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Test Taking Incentives

Many of you have used and will continue to use test-taking incentives to motivate high student performance. Please know that these are often good ideas and when used appropriately, motivate students to do well on assessments.

However, the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) has received guidance from the Family Policy Compliance Office (FPCO) regarding the use of such motivators. The FPCO is the office in the United States Department of Education that oversees the confidentiality rights of students under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The guidance we received from the FPCO is that, although it is proper to identify individual students who have received high marks, awards or honors, a motivation system may not be designed in a manner that leads to easy identification of student's who have performed poorly on assessments. Rewards or incentives based on a grade level's overall performance that do not leave out students scoring below proficiency (e.g. the whole 3rd grade gets to have a pizza party because they met targets) would be acceptable.

The FPCO guidance referred to a situation in which, for example, a school offered an incentive to all students who scored at the proficient level or above on state assessments. According to the FPCO, this particular offer, if carried out without parental consent, would violate the confidentiality provisions of FERPA because it would also readily identify students who had not scored at the proficient level.

Therefore, schools should be cautioned to either: (1) use motivation techniques designed to reward only exceptionally high achieving students, or (2) obtain parental consent from parents for participation of their child in the rewards program. If a school elects to develop a rewards program that will maximize student participation by, for example, offering particular rewards for students scoring at the proficient level on assessments, it is not necessary that all parents consent to the participation of their child. However, the school should include in such a rewards program only those students whose parents have consented to their child's participation. In short, before implementing motivational strategies, a school may want to provide parents with a copy of the rewards that the school is proposing to offer to the students and obtain informed, written parental consent for each child at the school who will participate.