



What Drives the Epidemic of Teacher Cheating?

Cheating on Standardize Tests - a Systems Thinker's Examination

Teacher cheating on standardized tests is a recurring theme in recent national headlines, ranging from teachers looking at tests in advance to develop study guides, to teachers and administrators erasing and correcting student answers after they have submitted tests.^{1,4,5,6} The media and the school communities have responded to these stories with shock and outrage, often vilifying individual teachers and administrators.

In this piece, we examine the factors that contribute to teacher cheating and provide insight from a System Thinker's perspective.

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Teacher Cheating on Standardized Tests is a Recent, Rampant and Widespread Phenomenon

Subsequent to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, which tied federal funding to a state's assessment of student skills at specific grade levels, standardized testing has risen dramatically. As a result, the stakes of this testing have increased. Sanctions are placed on schools that do not meet objectives or show improvement toward federal objectives and school districts and administrations emphasize high test scores as metrics for teacher salaries and rewards.

The New Yorker reports that more than 40 states have reported incidents of teachers cheating on tests between 2011 and 2013.¹ Cities implicated in

these reports include Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Houston, Las Vegas, Atlanta, and St. Louis.⁵ In Atlanta, more than 44 schools and 178 educators have been involved in cheating on standardized tests, with many losing their jobs and facing the possibility of jail time.^{1,4} Despite the media's focus on "a few bad teachers," the pervasiveness of the problem suggests otherwise; these symptoms indicate much deeper systemic causes.

The Media and Courts See: "A Few Bad Educators"

Many major media outlets, including the New Yorker, the Washington Post, and the Huffington Post have reported on a variety of cases regarding cheating on standardized tests. These articles often single out individual teachers and administrators through in-depth profiles and interviews where the narrative is

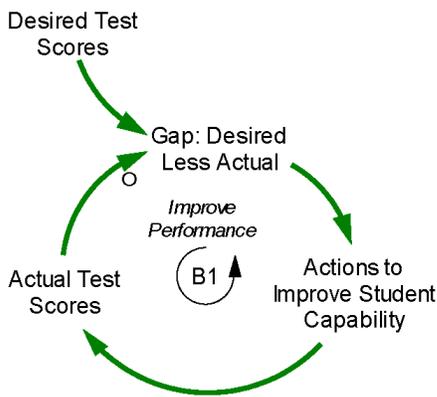


Figure 1: The balancing loop at the heart of the situation

centered on one person—the culprit.

While these more personal pieces provide context and insight about the individual’s actions and potential motivations, they do not fully examine the larger underlying structure of the system in which educators find themselves. Looking at just the actors in the system and placing blame on their shoulders is a classic non-systemic response that ignores larger structural sources for the problem.

As part of the focus on the separate players, rather than the entire system, individual school districts are also called into question. The low-income communities where the challenges of teaching are the greatest are also the communities most often identified as the centers of cheating. In schools where students face many challenges outside of the classroom, as well as inside, there are increased incentives for a teacher to cheat and raise student scores in what seems like an easy answer to a complex problem. But, the system is more than just the separate players and requires an examination of underlying structural issues and concerns.

A Systems Thinking Perspective Suggests That the System Is the Cause

Systems Thinking tools illuminate the teacher cheating situation at a deeper level of understanding and analysis. By

laying out each component and its relationship to other factors, we can begin to see and understand the underlying structures that are leading to the pervasive cheating behavior. Represented in a causal loop diagram (Fig. 1), these pieces articulate larger underlying systemic ideas.

Widespread patterns indicate a systemic problem

If there is a pattern of cheating across a wide number of school districts, it is a indication that there is likely an underlying structural imbalance driving the unacceptable behaviors. The presence of these situations in schools and communities across the nation indicate that the cheating is the result of the structure of the system, not the individual actors within the system.

By making this system visible, we can begin to identify ways to change the system—so that we can react to strong signs of system failure in ways more beneficial than corruption charges and perhaps focus less on blame and recriminations and more on efforts to improve our ability to achieve the system’s stated aim of improving student performance.

