TEACH +PLUS

Be Heard
Teacher Voices Around the PARCC

INTRODUCTION

On December 11, 2015, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) released the scores from the 2014-2015 school year, thus completing the assessment cycle. As Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellows who teach across subjects and in the elementary and secondary grades that took the PARCC assessment in Chicago, we wanted to use the release of the scores as an opportunity to reflect on PARCC's implementation and prepare for the next cycle of the assessment. We were interested in how test preparation and implementation were handled at various schools across the district.

We wanted to know the following:

- How well prepared were the teachers?
- Did they feel like they received adequate training on the content (Common Core State Standards)?
- How did they prepare their students for the test?
- What issues, if any, did they have with technology when administering the test?

To find this out, we held two focus group sessions with 57 teachers in the summer of 2015. Our report is organized around three key findings that emerged from the Chicago teachers' feedback and concludes with suggestions for the developers of PARCC assessments and for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) on resources, implementation, and communication.

FINDINGS

After reviewing the data gathered from the focus groups' participants, we found the following:

1. Teachers believe that professional development and resources focused on PARCC preparation (practice tests, creating formative assessments, how to use the data from PARCC to drive their instruction) are extremely useful in preparing their students for PARCC.

2. Teachers feel strongly that they need to receive their students' data from PARCC in a timely manner, so that they can use it to drive future instruction.

3. Teachers identified a need for clear, concise communication from Central Office/Networks on opt-out policies, test administration and protocols, technology troubleshooting, and the purpose/rationale behind administering PARCC, as well as what information to disseminate to parents about PARCC and how they can support their children.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARCC

1. Create a system for educators to provide feedback on PARCC assessments and items.

2. Create a system for providing assessment data to all stakeholders quickly.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CPS

1. Implement a communication system that provides all stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents) with information about PARCC including policies, purpose, impact of scores on schools/teacher evaluations, and resources.

2. Develop information and resources for teachers to better interpret and understand test data.

METHODOLOGY

To address Chicago teachers' experience with preparing for and administering PARCC, we conducted focus groups with 57 teachers of various grade levels and content bands. Each focus group was divided into two parts:

- During the first part, the teachers reflected on and discussed the 2015 implementation of PARCC. They talked about what worked and what could be improved. Each focus group then synthesized their data and charted it so other groups could see their ideas. All participants were asked to note the top four important ideas found on the chart during a gallery walk.

- For the second part, we followed the same protocol with teachers reflecting and discussing the planning and preparation for the 2015-2016 school year. We used these individual discussion notes, the top ideas noted by teachers during gallery walk time, and a survey to analyze and synthesize our findings.

FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS

Finding 1: Teachers believe that professional development and resources focused on PARCC preparation (practice tests, creating formative assessments, how to use the data from PARCC to drive their instruction) are extremely useful in preparing their students for PARCC.

Many teachers in the focus groups noted that practice assessments and other online resources provided to them by PARCC, administrators, or colleagues were extremely useful in preparing for the PARCC assessment. Because this was the first administration of the assessment, many teachers were unsure about content, test formatting, and question formulation so practice assessments proved to be invaluable for them and their students. One teacher noted, "My school did extensive in-house PD. We took sample tests together and created a Google doc to share resources with each other. Teachers and students found this incredibly helpful." Teachers were quick to say that they wanted more of these resources so they could both learn more about the PARCC assessment and use practice assessment items to help students become familiar with the test's electronic features.

When asked about the types of resources they would find most useful, 84 percent of teachers said additional preparation materials would be either "extremely useful" or "very useful" (see Figure 1)[i] and 87.5 percent said more sample questions would be either "extremely useful" or "very useful" (see Figure 2).[ii]

Figure 1

Question: "How useful would additional preparation materials be in helping your students prepare to take PARCC?" (n = 57)
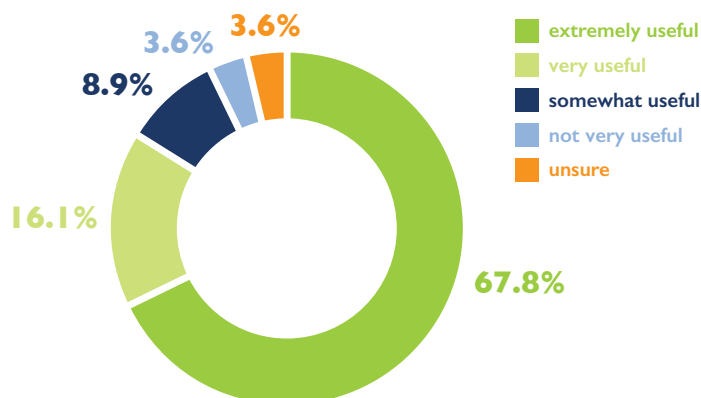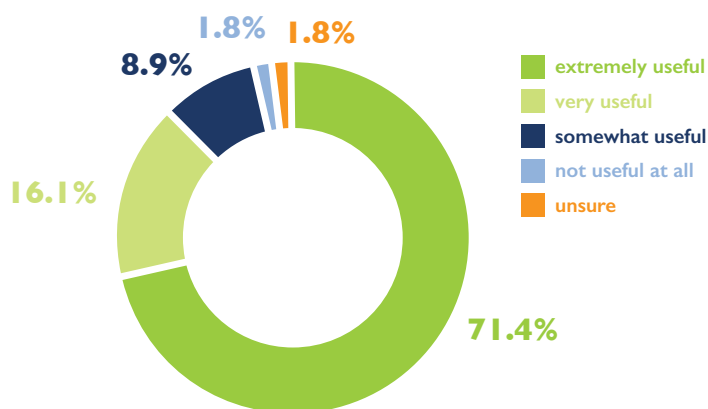

