

Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2016

Parents and families,

Let me start by saying thank you. You have been tremendous partners with your child's teachers and principals over the past several years as we have raised standards and transitioned to a new, aligned assessment in math and English language arts: TNReady. All of us are truly grateful for your support.

I also want to tell you directly that I am sorry for the frustrations the recent test changes have caused for you, your child, and his or her teacher and school leaders. Like many of you, I am disappointed we are unable to provide your student with an *online version* of TNReady this year, especially after a year of planning and hard work. Let me be clear: this is in no way your school district, school, or teacher's fault. We take full responsibility at the state department of education for the inability to test online this year, and we are working on a number of short-term and long-term solutions.

Given all the effort and anticipation of this new online test, it was a difficult decision to delay the transition to statewide online testing, but the needs of students and teachers came first. We know they deserve a reliable, consistent experience every time they log in. It's important to remember that **TNReady on paper is still TNReady**. Your child will *still* have an opportunity to show what they know this year in greater depth than they have in the past – and you will *still* get better information about where they are in their growth toward postsecondary and workforce readiness.

Over the past few months, the department and districts worked together to strengthen our technology infrastructure and prep systems and devices across the state, and we were prepared for everything we could control. But on Monday, a *new* issue we had not experienced before caused a network outage at the test vendor's site that interrupted testing for some students. This was unexpected and disappointing. Ultimately, this operational and network failure combined with the additional issues we had been mending almost daily over the past months caused us to lose confidence in our test vendor's ability to provide your child with an online platform that could perform reliably and consistently during testing.

We decided we could not risk having students and educators spend additional time on a platform that showed inconsistent performance, so we paused testing on Monday morning and asked districts to go back to regular classroom activities. Later that day, in order to protect our students' instructional time and better ensure they have a positive test experience, **we decided to move all students to a paper-and-pencil version of TNReady**

**for the rest of this school year.** This change applies to both Part I and Part II of TNReady, as well as social studies.

Your district leaders, principal, and classroom teachers have worked tremendously hard over the last several months to prepare both your student and the technology to be ready, and that is work we know will still pay off. **The questions your student practiced on a computer are the same types of questions they will see on the paper version of TNReady,** and those questions will ask your child to use critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. In addition, developing keyboarding and typing skills are both part of our state's digital literacy expectations (which apply to grades K-12) and match the real-world demands we are preparing our children to meet.

The investments your school and district have made in technology are absolutely critical if we want our schools to be 21st century learning environments. We don't believe students should learn how to use technology just to take a test, but we believe technology integration is part of the modern day teaching and learning cycle. Technology investments have helped personalize learning well beyond assessments and have given students opportunities to interact with content in more individualized and engaging environments. So, all of this hard work to improve technology infrastructure and device access will still benefit students' learning.

I also want to reiterate that I believe a test is just one measure of a student's learning and growth. Student understanding of the content should be measured in multiple ways, and one of those pieces of feedback is a state-level perspective to see how students are learning compared to their peers in other districts. We are concerned about test anxiety and overtesting, so we have taken initial steps to address this, including eliminating some tests and considering future changes to the structure of TNReady. In response to recommendations from our **assessment task force**, we are working with our schools and districts to ensure that testing is streamlined and meaningful and that adults are conscious of ways in which they can help alleviate test anxiety.

In addition, as we move through a transition to a different test, last spring Gov. Haslam and the General Assembly worked together to lower the effect of TNReady on teacher evaluation scores and provide districts with complete flexibility about how or if they consider evaluation in any personnel decisions. Finally, we have proposed a **test transparency bill** to the state legislature this spring that will allow us to release the majority of assessment questions and answers to parents, students and teachers to help for future preparation. We are continuing this conversation with many of our parents, educators, and students – we know it is important.

For now, we are working with our test provider to produce and ship paper copies of TNReady to each district, at *no* additional cost to taxpayers or the department. The paper version of the test includes questions that were developed and approved by Tennessee educators, just like the online version. We will provide more information to your school districts later this week on a new Part I testing window, which will begin **no earlier than Feb. 22**, and **your school district will tell you more specific testing dates as those are scheduled**. While this is not what we had anticipated, we hope your student's transition to a more familiar testing environment this year is as smooth as possible. We will be providing more information to your school district in the coming days, particularly on accommodations for students with disabilities and English learners.

The transition to TNReady is here – even though it will be taken on paper. The new test this year will assess readiness on the standards we have in the state with new types of test items aligned to full depth and breadth of our standards.

In the long term, we are committed to using computers for online testing – and we are committed to regaining your trust. This transition has been challenging, but we still believe that by working together, we can strengthen what is happening in each of our classrooms. The work that has gone into this transition supports goals that we believe are the right ones: preparing our students for the modern-day demands of our colleges and employers and equipping our education system to provide more real-time feedback to students, parents, and educators about where they are on that journey. This year will be the next step in an ongoing transition to ultimately make sure we do this right.

Thank you again for your partnership and support of our schools.

Best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Candice McQueen".

Candice McQueen  
Commissioner of Education