

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release: Thursday, June 23, 2011

Alonso Reveals Test Tampering at Two Schools; Highlights District's Strengthened Test Integrity Protocols, Severe Consequences for Cheating

(Baltimore, MD)—Baltimore City Public Schools CEO Andrés A. Alonso and State Superintendent of Schools Nancy Grasmick released two reports today that show cheating took place on the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) at Abbottston Elementary School in 2009 and at Fort Worthington Elementary School in 2009 and 2010. These findings, along with the investigations that led to them and new test security protocols that were put into place this spring, send a forceful message that cheating will not be tolerated in City Schools. It will be rooted out when and where it exists, and it will result in direst of consequences for those who do it.

Today's reports are the culmination of multiple investigations and data analyses by City Schools and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) that spanned a year-and-a-half, and included reviews of thousands of questions in MSA test booklets from both schools. These reviews showed patterns—and unusually high numbers—of erasures in which incorrect answers were changed to correct. And in both cases, the investigations' findings offer clear, statistical evidence that school staff engaged in test tampering. The investigations at Fort Worthington also revealed improper attendance practices in 2010, in which the school's attendance rates were altered to show higher than actual attendance. Both test scores and attendance are factors that determine whether or not a school makes Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal mandate, *No Child Left Behind*.

The Abbottston and Fort Worthington reports come as City Schools acts aggressively to strengthen its testing protocols and ensure test integrity across the district. Recent test security investigations have prompted the district to expand its testing protocols beyond merely what is required by the state. City Schools now educates all staff extensively on the importance of test integrity; trains all school leaders and test administrators; and conducts ongoing analyses of major changes in schools' test scores. This spring alone, the district invested \$390,000 to place external monitors at each of the 157 schools that administer the MSA, and to make sure that all test booklets were opened and sealed daily in the presence of these monitors using tamper-proof tape. And district leaders continue to commit to building a culture of test integrity throughout City Schools.

“Cheating is an unforgivable breach of the trust that holds school communities together. We will not tolerate it. We will do everything in our power to keep it from happening, and we will exact the most serious consequences possible when and where it occurs,” said Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners Chair Neil E. Duke.

“I said it last year when we found one school cheating and I will say it today—cheating is an insult to our kids and their hard work, to our families and partners who support them in school, and to the huge majority of City Schools school leaders and staff who work so hard to ensure that

they succeed,” said Dr. Alonso. “We have made it clear in the past that we will catch cheaters and the consequences we levy will be dire. We have now put into place a set of testing procedures to eliminate this kind of inexcusable action by adults. This is work that requires diligence and leadership at every level, and we are tremendously grateful for the leadership, cooperation and guidance of Dr. Grasmick and MSDE, who have been our partners every step of the way in addressing these incidents.”

While state law prevents City Schools from discussing any specific personnel actions, City Schools in the past has pursued license revocation in cases of large-scale cheating.

“Maryland is committed to strong accountability programs and assessment integrity. Our programs have strengthened classrooms throughout Maryland, helping make our schools number one in the nation,” said Dr. Grasmick. “Baltimore City Public Schools has worked diligently to ensure that its testing protocols are rigorous and in line with state requirements. This clearly reflects the district’s commitment to fairness and transparency in the administration of standardized state tests.”

Abbottston Elementary

According to the report issued today by Drs. Alonso and Grasmick, the investigation into cheating at Abbottston was triggered by an alert City Schools received in January 2010 from a concerned citizen that staff at Abbottston may be cheating on the MSA. City Schools took several immediate steps: it met with the school’s leadership regarding the allegation, requested that the state conduct an erasure analysis of the school’s 2009 test booklets and deployed extra monitors to observe the 2010 testing that March. While the 2010 testing was uneventful, the state did initiate a test security investigation into Abbottston’s 2009 MSA results. This in turn spurred an in-depth statistical investigation that included an erasure analysis of more than 7,000 questions in 485 test booklets from 2009 and 2010. The erasure analysis found a pattern of incorrect answers being changed to correct in 2009.

