The Washington Post Print

Maryland schools need $100 million for online Common Core tests, says report

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: January 17 at 9:33 am

A new report from Maryland's Education Department to the legislature says that the vast majority of schools in many of the state's counties are not technologically prepared to give new online Common Core-aligned standardized tests and that at least $100 million will have to be spent by 2015 to get ready.

In Montgomery County alone, it is estimated that necessary computer purchases will cost some $10 million, wireless enhancements to the infrastructure another $3 million and other technological improvements an additional $4 million. Prince George's County estimates it will need at least $5 million in improvements — money neither county has to spend. Eleven of 24 school systems in the state have completed a series to tests to determine readiness, and in those 11, a whopping 85 percent of schools aren't prepared, the report said.

State lawmakers were briefed on the report on Wednesday, according to this story in the Baltimore Sun, which quoted Sen. Paul G. Pinsky, a Prince George's County Democrat and member of the Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee, as saying that "some of the data that they showed us raises some concerns."

Indeed it should, especially since just last month Maryland State Superintendent of Schools Lillian Lowery tried to reassure Gov. Martin O'Malley that the challenge was with the tests, not the technology. O'Malley said: "Describe for me how much of this is an IT challenge and how much of this is a testing and education. [challenge]?" She gave a long response, and then said, "It's the testing, not the IT."

Maryland is part of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), one of two multi-state consortia that — with some $350 million in federal funds — promised to develop standardized tests aligned with the Common Core State Standards. The Core standards were adopted by 46 states plus the District of Columbia in recent years, though a number of states are reconsidering their participation as opposition has grown. Maryland, in fact, recently took on the role as the "fiscal agent" for PARCC but did so reluctantly, and, O'Malley said, as "a favor" to President Obama, whose administration asked the state to take over from Florida, which dropped out of the consortium.

New curriculum aligned to the standards has been implemented this year in schools across the state, and Maryland is planning to give up the Maryland School

Assessments in 2015 and replace them with the new exams for students in grades 3-11. Educators have asked Lowery to suspend this spring's test administration because it no longer tests curriculum being taught to students, but she has refused.

The General Assembly had requested the report from the state Education Department to assess schools' readiness for the new exams.

Some educators around the country have been calling for a moratorium on new Core-aligned online standardized testing until the schools are technologically ready and the new curriculum has been fully implemented.

"We need to focus on getting this transition right and doing what's best for students, not rushing ahead without giving educators and students the support they need," said Adam Mendelson, spokesman for the Maryland State Education Association.

Here are some of the highlights from the report:

There will be a 280 percent increase in the number of online test-takers when we move to PARCC — 301,036 vs 1,144,448

* Total time (in minutes) devoted to state standardized testing will increase with the PARCC exams by:
– Grade 3:   73 percent (277 vs 480)
– Grade 4:   102 percent (276 vs 560)
– Grade 5:   90 percent (297 vs 565)
– Grade 6:   95 percent (289 vs 565)
– Grade 7:   84 percent (306 vs 565)
– Grade 8:   83 percent (308 vs 565)

* In the 11 counties that have completed preparedness tests, 85 percent of the schools are not ready for the online PARCC exams:
– 46.65 percent of elementary schools are ready for assessment and instruction
– 26.57 percent of middle schools are ready for assessment and instruction
– 8.96 percent of high schools are ready for assessment and instruction

* Here are some highlights from the needs assessments that counties submitted detailing problems:
– Baltimore County: "While it will be difficult to test all of our students without addressing our two priorities, BCPS may be able to logistically test all students, but it will have a severe impact on our instructional program time having to use our existing wired and old desktop labs."
– Calvert: Installation and setup of wireless infrastructure will take approximately 2+ years."
– Caroline: "While we may be able to logistically test all students without implementing our priority 2 item, the impact on instruction would be severe."
– Cecil: "We are considering deferring computer-based instruction at Middle and High schools and altering 2nd semester course offerings in order to make physical space, then temporarily redistributing equipment to add testing capacity."
– Montgomery: "MCPS needs 17,894 additional PARCC compliant devices in order to meet the recommended testing scenario of 1:1 ratios within the largest testing

grade level. Without these devices, PARCC testing will likely not be completed within the testing window. ...[These devices] will cost $10,736,400 that we do not have for this initiative."

– Prince George's: "With PARCC testing we will not have enough staff dedicated to provide technical support for all sites."