America is criminalizing Black teachers: Atlanta’s cheating scandal and the racist underbelly of education reform

Last week, an Atlanta jury convicted 11 teachers and school administrators of racketeering in a system-wide cheating scandal. Yes, you read that correctly. Teachers and administrators inflating student scores on standardized tests is now considered “organized crime” in this country, and is punishable by more 20 years in prison, in these cases.

I am an educator. I am a Black woman who may someday mother a Black child. I have taught other Black mothers’ children. Much of my educational success in elementary school is directly attributable to high performance on standardized
tests that caused my white teachers to notice me and intervene on my behalf to get me “tracked” into higher-achieving classrooms. I believe all children deserve access to a good, high-quality, public education.

Therefore, I don’t have to condone cheating in any form (and I don’t) to assert that what has happened in Atlanta to these teachers is a travesty. The pictures that emerged last week of handcuffed Black schoolteachers being led out of Southern courtrooms in one of the country’s largest urban Black school systems were absolutely heartbreaking.

Scapegoating Black teachers for failing in a system that is designed for Black children, in particular, not to succeed is the real corruption here. Since the early 1990s, we have watched the deprofessionalization of teaching, achieved through the proliferation of “teacher fellow” programs and the massive conservative-led effort to defund public education in major urban areas throughout the country. There is no longer a consensus that a good public education — a hallmark of American democracy — should be considered a public good.

Black children have for generations been the primary victims of this continuing social mendacity about the national value of education. More than 51 percent of children who attend public schools live in poverty. In Georgia, the percentage of Black children living in poverty hovers right around 39 percent. For Latino children, the number is consistently over 40 percent. Nationally, the number for Black children is 39 percent, according to most recent data, and 33 percent for Latino youth.

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