

EDUCATION

Teacher says metro Atlanta system gives students a way to cheat on tests



Credit: arvin.temkar@ajc.com

Paulding County School District headquarters in Dallas, Ga., on Friday, May 26, 2023. (Arvin Temkar / arvin.temkar@ajc.com)

By Ty Tagami

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chance to graduate on time.

Jeremy Noonan is leaving his post with the Paulding County School District in much the same way he left Douglas County seven years ago: as a whistleblower.

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Noonan, who taught a regular physics class last fall, but was assigned to students in credit recovery courses this spring, is circulating a video he made that shows how easy it would be to cheat on those tests when taken at home. There's nothing stopping students from using Google for the answers.

Noonan said he initially had online students assigned to him but they were removed from his schedule when he balked at the idea of such unsupervised testing. He was left only with credit recovery students attending in person, at Paulding County High School.

He announced to the school board in March that he was resigning over the issue, but said nothing has changed.



Credit: Contributed

Jeremy Noonan sits down one last time in his computer lab on May 26, 2023 at Paulding County High School to proctor a final exam. CONTRIBUTED

Now, he's produced an 11-minute video that describes how easy it is to take tests on the online platform used by Paulding. Copy and paste the question into Google, and the result indicates which answer to select.



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Noonan started sharing his concerns with district administrators back in January, escalating his emails to the central office by February when he said nothing happened.

He said teachers he's talked to about it feel like it reflects a culture of low standards that can permeate all level of classes, even Advanced Placement.

"If you lower the bar here, it'll affect the standard for getting an A in your AP class," Noonan said in an interview.

The school district acknowledges the possibility of cheating on the tests. It says 78 students are doing the credit recovery program online — because they couldn't fit the classes into their school day.

Though Noonan accuses the district of trying to inflate its graduation rate, officials say that number of students — less than 1% of high school enrollment — wouldn't dent the district's overall rate even if they all did cheat, which officials say is unlikely.



They also note that Paulding’s graduation rate of just over 90% last year was in line with surrounding counties, even if it was 6 percentage points above the state average.

Noonan’s video notes some seemingly impressive feats: one student completed an Algebra course in 15 hours by pre-testing out of most of the lessons, yet Noonan’s narrator says the in-person course takes 120 hours; another student completed a tutorial on three acts of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” in under two minutes then completed the test in a minute and a half; a third student finished an American literature course in under 22 hours.

Tiffany L. Frachiseur, Paulding’s chief academic officer, said these are reasonable times for credit recovery students because they’ve already sat through the class at least once. Even though they’re at home, they’re assigned a teacher who works with them and monitors their activity on the platform.

“They look for the very things that Mr. Noonan suggests that we should look for, which is the time on test, the time on activities — if the outcomes of tests match the outcomes of activities,” Frachiseur said.

She accused Noonan of “cherry picking” details for his video, and a district spokesman depicted him as a bit of a zealot, noting that he’s been quoted in the past about credit recovery by [Channel 2 Action News](#), [The Washington Post](#) and [Slate](#), among others.



The accreditation agency Cognia looked into a complaint with details that match the description of Noonan’s scenarios, Paulding officials said. Cognia sent the district a letter indicating it found “no sufficient evidence” to pursue the complaint, according to a copy provided by Paulding. Others with expertise on the topic think Noonan’s complaints are merited.

Noonan’s concerns about credit recovery emerged in 2016 when The Atlanta Journal-Constitution [reported](#) on Douglas County’s online program. The story rippled out, eventually making it to those outlets and others, including [The Economist](#), an international magazine that quoted Noonan in a story under the headline: “The rise in American high-school graduation rates looks puffed-up.”

Carolyn Heinrich, a professor at Vanderbilt University who has written several papers about the online credit recovery industry, has known Noonan since 2019, when he contacted her about her research.

She has seen his video and said it is consistent with evidence from beyond Paulding about students finding test answers online and passing exams at ever higher rates. The conclusions in his video “are largely consistent with what we saw and reported in our research,” she wrote in an email.

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Michael Petrilli, the organization’s president, has seen Noonan’s video. He said it presents circumstantial evidence that cheating could happen.

“Jeremy has been sounding the alarm about online credit recovery for many years, and I think his concerns have been proven to be well founded,” Petrilli said. “It can mean that the high school diploma is further cheapened.”

Petrilli styled Noonan as a “heroic” idealist. Paulding cast him more along the lines of a zealot, saying he’s pulling records for students he doesn’t know, without grasping the full picture. One of them, for instance, did just as well on a proctored state-standardized Georgia Milestones test as on tests at home.

Noonan said he had access to the records of at least 10 previous students. He doesn’t know why he had access to the records. He said he didn’t take the Paulding job hoping to get into a fight over ethics that would lead him to resign.

“I was happy to be done with it,” he said, “but that wasn’t God’s plan for me.”

About the Author

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Ty Tagami is a staff writer for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Since joining the newspaper in 2002, he has written about everything from hurricanes to homelessness. He has deep experience covering local government and education, and can often be found under the Gold Dome when lawmakers meet or in a school somewhere in the state.

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