- extremely useful
- very useful
- somewhat useful
- not very useful
- unsure

3.6%
3.6%
8.9%
16.1%
67.8%

Figure 2

Question: "How useful would more sample questions be in helping your students prepare to take PARCC?" (n = 57)

- extremely useful
- very useful
- somewhat useful
- not useful at all
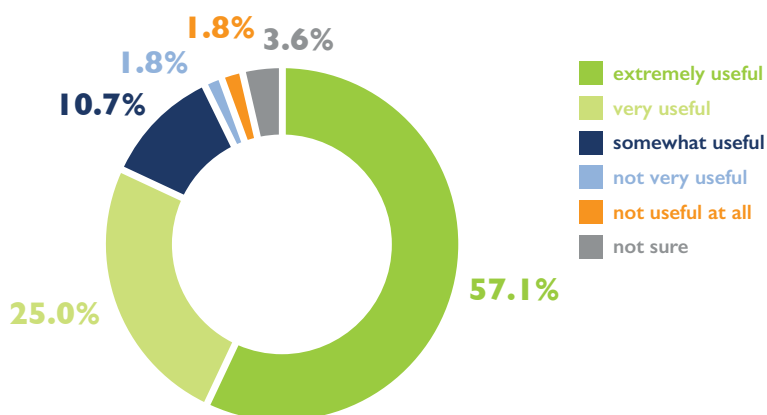- unsure

1.8%
1.8%
8.9%
16.1%
71.4%

A majority of participants said that they were extremely interested in professional development around the PARCC assessment. Over 82 percent of teachers reported that professional development on how to create formative assessments that measure students' progress towards success on PARCC would be "very useful" or "extremely useful" (see Figure 3).[iii] Over 80 percent of teachers indicated that professional development on how to use results from PARCC to inform their instruction would be either "extremely useful" or "very useful" to have.[iv] While an overwhelming majority of teachers commented positively about the rigor of

PARCC and its alignment to CCSS, 80 percent of teachers still found additional professional development on CCSS-related topics such as alignment to PARCC and tracking students' mastery of individual CCSS-aligned skills to be "very useful" or "extremely useful."[v]

Teachers wanted to learn how to craft better assessment questions like some of the items they saw on the PARCC. Additionally, they wanted to learn how to score students' work so they know if the student is approaching, meeting, or exceeding the standards.

Figure 3

Question: "How useful would professional development on how to create formative assessments that measure students' progress towards success on PARCC be in helping your students prepare to take PARCC?" (n = 57)

- extremely useful
- very useful
- somewhat useful
- not very useful
- not useful at all
- not sure

1.8%
1.8%
3.6%
10.7%
25.0%
57.1%

Teachers want to improve their practice and learn how to create better assessments that more accurately measure and assess students on college- and career-ready standards. They want to weave these into their daily instruction, apply the learnings from professional development and use the data from PARCC in order to create classrooms that are more standards-aligned, focused, and rigorous.

Many teachers stated that professional development around designing assessments, specifically PARCC- and CCSS-aligned assessments, is a major concern. While they noted that the professional development they had engaged in was beneficial, they still wanted more. According to CPS, trainings on the Assessment Design Toolkit were offered during fall of 2015. However, these trainings were not clearly communicated or well advertised to teachers. Teachers felt that there should be a clear training schedule and trainings should be open to all teachers, not just assessment leads, so that the implementation of these tools is effectively integrated into their instruction. More clarity about the Assessment Design Toolkit and how it can be used within their instruction would ensure that teachers can utilize this tool in their classroom to help prepare their students for the PARCC. For PARCC implementation to be successful, teachers need easier access to PARCC resources and training on using those resources.

Finding 2: Teachers feel strongly that they need to receive their students' data from PARCC in a timely manner, so that they can use it to drive future instruction.

