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PHOTO BY JIM STAUBISER, 2012

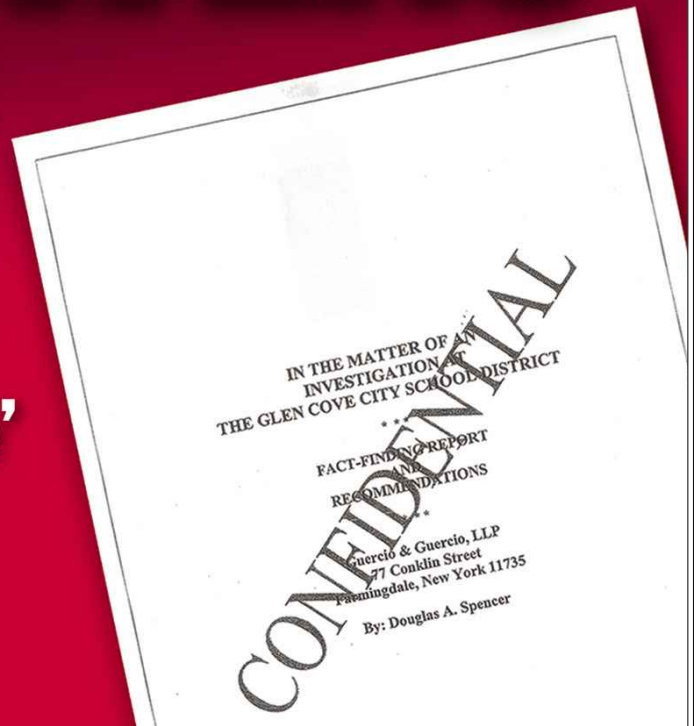
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GLEN COVE TEST-FIXING PROBE

**TEACHERS
GAVE KIDS
ANSWERS**

Report: Some
gave correct
responses,
others
'inappropriate'
help

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GLEN COVE TEST-FIXING PROBE

TEACHERS HELPED KIDS ON EXAMS

Independent report finds students given 'inappropriate staff-directed assistance' at two elementaries

BY JO NAPOLITANO
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Teachers at two Glen Cove elementary schools supplied fifth-graders with correct answers, darkened answer forms for them, or urged them to reconsider their responses on state English Language Arts and mathematics exams in spring 2012, an independent investigation found.

The findings from the probe, which focused on the Connolly and Landing elementary schools, are in a report commissioned by the district's board of education and completed in mid-March. Newsday obtained a copy of the report, which was signed by Douglas A. Spencer, an attorney with the Farmingdale-based law firm Guercio & Guercio LLP.

The independent report found that 84.7 percent of the 60 children who were interviewed "indicated they received inappropriate staff-directed assistance" on either the English Language Arts or the math test, or both.

The report also detailed state regulations and requirements governing test-taking and how the teachers were al-

leged to have violated those rules.

Officials for the district, state Department of Education and teacher union had no response to the report.

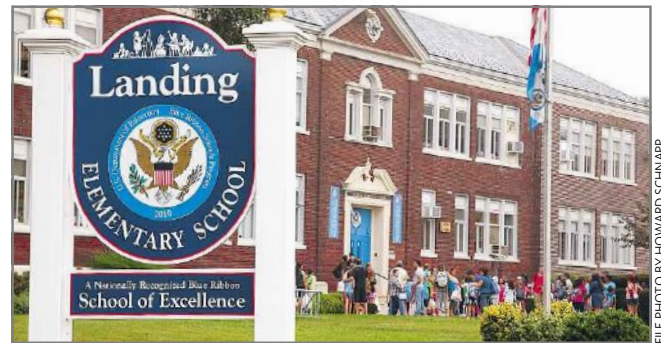
Student reports 'consistent'

Each of the 22 accused teachers at the Connolly and Landing schools "denied, outright, having either provided or witnessed inappropriate staff-directed assistance to students or otherwise failing to comply with the governing rules and procedures" for the tests' administration, the report said.

The students' descriptions, however, "were consistent and overwhelming, both in terms of the gravity of the alleged transgressions and the persistence with which they are alleged to have occurred," it said.

The report's sole recommendation is that "the matters detailed herein be referred for the consideration of possible disciplinary charges."

The test-fixing allegations erupted at a time when student performance on state tests carries more weight than ever before — especially as a component in new, state-mandated teacher and principal



Students at Landing were allowed extra time to finish tests.



Connolly's testing culture "encouraged extra assistance."

evaluations.

For districts, student proficiency on state tests is crucial to meeting participation and performance criteria established by the Education Department.

