

African American Education Crisis Highlighted in Atlanta Testing Case

Book places the criminalization of teachers in historical and social context

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"None of the Above: The Untold Story of the Atlanta Public Schools Cheating Scandal, Corporate Greed, and the Criminalization of Educators" by Shani Robinson and Anna Simonton, Beacon Press, Boston, 2019

This study chronicles the plight of 35 educators, all of whom were African Americans except one, in Atlanta, Georgia, a majority Black-populated municipality in the South, who were accused of felonies under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization Act (RICO) alleging that they were involved in a plot to fix the outcomes of standardized tests during 2009.

Author Shani Robinson and journalist Anna Simonton details the circumstances surrounding the indictment of these teachers and the role of the corporate media in creating the atmosphere which led to the conviction of the educators.

In April 2015, Robinson was only 30 years old and an expectant mother, when she was convicted on the RICO charges. Rather than accept the sentence in the case, Robinson has publically rejected the basis for the prosecution and the evidence presented by the prosecutors.

Robinson remains out of prison on appeal bond largely due to the fact that she was about to give birth to her child at the time of sentencing. She continues to fight to exonerate herself utilizing the publication of this book to further expose the racist and anti-public schools trajectory which has fueled such investigations in dozens of school districts across the United States.

Of the 35 indicted educators, including both teachers and administrators, only 12 refused to accept plea deals. Out of the remaining defendants tried, 11 were convicted and given prison sentences.

The trial began in September 2014 after several years of the criminal probe by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI). Defendants in the case were Donald Bullock, former testing coordinator who was sentenced to weekends in jail for 6 months, a \$5,000 fine, and 5 years of probation and 1,500 hours of community service. There was also Sharon Davis-Williams, Tamara Cotman, and Michael Pitts all sentenced to 20 years in prison, where they would have to serve a minimum of seven, in addition to paying a \$25,000 fine and providing 2,000 hours of community service.

The minimum sentences for Cotman, Pitts & Davis-Williams were later reduced from 7 to 3

years and fines to \$10,000. Sharon Davis-Williams and Michael Pitts had worked as school reform team executive directors. Dana Evans was sentenced to 5 years in prison, one to serve, and 1,000 hours of community service.

Angela Williamson and Tabeeka Jordan, the previous Deerwood Academy assistant principal was given 5 years in prison, with two to serve, and a \$5,000 fine in addition to 1,500 hours of community service. Diane Buckner-Webb, former Dunbar Elementary teacher was sentenced to 5 years in prison, with one to serve, a \$1,000 fine, along with 1,000 hours in community service.

Theresia Copeland, former Benteen Elementary testing coordinator was given 5 years in prison, one to serve, \$1,000 fine and 1,000 hours of community service. Pamela Cleveland, former Dunbar Elementary teacher was sentenced to 5 years on probation and home confinement for a year from 7:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. and along with community service.

“None of the Above” author Shani Robinson, a former 1st grade Dunbar Elementary teacher was sentenced to one year in prison, 4 years of probation, a \$1,000 fine and 1,000 hours of community service. (See [this](#))

The trial was the longest criminal proceeding in the history of Georgia and the largest of such legal hearings of all other so-called test cheating scandals in the U.S. Beverly Hall, the former Superintendent of Atlanta Schools who was at the center of the investigation, died of cancer before the trial concluded in 2015 at the age of 68. Hall had been employed in Atlanta since 1999 and was awarded as the National Superintendent of the Year in 2009 largely based upon the rise in standardized test score results in the district.

Attacks on Public Education behind the Investigation and Convictions

What is significant in this book is the articulation of the historical and social background to the problems of public education policy related to African Americans. Since the advent of African enslavement in the U.S. and its aftermath, the question of how to address the issues of schooling for African Americans has been at the center of the struggle against national oppression and institutional racism still prevalent in the country.

With the majority of African Americans residing in the South during and after enslavement, legalized segregation, popularly referred to as “Jim Crow”, was the law of the land which was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in a number of rulings. The failure of Reconstruction beginning in 1876 and continuing through the concluding decades of the 19th century consolidated the rule of the former slave owning class. The Plessy v. Ferguson ruling of 1896 by the Supreme Court stated clearly that “separate but equal” was constitutional.

Of course separation for the purpose of exploitation and social containment was adhered to although equality was never seriously considered. Even after the Brown v. Topeka ruling of May 1954 declaring that “separate but equal” was inherently unconstitutional and the enunciation of the mandate to desegregate “with all deliberate speed”, educational inequality remains a major issue well into the 21st century, some 65 years after the decision of the Warren Court.

During the 1960s amid the mass struggles for civil rights and political empowerment, various legislative initiatives were enacted which provided federal funding to address these

inequities. These policy reforms such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson as a component of the Poverty Program and Great Society initiatives. The following year in 1966 the Coleman Report commissioned by the Johnson administration suggested that an increase in educational funding for urban districts would not be effective absent of efforts aimed at deeper structural reforms within society as a whole.

However, the right-wing fought back with a vengeance while the liberals elements within Congress retreated from any substantive reforms related to education and other policy issues impacting African Americans. Robinson and Simonton cited the document released during the administration of President Ronald Reagan in 1981 under the rubric of the National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.”

This conservative manifesto claimed that the U.S. was falling far behind in regard to educational outcomes and that much emphasis should be placed on improvements. Yet these policy suggestions were designed to attack teachers’ unions and to promote further privatization through school vouchers and other forms of denying funding to urban areas.

This line of thinking continued through successive administrations resulting in the “No Child Left Behind” Act. This education policy of the administration of President George W. Bush, Jr. in the 2000s placed a strong emphasis on standardized testing results to the point of threatening the employment of teachers, administrators and the massive closing of schools.

It was within this context that pressure was exerted on Atlanta Public Schools and hundreds of other districts around the U.S. to raise the level of test scores. When Atlanta test scores saw significant increases in the late-2000s, it prompted a review by the Atlanta Journal Constitution (AJC) newspaper of the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) results. The CRCT standardized tests were given to students across the state of Georgia. The AJC articles claimed that it was statistically improbable for scores to rise in such a fashion and therefore some form of criminal activity was involved.

National Significance of the Atlanta Case

These concerted attacks on public education in urban districts are by no means confined to Atlanta, a city which became known during the 20th century as a “mecca” for African American education and social achievement. The city has numerous Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and is home to luminaries such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., among many others.

Robinson was a graduate of Tennessee State University (TSU), a HBCU in Nashville, Tennessee. She was recruited into elementary education after a brief media career through the Teach for America (TFA) program designed to encourage those who did not major in the field to become employed in the public school systems. The author is quite critical of TFA and similar programs which undermine colleges of education along with teachers’ unions.

Federal and state cutbacks in school funding, the closing of schools, the promotion of charter school education, vouchers and the pressure placed on unions are all designed to continue the evisceration of public education. There is clearly a need for the renewal of organizing and mobilizing of African Americans and other people of color communities to demand quality education on a national level.

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