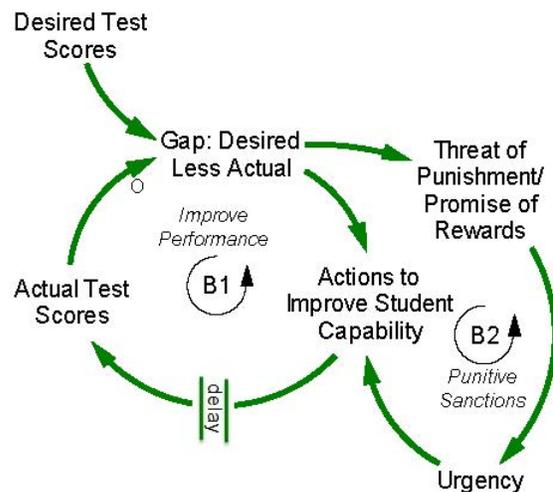


Figure 2

Structure of the system drives behavior

The causal loop diagrams in this piece illustrate the structure of the system in which these teachers are



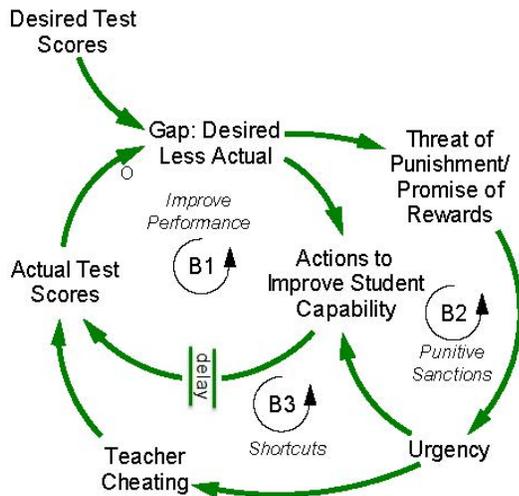


Figure 3

trapped. Testing is put in place to encourage teachers to take action to improve their students' capabilities (B1: Motivation to Teach). This reasonable action should serve to increase student test scores.

Many states have strengthened the drive to improve test scores by adding a series of rewards and punishments that serve to amplify the school system and teacher urgency for improvement (B2: Punitive Sanctions). The strength of these loops has increased over time as more stringent requirements are put in place and schools are held to higher standards as well as threatened with increasingly dire consequences for not closing the gap. On its face, this system seems well designed for its intended use: closing the student performance gap and bringing underperforming schools up to par with higher performing schools.

However, an important characteristic of the loops in Figure 1 is missing: the significant delay between identifying a capability gap and improving actual test scores. This delay causes the school systems and teachers to resort to the "shortcut" in testing (B3: shortcuts). It also causes the

"punitive sanctions" loop to shift influence from the longer term solution of actions to improve student capability to the quicker fix of teacher cheating.

The causal loop diagram in Figure 3 incorporates this concept. When faced with a troubled school system with struggling students and the urgency to improve things in a short time frame, shortcuts like cheating become the only viable solution for success. They can be assured of achieving the goal of higher test scores within a shorter time frame and with greater likelihood of success.

Too much tension caused by goals can cause a system to snap

In the teacher cheating situation, we can see elements of the systems archetype called "Eroding Goals." Generally, when a goal is set too high, the system will either adjust the goal or find other, possibly undesirable, ways to make the goal more achievable. A goal setting process that tries to identify meaningful and challenging, yet achievable, goals is a vital part of the systemic process. Designers of systems must realize that this is often an iterative process—the best goals are not always the first goals outlined by the system. Creating space for these iterations and for goal adjustment is an important part of having a functioning system, and one that performs.

Within the standardized testing system, the goals have not been adjusted over time or based upon the parameters of individual school systems, despite a growing body of evidence around the perceived impossibility of meeting required objectives. It is this perceived impossibility, and the delay to figure out and implement teaching techniques to simultaneously improve test scores while improving teaching effectiveness, that leads to the shortcuts of cheating.

How Can the System Be Changed?

Looking at the problem of cheating and standardized testing from a Systems Thinker's perspective adds



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