In the case of English and math tests given to students in grades 3 through 8, for example, 95 percent of students

in groups defined by race, ethnicity, English language proficiency and special needs must take the test in order to meet the performance measure. Districts reach their performance objective when a certain portion of those tested scores at or above what they were expected to score.

The Guercio & Guercio re-

FILE PHOTO BY HOWARD SCHNAPP

FILE PHOTO BY STEVE POST



GLEN COVE BY THE NUMBERS

All figures are from the 2011-12 school year

DISTRICTWIDE FIGURES

Total enrollment (K-12): **3,120**

Percent eligible for free lunch: **35%**

Percent limited English proficient: **12%**

Total taking 5th-grade English Language Arts test: **231**

Total taking 5th-grade mathematics test: **236**

SOURCE: STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

ISTOCK PHOTO

SOURCE: GUERCIO & GUERCIO
FACT-FINDING REPORT AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

Highlights of the report

22 teachers at the Connolly and Landing elementary schools were described as giving inappropriate test help during spring 2012 state tests.

60 students who took those tests at Connolly and Landing elementary schools were interviewed.

84.7 percent of students interviewed received "inappropriate staff-directed assistance" on either the English Language Arts test, math test, or both.

Students said teachers urged kids to change their responses, pointed out wrong answers and explained questions.

8 Gribbin Elementary School staffers were interviewed about their experiences at Connolly; several said they observed problems with test administrations in years past.

port names administrators and teachers. Newsday is not publishing the names of teachers contained in the report or any identifying information about the children interviewed.

Some of the students had special needs and, by law, were allowed accommodations, which can include having extra time to take tests and having the directions and questions read to them by a teacher or proctor. But the investigation found the accommodations far exceeded what is allowed.

"No one, under any circumstances, may interpret or explain test questions to students, nor may anyone review or comment to the student about the correctness or sufficiency of the student's response while the test is in progress," the report said, citing state regulations.

In addition, answer sheets "may not be reviewed,

scanned or scored by anyone before the official scoring process has been completed," the report said.

According to the report:

- Some teachers darkened students' answer forms or sent children back to their desks to have another go at questions or essays answered incorrectly.

- One instructor told students to wait to consult with her before moving on to the next question. Another called a student to her desk and dictated the right answers — A, B, C — for the child to fill in.

- One student told investigators the teacher in question didn't specify which was the correct answer, but said: "This one can't be it. Look at another one. Narrow down. Cross out A, B. . ."

- Some teachers allowed children to return hours afterward — or even a full day later — to

finish tests they did not complete in the allotted time.

- One instructor changed words and suggested spelling corrections on a student's essay, and another told a child where to place punctuation and when to capitalize letters.

- Students said teachers expounded on questions the students did not understand, used scratch paper to show them how to arrive at the right answers, and left guidelines in the classroom about how math problems should be solved and how essays should be constructed.

The two Glen Cove elementary schools serve students in grades 3 through 5. In the 2011-12 school year, the Connolly school's total enrollment

was 379 students, with 135 in fifth grade, and the Landing school's total enrollment was 323 students, with 99 in fifth grade, according to data the district supplied to the Education Department.

How suspicions began

The school board hired Guercio & Guercio to investigate in November after allegations of test-fixing by teachers burst into public view following weeks of parents' questions and speculation in the 3,100-student district.

The accusations also involved several administrators, for alleged lack of proper oversight.

The district faces separate allegations of test-changing

on 2012 Regents exams at Glen Cove High School. Those accusations were not addressed in the Guercio & Guercio report.

Two separate probes of the alleged test-fixing at the two elementary schools and the high school are pending — one by the Education Department and the other by Nassau County District Attorney Kathleen Rice, whose office served subpoenas upon the district in April.

Earlier this month, the district's lawyer, Chris Powers, told Newsday that administrative proceedings had begun against staff members implicated in the alleged test-fixing scandals. At the time, Powers said potential punishments against administrators and teachers could range from a letter of reprimand to dismissal. He would not say what ac-

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See PROBE on A4

★ INSTRUCTION GIVEN TO TEACHERS QUESTIONED

PROBE from A2

tions might be taken.

Rice still could prosecute individuals, spokesman Shams Tarek said yesterday. The district attorney's office "will review the anticipated agreements reached by the employees, the school district and the state," he said.

Spencer, the report's author, yesterday declined to comment on the report or any questions about the investigation.

Greg Guercio said the district hired his law firm to do an investigation and write a report based on the findings. "I can certainly say that our investigation is thorough and complete and represents our best effort," he said.

