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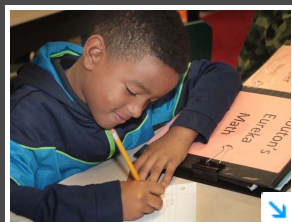
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Roemer: Testing letter unethical, intimidating

Barbara Leader, The News-Star 10:01 p.m. CST December 10, 2014



(Photo: MARGARET CROFT/THE NEWS-STAR)



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A letter sent from state's Division of Administration office last week to the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and Superintendent John White is unethical and an attempt to intimidate board members, BESE President Chas Roemer says.

The letter, dated Dec. 4, urges members to ask White about how the Department of Education is acquiring PARCC questions for its standardized tests to be administered in the spring, suggesting that the DOE's current contract does not provide for procurement by its testing vendor, Data Recognition Corp.

Roemer says the governor's office is only continuing to argue a lawsuit that it lost earlier this year.

"The judge has already said there is a contract in place," he said. "It's the whole reason this ended up in court. They are trying to use procurement issues to determine education policy."

The governor's letter to the DOE said the contract with Data Recognition Corp. "is to develop testing items, not obtain test items from another source."

Louisiana does not have a contract with Pearson Education Inc., the testing vendor who distributes questions for the PARCC test, which is aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

According to the Department of Education, Louisiana's students will be tested using PARCC questions administered by the DRC, which has a licensing agreement with Pearson.

"I've never been concerned about where tests come from," Roemer said. "I don't pay much attention to whether it has PARCC on it or another as long as its the highest quality testing for our children."

In its response to the Division of Administration, the attorney for the Department of Education also indicates the DOA letter violates "ethical obligations as an attorney."

"A fair reading of your correspondence appears to be a heavy-handed effort by the Division of Administration to derail the upcoming year-end assessments for the 2014-15 school year," attorney Charles Gordon writes.

Gordon's letter also references a decision by 19th Judicial District Judge Todd

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Hernandez regarding the previous dispute over testing between the governor and the DOE.

"Judge Hernandez issued a judgment dated September 18, enjoining the DOA from interfering in those year-end assessments and specifically enjoining the DOA from implementing its suspensions of the contracts with DRC."

Gordon also indicates that if the DOA continues to violate ethics laws or Hernandez's judgment, BESE is prepared to sue.

In response to The News-Star's questions about the origin of the test material, the governor's office said these things also concern them.

"We are asking these same questions of DOE," Deputy Communications director Shannon Bates said. "That's why DOA sent them the letter. We are very hopeful that DOE will take the time to address our concerns because transparency and accountability are very important when administering taxpayer dollars and the duties of public office. Parents and teachers deserve clarity about what tests will be administered in the spring."

Roemer said the whole issue has become a political "hot potato."

"We should not let the politics of it dissuade us as a state from providing the best education possible," he said. "They can send me all the letters they want. I'm going to do what's best for our students, that's it."

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