

75% of Atlanta Graduates Cannot Add $\frac{1}{2}$ Plus $\frac{1}{4}$

by Dave Sloan

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For three days in a row I attended the graduation ceremonies for the Atlanta public high schools at the Civic Center. I polled the students to find out how many of them could add one-half plus one-fourth. The vast majority of seniors graduating were unable to answer the question. It was an intense experience. But before going further, I should explain what compelled me to undertake this task.

A friend of mine taught math in Atlanta public high schools for over ten years. We were at Lenox Square purchasing tickets for a movie.

"What school do you go to?" my friend asked the pleasant young woman in the ticket window.

"Grady," she answered.

"What grade are you in?"

"I graduate next Saturday."

"I used to teach at Grady," he said. They chatted a moment about some teachers they knew in common.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?" my friend said.

"Okay."

"How much is one-half plus one-fourth?"

She laughed nervously, put her hand over her mouth, removed it, and repeated, "One-half plus one-fourth?"

"Yes."

Her hand was back over her mouth, her face was squinched, and my gut was tied up in a knot. After what seemed like forever, but was only about ten seconds, she said, "I don't know, a third?"

"No." My teacher friend smiled. "It's three-fourths. It's like if you have two quarters, which is half a dollar, and one quarter, that would equal three quarters, or three-fourths of a dollar."

"Right," she said. "Three-fourths, I remember now."

As we walked away from the ticket window, I was shaken. I have been very blessed by education. It was hard to comprehend that this sweet young woman was about to get a diploma and go out into the world to try to make a life for herself, and she had been deprived of something so priceless.

"It's like that all through Atlanta," my friend told me. "Only half the kids coming into the high schools wind up graduating, and of the ones that do, the vast majority cannot add a half and a fourth."

"Are there statistics to back that up?" I asked.

"No. You can bet there are no statistics. If you want proof, you'll have to get it yourself."

So I went to the Civic Center and, as the kids from one school after another showed up in their caps and gowns, I asked them if they would answer a couple of quick questions for a newspaper story. Almost all obliged. I pulled them aside and questioned them one-on-one, so they would not be embarrassed in front of their friends or family.

I asked them about their college plans, and about their favorite writers and role models. And, tucked in with those questions, I asked them to add one-half plus one-fourth.

Nervous laughter was common. A number of the girls emitted loud scream/squeals. There were lots of mouths covered with hands.

Fewer than a fourth of them got it right. Among the others, about half of them had incorrect guesses, such as $\frac{1}{3}$, $\frac{2}{6}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, or $\frac{1}{8}$. The rest either admitted not knowing or simply fidgeted in embarrassment for a few seconds, after which time I moved us on to another question.

Over three days, I queried 140 students from several high schools. My poll included Mays High School, which is the crown gem of the school system. At Mays, nearly forty percent of the students got the question right. They brought the overall average up quite a bit.

Statistics can vary from poll to poll, and my survey was certainly not scientific. But I do believe the survey I conducted was reliable. All of the students who graduated had passed the Georgia Graduation Test. On the basis of my data, I am convinced that the vast majority of Atlanta high school students who passed the GGT did so without being able to add one-half plus one-fourth.

One young woman I spoke to wore honors sashes and a ribbon and pendant for perfect attendance, was headed to Syracuse University on scholarship, and could not add one-half plus one-fourth. How sad, and how unfair for her.

The kids I spoke to were full of excitement over their big day. They were courteous and well-spoken, and their eyes shone with the brightness of youth and the promise of tomorrow. Those kids have been cheated of an education. They would have learned if given the opportunity. In many cases, these are kids who overcame a culture of poverty and crime, stayed in school, and completed the tasks asked of them. The kids are not the ones to blame.

There is much to be said on the subject of who and what is to blame, and what needs to be changed. But first, we have to become willing to face the truth. The teachers I spoke to while at the Civic Center insisted that nearly all of the students graduating could answer my math question. That denial is a big factor contributing to the problem.

Later, I asked teachers, math department heads, principals, and Margaret Brooks, who is head of testing for the Atlanta Board of Education, if anyone could offer me data that would refute my findings. No one could. Brooks said that, while disturbing, my findings were indeed plausible.

Ron Brown, the principal at Mays High School, initially guessed that at least 85–90% of his graduates could add one-half plus one-fourth. When informed of my findings, he said, "I'm a little shocked. And I'm disappointed. Obviously something is missing. You know, at Mays we don't even teach developmental math. All of our students start out ninth grade taking algebra. But they use calculators. They know how to use those calculators, but they may not know how to add a half plus a fourth. I won't deny it. Quite frankly, I find it a little depressing. And I'll be paying more attention to that question next year; you can count on that."

That's exactly what I am hoping for. Although more money may be part of the solution, more money is obviously not enough. Bureaucratic and political maneuverings have resulted in the people who administer the money either not knowing or not acknowledging the real extent of the problem. There are strong forces with a vested interest in maintaining their own power and preserving the

status quo. These forces are fighting to resist meaningful testing and accountability at every step of the way.

The forces of the status quo must be overcome. We must stop turning thousands and thousands of teenagers out into the world with a perverse pretense of preparation and then blaming them for the great troubles which so often befall them.

Those kids are precious, and we need them desperately if we are to forge a future worth living in. There is no excuse for not giving the kids a fair shake. And it begins with acknowledging that they have not yet been given one.