

Cheating Charges Made Against Oakland Teacher SAT-9 test-taking prep questioned

An Oakland teacher could be fired for preparing her fifth-grade class for the annual statewide exam by giving students real test questions, school district officials said yesterday.

“Four different children remembered studying the same five reading comprehension stories before taking the test,” said Alma Williams, director of research and evaluation for the Oakland schools.

“We called the state and confirmed those five reading comprehension stories were on the SAT-9,” she said.

Toler Heights fifth-graders posted reading scores this spring that far outshined those of their peers. There is only one fifth-grade class at Toler Heights, and 85 percent of its students scored at or above the national average in reading. Last year, only 19 percent of the fourth-graders -- many of whom are in the fifth-grade class this year -- scored at or above the national average in reading.

Meanwhile, only 9 percent of this year's second- and fourth-graders at the school, and 6 percent of its third graders, scored at or above the national average in the subject.

The Toler Heights Elementary schoolteacher, who has denied wrongdoing, first came under suspicion three weeks ago when the California Department of Education flagged her class along with another Oakland class at Horace Mann Elementary because test answer sheets had too many bubbles that had been erased and changed to correct responses.

At that time, Superintendent Dennis Chaconas also offered up a third school for potential trouble, after a parent at Carl Munck Elementary said she couldn't believe her daughter's test scores jumped from the bottom to the top in one school year.

Critics of new standardized testing for public schools say the cash rewards promised to successful schools and teachers can encourage cheating.

Schools that fare poorly on new state exams could ultimately be taken over by the state.

The Oakland school district conducted its own investigation and didn't find any evidence that the teachers had made the eraser marks, Chaconas said.

The test answer sheets in question had about two to four erased and corrected answers per test section. Children who were interviewed in those classes said they changed the answers themselves, Williams said.

Oakland's three suspicious schools were among 51 in California whose Academic Performance Index scores were withheld last month for "testing irregularities."

Six of those red-flag schools, including Schafer Park Elementary in Hayward, confirmed to the state that something was indeed amiss in their testing process.

Another 13 schools, including Longfellow Arts & Technology Magnet School in Berkeley and Vacaville High, reported themselves to the state. At Longfellow, a teacher accidentally passed out the real test and caught it before the students got it. At Vacaville, teachers reported a teacher for "suspicious" behavior in the testing process.

The remaining 32 schools denied wrongdoing, and while some have been exonerated, state officials will ask for more investigations on most of them, said Bill Padia, director of policy and evaluation for the California Department of Education.

The six schools with confirmed irregularities, and now Toler Heights, stand to jeopardize their chances of cashing in on new state rewards for schools that lift their test scores.

Oakland officials cleared the Toler Heights teacher of accusations that she erased the test answers herself, but while investigating came across charges that she used actual test material to prepare her class for the exam.

The SAT-9 is kept under lock and key at schools, and teachers are not given access to it until the day of the test.

"We investigated the security at Toler, and we feel that they had proper procedures," Williams said. "We have no idea how she got the test content." Although Oakland teachers use a booklet during the school year called Test Ready to prepare their students for the SAT-9, it does not contain test questions that would be found on the statewide exam.

Instead, it teaches test-taking skills, such as how to spot a misspelled word, how to make educated guesses on multiple-choice questions, and for the younger students, how to fill out bubble answer sheets.

Next week, the Oakland school district human resources department will write a report to Chaconas with a recommendation about how to handle the Toler Heights teacher.

“I am prepared to take severe action, up to and including termination if I deem that is appropriate,” Chaconas said.