



OFFICE of A.T. KARBERG WINIK

August 14, 2009
Titusville, Florida

Ms. Sharon Koon
Policy, Research & Accountability Coordinator
Assessment & School Performance Office
Florida Department of Education
Turlington Building
325 W. Gaines Street, Suite 1514
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

Dear Ms. Koon,

I am replying to your return note of August 11th concerning Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test ("FCAT") prep materials and workbooks used by the Florida Department of Education ("DOE") in the course of the daily classroom time of an average student in Florida's public school system. In doing so, I want to answer your note by individual points.

DOE: You continue to express concern over FCAT workbooks that schools are using in day-to-day lessons for test preparation purposes. The Department does not publish such workbooks. The only Department-published FCAT sample test materials for student use are posted online at <http://fcap.fldoe.org/fcatsmpl.asp> and <http://fcap.fldoe.org/fcatrelease.asp>.

Response: While your message on behalf of the Commissioner and the DOE may have been a mischaracterization in semantics, the DOE does in fact have prep material workbooks that are used in the course of a student's daily workings in a public school classroom.

My office has obtained such workbooks, not bound by the DOE, but instead by Pearson Prentice Hall Inc., a company with which the DOE does extensive business and whose texts are on the list of approved texts for statewide use for the 2009-2010 school year. It would be my educated guess that any information provided as "FCAT Preparation" with sample FCAT questions and skills and using the DOE's test name would be under license from the DOE itself. You may wish to further address this in writing.

The links that you provided are to practice tests and answers. While I am not enthused by the fact that the DOE publishes full answers, the writing portions available online have an explanation as to why a certain grade was given. No explanation exists on multiple choice FCAT tests to explain why a given answer was chosen, simply a percentage of students who chose that answer and the SSS benchmark it seeks to fulfill.

DOE: Many constituents have also responded to the Department's concerns regarding "template" writing with statements that are aligned to the use of "formulaic" writing. While it may appear to be a case of semantics, there is a significant difference. "Template" or "Patterned" writing refers to situations where students use a prescribed format for responding to any prompt, regardless of the topic, or intended purpose; use practiced or memorized settings, words, phrases, elevated figurative language; or use a contrived introduction that is disconnected from the prompt or purpose for writing. In contrast, "formulaic" writing refers to the over-reliance on a particular structure of organization.

Response: My position in writing the DOE in an attempt to stop the DOE and its boards from implementing punishments for individual school districts has always been over template writing. That is, in my definition, the use of identical or almost identical sentences and phrases which appear in more than one student's test.

My office understands formulaic writing, but to this point, I assert that writing preparation for the FCAT itself has allowed students to rely heavily on a "first, second, third, and in conclusion" model instead of an elaborate and more diverse use of transitions and writing schemes such as those employed on the ACT test.

Likewise, FCAT remediation classes which have become a common practice and scene in Florida's public schools teach students how to learn, take, and pass the FCAT test. You may wish to address whether or not the 2008-2009 statute change has done away with remedial classes. If they have not, the DOE has not discontinued the practice of "teaching to the test."

DOE: You also express concern over the annual release of FCAT assessments. Currently, there is not sufficient funding to release FCAT assessments annually. You will find information pertaining to this issue in the Frequently Asked Questions about the FCAT Released Tests <http://www.fldoe.org/faq/default.asp?Dept=202&ALL=N>.

Response: Unless there is a significant cost in scanning pages of an answer-keyed test into your computer system, I am unsure as to the type of funds the DOE needs in order to provide online versions of the FCAT test and answers. While I am not a proponent of providing full answers online, to either the written portions or mathematics, reading, or other portions, I do not fully comprehend the argument of cost associated with scanning the information and placing it on your website.

My office is fairly small, with two to three people working with me to ensure my work to better Florida is able to stay afloat, stay current, and keep up to date with what's going on around the state. As a student, I support my office on a part-time salary.

There is, in my opinion, no excuse as to how I am able to scan documents onto my system with very low cost and efficiency and why the DOE cannot. I do not find this response as acceptable to why the DOE has not released more current information.

As I previously stated, I assert that the information used in the template writing incidents this year in several counties including my own was lifted from sample answers—such as the ones you kindly pointed me to on your website—that have been released and given to students to use.

The DOE has yet to explain publicly how they believe students in 12 different districts at 49 different schools were able to use identical sentences. It is my hope that the DOE would launch an investigation into all of the materials provided to students—including those not available on the Internet—to determine where the statements came from.

It is not enough to punish individual districts for the work of the entire Department. If the sentences were lifted from your materials, the DOE needs to reevaluate how the information is released and handled in terms of providing former answers to students. Children in the 4th grade are creative thinkers, and as such, may use former sentences from writing tests graded with 5's and 6's to bolster their own writing grades.

Please do not misunderstand; the use of template writing by a student is not acceptable. But by the same token, neither is providing the means by which to accomplish such writing. The students found to have template written did not have the same teachers, the same schools, nor do they likely all know each other. A larger issue is apparent in this situation, and needs to be addressed.

I will continue to keep a watchful eye on any move the DOE makes on this front, and will come to Tallahassee at any point in time at which I feel the DOE is taking unnecessary steps to punish school districts which are, as you pointed out by your own Department's financial situation in apparently providing online materials, cash-strapped and over-worked.

I appreciate your further response to my points listed, and I look forward to the Commissioner calling for a full investigation as to how this template writing occurred. I would be more than happy to serve in any capacity the DOE would like as a public member concerned over the education of our brightest generation, and thank you for your previous and future letters.

I look forward to meeting with you and the Commissioner when I am next in Tallahassee, and send my best wishes as the DOE continues to determine an appropriate action towards these incidents.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A.T. 'TYLER' KARBERG WINIK". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

A.T. "TYLER" KARBERG WINIK
Chief Policy Advisor & Consultant

Ms. Sharon Koon
Florida Department of Education
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