Fort Worthington Elementary

As outlined in the report on Fort Worthington, investigations at that school were initiated when City Schools received complaints of cheating by concerned individuals during the 2010 MSA testing period. The district promptly met with the leadership of the school to explain the investigative process, and began reviewing prior year test results from the school and interviewing Fort Worthington students and staff. City Schools then initiated an analysis of student attendance during the 2010 testing period and conducted a review of select test results. City Schools also requested that MSDE review the test booklets of several 3rd-grade students in particular. In its review, the state found that the incomplete test booklets of these students had been completed after Day One of testing and before booklets were re-issued for testing on Day Two. It then initiated a comprehensive investigation into MSA test security at Fort Worthington, which found test violations in both 2009 and 2010.

City Schools’ 2010 attendance analysis at Fort Worthington also revealed tampering. The district’s review uncovered a large number of changes, made during the final days of the reporting period, that altered students’ attendance status earlier in the reporting period.

New Testing Protocols

In the last year, City Schools has significantly strengthened and expanded its testing protocols in an effort to preclude the possibility of the kind of tampering that took place at Abbottston and Fort Worthington.

“Test results play an incredibly important role in City Schools—not just in pointing up the progress and potential of our kids, but also the places where we can be doing a better job of educating them. They are a powerful accountability moment, for us, the adults charged with ensuring our students’ success. So proper test administration is absolutely critical,” Dr. Alonso said. “When it is compromised, we cannot look the other way. Our responsibility is to our students and families, period. Because of that, we are doing everything within our power to make it impossible to cheat, and we will find and punish those who do. The protocols we now have in place go beyond what we know most large urban districts to be doing in the realm of test security. Most importantly, they allow us to be confident that our students’ performance in 2011 and beyond will not be subject to question because of this kind of systemic cheating.”

“The steps Baltimore City is taking to prevent and stop cheating on standardized tests in its schools are the right thing to do,” said Mike Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of Great City Schools. “They are aggressive in terms of what other large urban districts are doing, and they are proactive.”

City Schools’ test integrity protocols this year greatly expanded on practices of recent years that included random and targeted monitoring of testing in schools; investigations—often in partnership with the state—of complaints and observations of testing irregularities and improprieties; statistical analysis of unusual drops and gains in test scores; reviews of test booklets where warranted; and the strongest possible consequences for those involved in cheating.

This year, the district built on these protocols and took several unprecedented steps towards preventing the kind of testing abuses documented in today’s reports. City Schools stepped up monitoring of test administration at schools, hiring 157 temporary monitors from outside the district to oversee testing at each of the 157 schools that issued the MSA this year. City Schools also tapped 31 district office employees to serve as testing coordinators—one for every five schools. And the district focused on ensuring the proper handling of booklets, using tamper-proof security tape to seal boxes of test booklets at the end of each day.

City Schools also revamped its test administration training for school leaders and test administrators, and required that all school leaders in turn provide school-wide training based on their own. This training includes a pre- and post- test; a video from Dr. Alonso addressing the importance of test integrity and possible consequences for those who tried to game results; a presentation of case studies and common violations; a discussion of consequences for violations; and customized, step-by-step administration guides for those involved in testing. The district also requires all schools to create and submit to the district a detailed test administration schedule.

Finally, today’s test security reports and the many steps that led to their findings underscore the commitment of City Schools and MSDE to the integrity of test results in Baltimore City, and both agencies’ recognition that these results serve as a critical measure of student achievement.

“In no way is what a handful of adults did at Abbottston and Fort Worthington a reflection of the hard work of these schools’ students and the dedication of their families and staff,” said Dr. Alonso. “Both schools have the full support of City Schools behind them and from here on out, our focus shifts from the wrongdoing of a few adults to what matters most: the success of every student.”