

Computer mishaps give foes of standardized tests attack line

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ALBANY — Troubles administering computerized test exams in third through eighth grade has provided new criticism in the battle over standardized testing in New York.

The New York State United

Teachers on Monday ripped the tests following a statewide software glitch that caused a delay for the second straight year in administering English Language exams last week for grades three to eight.

The union, which has more than 600,000 members statewide, has long railed against the exams and now has a new enemy: the computer-based tests.

“We are not going to accept this in our great state,” Andy Pallotta, NYSUT president, said at a news conference

Monday.

The state has been forced to delay its federally mandated computerized testing the last two years because of software related problems.

New York currently has a contract with Questar, an independent electronic testing service based in Minnesota, through 2020.

State responds to testing

The state Education Department said repeatedly it has taken steps to try to address any problems.

“We regret the hardship these difficulties have placed on school communities. We are holding Questar accountable for its failure to deliver the services required in our contract with them,” MaryEllen Elia, the state’s education commissioner, said in a statement Monday.

But opponents of the exams have long argued New York’s testing extends well beyond the state’s recent push to computerize the exams.

Lengthy testing periods — some as long as four hours, according to a handful of teachers at Monday’s press conference — have caused students needless stress, according to opponents.

And a lack of funding often leaves schools illequipped to properly administer the exams.

missing recess — they’re just missing school,” she said.

The problems extend well beyond the electronic format.

Rudley contended that lengthy testing periods cause unnecessary stress to students, and the tests are developmentally inappropriate for students.

“The test in and of themselves are unkind,” she added.

Possible changes

State lawmakers on Monday promised changed.

“These tests are not working,” Assemblyman Angelo Santabarbara, D-Rotterdam, Schenectady County.

“They’re hurting our children and it needs to stop.”

A group of Assembly members vowed to further reforms the testing system.

“This is not right -- it needs to stop,” said Santabarbara, who said several of his schools were impacted by last week’s software issues.

“We’re going to do something about this, we’re not going to let this continue,” he added.

Elia said Monday that no district will be unfairly penalized for participating in computer-based testing, which remains optional for schools.

A group of lawmakers are now vowing to reform how the state assesses its students.

The state, however, has taken numerous steps to pare back the exams, such as cutting the days and length of the exams and no longer tying the results to the performance of students or teachers.

“Over the past four years, Commissioner Elia and the Board of Regents have listened to the concerns of parents and teachers and made significant changes to the exams as a result,” said Education Department spokeswoman Emily DeSantis.

“Starting last year, both the ELA and Mathematics testing sessions were reduced to only two sessions each, resulting in substantially fewer questions than in prior years.”

Past problems

About 25% of students were administered their ELA exams electronically this year.

But problems with the software forced the state to push the exams back a day last week.

Last year, log-in issues prevented thousands of students from taking their exams on time last year. And a data breach exposed personal information of some students the same year.

Despite the problems this year, 120,000 students were still able to complete their exams on time, according to the state.

The computer problems add to a system already hotly debated in schools.

Each year, about 20% of parents have their children opt out of the exams, despite efforts by the state to encourage students to participate.

The math tests start May 1.

The delays have far-reaching effects, according to Lisa Rudley, of Ossining, Westchester County, and executive director of NYS Allies for Public Education, a group that has promoted the opt outs.

“Students are missing instructional time, they’re

The department said it brings in hundreds of teachers each year to help develop the tests.

“This year, New York State teachers reviewed all questions for inclusion on the assessments at least six times,” DeSantis said.

“It’s up to parents to decide if their children should take the tests, and we want them to have the all the facts so they can make an informed decision.”

Andy Pallotta, president of NYSUT, on Monday calls on the state’s Education Department to reform its standardized testing. CHAD ARNOLD/ALBANY BUREAU