

PUBLIC NOTICE

Alaska requesting waiver from administering assessments in 2016

Alaska is requesting a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education of the requirement to administer English language arts, mathematics, and science assessments during the 2015-2016 school year.

Due to significant technology challenges, the state was not able to administer the required assessments in English language arts and mathematics to all students in grades 3-10 and in science to all students in grades 4, 8, and 10. On Tuesday, March 29, 2016, at approximately 10:30 a.m. Alaska Daylight Saving Time, construction workers severed a fiber optic cable at the University of Kansas, where Alaska's testing service provider is based, shutting down Internet service at the university and interrupting the computer-based test for all students in Alaska until Thursday, March 31. After resumption of testing on March 31, the system crashed two more times that morning, evidently because the repaired cable could not handle the volume of test-takers in multiple states.

Both before and after the cable was cut, there were reports from across the state of multiple technology errors that affected students, such as blank screens, no sound, items out of sequence, and answers not being saved. Many students had their testing interrupted, had to answer the same question more than once, or had a test that did not work as designed. On Friday, April 1, after several communications with the testing service provider about both the capacity of the cable repair and the multiple technology errors, Interim Commissioner Dr. Susan McCauley announced the cancellation of testing. The cancellation was based on concern that the repeated technical disruptions had rendered the affected tests invalid. The affected tests included the English language arts and mathematics Alaska Measures of Progress (AMP) tests, the Alaska science tests, and the Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) alternate assessments.

Subsequent to the announcement of the cancellation of the tests on April 1, Alaska communicated multiple times with the testing service provider in an effort to find resolutions to the testing errors that had occurred. Alaska was not able to resume testing because reasonable assurances that system errors were corrected were not provided by the testing service provider. There was insufficient evidence that Alaska students would have a high probability of successful testing. By the third week of May, when solutions for the testing errors still had not been adequately explained or determined and schools around the state were closing for summer break, it was no longer an option to administer the assessments during the 2015-2016 school year.

As a result, Alaska is seeking a waiver from the requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), to implement a set of high-quality, yearly student academic assessments in language arts, mathematics, and science; to measure the achievement of all students in grades 3-8 and once in high school on the language arts and mathematics assessments; and to measure the achievement of all students in grades 4, 8, and 10 on the science assessment. Specifically, Alaska is requesting a waiver of sections 1111(b)(3)(A), 1111(b)(3)(C)(vii), and 1111(b)(3)(C)(ix)(I) of ESEA, as amended by NCLB.

Because the interruption to testing occurred during the first week of the test window, only a small percentage of students statewide were able to complete the assessment before the interruptions occurred. In addition, there is substantial doubt about whether the answers recorded by students represent credible data. Schools and districts reported that the interruptions and other test administration problems created testing situations in which some students took questions more than once, clicked through answers in order to finish before the test crashed again, experienced other difficulties, or became confused or frustrated. For a statewide assessment, student results are reported as a scale score that is

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comparable from student to student, school to school, and year to year in a grade level and content area. The scale score allows an achievement level to be reported that indicates whether a student met the state standards. In order to report scale scores and achievement level results for students on a statewide assessment, a large number of students must take the assessment. Because so few students completed the assessments and there is concern about the credibility of the answers, it is not technically possible to report valid scale scores or achievement levels for the 2016 assessments.

As a result, Alaska is seeking a waiver from the requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), to report achievement data on its state and local report cards, and to submit data for the annual State Report to the Secretary. Specifically, Alaska is requesting a waiver of sections 1111(h)(1)(C)(i, iii, and iv), 1111(h)(2)(B), and 1111(h)(4)(B) of ESEA, as amended by NCLB.

The requested waiver is for the 2015-2016 school year. Alaska is seeking a new assessment system for English language arts, mathematics, and science to begin in the 2016-2017 school year, and expects to release a Request for Proposals (RFP) in the near future.

The public may submit comment and provide input on the waiver request until July 7, 2016, at 5:00 p.m., to eric.fry@alaska.gov.