

May 4, 2015

The Honorable Charles W. Wiger  
Chair, Senate Education Committee  
75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
Room 205  
St. Paul, MN 55155-1606

Dear Chairman Wiger:

I am writing today to clarify the circumstances of the testing glitches that caused interruptions last month to the online administration of the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA). We apologize for the interruptions and are very aware how disruptive these issues were to educators and students. In fact, we too felt the disruption at a very personal level as many of our 1,200 Minnesota-based employees work in assessment and are parents of school-aged children. Pearson holds itself to a high standard, and when our products and services do not work properly, we should be held accountable. Below I will describe some of the steps that Pearson has taken to fix this issue and minimize the chance of any reoccurrence in the future.

During the first five weeks of testing, which began on March 9, there were no major incidents related to the online administration, and nearly 400,000 tests were completed. Then over the course of three days during a two-week period in April, some Minnesota students experienced issues logging into Pearson's test management portal, called PearsonAccess. On Tuesday, April 21, test administrators experienced two periods of unexpected service interruption that affected their ability to access PearsonAccess in order to create, resume, and monitor test sessions. More specifically, an overloaded processor, one of four that supports PearsonAccess' firewall configuration, was the cause. We reconfigured the firewall to ensure more evenly distributed loads during peak usage periods. A second interruption on April 21 involved a denial-of-service attack (DDoS) that was terminated after 30 minutes. Pearson that week implemented additional protections to reduce the likelihood of any additional service interruptions due to DDoS attacks. It's important for me to convey that while this second cause was an example of someone trying to disrupt the system, it was not a hack attempt. No one was trying to break into our testing system – and at no time was any student data at risk for exposure.

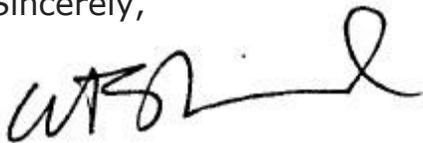
Education Commissioner Cassellius exercised her prerogative to suspend statewide testing on Wednesday, April 22, to ensure that Pearson could confirm the system was running properly. Testing resumed on Thursday, April 23.

We regret and apologize for these service interruptions. As soon as we learned of these technical issues, we acted quickly to identify the causes and implement a fix so that students could resume testing. While testing glitches receive heightened attention in the eyes of the public and media, as they should, glitches are the exception. During the week of April 20, nearly 173,000 tests were completed. Year to date, Minnesota public school students have completed more than 540,000 tests. Even with the service interruptions that occurred, no student tests were invalidated.

When the issue culminated with the April 21 outage in Minnesota arose, our first priority was to fix the immediate issue. With testing restored, we have now moved on to making certain our services more resilient and increasing capacity where possible.

Please contact me directly should you have any additional questions.

Sincerely,



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President, State Services  
Pearson

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The Honorable Sean R. Nienow, Ranking Member, Senate Education  
Brenda Cassellius, Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Education