

April 20, 2015

Governor Rick Snyder  
P.O. Box 30013  
Lansing, Michigan 48909

Dear Governor Snyder:

We are only in the second week of an eight-week M-STEP testing window and already this test has been a disaster. It is impossible to believe that this test could be considered an accurate measure of student growth. Despite public announcements from the State Superintendent and the Department of Education (MDE) that they will not use test results this year in teacher evaluations or school rankings, test scores may still play a part in a teacher's evaluation. What's to prevent an administrator from using unreliable M-STEP data to judge a teacher's performance?

MEA is hearing loud and clear from our members about some of the enormous problems associated with M-STEP.

1. M-STEP is stealing time from Instruction. M-STEP testing began the week of April 1 and will continue through the week of June 1. This is a significant amount of the school year devoted to testing. This does not take into account that many schools districts are also testing their students with the NWEA in the fall, winter and spring – which can mean an additional three weeks of testing – making “standardized testing” account for an even greater portion of the school year!
2. M-STEP is absorbing the whole day for testing. Teachers report testing is taking much more time than anticipated, and students are not finishing their work during the day. The original directive from MDE indicated a student must finish the test on the same day it was started or the test would be “locked.” This is exactly what happened at the end of the day and students could not complete their tests. After a few days, and many complaints, MDE did send out a communication stating the testing procedure would change and students would be allowed to finish the test on a later date. This will create more work and confusion since the initial tests will have to be “reopened.”
3. M-STEP is taking time away from the curriculum. Teachers report the amount of time they need to devote to M-STEP will be a loss of valuable instructional time. Current curriculum and educational opportunities will be lost since M-STEP threatens to take up the remainder of the school year.
4. Computers and technology are now unavailable for any other purposes. During the eight-week testing window, the schools' computer labs are shut down for M-STEP testing, which means all other instruction in computer labs is not possible. The computer lab is not available for technology classes or for any other Core classes through the end of the school year!
5. Even libraries are not available during the testing window. In most districts, the library contains a computer lab; therefore, libraries all over Michigan are unavailable for students to complete research or even check out books.

6. Multiple parts of the M-STEP make planning around testing and make-up impossible. Each test contains multiple sections with “rules” on when the sections can be tested. For example, “performance tasks” must be completed within three days of the classroom activity. This causes a problem—both for completing the “classroom activity” and for test makeup—when students are absent. M-STEP coordinators have told us that multiple test sections mean some students could be spending as much as 12 hours taking the test.
7. M-STEP, in many cases, is testing a student’s ability to manipulate the technology of the test, not the Common Core State Standards. MEA continues to support strong Standards; however, this test seems to be beyond many of our students’ grasp with the subtleties of technology. For example, students are asked to “cut and paste” and manipulate text in a way that is unfamiliar to them, making it difficult to assess a student’s knowledge of content or technology.
8. District infrastructure is not able to meet the needs of the M-STEP. Teachers who are responsible for coordination of the M-STEP are seeing huge problems with the technology and school building infrastructure. Computers are “crashing” and locking up during the test, causing delays in testing and stress on students. In addition, it seems that there is not enough bandwidth to get the test up for all students.
9. More and more parents are talking about “opting-out” their children. Districts and teachers understand they are required to test a minimum of 95 percent of their students. Districts that fall below that participation rate could be subject to a lowering of their statewide rating. MDE reports that if schools continue to fall below 95 percent, they will be subject to both “support and intervention,” which we fear will lead to unintended consequences.
10. Districts, teachers and parents fear what M-STEP will mean to the status of a school. At some point, M-STEP will be used, in part, to determine a district’s placement on the Top-To-Bottom list. And as we know, this list is used to determine Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools. As we understand it, the Priority, Focus and Reward identifications are not slated to happen again until 2016-2017. However, will the results from the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 tests be included in identifying those schools?

All of these issues with the M-STEP have to give us pause. We must take a step back and reevaluate the assessments we use, since it has such important consequences for students, educators, school districts and the state itself. We have to be sure of what we want from the test and how we’ll use the information it provides.

While the M-STEP testing may have to continue despite the problems, MEA is urging that any use of the test results be postponed until we have adequate and reliable data. At this point, the M-STEP is not capable of providing a reliable measure of student growth. We can’t judge students, educators or school districts on such an uncertain assessment. The stakes are too high.

Sincerely yours,



Steven B. Cook  
MEA President

cc: State Superintendent Michael P. Flanagan  
Incoming State Superintendent Brian Whiston  
State Board of Education  
Speaker of the House Kevin Cotter  
House Minority Leader Tim Greimel  
House Education Committee  
Senate Majority Leader Arlan Meekhof  
Senate Minority Leader Jim Ananich  
Senate Education Committee