

Poof! Schools in Orlando area, other districts teaching canned phrases for FCAT essays
Writing at 49 schools shows signs of memorized passages, state says

The practice of having elementary students memorize phrases and sentences to spit out on their FCAT writing exams did not go "poof!" and disappear the way the Florida Department of Education had hoped. This week, the department notified 12 school districts, including Brevard, Lake and Orange, that at least one of their schools "exhibited this practice" on this year's Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

Writing exams from 49 schools were found to have "template writing" -- instances in which students from the same school used identical or similar phrases on FCAT essays, such as "Poof! Now I'm in dragon land." The patterns were discovered when the exams were scored. Some educators blame the problem on FCAT, the state's high-stakes test, and the pressure to score well. The phrases found repeatedly seem an attempt to showcase colorful, creative writing, and they might be viewed that way if they were used by individual children. But when many youngsters in a school write the same way, the department suspects that rote memorization, rather than good writing, is at play.

The department said last year that the practice -- which it wants to snuff out -- is not technically cheating and that the essays with the often-used phrases would be graded on their merits. But in letters to the districts sent Wednesday, the department said it was "beginning policy discussions ... to determine appropriate consequences when template writing is identified during scoring."

The letters were written by Victoria Ash, chief of the department's Bureau of K-12 Assessment. She was not in the office Friday, and department officials said additional information would not be available until next week. The number of schools whose essays

raised red flags this year is significantly higher than the four found last year, but that could be because the department urged scorers to be on the lookout for certain phrases.

Students in grades 4, 8 and 10 take the timed FCAT writing test, creating essays on assigned topics in 45 minutes. The department has dubbed the problematic essays "poof! papers" because last year one of the most common examples was fourth-graders writing "Poof!" and then going to dragon land, pirate land, fairy land or candy land. "In the blink of an eye," "one quintessential, supersonic day," and "a kaleidoscope of colors encircled me" were other popular phrases.

The schools cited in the letters included five in Brevard, plus Conway and Deerwood elementary schools in Orange and Tavares Elementary in Lake, which was flagged last year, too. In part because of reduced summer working hours, the principals of Conway, Deerwood and Tavares could not be reached for comment Friday. All three schools had high writing scores and earned A's from the state this year.

Before students took this year's exam, Barry Farley, Lake's manager of testing and evaluation, said the district had worked with Tavares' staff to ensure that teachers didn't emphasize certain phrases and that students' creativity would shine through.

The district's offices were closed Friday, so he could not be reached. In Orange, district administrators familiar with the letter also were not in the office Friday. In Brevard, educators plan to first review all the essays from the five schools to figure out "just what DOE is referring to," said spokesman Christine Davis. Then the district will use teacher training to address the concerns.

Leslie Postal
Sentinel Staff Writer
July 17, 2009