



Fulton County Taxpayers Foundation

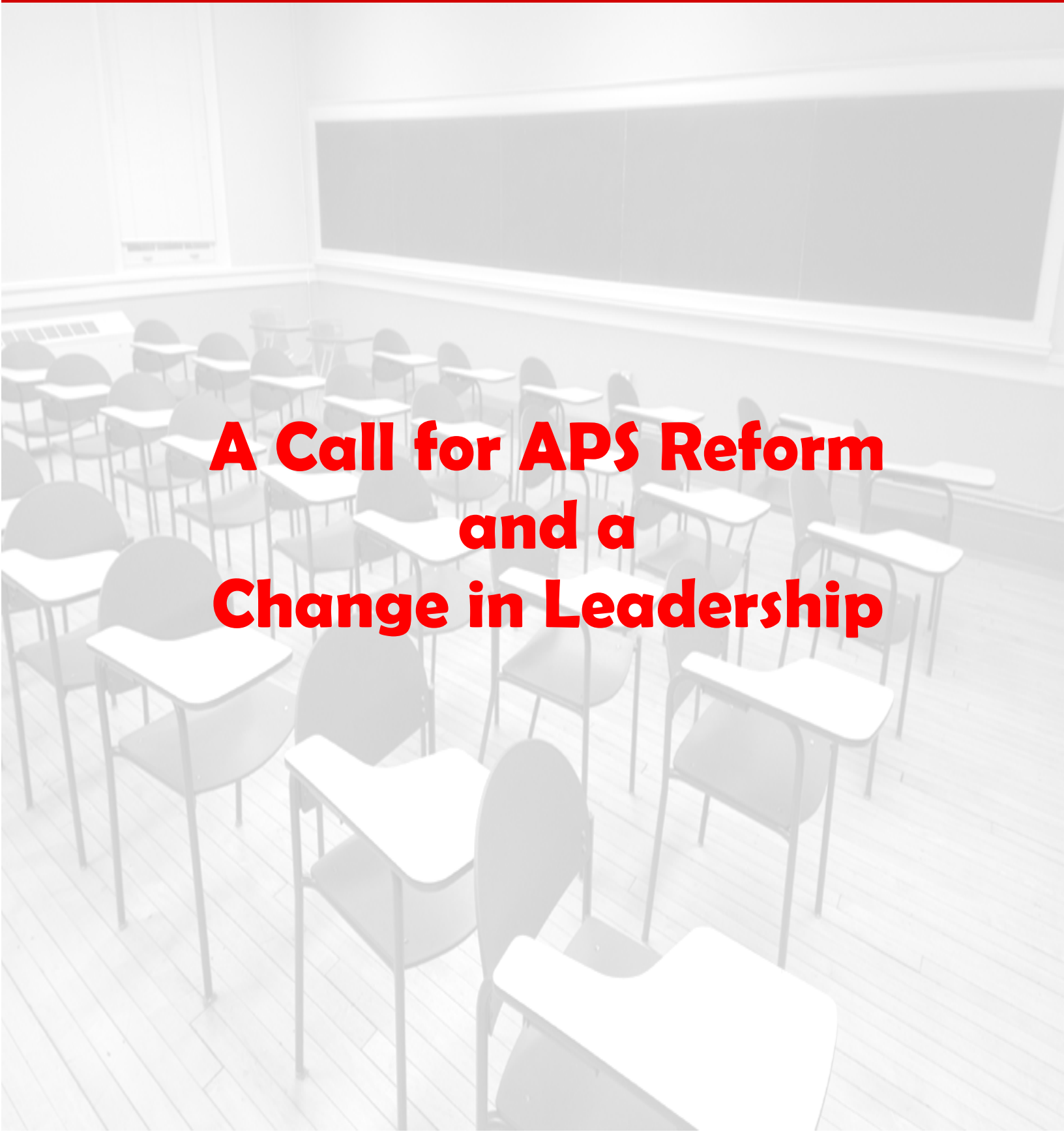
Non-Profit Advocate Of Lower Property Taxes In Atlanta/Fulton County

Property Tax Appeals

Best Practices

Advocacy and Education

Special Edition February 2010

A photograph of a classroom with rows of desks and chairs, and a large chalkboard in the background. The image is faded and serves as a background for the main title.

