-five years in prison.

More than half of the defendants, including Christopher Waller, pleaded guilty to lesser charges. Now the senior pastor at a church three miles from Parks, Waller agreed to serve five years of probation, pay forty thousand dollars in restitution, and testify as a witness for the prosecution. He told me that he was offended by the idea that he would cheat in order to get what amounted to five thousand dollars in bonuses. He and other teachers at Parks spent their own money to buy groceries, H.I.V. medications, furniture, and clothes for students and their mothers, and this continued even after he was fired. “It wasn’t because of the money—I can promise you that,” he said.

In lengthy plea statements, Waller and the other defendants provided a miniature history of the past twelve years in education policy, describing how No Child Left Behind, in conjunction with the district’s targets, created an atmosphere in which cheating came to seem like a reasonable option. One principal described a “toxic culture throughout APS where all that mattered was test scores, even if ill-gotten.” Another said that the district’s “primary focus . . . became meeting targets instead of focusing on the needs of the students.”

In statements sent to me through their respective lawyers, Hall and Michael Pitts both denied wrongdoing and said they were confident that a jury would find them innocent of the charges. Hall wrote, “I did not order, request, or condone cheating to meet targets nor did I have knowledge of cheating.” She explained that in setting targets she had “relied on APS educators to behave with integrity.” She also said that, compared with the objectives set by No Child Left Behind, Atlanta’s targets were “decidedly more incremental in nature,” and the sanctions less “draconian.” (Many of her employees disagree; the district was unusual in that it required a certain percentage of students to exceed targets each year.)

Since the investigation, the stakes for testing in Georgia have escalated. Although the state is replacing the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test with a more comprehensive method of evaluation, this fall Georgia is implementing a new teacher-evaluation program that bases fifty per cent of a teacher’s assessment on test scores. The program, along with a merit-pay system, is required as a condition for receiving a four-hundred-million-dollar grant from President Obama’s Race to the Top program. Tim Callahan, the spokesman for the Professional Association of Georgia Educators, which represents eighty-four thousand teachers, told me, “The state is going down the same path as Atlanta, and we are not exactly enthused.” He said that many teachers have become so demoralized that they’re retiring early or transferring to private schools. He told me, “Our teachers’ best qualities—their sense of humor, their love for the subject, their excitement, their interest in students as individuals—are not being honored or valued, because those qualities aren’t measurable.”

This spring, Lewis was hired as a database developer at a mortgage company. He was thrilled by the job, to such a degree that his energy level was out of synch with that of his colleagues. When I met him at his home, a small ranch house in East Point, Georgia, he said that he found his co-workers surprisingly detached and unemotional. He often dreamed about his students. “I miss having a classroom full of Energizer bunnies,” he told me. In his dreams, Waller occasionally apologized or offered him a new job.

Lewis was looking forward to hearing Beverly Hall explain herself at the cheating trial, which is scheduled to begin in August. It had been delayed several months, because Hall is undergoing treatment for cancer. She’s now

bedridden and may not be able to attend her trial. For years, Lewis had assumed that Hall instructed people to cheat, but now he began to wonder if she'd been so idealistic that she didn't understand the environment she had created and, when it became clear, didn't want to undermine her cause—the idea that educational reform could swiftly lift children out of poverty—by acknowledging the evidence that was in front of her. Lewis said, “I know that sometimes when you're in the fight, and you're swinging, you want to win so badly that you don't recognize where your blows land.”

Last year, Parks merged with Sylvan Hills Middle School, which Lewis called “our archrival.” The students were still in the Parks building, which had been renamed, but in a year they would move into a renovated building outside Pittsburgh. No one in the community knew what would become of the vacated building. Lewis blamed himself for the fact that Parks had ceased to exist. According to the district, the school closed because of low enrollment, but Pittsburgh residents believed that it was because Parks's reputation had been ruined. After the cheating investigation, and the departure of nine teachers and administrators, students' scores dropped each year.

Lewis told me that in a week one of his most ambitious students, Neekisia Jackson, who graduated from Parks in 2006, would receive her diploma from Emory University. She had asked Lewis and two other former teachers from Parks to come to her graduation. Lewis found himself, almost against his will, plotting out Jackson's future. She would go to law school, become a judge—no matter what kind of defendant was in her courtroom, she would be able to “empathetically go there”—and then become a model for kids in Pittsburgh, just as he'd been. For the past year, he'd been putting away a small percentage of his paycheck so that he could give Jackson some cash. “This is a real drop in the bucket for what life has in store for you,” he planned to tell her at graduation. “Just spread your wings—the wind is coming.” ♦

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