



Wyoming Department of Education

Dr. Jim McBride, Superintendent of Public Instruction

Hathaway Building, 2nd Floor, 2300 Capitol Avenue

Cheyenne, WY 82002-0050

Phone 307-777-7673 Fax 307-777-6234 Website www.k12.wy.us

MEMORANDUM NO. 2010- 076

TO: School District Superintendents

FROM: Jim McBride, Ed.D. 

DATE: April 9, 2010

SUBJECT: PAWS Concerns Shared with USED

MCBRIDE CONTACTS USED ON PAWS CONCERNS

Attached you will find a letter I sent to Dr. Zollie Stevenson at the United States accountability determinations. The letter outlines problems associated with the 2010 PAWS administration and specifically asks USED to grant a waiver in using the results of 2010 PAWS to make accountability and AYP determinations.

The letter was sent to Dr. Stevenson on March 26, 2010. I have spoken with him personally and believe that USED will work with Wyoming on the concerns expressed in the letter. It is important to emphasize that we have only initiated the conversation. Dr. Stevenson's only promise was to work with us to continue to evaluate the 2010 PAWS situation.

The Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) has been very concerned about the problems associated with the 2010 PAWS online testing. I emphasize that I share the concerns voiced throughout the state regarding the accuracy of the online results. We will vigorously pursue an outcome that does not allow these results to impact AYP and other accountability determinations.

We wanted to make the letter available to you in advance of Monday's meeting with the PAWS Technical Advisory Committee via the WEN.

As a reminder, all district superintendents have been invited to speak directly with the Wyoming TAC regarding 2010 PAWS experiences. That meeting is scheduled for Monday, April 12, from 3:00 until 5:00pm. A roll call of districts will be taken and each superintendent will be given up to two minutes to discuss student experiences as well as impacts to upcoming educational decisions related to 2010 PAWS.

District superintendents are encouraged to submit written comments to supplement the WEN meeting. These should be directed to Melissa Irvine (mirvin@educ.state.wy.us).



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March 26, 2010

Zollie Stevenson, Jr., Ph.D.
Director, Student Achievement and School Accountability Programs
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave., SW, Suite 3W226
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Dr. Stevenson:

Thank you for taking the time to visit with my team and for your shared concern regarding the current dilemma faced by Wyoming's school districts and students caused by Pearson's online assessment platform. The purpose of this letter is to advise and further inform USED of the problems Wyoming is experiencing with our 2010 assessment. We are deeply concerned that these problems have impacted our 2010 results, and we ask for a waiver in using these results to make accountability and AYP determinations.

In preparation for the Proficiency Assessments for Wyoming Students (PAWS) 2010-12 administrations, the Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) released a detailed Request for Proposal which included an explicit description of the expected functionality for an online assessment platform. NCS Pearson was selected by a twelve-member panel through a rigorous evaluation and scoring process of vendor proposals. Following the selection of Pearson, the WDE attorney and assessment team crafted a contract which included a four-year Action Plan with clearly defined deliverables.

Wyoming intends to apply liquidated damages to each deliverable that has not been met by its respective target date listed in the contract. The deliverables relevant to this letter are related to the online system contractually required to meet or exceed the functionalities of the PAWS 2009 online assessment. The redesigned TestNav online platform provided by Pearson to Wyoming for the 2010 assessment is called TestNav 7.0. In the January 2009 PAWS Planning Meeting, Pearson relayed to Wyoming that TestNav 7.0 would first be in use in October of 2009 and that Wyoming would not be the first state to administer tests on this platform. Regardless, Wyoming required Pearson to pilot TestNav 7.0 in a carefully chosen sample of districts in Wyoming. While this pilot was successful, the proctor caching interface with TestNav 7.0 was not available to test at that time.

Preparation for the 2010 PAWS assessment began at a Planning Meeting in January 2009. The department worked with Pearson to complete an Annual Program Plan and participated in subsequent planning meetings, management meetings, weekly development conference calls, weekly management calls and weekly technology calls to monitor the progress of the assessment program in order to ensure an on-time, fully functional assessment for the students of Wyoming. All timelines and deliverables were met between January 2009 and October 2009.

Beginning November 2009, the WDE started receiving amended timelines, which included several To-Be-Determined dates related to the final development of TestNav 7.0. This resulted in impacts upon multiple areas of the assessment program. During November and December 2009, the WDE raised concerns to the Pearson Program Management team over the status of the platform. These concerns were

met with assurances that while there were delays, our concerns were not warranted. At the PAWS 2010 Planning Meeting in January 2010 my staff again voiced their concerns. On January 27, 2010, I sent a letter to Pearson's President of State Services (see attachment), expressing our concern that we had yet to see TestNav 7.0 with Wyoming specific content. On January 28, 2010, I conducted a conference call with Pearson's senior management. During the call, I requested a redundancy plan should Pearson not be able to meet the online administration date of March 8, 2010. I also required that a daily conference call be held with the WDE and Pearson in order to receive a daily status of TestNav 7.0.