A Call for APS Reform and a Change in Leadership

Where Is the Accountability?

APS Reform Long Overdue

Atlanta has been in denial about the poor performance of its public school system for at least a decade. A complacent business and government elite stonewalled all questions about test performances, graduation rates and bloated administrative expenses at the Atlanta Public Schools (APS). EduPAC, the Chamber-linked interest group, insisting that all was well, succeeded in protecting school board incumbents who toed the Superintendent's line. The Board, perhaps more interested in diverting tax dollars to development projects than in delivering quality, cost-effective education, awarded the Superintendent with generous bonuses. The sad reality is finally coming out about true test results, thanks to an independent review by the State. This review appears to expose a pervasive culture of cheating within APS.

Will Atlanta's taxpayers now wake up to reality and insist on wholesale changes at APS?

Evidence that all was not well in APS goes back at least to 2001 when the AJC reported that 30 of 68 Atlanta elementary schools had gains of 30% or more in one or more State Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT, the annual student achievement tests in grades one through eight). At that time, one of the APS Board members, Jean Dodd, a teacher over a period of 30 years, expressed doubts, Neither Superintendent Beverly Hall nor the Atlanta School Board investigated or enlisted outside experts to study the data and promptly fire those responsible. Instead, Superintendent Hall attributed those unrealistic gains to "impressive leaps on school reform and better class room strategies."

A scandal concerning misuse of federal funds for computer procurement was also swept under the rug.

What was the evidence last year that caused the argument between Superintendent Hall and Governor Perdue? the same problem of Competency Test cheating through massive erasures. Here, again, neither Superintendent Hall nor the Atlanta School Board investigated or enlisted outside experts to study the data and fire those responsible. At that time, Superintendent Hall said she did not believe that cheating was "pervasive" in the system. This comment drew a rebuke from Governor Sonny Perdue.

On February 12, 2010, the Governor's Office of Student Achievement reported the results of its comprehensive review of Spring 2009 CRCT answer sheets. The review measured how often wrong answers were changed to right through erasures. The worst instances occurred in Atlanta where the data suggested that cheating occurred in 37 of 55 elementary schools. Six Atlanta middle schools were found to have a "severe" level of test result tampering, and another 15 Atlanta schools showed a "moderate" number of classrooms with suspiciously high erasures. While finally committing to review what happened at the schools with the most severe level of test erasures, Superintendent Hall continues to look for excuses, suggesting that somehow small class sizes make wholesale wrong-to-right erasures reasonable. The Superintendent's track record is hardly reassuring. According to the AJC, "in three years, just two teachers left after the District found cheating."

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The Taxpayers Foundation hopes that Atlanta's leadership will now demand that the Atlanta School Board members assume responsibility for rebuilding a badly-damaged system.

First, the Board must require APS to undertake immediately a sample re-test under controlled conditions of the classes in which high erasures occurred. This is the only way to disprove cheating. If students in these classes perform as well as originally reported, the evidence of cheating itself becomes suspect. Conversely, if the re-test confirms what the experts know, that students are unable to pass the CRCT, then we will all know for sure that the suspect schools tampered wholesale with the answer sheets. In that case, the Board must replace the Superintendent and HQ administrators for permitting the cheating and remove the Principals of the schools involved. Unfortunately, far too many teachers must have participated in the erasures for it to be practical to remove them.

The Board will then need to recruit a Superintendent from a respected system, someone with the ability to repair the profound damage that has occurred. The Board and the new Superintendent would also need to open a dialogue with parents and taxpayers about the realities of urban education. Atlanta's young people need real educational reform, not the public relations magic that we have endured for the past decade.

The Taxpayers Foundation will be running a series of newsletters in 2010 regarding the state of Atlanta Public Schools, calling for a change in leadership and involvement from city officials. In light of this recent cheating scandal, one of the highest cost per student in the country and extreme lack of accountability, the time for cleaning up APS is upon us. Our children and families deserve better as do the Taxpayers in the City of Atlanta.

John Sherman



President

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Mayor Kasim Reed On...

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