Johnson urges more security around tests

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School Board member Ron Johnson said Monday that the board could call for tighter security around state-mandated tests, possibly including videotaping high school exit tests, in light of recent allegations of cheating at three local schools.

However, he said the increased security could stretch further than that to include more controls over students’ answer sheets after they are turned in.

An erasure analysis by a testing service of spring Louisiana Educational Assessment Program tests revealed widespread changing of answers in a fifth-grade class at Beechwood Elementary and a third-grade class at Banks Elementary. A local investigation ruled out students as suspects in the alleged cheating.

Those two classes were among 50 classes in 33 schools in 19 parishes suspected of cheating on the spring tests, a state report shows.

A similar erasure analysis of the summer retake of LEAP exit tests revealed suspected cheating at Capitol High School on the social studies and math sections. A local investigation has revealed so far that if any cheating occurred at Capitol, it happened after students turned in their answers.

A total of 141 exit tests at Capitol High have been identified as being changed in a “questionable manner by or for some... students” compared with a total of 66 tests in eight other schools, including some in Pointe Coupee, Iberville and Livingston parishes, a state report shows.

High school students must pass all five parts of the exit test to graduate.

Johnson said that before news broke of the allegations at Capitol High, he asked Superintendent Bernard Weiss to place an item on a committee agenda calling for a review of the system’s own policies on how the alteration of answers on state tests should be handled.

Johnson said he was prompted by the allegations concerning Banks and Beechwood elementary schools, which were revealed before the allegations broke concerning Capitol High.

The questions surrounding testing at the three schools point up the need for greater internal controls, including more monitoring of tests before, during and after their administration, he said.

“It does show that we’re moving ahead,” Johnson said.

“I am concerned about those children who took the exam and may have passed” regardless of the changes made to their answer sheets, he said. “My only concern is with the kids and of course the kids want the results to stand and I support them in that regard.”

A school system report on the local investigation so far said that some of the scores the state plans to invalidate were sufficient for the students to pass even if all the erasures had been incorrect.

Students whose scores will be invalidated because of allegations of cheating will be able to take the tests over. However, Johnson said that could mean additional remedial classes might have to be offered to those students to ensure the knowledge they need to pass remains fresh in their minds.

Johnson said his earlier concerns about the number of high school students who have failed at least two sections of the five-part exit test ultimately led the state to offer local students additional retake dates to give them another chance to earn diplomas.

The exit test will be offered on Feb. 4 and 6 next year.

About 350 East Baton Rouge Parish high school students had failed at least two sections of the exit test before the results of the summer retake were taken into account, Johnson said. An updated figure was not available.