The WDE inquired on several occasions as to the need to move the entire assessment to either paper pencil or move the online portion of the assessment to an earlier version of TestNav. We were told that paper pencil was not needed and an earlier version of TestNav was not a viable option. WDE then requested a fully detailed timeline with best and worst case scenarios to meet both the February 15th tutorial window and the March 8th assessment window.

The tutorial opened on February 15th as planned. However, districts began expressing concerns almost immediately (see attachment). The Department collected data through district technology directors, and submitted these data to Pearson. During the next several evenings, Pearson completed and loaded rebuilds of the TestNav 7.0 software. These rebuilds addressed some issues expressed by the technology directors, but also resulted in the origin of new problems requiring further "fixes". During the days approaching the opening of the assessment window, multiple issues continued to surface as districts began the proctor caching of the test content.

Wyoming's heightened stages of alarm were met with very reluctant acknowledgement by Pearson of any significant threats to the 2010 PAWS assessment. In fact, Pearson continually sought to blame the problem on local districts as they stated that they were not seeing the problems that our districts were seeing within their own system. The WDE required that Pearson send technology experts to work in our local schools prior to the window opening and throughout the first two weeks of the assessment to identify problems and solutions to their software failure. Pearson responded by sending two representatives prior to the assessment window opening. Six representatives were sent the first week and four the second week of the assessment window, several of which were ill-prepared and unaware of the significant issues related to TestNav 7.0 facing Wyoming districts.

The following is a list of the system issues that students in all districts have experienced during the online assessment:

- White screens
- Java script gibberish
- Frozen screens
- Lost responses
- Booted out of the test
- Unable to submit
- Log-in and log-out failures
- Extended, protracted loading of the items
- Pearson TestNav 7.0 outage causing statewide testing disruption
- Writing issues so profound that the test was shut down for a day

On March 10, 2010, I held a press conference to share with the public the issues that our students were experiencing and informed school districts that they would receive correspondence from Pearson twice a

Dr. Zollie Stevenson
March 26, 2010
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day with any updates. I also held a conference call with district superintendents to collect information on their students' testing experiences. The department has attached a sample of the feedback we have received. Their feedback indicated widespread failures of the online platform, and adverse conditions experienced by students statewide attempting to take PAWS.

The WDE has maintained close contact with our Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) throughout the testing cycle to discuss student results. We contacted our TAC during the first few days of the assessment window, as reports of problems compounded. It was initially thought that we would be able to isolate results of schools that experienced issues during the first few days of the assessment window. We believed that all problems with online platform functionality would be solved, and the administration would proceed normally. But, now that we have entered the third week of testing (day 15), the issues are not resolved and they continue to be evidenced across the state.

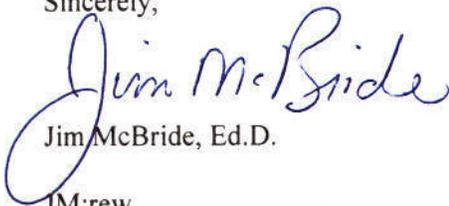
The widespread reports from WDE's technology director, district technology directors, and school administrators of the chaotic testing environment where students attempt to complete PAWS, using a platform that functions only intermittently, while technology directors and test administrators attempt to work around the lock-ups, white screens, and difficulties resuming the test in computer labs during testing sessions, has convinced me that the results of this year's PAWS administration have been seriously compromised. Our TAC supports my view that these results are suspect and should not be used for accountability purposes. Students, schools and districts cannot be held accountable for Pearson's failure to provide us with a viable, fully-functional online platform to accurately measure student achievement as required by NCLB. Wyoming will continue to work with our TAC to salvage as much value as possible for students and teachers and to determine what, if any, are the appropriate interpretations of the results.

The Wyoming Department of Education did everything possible to address and avoid problems with the 2010 assessment. The difficulties experienced within our districts and schools, and by students taking the assessment are entirely outside the control of individuals in Wyoming.

Wyoming is fully committed to accountability. We are seeking your guidance for alternative options to make fair and valid AYP determinations for our schools and districts. We respectfully request your alerting the appropriate parties to Wyoming's urgent need for guidance regarding 2010 school and district accountability.

