

Brunswick School Department
William Thompson, Chairman
46 Federal Street
Brunswick, ME 04011

March 16, 2016

Joint Standing Committee on
Education and Cultural Affairs
Senator Brian Langely, Chairman
Representative Victoria Kornfield, Chairwoman
Cross State Office Building
Augusta, ME 04333

Dear Senator Langley, Representative Kornfield, and Committee Members,

This week will mark the beginning of MEA testing in our schools, a time of year that has long existed but with growing apprehension. With inconsistent tests year to year, more demands on student time, short preparation time for faculty, and greater financial implications, the MEA wastes time and lowers morale.

The Brunswick school board supports assessments of students. They provide important information to faculty, administrators and board members, data that informs our programmatic decisions each budget year. However with tests that change every year it is impossible for us or for the state to get an understanding of student achievement. There is no way to compare year over year or cohort to cohort results as every year the students are taking different tests. From the NWEA to Smarter Balance and now to Measured Progress, we are losing valuable information because of indecision by the Legislature and Department of Education. Bad decisions are compounded by your committee and the department rushing to try and fill a gap. This fire drill management style has to stop so that the hours our students spend taking these assessments and the administrative hours proctoring them are not wasted.

Our students and schools are negatively affected in several ways, including:

- The most recent iteration of the MEA is nearly six hours long for students from 3rd through 8th grade. It will be even longer in fifth and eighth grade, because the MEA Science component adds two hours. This is an unreasonable amount of time spent on assessments. In contrast, high school juniors will take the SAT, a test which lasts just under three hours, with an optional 50-minute writing section. If juniors can be assessed in less than half of a school day, it is difficult to understand why 9 -11 year olds need to sit for 6-8 hours of testing.
- It is not just student time that is wasted. At our junior high our teachers are switching rooms to accommodate the demands on our IT infrastructure. Our library will need to be closed to the rest of the building every morning and the computer lab will be closed so sixth graders can take the tests. During any time in which testing occurs, no other student computer use can occur because bandwidth is not sufficient to support the intensive computer use.
- At our elementary school the library, computer lab, and both art rooms will be unusable during testing and other students will have to move classrooms for students requiring accommodations. The school will also be borrowing computers from the high school, so computer work scheduled in that building will also be put on hold.

- Based on the testing experience during last year's Smarter Balance, this means that almost a full week of instructional time will be lost for each classroom, and the important services of library, art, and computer lab will be unavailable to students for three weeks.
- Across the district, with less than a week until testing begins, our administrators were just beginning to receive important information on the test from the Department. They were informed that faculty and proctors would need to take two webinars causing the elimination of team meetings and forcing ed techs out of the classroom to complete training.

The apparent futility of all of this only serves to lower morale in our schools and takes faculty away from doing what we pay them to do, teach our children.

The Assessment Task Force established by your committee was instructed to reduce the amount of time students spend on standardized tests, how does the Measured Progress test achieve this objective? Reviewing discussions of the task force the term "don't rush" appears repeatedly yet that appears to be exactly what was done. The selection of an assessment in accordance with the objectives of the Task Force was the responsibility of the Department of Education and oversight of that decision was the responsibility of the committee both appear to have failed in their respective roles.

Where does that leave us as a school district? Once again a test was hastily selected to measure our students against standards that fail to meet the objectives outlined by the legislature, increasing the likelihood that yet another assessment tool will need to be selected next year rendering this entire exercise moot.

It is important that this letter is not construed to mean Brunswick doesn't support assessments. We have great teachers who work with all students to achieve success and as a school board we welcome the opportunity to demonstrate our strengths and learn about our weaknesses but to continue to ask our students and faculty to participate in excessive testing, particularly for grades 3-8, without any benefit is unacceptable. This letter is sent in the hopes that the Legislature will set clear guidelines for the Department in choosing an assessment, support the Department as they push back against federal mandates that threaten our Title I funds, and work with the Department to ensure whatever the end result it serves Maine students.

Sincerely,
Brunswick School Board

William Thompson, Chairman

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