When Pineapple Races Hare, Students Lose, Critics of Standardized Tests Say

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

A reading passage included this week in one of New York’s standardized English tests has become the talk of the eighth grade, with students walking around saying, “Pineapples don’t have sleeves,” as if it were the code for admission to a secret society.

The passage is a parody of the tortoise and the hare story, the Aesop’s fable that almost every child learns in elementary school. Only instead of a tortoise, the hare races a talking pineapple, and the moral of the story — more on that later — is the part about the sleeves.

While taking the test, baffled children raised their hands to say things like, “This story doesn’t make sense.”

Antitesting activists have taken up the cudgel, saying that the passage and the multiple-choice questions associated with it perfectly illustrate the absurdity of standardized testing. And by Friday afternoon, the state education commissioner had decided that the questions would not count in students’ official scores.

Daniel Pinkwater, a popular children’s book author who wrote the original version of the passage, which was doctored for the test, said that the test-makers had turned a nonsensical story into a nonsensical question for what he believed was a nonsensical test, but acknowledged that he was tickled to death by the children’s reaction.

“One kid called me, and there were quite a few e-mails,” Mr. Pinkwater said.

“Some kids took me to task; the phrase sellout appeared on my screen,” he said, adding that he had been paid for the right to his excerpt and never looked back to see what had been done with it. “Others were gentler about it.”

While the furor over the test passage seems to have achieved phenomenal proportions in New York — one boy has already posted a picture on his Facebook page of a T-shirt with the motto “Pineapples Don’t Have Sleeves” — it has caused similar ripples across the country.
It turns out the same passage and questions, perhaps with variations, have been used at least as far back as 2007 in states like Illinois, Arkansas, Delaware and Alabama, and every time, elicited roughly the same spectrum of incredulity, bafflement, hilarity and outrage.

“I’m still confused about the WHOLE thing,” a student from Alabama posted on a blog in March 2010.

“Our whole school was talking about that story all day long,” posted Adam from Arkansas, a month later.

“Given all the negative feedback they got in other states, they should have pulled this story,” Diane Ravitch, an education historian and critic of the growth of standardized testing, said Friday.

“When the kids ridicule it when they first read it, you know that something’s wrong here. That’s the scary part.”

The test publisher, Pearson, did not respond to requests for comment about the most recent confusion caused by the passage, which was reported Friday by The Daily News.

In a statement Friday afternoon, John B. King Jr., the state education commissioner, said that “due to the ambiguous nature of the test questions the department has decided it will not be counted against students in their scores.”

Mr. King also said that a committee of teachers had reviewed all testing material, including the passage in question, and that it had been reused by Pearson as a way to compare New York students to counterparts in other states. Mr. King also said that in the context of the full passage the questions “make more sense.”

But more than a dozen eighth graders interviewed Friday unanimously disputed Mr. King’s assessment, saying that two of the six questions were barely rational. (All six are being thrown out.)

The crux of the passage is that the pineapple challenges the hare to a race, and the other animals are convinced the pineapple must have a trick up its sleeve and will win. When the pineapple stands still, the animals eat it. The moral of the story: “Pineapples don’t have sleeves.”

One of the disputed questions asked, essentially, which was the wisest animal. Some students said that none of the animals seemed very bright, but that a likely answer was the
owl, because it was the one that uttered the moral.

Others worried that the owl was a distraction, because owls are supposed to be wise, so it would be the wrong answer.

The other tough question was why the animals ate the pineapple. Students were torn between two of the four choices: they were annoyed or they were hungry; either one seemed to work.

“It was kind of weird,” Octavio Solis, 13, an eighth grader at Intermediate School 136 in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, said Friday morning, bursting out laughing at the memory of the passage. “I didn’t really understand it, why they ate the pineapple.”

A sidewalk sampling of students in the Delta program, a gifted program at Middle School 54 on the Upper West Side, reached a consensus that the owl was the wisest. (Correct.) Most thought the animals ate the pineapple because they were annoyed that it had tricked them (Also correct.), and said that there was no evidence that the animals were hungry. (By that point the pineapple had “lost all human traits,” said Geoffrey Cowling, 13, so eating it did not seem so bad.)

But Kate Scheuer, another Delta student, said the jokiness of the story made her nervous. “I thought I was getting it wrong,” she said. “I was second-guessing myself because it’s so ridiculous.”

Deborah Meier, founder of the progressive Central Park East schools in New York City, who has lectured and written widely about testing, said the pineapple passage was “an outrageous example of what’s true of most of the items on any test, it’s just blown up larger.”

In the world of testing, she said, it does not really matter whether an answer is right or wrong; the “right” answer is the one that field testing has shown to be the consensus answer of the “smart” kids. “It’s a psychometric concept,” she said.

Even very intelligent children, she said, can sometimes overthink an answer and get it wrong.

A more legitimate question for a nonsense fable, she said, would have been something like, “Is this a spoof? Is it intended to make sense?”
Mr. Pinkwater’s original twist on the fable is in his novel, “Borgel,” part of his book, “4 Fantastic Novels,” published in paperback 12 years ago. It is told by a 111-year-old man to a boy who might or might not be his relative, while they are riding a bus. “He tells them these fables from the old country, and this is one of them,” Mr. Pinkwater said. “Sometimes everybody on the bus would get involved.”

In the original version a rabbit races an eggplant, and children speculated Friday that the eggplant had been changed to a pineapple because some kids might not know what an eggplant was. Why the rabbit was changed to a hare was harder to explain. There is no mention of sleeves.

Mr. Pinkwater (whose wife, Jill, is a former college remedial reading teacher) said he considered himself a nonsense writer, and the test-makers had taken his story far too seriously. “Well give me a break,” he said. “It’s a nonsense story and there isn’t an option for a nonsense answer.”

Ann Farmer and Daniel Krieger contributed reporting.