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Florida investigating hack into state testing system



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As if the rollout of the computerized Florida Standards Assessments weren't troubled enough, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement has announced it's investigating an outside hack of the system that appears to be the cause of the concerns. The story continues to be reported.

Meantime, here's the Department of Education press release:

Today, Education Commissioner Pam Stewart and Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) Commissioner Rick Swearingen announced that FDLE is investigating testing delays caused by cyber-attacks on a server used to administer the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA).

Education Commissioner Pam Stewart said, "While most Florida students are continuing to test successfully, we now know that some of the delays in testing late last week were due to cyber-attacks on our testing system operated by American Institutes for Research (AIR). The Department has been working with FDLE since last Thursday when we were notified about the problem and we will continue to provide them with any information possible to ensure they identify the bad actors and hold them accountable to the fullest extent of the law. We are holding daily conference calls with AIR to ensure they immediately address any flaws or attacks on our system as we move forward in this second week of testing.

"Our highest priority is to make sure students can complete their tests and we will continue to work with AIR to ensure their system operates effectively. It is important to point out that AIR has reported that while access to the test has been delayed because of the cyber-attacks, no student data has been compromised. AIR is also working to capture any student writing responses that were reported lost and they believe the measures they have now put in place will prevent any future attacks from impacting testing. However, we know that we have to remain vigilant to ensure all our testing vendors protect students' testing results and personal information at all times."

FDLE Commissioner Rick Swearingen said, "FDLE's Tallahassee Cyber-Crimes Squad began working with the Department of Education on Thursday to determine where these attacks are coming from and to identify suspects. This investigation is to be a priority for our Cyber-Crime Squad and we consulted with our counterparts at the FBI. If suspects are identified, we will work with prosecutors to ensure the perpetrators are held accountable."

On Monday, March 2, Florida's eighth, ninth and 10th grade students began taking the computer-based

writing component of the English language arts Florida Standards Assessment. At the start of the two-week testing window, districts experienced a number of technical difficulties unrelated to the cyber attack. This includes delays because test administrators could not log in, and students being logged out of the test prior to completion. This resulted in some responses being temporarily unavailable to the students.

Commissioner Stewart directed AIR, the organization delivering the tests, to determine the cause of the issue and immediately resolve it. AIR accepted full responsibility and concluded that an update it performed had inadvertently resulted in the delays. AIR has had success retrieving student responses and AIR is researching and resolving the remaining cases.

By Tuesday afternoon, the issue with the log on server was resolved. While there were some sporadic reports of denial of service on Monday and Tuesday, significant concerns of an attack did not occur until Thursday morning when DOE received widespread reports from a number of districts of “white screens” after logging in. By approximately 8:30 a.m. Thursday, the problem had subsided and the districts that continued were able to test successfully for the rest of the day. AIR confirmed the cause of this issue was a cyber-attack on the log on server. Commissioner Stewart, upon learning about the cyber-attack, immediately contacted FDLE and requested the agency to investigate this issue and hold those responsible accountable.

According to AIR, the cyber-attack that caused a denial of service will not compromise student performance on the test or any personal student data. Despite these issues, in the first week of the two-week testing window, a total of 397,352 students completed the computer-based writing component, which represents more than 60 percent of students registered to take the test.

UPDATE: AIR issued this statement on the situation:

"AIR Assessment is working closely with the Florida Education Department and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement in their efforts to identify those responsible for the cyber-attacks on a server used to administer the Florida Standards Assessment. Although the cyber-attacks did cause delays for some students attempting to take the English language arts test, no student data was compromised. Additional information is contained in a news release issued by the Florida Department of Education. Because a criminal investigation is underway, we decline further comment."

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