Superintendent Maria Rianna, who joined the district this summer, said in an interview yesterday that she had not read the report and could not comment on its contents.

"The district's attorneys, the Education Department and the district attorney's office, to the best of my knowledge, are moving forward together to ensure appropriate processes and resolutions are in place," Rianna said.

State Education Department officials were present for the administering of the spring 2013 tests, she said, adding that she will ensure future tests "are absolutely aligned with state regs and direction."

Former interim superintendent Joseph Laria, who resigned in May after he allowed a student to drive his car in the high school parking lot, said he had no comment on the report or its findings.

Tom Dunn, a spokesman for the Education Department, said yesterday that the agency does not comment on investigations.

Carl Korn, a spokesman for New York State United Teachers, the state's largest teacher union, said yesterday that he had not been briefed on the latest developments in the matter.

"Teachers have a great deal of integrity, and it's never acceptable to take shortcuts when it comes to academic honesty," Korn said.

Principals' responsibility

Responses of the teachers accused of improper actions



PHOTO BY JOHNNY MILANO

The district's attorneys, the Education Department and the district attorney's office, to the best of my knowledge, are moving forward together to ensure appropriate processes and resolutions are in place."

— Superintendent Maria Rianna, who joined the district this summer

were included in the report. Uniformly, they denied "engaging in any prohibited conduct," though some said they had advised students during the tests to "check their work."

Many teachers said they were unsure if they had received proper instruction on test administration, with some saying they received such guidelines on the morning of

the test. School administrators are supposed to review testing procedures with teachers and proctors on "in-service" staff days ahead of exams, according to state guidelines.

One teacher, asked if she had reviewed problems with the students before the test, did not respond. Another, asked if students were permitted to leave for lunch and return to complete the test, said

she did not recall.

A teacher at the Landing school said she understood the rules about explaining questions to children, but added, "You can't help telling them what to do to solve the questions."

The principals of the two elementary schools at the time — Rosemarie Sekelsky at Connolly and Michael Israel at Landing, who now is the district's assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction and technology — ultimately were responsible for making sure the exams were properly administered, the report said.

At best, it said, Sekelsky showed a lack of oversight.

State regulations regarding site preparation, scheduling, test security, makeup exams and the use of testing modifications were not properly followed at Connolly, the report said. Boxes containing students' tests were not sealed, and some of the student test books were lost, including some pertinent to the investigation.

Israel, the report said, failed to see that all test proctors at the Landing school were properly trained, which appeared to be "a significant violation" of his duties "in light of the significant deviations from standardized testing procedures and prohibited assistance given to students by Landing teachers."

The report said, too, that students at the Landing school were allowed to finish tests beyond the state's allotted time frame.

Other teachers speak out

The report also went beyond the allegations of improper test-fixing on 2012 tests, detailing experiences related by other teachers who described witnessing what the report said was inappropriate help given to students — particularly at Connolly Elementary.

Several of the eight Gribbin Elementary teachers who had proctored tests at Connolly in earlier years "alluded to what may be described as a 'testing culture' . . . which encouraged extra assistance," in violation of state rules, the report said.

One Gribbin teacher said she had questioned a teacher

at Connolly about helping a child, and the Connolly teacher responded, "I'm just doing what I was told to do, please just go along." That same Gribbin teacher told investigators, "Even if I am insubordinate . . . I will not go to Connolly this year."

Another Gribbin teacher who had proctored tests at Connolly in earlier years said students were given answers and that the tests were not timed, and yet another said she had witnessed proctors explaining answers to children and giving them back their test booklets, encouraging them to reconsider their work.

The Gribbin teachers whose accounts were included in the report also described apparent improprieties in administration of fourth-grade tests at Connolly.

One said she witnessed fourth-graders completing one question at a time as "the questions were read aloud" by a Connolly instructor. The tests took all day, she said, with students receiving "unlimited time."

"This is the way they always run the test," that teacher said the Connolly teacher told her, according to the report.

The accusations of improprieties at the two elementary schools came to light after the parents of a sixth-grader, a special-needs student at Finley Middle School, told school officials in October that their daughter's math score on a spring 2012 state test seemed out of step with her classroom achievement, the report said.

Within two weeks, teachers at Finley told Principal Nelson Iocolano that sixth-grade students coming from Connolly were performing poorly in school and had an "exorbitant need for extra help."

A subsequent review of those students' spring 2012 test scores showed significant increases in their math scores, including for the student whose parents approached the district just 12 days earlier. School officials contacted the child's parents, who told them a classroom proctor "showed" their child how to solve several problems on the test.

District officials notified the Education Department and then initiated the district's own investigation.