Test security now means checking social media for cheaters

March 19 2015, byGeoff Mulvihill

For the organizations that give standardized tests, it's a common—and common-sense—security measure.

But to the growing number of critics of the exams, the practice of monitoring students' social media accounts against leaks of test questions is evidence that the tests and the companies that create them are too invasive.

The debate exploded last week in New Jersey when a school administrator emailed some colleagues about her district's experience. In the email, Watchung Hills Regional High School District Superintendent Elizabeth Jewett said the state Education Department contacted her district at a testing company's request at 10 p.m. one night last week with news of a possible test breach. A student apparently had posted a photo of a question from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers test, or PARCC, on Twitter.

The state Education Department, she said in her note, was informed of the issue by Pearson, the London-based company that oversees the test developed by PARCC. It is being given in a dozen states this month.

"The DOE wanted us to issue discipline to the student," she wrote.

But, Jewett said in the March 10 email to leaders of other schools that was obtained by education blogger Bob Braun, it turned out that the student was merely complaining about a test question; there was no

photo of the item itself. She said the student's tweet was removed.

Jewett released a statement confirming that the email was hers and asserting it was accurate, but she did not return an email seeking more details. The district also said she would not comment further.

PARCC, intended to measure how well students are learning what's required by the national Common Core curriculum standards, has many critics. Some students scattered across the country are protesting the exam and some parents organized through social media networks are boycotting it.

Their objections include that the exam itself is inappropriate, that it's part of a culture of testing that is taking away from real learning at school and that it's generally dehumanizing. They say the testing is more about consequences—as factors in determining which teachers could be fired; which schools may be closed for performing badly—than it is about learning. They also say they worry about the privacy of students' data.

At a legislative hearing on Thursday, the state Education Department said it would do a review to make sure students' privacy isn't compromised. Still, one lawmaker said he would introduce legislation to address the monitoring of social media.

"I just find this to be unacceptable," said Assemblyman Patrick Diegnan, the Democrat who is chairman of the Assembly's education committee.

In the testing world, there's nothing ominous about the monitoring. Pearson referred a reporter to a statement on its website that the company notifies education departments to any possible breaches.

"Copyright and test security are not new issues in testing. What's

different is the social media aspect," said Luci Willits, deputy executive director of Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, which is giving Common Core-measuring exams in 18 states this spring. "You wouldn't approve of a student taking copies of the test and handing it out to friends or posting it on the locker."

Willits said her group uses student workers to do hashtag searches online to see if anyone is posting the test itself. Last year, when 4 million students took a trial run version of that test, she said about 75 breaches were discovered.

But the New Jersey incident gave opponents more not to like.

Save Our Schools NJ is calling for an investigation. "Posting a snarky comment about a stupid question hardly warrants the Department of Ed calling a superintendent," said Susan Cauldwell, an organizer of the parents group.

Randi Weingarten, national president of the American Federation for Teachers union, started a petition drive this week calling for Pearson to stop monitoring students' social media accounts.

In an interview, Weingarten compared the alleged snooping to tactics in the Soviet Union. "It's creepy for parents, creepy for students and creepy for teachers," she said.

New Jersey Assistant Education Commissioner Bari Erlichson said monitoring should be expected. "We should work to ensure that students and parents understand that statements that are posted publicly online are not private," she said.

Melissa Tomlinson, a middle school math specialist in New Jersey's Buena Township, said her objection was what the test company asked

the state to follow up on.

"It was not a test question," she said. "It was not the big security breach that Pearson implied it to be."

Citation: Test security now means checking social media for cheaters (2015, March 19) retrieved 26 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2015-03-social-media-cheaters.html