The purpose of this letter is to begin the discussion. I am confident that you and members of your staff will want to follow up. Please feel to contact me at any time. Alan Moore is the Director of our Standards and Assessment Unit. He can be reached at 307-721-1930 or email at amoore@educ.state.wy.us. Lesley Wangberg is our State Assessment Director. Her contact information is 307-721-1920; her email address is lwangb@educ.state.wy.us.

Sincerely,



Jim McBride, Ed.D.

JM:rew

Attachments



Wyoming Department of Education

Dr. Jim McBride, Superintendent of Public Instruction
Hathaway Building, 2nd Floor, 2300 Capitol Avenue
Cheyenne, WY 82002-0050
Phone 307-777-7673 Fax 307-777-6234 Website www.k12.wy.us

January 27, 2010

Darice Keating, SVP, General Manager State Services
Frosyne Mensendick, Territory Vice President
Tracy Freeman, Program Technology Manager
Loraine Greenwood, Senior Program Manager
NCS Pearson, Inc.
2510 North Dodge Street
Iowa City, IA 52245 USA

Dear Officers:

As State Superintendent of Public Instruction, I have a responsibility and commitment to the well-being and success of all Wyoming schools and students. With this in mind, the Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) took great efforts to write a comprehensive Request for Proposal (RFP #0056-S) for our Statewide Assessment System, and very carefully scrutinized all documentation submitted by the proposers. As the selected assessment vendor, NCS Pearson, Inc. offered an online assessment for the Proficiency Assessments for Wyoming Students (PAWS) offering an evolution and expansion of the platform upon which PAWS was delivered in 2007-08 and 2008-09.

I am writing to you to express a concern shared by my staff and me regarding the viability of the TestNav 7.0 platform and the ability of Pearson to meet required contractual obligations in a timely manner and of the quality as indicated in the Pearson Technical Proposal to RFP #0056-S. Specifically, as of today, January 27, 2010, the WDE has not been presented with a fully functioning version of TestNav 7.0 with Wyoming content. It appears to the WDE that the TestNav product may not be ready for a spring 2010 statewide assessment in Wyoming. As a result of persistent delays to TestNav, the following deliverables are directly impacted:

- Online Tutorial
- Training Video
- *2010 Online Directions For Administration Manual (DFA)* (to be printed, shipped and delivered to schools by February 15, 2010)
- The TestNav solution for the 11th grade online writing assessment

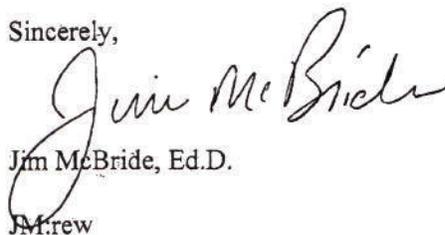
Although the program and content teams of both Pearson and the WDE have been working diligently, the schedule is behind by over six weeks. I am curious as to how six weeks of an edit and review process can be accomplished with only 12 working days before the contractual delivery of the items listed above without the quality of the deliverables being compromised. Above all is the overriding concern I have regarding the potential impact of a compromised tutorial on students' ability to interact with this new platform.

Pearson Officers
January 27, 2010
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I would like to make a formal request for a phone conversation between my WDE staff and your development teams to be held as soon as tomorrow (1/28/10). Please contact Rita Watson, 307-777-7675, with your hours of availability. During the course of our conversation, we will be inquiring of the schedule or plan that Pearson has in place to provide the WDE with sufficient opportunity to review these deliverables, and to ensure an on-time delivery of the 2010 PAWS and the redundancy plan in the event TestNav 7.0 cannot provide a solution to our assessment needs. All plans must also demonstrate Pearson's "*ability to match or exceed the current online technological capabilities of the PAWS,*" as stated on page 61 of RFP #0056-S. Please see the attached agenda for the conference call dial-in information.

If there is even the slightest possibility of a compromised delivery schedule, I insist that you inform me immediately. This is the first test to be delivered by Pearson on Pearson's platform under the current contract. Any mishap will be a significant blow to not only Pearson's credibility, but to the credibility of the WDE as placed by the public.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jim McBride". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Jim McBride, Ed.D.

