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Hearings first step to firing educators

9 accused Atlanta educators to go before tribunals next week

By Jaime Sarrio
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Atlanta Public Schools next week will hold the first in a series of hearings necessary to fire educators accused of cheating, the district confirmed Thursday.

After months of delay and millions spent in payroll and legal expenses, nine educators suspected of some of the most egregious of the school system's widespread test cheating are scheduled to go before a tribunal.

For the school district, it's a chance to bring resolution to a case that has dragged on for months and cost taxpayers millions. For educators, it's the first chance to tell their side of the story since a damning 400-plus-page state investigation was released in July.

"Like any person accused . . . they are anxious," said Gerald Griggs, who represents six educators named in the report. "But they are confident in the evidence we have, that they will be heard and truth will come out."

Last week, the district sent certified letters to 11 educators notifying them of the district's intent to fire them. Known as "charge letters," the documents obtained Thursday by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution detail the allegations and list the potential witnesses who will be called to testify.

For example, Tremelia Donaldson, a former Gideons Elementary teacher, is accused of lying to special investigators and admitting to altering test answers. Witnesses to be called in her case include GBI agents, special investigators and other employees at the school.

"Your actions and inactions brought embarrassment, suspicion, scorn and disrepute upon APS," the letter states.

When reached by the AJC, Donaldson refused to comment. Her hearing is scheduled for March 26.

Two of the 11 educators who received charge letters chose to quit rather than go through with the hearing, according to the district. About 70 educators of the approximately 180 named in the state investigation have resigned or retired since July — 12 of those since late February, when the district warned educators it would start firing proceedings.

The district has revised how much it is spending on the salaries of the remaining 107 educators who are awaiting their punishment on paid leave. It is costing the district \$1 million a month.

A state investigation uncovered evidence of cheating at 44 schools on the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test, a standardized test that's a pivotal measure of a school's achievement. The investigation concluded some APS staffers, for perhaps as long as a decade, worked in secret to transform testing failures into successes by changing wrong test answers into correct ones. Some administrators either covered up the behavior or turned a blind eye to it, the investigation said.

Educators accused of cheating face three avenues of punishment — loss of their jobs, loss of their teaching licenses and criminal charges. A Fulton grand jury has been investigating the case to determine whether the educators' actions were criminal, and charges against some are expected.

The Professional Standards Commission, which licenses and monitors Georgia educators, has sanctioned 16 in the scandal. Kelly Henson, executive secretary of the commission, said Thursday the agency is moving forward with APS cases and additional sanctions could come next month.

APS spokesman Keith Bromery said the district is trying to resolve these cases as soon as possible.

Hearings can last for a couple of days. Attorneys for APS will outline the grounds for firing, present evidence and call witnesses to testify. The accused will be given a chance to dispute the allegations and attempt to save their jobs.

The tribunal members then make a decision, which the elected school board votes to uphold or reject. A teacher can appeal a local school board's decision to the state school board, then to Superior Court, the Court of Appeals and up to the state Supreme Court.



Attorneys for many of the educators have expressed concern about whether the tribunal hearings will be fair. Tribunal members, who serve as the "jury," are selected and paid for by APS, as is the hearing officer who oversees the proceedings. APS said it believes they will be impartial.

Attorney Mel Goldstein, who represents at least 20 educators, compared the hearings to going before a death squad.

"I don't know how many are going to go through with the hearing," he said. "They have all indicated they are anxious to tell their stories. At the same time, they don't feel they can prevail because they're not on a level playing field."

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