

JACKSON JAMBALAYA

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Education probe: State data manipulated, sold for profit

A 'triangle' of corruption

An internal investigation of the Mississippi Department of Education that took place in 2010 and 2011 revealed that data was being manipulated to falsely inflate school ratings and also being sold for profit. The nine-member [Mississippi Board of Education](#) oversees the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) and its watchdog entity, the Office of Educational Accountability. In 2010, then-Board Chairman [Charles McClelland](#) ordered an investigation after he noticed some suspiciously high ratings assigned to historically poorly performing schools. Two then-employees of the Office of Educational Accountability, Charlie Evers and Toby Frazier, assisted by contractor Lisa Williamson, conducted the investigation.

The investigation focused on the activities of three men: Ken Thompson, Steve Hebbler, and Russ Davis. Thompson was at that time the director Office of Research and Statistics, the division of the Office of Educational Accountability responsible for crunching the numbers used to determine individual school ratings. Hebbler was the former director of ORS and a contract worker at that time. Davis was a former employee of the Department of Education.

E-mails sent by these men revealed unethical and illegal actions: First, all three men manipulated school data which inflated some schools' ratings. (For more details, read the story: "[Miss. public school ratings falsely inflated.](#)")

Second, confidential student data was leaked to Russ Davis, who was not authorized by the Department of Education to view or receive student data. Beyond this, Evers found evidence that Davis was using the data to run a ratings-interpretation service that he sold to school districts. (For more details on Davis' unauthorized access, read the story: "[Former MDE employee included in department e-mails.](#)")

[One e-mail](#) shows that Davis had downloaded state data to a personal Dropbox account.

Davis still runs a web-based service called [Accountability Analyzer](#), which helps school administrators understand how they should improve student achievement to get a better school rating. AccountabilityAnalyzer.com claims the service is "trusted" by half of Mississippi's approximately 150 [school districts](#). Davis has said subscriptions are "less than \$5,000" each.

If 75 Mississippi school districts bought an Accountability Analyzer subscription at \$5,000 each, Davis' company could rake in revenues of around \$375,000. If districts paid additional fees per school, Accountability Analyzer revenues could easily be in the millions of dollars. (For more details on state data and Accountability Analyzer, see the story, "[Private service using Miss. public school students' data.](#)")

A school administrator whose school uses Accountability Analyzer has said the service gets the school's data from the Department of Education and then loads that data into website for the school.

Because Davis was working in an unknown and unauthorized capacity on the school ratings calculations with Thompson and Hebbler in 2011, he did not receive a paycheck from the state.

In a September 2011 meeting the results of the education investigation were revealed to Charles McClelland and School Board member [Bill Jones](#). Evers and consultant Lisa Williamson stated their belief that Thompson and Davis were stealing state data, manipulating it, and selling it for profit. (See pages 34 and 35 of [transcript document](#).)

Charlie Evers: What we've told y'all this morning in an hour and 15 minutes is the tip—it's the tip of the iceberg as to the magnitude and how deep this goes. You've got general concepts. The illegalities that take place, much less the ethical side of it—but, having the state's data base moved and put out into a file sharing device and brought down—

Lisa Williamson: In public.

Charlie Evers: Public domain by two individuals that are employed—Think about what Toby (Frazier). He's CIO. The reason we've spent all this money is to make sure the data that we have is held securely within the Department of Education.

Bill Jones: And they're giving it away.

Charlie Evers: And they're giving it away.

Lisa Williamson: For profit.

Charlie Evers: And they're profiting from it. And manipulating for profit. They're manipulating it for profit to the point where, who is not to surmise that there aren't errors that are being made You can squint your eye just for a second and think that a school that thinks it maybe should have done better—

Where are they now?

Steve Hebbler is was under [contract](#) as recently as June 2013 to work on state ratings calculations. In January 2013, after Florida Gov. Jeb Bush visited Mississippi to discuss education reform, Hebbler advised the Board of Education not to change its ratings system to that of Florida's. (See [document](#).)

Ken Thompson is marketing himself to school districts as a consultant who can interpret the confusing ratings system. See [Ken Thompson and Associates](#). (*For more details on the complexity of the state's "Accountability Model," read "[Miss. public schools' rating system impossible to understand.](#)"*)

Russ Davis' [AccountabilityAnalyzer.com](#) service is still going strong.

More information:

- For School Board member Bill Jones' take on the lack of oversight at MDE, see Nov. 5 post, "School Board member: Hank Bounds can 'sell you the sweat off his balls."<http://www.kingfish1935.blogspot.com/2013/11/school-board-member-hank-bounds-can.html>
- For more info on Accountability Model and power structure, see the Oct. 31 post: "[Miss. public schools' rating system impossible to understand.](#)"
- For the transcript and audio recording of the September 2011 meeting, see the Oct. 28 post "[Surprise: Cronyism and fraud in education](#)" or click [here](#).
- Look for upcoming posts on issues in Mississippi public education governance.

Amy McCullough is a freelance journalist who has donated this material to Jackson Jambalaya in memory of Charlie Evers who passed away on Aug. 26, 2013.

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