

Pearson Under Fire for Monitoring Students' Twitter Posts

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By NATASHA SINGER MARCH 17, 2015

Is it corporate due diligence or spying on children?

That is the question parents across the country have been asking on Twitter and on blog posts since they learned that the publishing giant Pearson Education has been monitoring social media to identify students who might be leaking information about certain tests administered by the company.

The math and English tests — called the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC — are being developed by a consortium of states in conjunction with Pearson to measure students' preparedness for life after graduation.

In a statement posted on the company's site, Pearson said the states contractually required it to monitor public social media posts to make sure students did not disclose test questions.

Although education officials in some states already screen social media on their own for possible test leaks, Pearson's efforts have ignited a firestorm among some teacher and parent groups who contend the

monitoring is invasive and unfair.

On Tuesday, the American Federation of Teachers demanded that Pearson halt its student social media monitoring and make public any contract language related to its security measures for tests.

“It’s one thing to protect intellectual property, but this raises far too many questions,” Randi Weingarten, the president of the teachers’ union, wrote in an email on Tuesday. “How is Pearson monitoring students? What information about students does Pearson have, where did it get it, and what will it keep? Is Pearson reviewing everything students post? What protections are there for student privacy?”

Pearson’s monitoring of social media for possible leaks on test questions first came to public attention a few days ago after Bob Braun, a blogger in New Jersey and a former columnist for The Star-Ledger, of Newark, published a private email from a concerned school official to her fellow superintendents.

In the email, Elizabeth C. Jewett, the superintendent of the Watchung Hills Regional High School District in Warren, N.J., told her colleagues that Pearson had notified state education officials of a security breach in the belief that a student at the school had taken a photograph of a question during the test and posted it on Twitter. The state officials, she wrote, asked that her school discipline the student.

But, in the email, Ms. Jewett seemed more disturbed by the company’s conduct than by the student’s comporment. Although the student did post a comment on Twitter, she wrote, it was only after the test, and the report of a photo of a test question was spurious.

“The student deleted the tweet and we spoke with the parent — who was obviously highly concerned as to her child’s tweets being monitored” by the Department of Education, Ms. Jewett wrote. “The DOE

informed us that Pearson is monitoring all social media during PARCC testing. I have to say that I find that a bit disturbing”

In a subsequent letter posted on the school’s website, Ms. Jewett acknowledged that the email obtained by the blogger was genuine. She did not return an email today requesting comment.

In its statement, Pearson described as a fairness measure its efforts to prevent test questions and other sensitive information from being disclosed.

“A breach includes any time someone shares information about a test outside of the classroom — from casual conversations to posts on social media,” the statement said. “Again, our goal is to ensure a fair test for all students. Every student deserves his or her chance to take the test on a level playing field.”

But some parents and privacy advocates contended that using personal information collected about students in an educational context to covertly monitor them on social media was an unfair practice.

“How did they figure out what district the kid who tweeted was in?” Allison White, a parent of a high school student in Port Washington, N.Y., said in a telephone interview on Monday. “Did they use any of the personal information they had access to in the testing database?”

The answer, apparently, was yes — at least until I contacted state education officials in Massachusetts on Monday evening.

“Previously, Pearson would take the knowledge that they found from public postings — the student’s state, name and school — and check it against its list of students registered to take PARCC at that school to see if that person was actually scheduled to take the test,” Jacqueline Reis, a spokeswoman for the

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, wrote in an email on Tuesday afternoon.

But she said the consortium of states had asked Pearson to stop checking names against its own list of students.

Although the company's social media monitoring will continue, Ms. Reis wrote, "as of today, Pearson will forward what they found online to the state education department without checking to see whether the student is registered to take the test."

That may alleviate some parents' concerns about the secondary use of their children's personal details by private companies. But it is unlikely to solve the fairness and accuracy issues raised by surveillance of students on social media.

Massachusetts, for instance, is trying out the PARCC assessments this spring but has not committed to the tests. Even before testing PARCC, however, the education department assessment office monitored Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for possible security breaches for an existing statewide test, Ms. Reis, the department spokeswoman, said.

Pearson did not immediately return an email seeking comment.

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