Testing the Test
A Study of PARCC Field Trials in Two School Districts

Overview

In spring 2014, new computer-based tests developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) were piloted in selected classrooms across the country. These assessments are designed to measure students' knowledge of content in English language arts and mathematics as defined by the Common Core State Standards. Two Massachusetts districts—Burlington Public Schools and Revere Public Schools—opted for a district- or school-wide trial of these new tests to gain crucial information on implementation issues such as technology use and device adaptability, scheduling and staffing of test administration, and students' experience taking computer-based tests.

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy conducted a case study of the implementation and administration of computer-based PARCC assessments in the Burlington and Revere School Districts during the spring 2014 PARCC field test. Case study activities were guided by a steering committee including the superintendents of the Burlington and Revere public schools, the Burlington Educators' Association and the Revere Teachers Association, along with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Massachusetts Association for School Superintendents, and the Massachusetts Teachers Association. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with district leadership, district technology staff, principals, teachers, and students. An educator survey was also conducted prior to and after test administration. Findings provide detailed information on how both Burlington and Revere planned for and carried out PARCC testing, as well as addressed unforeseen challenges.

PARCC trials in Burlington and Revere

The involvement of Burlington and Revere provided an important opportunity to examine PARCC administration in Massachusetts at a scale reflective of actual testing procedures. In Burlington, all students enrolled in grades 3-8 and 10 participated in PARCC field tests (referred to as district-wide); in Revere, two elementary and one middle school of, the district's 11 schools, administered PARCC tests school-wide. It is important to note that both districts have devoted a significant number of years to improving technology integration in classroom instruction and possess sophisticated information technology (IT) systems that include fiber optic network connections between school facilities, high-speed connectivity, and the latest generation devices to support student learning.

However, despite a shared emphasis on IT investments, significant differences exist between Burlington and Revere in the educational challenges they confront. Burlington Public Schools is a suburban district with a less diverse student population compared to the Commonwealth's general student population. Revere Public Schools is an urban district enrolling a more diverse student population. Case study findings present lessons learned from district- or school-wide implementation of PARCC tests in light of these different district settings.

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Summary of findings

District- and school-wide trials in Burlington and Revere produced substantial information that will help guide test administration in spring 2015. A careful review of both districts' decision-making processes revealed a number of critical questions that warrant consideration by all school districts across the Commonwealth.

Determining technology infrastructure capacity and the inventory and location of PARCC-ready devices ahead of time is critical. Burlington and Revere have prioritized the use of technology in schools, and had more than adequate technology infrastructure features to support a district- or school-wide PARCC trial. However, both districts remained concerned about taking full advantage of the technology they had to make the trial successful, while maintaining other essential learning activities. To successfully manage the testing process, district IT staff determined the number of devices (e.g., desktops, laptops, tablets) that could be used for student testing, maximized their use in scheduling test administration over the fewest days possible, and established a process to prepare these devices in PARCC test administrations.

Related technology questions to consider:

- How is network access set up in your district? Are buildings networked to each other and/or a central server?

- What is the amount of bandwidth available? To the district? To each building?

- How many—and what kinds—of existing devices are available for test administration? Where are these devices located? How many devices are required for instruction that will be occurring at the same time as test administration?

- Are software and hardware features on these devices compatible with PARCC test specifications?

- What are the costs of bringing IT systems up to readiness? And what is the impact on school budgets?

School-level management of test administration is challenging. Scheduling computer-based tests depends almost entirely on the inventory, type, and location of available devices used for test administration; in short, not all students can be tested at one time as with a paper-and-pencil test. School leaders in Burlington and Revere needed to create a school-wide schedule to maintain and carry out "regular" school functions for multiple days during the testing period. This required planning for instances when space, staff, and technology resources were often limited or unavailable due to test administration.

Related scheduling questions to consider:

- What classrooms/spaces will be used for testing?

- Given the number of devices and space available, how many test sessions can be conducted each day? And how many classes/grades can be tested concurrently?

- How will the school's schedule be modified to accommodate testing, including instructional blocks? How will these modifications affect regular school scheduling?

Computer-based test administration requires new administration roles for staff and additional support and training. During the PARCC Performance-based Assessment and End-of-Year test administrations, Burlington and Revere had educators and IT staff handling new and different responsibilities. District IT staff were heavily involved in planning test administration, and in some cases, training colleagues; teachers were involved in troubleshooting some technological issues during test sessions. Student data management staff needed to compile and upload student information data, perhaps the most challenging aspect of preparing for PARCC test administration.

Related staffing and training questions to consider:

- Who is qualified to perform the sophisticated IT tasks needed to prepare a district for computer-based test administration, e.g., reviewing district IT infrastructure, managing devices, and updating systems?

- Who will make decisions on scheduling and staffing test sessions? How many staff are needed for each test session? Who will staff test sessions?

- Who will manage the required student data? How will training and time inputting data affect staff workload?

- How will the staffing of test sessions affect regular school operations, particularly classroom instruction?

- Who is responsible for training educators? What kinds of training (e.g., content and format) will test administrators receive? How and when will the training be provided?

Investments in technology were—and will continue to be—focused on instruction. Burlington and Revere opted into PARCC district- and school-wide trials based on the view of district leadership that technology-enhanced instruction and assessment is "the wave of the future." The PARCC field test provided an opportunity to determine how to manage a computer-based test in terms of planning for test sessions, staffing, assessing needed training, preparing students and managing district- and school-level resources. District leadership has clearly articulated to their respective teams, however, that assessment is only one of the educational activities where technology will play an increasingly expanded role; both districts are determined to ensure that the primary focus of all decisions about technology is the improvement of student learning. Given that most students did not report significant roadblocks utilizing technology during the PARCC field test, many educators in these districts are optimistic about the integration of technology into classroom practice.

Related technology integration questions to consider:

- To what extent is technology integration in classroom instruction a critical issue for district leaders? Which educators (in your district) are addressing issues of technology in the classroom?

- How routinely is technology used in classroom instruction and for assessment? What type of devices are used for these types of instructional activities?

- How will use of technology for testing affect the capacity to use technology for other school activities that are routinely part of teaching and learning?