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## COMMENTARY

### Americans Know Very Little About Local School Quality



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J.E. Stone | 06:47 PM ET 06/06/2013

**A** cheating scandal involving teachers in Atlanta has captured national attention and revealed a profound breach of trust in the public education system.

Thirty-five local educators, including some principals, have been accused of falsifying student test scores and now stand charged with racketeering, theft and making false statements to law enforcement.

Apologists blame their actions on excessive testing, but that's like blaming a banking scandal on the auditors. Instead of worrying about fairness for the adults, we should be worrying about these children and their futures.

Many will receive a shockingly poor education, leaving them little hope of earning a family-sustaining wage once they enter the workforce.

How could a scam this massive take place under everyone's nose? Clearly, Atlanta has a problem. But this is just a highly visible instance of a much larger problem.

Average Americans actually know very little about the quality of their local schools. Despite the obvious conflict of interest, most people simply accept the soothing reassurances of the schools themselves.

That's a problem. The only way to actually improve educational outcomes is for parents and local boards to hold schools accountable. And to do that, they need accurate information about student achievement, budgets, program effectiveness and the like.

But right now, all across the country, parents and local boards are being kept in the dark about such essential matters. Even where there has not been outright cheating as in Atlanta, the information furnished by districts is typically slanted or outright misleading. Successes are hyped, failures rationalized and statistics are reported with skimpy context.

It's no secret that too many students aren't learning. Today, only about 30% of children can read at grade-level by the third grade. For low-income students, an astounding 83% of students fail to meet this mark. And half of the U.S. workforce — about 80 million adults — lack the educational skills necessary to earn a family-sustaining wage. The future is in jeopardy.

To get a sense of the problem, consider the differences between the scores reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and those reported by the states.

Congress created NAEP in 1988 to independently measure national student achievement on a variety of subjects for the Department of Education. Today, it's considered the gold standard of educational assessment for critical subjects like math, reading, science and writing.

States, of course, also have their own metrics. The differences are stark and embarrassing.

For instance, the Alabama Department of Education claims 80% of its fourth-grade students are proficient in math. According to the NAEP, only 30% are actually proficient.

Alabama isn't unique. Scores are just as inflated in neighboring Georgia — and that's in addition to distortions caused by Atlanta's cheating. The state says over 80% are proficient in math, but the NAEP says 40% is closer to reality.

But wait, there's more! Much more. The Maryland Department of Education claims 90% of its students are proficient in fourth-grade math. NAEP says it's closer to 50%. California's Education Department says six in 10 eighth-graders are proficient in science. NAEP's assessment? Barely above 20%. Most states follow this pattern.

As a result of these reporting gaps, parents and board members generally believe their local schools are better than they actually are. And those that do sense problems tend to assume that money will solve them.

But decades of increased funding has produced little improvement. Since the 1970s, the NAEP reports that achievement in core subjects like reading and math has remained stagnant. In fact, constant-dollar per-pupil expenditures doubled between 1971 and 2009, yet reading scores didn't budge.

In a global economy, the U.S. will inevitably sink unless parents, school boards and educators are able to confront the facts, warts and all. Some states — such as Florida, Tennessee and Massachusetts — have tried to close these reporting gaps, but resistance is huge. Educators fear exposure.

Fortunately, there are sound data out there. Parents don't have to wait for distant bureaucrats to tinker their way to trustworthy school reports. Right now, they can find detailed report cards at websites such as [greatschools.org](http://greatschools.org) and [schooldigger.com](http://schooldigger.com).

My organization, the Education Consumers Foundation, displays school-by-school data online in easy-to-understand graphics for virtually all states.

These are just a few of the resources available to parents, boards and community leaders who want to look beyond inflated self reports and into the facts that can lead to real school improvement.

- Stone is president and CEO of Education Consumers Foundation. Its data on individual schools can be seen at [www.education-consumers.org/rad.htm](http://www.education-consumers.org/rad.htm).