Overwhelmingly, focus group participants said that teachers need to know how their students performed on the test in a timely manner. Teachers expressed concerns about student data and how and when they would receive it. They were uncertain when they would receive data, what that data would look like, and how it would be used. Teachers want to use PARCC data to inform their instruction so they can make curriculum adjustments based on student performance, particularly since this is the first standardized assessment to measure students' progress towards meeting the Common Core expectations. One participant said, "We need to get students' scores to help and support instruction and to know what scores mean for the students, teachers, and schools."

> *We need to get students' scores to help and support instruction and to know what scores mean for the students', teachers, and schools.*
> – Chicago Public School Teacher

Teachers pointed to other assessments, like the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), that give educators results quickly after the test administration. Many teachers stated that the benefit of computer-based testing was that it allows for real-time test data to be accessed instantaneously, yet they would not receive the scores until long after these students had left their classrooms. It is now December, more than six months after PARCC was piloted in Chicago, and teachers are just now receiving feedback on their students from the last school year. While open-ended responses like those on PARCC make instantaneous feedback impossible, it also should not take over six months to receive feedback. Teachers need a system in which all stakeholders receive PARCC scores quickly so that they can align their instruction to the standards the students need to know in order to be successful.

In addition to receiving students' test scores in a timely manner, an overwhelming number of teachers in the focus groups — 80 percent of the participants — indicated that they would like professional development on using this data to drive their instruction.[vi] Teachers want to be able to accurately analyze their data to inform their instruction, and they want to make sure that they are accurately communicating information with parents and engaging in honest conversations about their students' scores. Since this assessment is new to them, teachers feel that they need training in order to do this accurately and efficiently. Since scores are now released, CPS, independently and/or in partnership with PARCC, should disseminate information and provide resources to help teachers understand and interpret the data. CPS should hold webinars or trainings on how to interpret and understand data for both teachers and parents. Timely score report turnaround in combination with resources to help

teachers understand and interpret the data will improve teachers' ability to engage in the conversations and activities needed to prepare the students and parents for the PARCC.

Finding 3: Teachers identified a need for clear, concise communication from Central Office/Networks on opt-out policies, test administration and protocols, technology troubleshooting, and the purpose/rationale behind administering PARCC, as well as what information to disseminate to parents about PARCC and how they can support their children.

Communication around PARCC — before, during, and after test administration — was a major concern for the teachers in the focus groups. Teachers reported that communication from CPS needs to be improved in order for them to accurately and effectively plan test administration, provide information to parents, and ensure testing environments are the best for students. One teacher noted that she felt as if the pendulum kept swinging back and forth: "We are taking the test. We are not taking the test, etc. We need clear answers." One option is to provide professional development sessions not just for test administrators, but for teachers who are responsible for administering PARCC so that they can directly receive the information.

A majority of teachers in the focus groups cited a lack of information from CPS on opt-out policies, test protocol, and the rationale for administering the assessment. Teachers said they felt like they couldn't talk clearly with students, parents, and communities about the PARCC because there was so much uncertainty surrounding the test. This confusion escalated as many media outlets reported on PARCC and whether students would take the test, while the teachers themselves felt like they were in the dark. They stated that because there was no clarity around whether students would take the PARCC or not, they

weren't sure how much to prepare students. Teachers wished CPS would have made a decision about testing sooner and clearly communicated information to all staff, not just the test administrator or principal, so school communities could better prepare.

Teachers are requesting more information for the 2015-16 school year so that they have a clear understanding of the expectations for themselves and for their students. Memos or documentation necessary to PARCC administration should be included in the weekly alerts or as a separate tab in the Knowledge Center with equal access to teachers and administrators. Finally, the district should provide a document for parents that schools can pass out which clearly explains the rationale behind taking the PARCC, what happens to those students who don't take the test, and what parents can do at home to help prepare their child.

Teachers also need a way to communicate with PARCC on both real-time administration issues and to provide suggestions after administration. Teachers noted various technical difficulties within the assessment. For example, "PARCC had some technical difficulties where the students were given a math question and the diagram, grid, or image that was supposed to go with it did not show up." This was challenging because there was not one specific person whom teachers could contact for assistance.

Teachers suggested various ways in which the test could be improved to benefit students, such as adding a built-in timer, ensuring that the question and response area are on the same page, or a clearer rubric of expectations for students when answering questions. However, teachers were not aware of a way to communicate this feedback to PARCC. While Illinois has an Educator Leadership Cadre that provides feedback, many teachers were unaware of this group and uncertain about how they could get involved. Teachers emphasized that they would like to have a way to directly contact

PARCC about issues and concerns they observed during their test administration. The Central Office needs to include teachers in PARCC communication so that teachers can better prepare, have accurate discussions with parents, and best support their students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARCC

1. Create a system for educators to provide feedback on PARCC assessments and items.

   Teachers want to be able to contact PARCC directly to inform them of the issues or concerns they found during the test administration. One way this can be done is by providing teachers with ways to submit feedback to the Educator Leadership Cadre members.

