

'We're not cheaters' educators tell state lawmakers

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"We're not cheaters" was the message dozens of superintendents sent to state lawmakers at a hearing on the MEAP test Thursday, June 14, in Lansing.

And despite a "sincere" apology from state Treasurer Doug Roberts for releasing the names of 71 schools where "irregularities" were spotted in MEAP test answers, educators say the damage has already been done.

"I am here today to sincerely apologize for the way this issue has unfolded," Roberts said at the outset of a special joint meeting of the Senate and House Education committees.

"Obviously, it was never the state's intention that schools, teachers and students be subjected to what was essentially an indictment of their integrity. I can't go back and undo what happened this year, but I can learn an important lesson about how this issue will be handled in the future. I can assure everyone here today, as well as a school

officials throughout Michigan, that there will be no future press conferences about test irregularities prior to school districts being contacted for response."

Responded to leak

He explained he felt compelled to put out all the information about irregularities - which may indicate cheating or "teacher interference" - because a reporter had obtained a copy of the list through a leak.

Roberts said he realized later he should have simply refused to confirm the list for that reporter.

Sen. Loren Bennett, R-Canton, called Roberts a "class act" for apologizing and accepting responsibility so quickly. "How often do you see that in government these days?" he asked.

Bennett, chair of the Senate Education Committee, predicted that when the Treasury Department completes its review of the irregularities and the responses from school districts that it will find a few instances of actual cheating, but "the vast majority" will be exonerated.

"I look at that one example,

out of a class of 20 in which six students gave identical answers, three sentences long, with every word spelled correctly. I find that a bit beyond chance," he said. Although that "irregularity" was included in a set of examples, the Treasury Department has not identified which school it came from.

Explanations given

Of the superintendents who appeared before his committee, most gave perfectly reasonable explanations for the "irregularities" seen in their test results. He noted that the original list of irregularities, after test scores were done grading, included more than 400 schools.

Educators tossed out many of these on review, paring the list to 71. Roberts told lawmakers that what had been included as "irregularities" were test answers in which different students had answers that were virtually identical, different handwriting in a single answer, identical phrasing in different students' answers, and vocabulary that was inconsistent with the grade

level of the student.

Test reviewers explained how they spotted irregularities. They said they were looking for similarities in large numbers. It's not practical for more than two or three students to copy each other's answers. But when eight answers are identical or very similar, it may indicate "teacher inference."

Garden City Superintendent Michael Wilmut explained why the phrase "descendants of Native Americans" showed up in the answers of five students at Memorial Elementary School. They had had a teacher who was married to a Native American and instructed the children that the term "Indian" is derogatory. So when asked about who migrated to North America in prehistoric times, students answered "descendants of Native Americans." That's an incorrect answer, Wilmut noted. It should have been "ancestors."

"Once this had been reviewed, you will find there is nothing improper here," he said. "But the accusation has been made and it cannot be corrected ... The dam-

age has been done. The kids know they have been accused of cheating."

No fix

Of Roberts' comments, Wilmut said, "I accept his apology but it doesn't fix it."

Wilmut noted that the information was released one day before an election in Garden City for \$36 million in bonds. While it still passed, he said several parents told him they would not vote for it because "cheating" was going on in the school district.

Oak Park's Pepper Elementary made the list because several students mentioned Oakwood Street in their essay answers to a question asking them to tell about a time when they got lost.

"Oakwood is three blocks from the school, and it's five blocks long. We have a lot of students who live on Oakwood," Superintendent Alexander Bailey said.

But beyond that, he couldn't find any similarities in their answers.

Bailey said the state handed out examples that constituted

the worst irregularities seen in the test, but others, like those in his school district, were much less clear.

"How do you even assess irregularities when you have only one or two answers to look at?" he said.

Bailey contended that the state should indeed be reviewing the test for irregularities and cheating. But he said the release of the information, before it was reviewed by the schools, hurt students.

"They need to make sure the integrity of the school district is protected," Bailey said. "They also have to protect the integrity of the information about test. And it isn't fair to put the kids on the firing line."

Norville Superintendent Len Reznierski said Winchester Elementary appeared on the list because several students, when asked for an example of problem solving, wrote about an issue at the school in which a playground had been taken over for parking space. Several had used the phrase "more parking for parents and teachers."

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