JM:rew

Attachment: Meeting Agenda

Item	Issue	Resolution/Solution	Platform	Status	NOTES
1	Item transition lockup	Caused by the interface between Java and Flash. Using BlazeDS/AMF from adobe. Required tweaking of timing parameters to resolve.	Mac	Fixed (3/8)	
2	Not accepting certificate	TestNav is a signed Java applet which invokes the "accept/deny" certificate process in browsers. Users not accepting certificate or not waiting on the browser to display the pop-up before logging in would lock up due to browser not allowing software to execute. Provided documentation on how to accept this setting permanently so it does not have to be performed on each session launch.	All	Local setting	See PearsonAccess/Support/User Documentation for technical bulletin
3	Tab key causing Early Warning System (EWS)	When on an open ended writing item, students were pressing the tab key which was inappropriately activating the EWS requiring the student to have to be resumed.	PC	Fixed (3/9)	
4	Tutorial flag not being set in a timely manner	The message being sent from TestNav to the registration system to indicate that the tutorial test was complete for a student was queuing causing delays in the student being able to proceed to the operational test.	All	Fixed (3/7)	
5	Tutorial flag being overwritten on student preID file submission	If a school or district submitted a new preID file for a student that had previously taken the tutorial test was being updated. During the update, the tutorial flag was being overwritten.	All	Fixed (3/5)	
6	Highlighter usage on passage and item causing lockup	If a student highlighted both the item and the passage and continued to navigate frequently between items with the highlighting was causing overflow lockup. Students could not be resumed.	All	Fixed (3/10)	
7	Section break causing EWS	If TestNav did not have all of the necessary content downloaded to the client when the student navigated to the next section, this would cause EWS to kick in or in some cases raising a message the TestNav was unable to connect to server.	All	Fixed (3/9)	
8	Proctor caching	Several issues where addressed: if forms were published with duplicate form codes, caused cache to overwrite duplicate form codes, proctor caching was purging cache too frequently, UI paging was not working properly, temporary file location not handled correctly. Instructions for loading new software were provided with Communication #2 on 3/9/2010	All	Fixed (3/9)	See PearsonAccess for latest version Proctor Caching Software
9	Utilization of Ampersand "&"	The ampersand character "&" should not be used in the test session name. Utilization of this character results in the test not being automatically processed. If the test taken was a tutorial this will prohibit the student from taking an operational test. In addition, this character should not be used in the "Mark Test Complete" reason.	All	Local set-up	
10	Proxy Server needs to run proctor caching without any interference from other applications	Pearson has verified during customer service contacts that districts may be running network analyzer tools (i.e. Spiceworks) which are allowed/given permission to stop TestNav. These tools should be removed from proctor caching servers or be configured so that they do not interfere with testing.	All	Local network management	
11	Internet Explorer Script Error	An Internet Explorer Script error was reported by two districts and is being researched by Pearson for support	PC	Fixed (3/14)	
12	11th Grade Online Writing Test- difficulty logging on and/or staying connected to TestNav	Three WY Districts reported issues with Gr 11 online Writing testing; Students had difficulty logging-in and once in the test were losing connectivity when attempting to launch the first prompt. This issue appeared to be limited to highspeed networks	All	Fixed (3/18)	11th Grade Writing testing was suspended on 3/17 until fix was verified; testing resumed 3/18

No further updates Thursday 3/18

Quotes From District and Schools Regarding PAWS 2010 Online Issues

Quote from School Principal received on March 9, 2010:

*"How can students take a test seriously when they are unsure if it will even work? How many times can we rearrange the schedule and lose instructional time and not impact the importance of the test in the staff and student's eyes? As a school administrator I am held accountable for the performance of my school yet it seems no one is held accountable for a poor assessment. I am forced to call a parent of a fourth grade student who also happens to be a local board member and explain how the multi million dollar testing platform does not recognize his son. Therefore his son could not test with his classmates and will lose two days of school time, one to not testing and one to making up the test. E***** School is judged on performance based on PAWS testing, this info will be available to the world yet how accurate will the results be? The test does not perform as it is suppose to but the results will be judged as if it does. One possible result of not meeting AYP is school personnel being removed from jobs and replaced. Therefore my job is on the line and I will be judged by a flawed test/testing system. When is the question asked about the validity of the PAWS? Who answers for the performance of the test/testing system? It seems that a cobbled together fix for the test/testing system will be put in place as we go. The schools will be judged on AYP based on this questionable approach and nothing will change. I would like to know what is being done to address these issues?"*

Quote from PAWS District Technology Director received on March 10, 2010:

"Well we could have only hoped! About 10:10 the one student I had taking the 7 grade science test froze up between questions. Then at 10:35 the 4th grade class taking the math test 10 out of the 20 froze between questions. The 50 students we had testing at the other elementary 3 froze during the test and then 12 froze at the end of the test submitting their final question. All the test that did freeze where cached before the test started. All of them were on Mac's, OS 10.4 or 10.5."

