

ARTICLE: SIX ENTER GUILTY PLEAS IN APS TEST-CHEATING CASE

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By Mark Niese and Bill Rankin

Six defendants, including the second principal in the case, pleaded guilty Monday in the Atlanta Public Schools test-cheating scandal.

Former Parks Middle School teacher Starlette Mitchell was the first former educator to enter a plea to a reduced charge. She accepted responsibility for her role in the case during a hearing before Fulton County Superior Court Judge Jerry Baxter.

Five more defendants entered guilty pleas. Following Mitchell to the defense table were former Venetian Hills Elementary principal Clarietta Davis, former Parks teacher Kimberly Oden, former Dobbs Elementary teacher Derrick Broadwater, former Kennedy Middle secretary Carol Dennis and former Dunbar Elementary teacher Gloria Ivey.

Baxter required the other APS defendants, including former Superintendent Beverly Hall, to remain in his courtroom while their co-defendants entered their guilty pleas.

"You need to stay and listen," Baxter told one lawyer who asked whether he and his client needed to stay in the courtroom.

Before adjourning for lunch, Baxter promised those wishing to go forward that he will give them a fair trial. But if the trial does not turn out well for them, Baxter warned, "There will be severe consequences."

Lead prosecutor Fani Willis told Baxter that three of the remaining defendants, including former APS human resources director Millicent Few, remain actively involved in plea negotiations.

Mitchell, who began working for APS after graduating from college, admitted to changing answers from wrong to right on the 2007, 2008 and 2009 Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests. According to court records, Mitchell was pressured and harassed by co-defendant, former Parks principal Christopher Waller, to engage in test cheating.

"I am ashamed I succumbed to the extremely intense pressure," Mitchell said, reading a letter of apology.

Baxter, after hearing Mitchell read her letter, said, "I'd give that about a D as far as an apology."

But Baxter accepted Mitchell's guilty plea.

Mitchell pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor count of obstruction. She was sentenced to one year on probation, ordered to perform 250 hours of community service and directed to return \$3,000 in bonus money she should not have received. She was also sentenced under the first offender act, meaning if she

successfully completes her term of probation she can have her conviction erased.

Oden also pleaded guilty to a reduced misdemeanor charge of obstruction and was given a sentence similar to the one imposed on Mitchell, except Oden did not receive any bonus money.

Oden admitted to erasing and changing students' answers on the 2009 CRCT.

"As a teacher, I know I hurt the people who trusted me the most: students and their parents," Oden told Baxter. "... My actions did not help my students learn."

Broadwater, who also admitted to test cheating, said he regretted he could not be a positive role model for his students.

"I have failed both students and their families," Broadwater told Baxter. "I have no excuse for my dishonest and unethical behavior."

In his letter, Broadwater told his former students and their families, "I sincerely apologize for my actions for disappointing you. I only hope that one day you will forgive me."

Broadwater also received a year on probation and was ordered to perform 350 hours of community service.

Davis, 62, pleaded guilty to a felony charge of making false statements. She was to two years on probation and ordered to perform 1,000 hours of community service. She also received first-offender treatment.

All the defendants who pleaded guilty have agreed to cooperate with prosecutors and testify against others at the upcoming racketeering conspiracy trial.

Baxter had set a deadline today for APS defendants to declare whether they were entering negotiated plea agreements with prosecutors or proceeding toward the lengthy trial set for this spring. After being told negotiations are still ongoing with a few more defendants, Baxter extended this deadline until Jan. 24.

With Mitchell, Davis, Oden, Dennis, Ivey and Broadwater having entered pleas, there are 17 defendants remaining in the massive APS indictment.