2. Create a system for providing assessment data to all stakeholders quickly.

   Teachers need data to drive their instruction. Ensuring that teachers receive their students' scores in a timely manner was a major concern of the focus groups' participants.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CPS

1. Implement a communication system that provides all stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents) with information about PARCC including policies, purpose, impact of scores on schools/teacher evaluations, and resources.

The teachers in our focus groups overwhelmingly felt that they did not have all of the information

they needed to have an informed conversation with all stakeholders (parents and students) about PARCC. By incorporating all of the PARCC information in one place, such as a tab on the Knowledge Center, teachers can have access to everything that is given to test administrators or counselors. This will ensure better communication and greater transparency when it comes to testing procedures, which in turn will improve test administration.

Providing teachers with clear communication around available resources like the Assessment Design Toolkit and Item Bank will ensure that they have the tools to create assessments that are CCSS- and PARCC-aligned. This in turn will provide teachers with opportunities to incorporate PARCC-like assessment questions into their classroom instruction. Poor communication around valuable resources does not benefit teachers or their students.

2. Develop information, training, and resources for interpreting and understanding test data.

   The PARCC score reports will be a significant piece of new data for teachers. Teachers need to be able to interpret their students' scores in order to know how their instruction aligns with the PARCC assessment, and to think through how they need to adjust their instruction. This recommendation will also help teachers to explain the utility of the score reports to parents. In order for teachers to make this shift successfully, CPS should invest in professional learning focused on using the data from PARCC. Teachers want to make sure that this training is done in a timely manner so that they can use the data to make instructional decisions.

CONCLUSION

Teachers want to use high-quality, rigorous assessments to measure student progress but they need clear communication, resources, and professional development in order to use these assessments effectively. Creating more opportunities for teachers to engage in meaningful professional development opportunities around PARCC-related topics such as using score reports to inform instruction, creating formative assessments that measure student progress toward success on PARCC, and tracking student mastery on CCSS-aligned skills would better prepare teachers and consequently help improve student preparation for PARCC.

Along with more resources and training for teachers, communication between CPS, PARCC, and teachers needs to improve. The creation of clear communication lines, transparent planning and timelines, and timely feedback can lead to improved test administration as well as an improved testing environment for students, teachers, and families. With greater clarity around PARCC testing and increased, targeted professional development, teachers can focus on using the data obtained from the PARCC assessment to improve student progress and increase student achievement.

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ENDNOTES

[i] Question: "How useful would additional preparation materials be in helping your students prepare to take PARCC?" (n = 57) Responses: "Extremely useful" (67.8 percent), "Very useful" (16.1 percent), "Somewhat useful" (8.9 percent), "Not very useful" (3.6 percent), "Not useful at all" (0.0 percent), "Unsure" (3.6 percent).

[ii] Question: "How useful would more sample questions be in helping your students prepare to take PARCC?" (n = 57) Responses: "Extremely useful" (71.4 percent), "Very useful" (16.1 percent), "Somewhat useful" (8.9 percent), "Not very useful" (0.0 percent), "Not useful at all" (1.8 percent), "Unsure" (1.8 percent).

[iii] Question: "How useful would professional development on how to create formative assessments that measure students' progress towards success on PARCC be to you as you help your students prepare for PARCC?" (n = 57) Responses: "Extremely useful" (57.1 percent), "Very useful" (25.0 percent), "Somewhat useful" (10.7 percent), "Not very useful" (1.8 percent), "Not useful at all" (1.8 percent), "Unsure" (3.6 percent).

[iv] Question: "How useful would professional development on how to use results from PARCC to inform your instruction be to you as you help your students prepare for PARCC?" (n = 57) Responses: "Extremely useful" (56.4 percent), "Very useful" (23.6 percent), "Somewhat useful" (7.3 percent), "Not very useful" (0.0 percent), "Not useful at all" (5.5 percent), "Unsure" (7.3 percent).

[v] Question: "How useful would professional development on CCSS related topics such as alignment to PARCC be to you as you help your students prepare for PARCC?" (n = 57) Responses: "Extremely useful" (53.6 percent), "Very useful" (26.8 percent), "Somewhat useful" (8.9 percent), "Not very useful" (1.8 percent), "Not useful at all" (1.8 percent), "Unsure" (7.1 percent). Question: "How useful would professional development on tracking students' mastery of individual CCSS-aligned skills be to you as you help your students prepare for PARCC? (n = 57) Responses: "Extremely useful" (55.4 percent), "Very useful" (28.6 percent), "Somewhat useful" (7.1 percent), "Not very useful" (1.8 percent), "Not useful at all" (1.8 percent), "Unsure" (7.1 percent).

[vi] See endnote 4.