Quote from District Technology Director received on March 11, 2010:

*"Items 3 and 4 on the matrix we received last night, say that the issue with continuing to another test after the tutorial was completed was fixed on 3/7. Since we reported this specific problem on 3/8, 3/9, and 3/10, I would say that it is ***not*** fixed."*

*In the log that I sent to you yesterday, C***** High School reported 28 students who had completed the tutorial but were unable to move to the next test. This was reported to Pearson yesterday on ticket #1759732 by D**at C***** High School. A** also reported a student who was unable to continue after completing the tutorial. This happened on March 10th, so a fix on March 7th doesn't seem to have reached us."*

We are hopeful that this issue really is fixed, but our experience yesterday and earlier in the week suggests otherwise."

Quote from District Technology Director received on March 11, 2010:

"Basically---1/3 of our students who took the 10th grade writing "lost" their writing after doing the "save as final" option, getting the "grey" screen with the "edit" button

Quotes From District and Schools Regarding PAWS 2010 Online Issues

available. The students did not exit the test, instead, they got up to go to the restrooms, get a drink etc. Upon returning to their computers 2/3 were able to click "edit" and begin work again. The other 1/3 just had the "white" screen and we eventually had to force quit the testnav. Upon resuming the test, the writing that they had saved was gone."

Quote from District Superintendent received on March 16, 2010:

"As you both are aware, this again is a "technical" issue which could affect the results of my middle schools scores.... This is unacceptable! AYP determination should be based on what our students can and can not do. Not how we report the data, how you collect it or if we can muddle through the test using a platform that doesn't work. To me this is not an equal playing field...but my students and staff are the ones who will pay the price."

Quote from District PAWS Coordinator received on March 17, 2010:

"I well understand the frustration level that you folks at WDE have with Pearson at this time.

I was just at a school where testing was happening for a class of students. All students were unable to proceed with testing due to a message that something was "loading". The class was sent to PE class. About half of the students were done with the test about half were not.

We have since learned that this occurred state-wide and had to do with a problem on the Pearson end. The system is working again but the cause of the problem is still under investigation. This creates a dilemma for us. Do we start testing again, or do we wait until Pearson has a chance to investigate the cause of the problem and can assure that it will not happen again? We plan to suspend testing until we hear more from Pearson, or until tomorrow (when Pearson has at least had a chance to understand and fix the problem that occurred). We do not want the test sessions for our students interrupted midstream by technology problems.

When testing is interrupted during a session we are entering a realm where the technology problems are potentially having a negative impact on validity of test results. Reading a passage and responding to all items on that passage at that time would yield an optimal result. Reading the passage and answering some items at that time and then coming back at a later time to answer more items related to that passage might very well lead to different, less valid, results. Students tend to not reread the passage or to quickly skim it (i.e., they believe they remember the passage). Memory of details in the passage will, however, degrade as time goes by. This is over and above any frustration for students about starting and stopping the same test. If their frustration level is anything like that of the staff this would definitely be negative for any test results.

We will need to begin testing again tomorrow unless we learn more than we know at this time. We will do so in the hopes that the problem we had today will not occur again. Any guidance you can offer would be appreciated."

Quotes From District and Schools Regarding PAWS 2010 Online Issues

Quote from District Technology Director received on March 25, 2010:

"It is now Thursday morning and the TEST STILL HAS NOT BEEN RESET

Frustrated is not a term adequate enough to describe this lack of response.

My staff moved this student to a separate reading group after she was again unable to complete questions 35-51 yesterday (Wednesday) since she was the only fourth grade student remaining to be tested.

She is now in her own group waiting for a chance to finish the exam. Should the little girl ask nicely or perhaps get a note from her mom getting permission from Pearson to continue this mandated exam?

New test code is list below as TJJCXA

XXXXXXXXXXXXX · WISER ID:XXXXXXXXXXXXX

This is now 15 phone calls and e-mails combined to Pearson and the WDE to get one little girl the opportunity to finish her exam.

How many more times do I have to make contact before this is accomplished?"

Quote from Building PAWS Coordinator received on March 25, 2010:

"I am a building PAWS administrator. I want you to know that, regardless of what Pearson is telling everyone, the problems with the online PAWs test have not been resolved. If I called PearsonAccess every time we have difficulties logging in students, or getting students from one section of the test to another, or with students getting bumped out of a test, I would be calling them up to 40 times a day. We are able to, eventually, get our students where they need to be, but it can take a very long time with some students. I stopped calling Pearson because they don't help very much--they give the wrong "fix" to the problem or tell me that the problem must be with our computers or with our network. Our tech support folks could tell you a lot more than I can about how frustrating it has been to work with Pearson."