

**“When Teachers Cheat, Don't Blame Standardized Tests”**  
USA Today (editorial) March 10, 2011

Once upon a time, cheating was a problem among students. Teachers were the enforcers of honesty, and most still are.

But under pressure to meet rising standards, measured by high-stakes testing, the tables are turning. Some teachers and school officials have become the cheaters and students the police.

That's what happened at Charles Seipelt Elementary School in Ohio, where teacher Scott Mueller took an early peek at the state's 2010 math tests and wrote a "study guide" for his fifth-graders using some identical questions. At Groveland Elementary near Orlando, school district documents show, teaching assistant Johanna Munoz erased wrong answers and whispered corrections to fourth-graders as they took the exam.

Both were caught after students revealed what happened. Both faced sanctions, and both resigned. But what they did exposes a much larger problem, according to a USA Today investigation of millions of students' standardized tests in six states and Washington, D.C.

The special report, published this week, suggests that lax ethics, sloppy security and the outsized consequences of exam scores are creating an atmosphere in which the purpose of the testing — improving education — is too easily lost.

The investigative team found statistical indications of cheating in 1,610 cases in selected school districts in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Ohio and Washington, D.C. There were large numbers of erasures, with answers changed from wrong to right, as well as huge jumps in scores for an entire class followed by huge plunges the next year — anomalies so rare that they should raise red flags about cheating.

School administrators could have developed similar data themselves, but those in schools with high scores have little incentive to look for suspicious trends. By ignoring them, they look better.

Critics of mandated state testing — which is at the heart of a decades-long push to define standards and raise accountability — see an easy answer: Get rid of the tests. But that's about as smart as suggesting that the U.S. abandon elections because of a smattering of voter fraud.

Ways already exist to police testing effectively. Last spring, Georgia put independent monitors at 74 schools that were on a "severe concern" list in 2009 because of high numbers of erasures. The list promptly dropped to nine.

States could also shorten the amount of time schools have access to the tests both before and after they are given. Or they could end the practice of having teachers monitor exams in their own classes.

A knottier problem is finding ways to address subtler problems such as "teaching to the test" — the practice of drilling in rote information rather than instilling critical thinking. That is a matter of school-by-school teacher evaluation.

Testing was never meant to be an end in itself. It is a tool that came into common use because so many schools were failing to lift students to even minimum standards. Educators had to be made accountable, and they needed goals, regardless of students' economic status. That need hasn't changed, but cheating is clearly a new obstacle, one that has been kept under wraps.

Now that it's getting the kind of scrutiny it deserves, educators and state officials should have little trouble finding ways to deter it.

**Topic F: Are high-stakes tests responsible for cheating behaviors?**