

In Cheating Cases, Teachers Who Took Risks or Flouted Rules

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A charter school teacher warned her third graders that a standardized test question was “tricky,” and they all changed their answers. A high school coach in Brooklyn called a student into the hallway and slipped her a completed answer sheet in a newspaper. In the Bronx, a principal convened Finish Your Lab Days, where biology students ended up copying answers for work they never did.

These are among the 14 cases of cheating by educators substantiated by New York City’s special commissioner of investigation for schools since 2002.

They represent a tiny fraction of the more than 1,250 accusations of test tampering or grade changing that the special commissioner has received since Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg took control of the city schools — most are handled by the Education Department, which has declined to provide a full accounting of its investigations.

But as cheating scandals have engulfed school districts in Atlanta and Washington, as well as in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, a review of these substantiated cases in New York shows that cheating schemes can be mundane or audacious, with motivations that include inflating the statistics used to evaluate a school and helping a favorite student become eligible to graduate.

They portray stressed educators who take inappropriate risks — and brash ones who appear to believe they can flout rules with impunity.

Three of the cases were announced as they were completed by the special investigator, Richard J. Condon, including one that led to the ouster of Ruth Ralston, an assistant principal at the High School for Contemporary Arts in the Bronx, who investigators found had erased hundreds of student answers on the June 2008 algebra Regents exam. Documents related to the other cases were provided to The New York Times under the Freedom of Information Law. Of the 23 educators named in the investigations, about a third have resigned or have been fired, sometimes after an administrative hearing that is required for those with tenure.

Jooyeon Kim, a third-grade teacher at the well-known Harlem Children’s Zone/Promise Academy I, for example, was dismissed in 2009 due to two words: “Alligator Park.”

Ms. Kim’s students had been asked to correct the punctuation in a paragraph on the state’s English test in January 2009 that included this sentence: “We saw alligators at an alligator park.” City testing officials noticed that each of her 22 students had made an identical change: first capitalizing both the A and the P in “Alligator Park” (incorrect), then erasing it.

They began an investigation, and Ms. Kim, who could not be reached for comment for this article, ultimately acknowledged that she had warned the children, “You’re on the last question, be careful,” saying it was “tricky.” Eight of the children confirmed her account, though investigators did not find evidence that she had actually given them the answer.

Teachers at Promise Academy, run by the billionaire investor Stanley Druckenmiller and Geoffrey Canada, are not unionized, so it was easier to fire Ms. Kim than it would have been at a traditional school. “Although we had no hard evidence,” explained Marty Lipp, a spokesman, “the soft evidence led us to make a decision to let her go, because we can’t and won’t tolerate cheating on the tests.”

By contrast, only one of eight educators who investigators said had participated in a “herculean and dishonest” effort at the High School for Youth and Community Development in Brooklyn to give students answers before the 2005 biology Regents exam was fired. The others received reprimands.

“Students were not merely permitted but were openly encouraged to cheat,” investigators wrote of the case, in which students were given answer keys to copy instead of completing

required lab experiments in the days and hours before the exam. Several teachers said the principal, Marie Prendergast, had known about the copying, but investigators found conclusive evidence only that she had failed to properly supervise her staff. She received a counseling memo.

"It's something my staff did," Ms. Prendergast said in an interview. "I have a different organization, that was an unfortunate incident, but that is not my school now."

She added, "Why are you going to crucify me for something that I was called green and stupid for, but I was exonerated?"

Another case led to the retirement of a gym teacher at A. Philip Randolph High School in Manhattan, who was also a track coach, mentoring generations of students who included two Olympic runners. To help one of her athletes graduate in 2007, investigators found that the teacher, Phyllis Anderson, devised a scheme to substitute a failing essay in the student's global history Regents exam.

Fonte: The New York Times, New York, 17 Oct. 2011, Education, online.

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