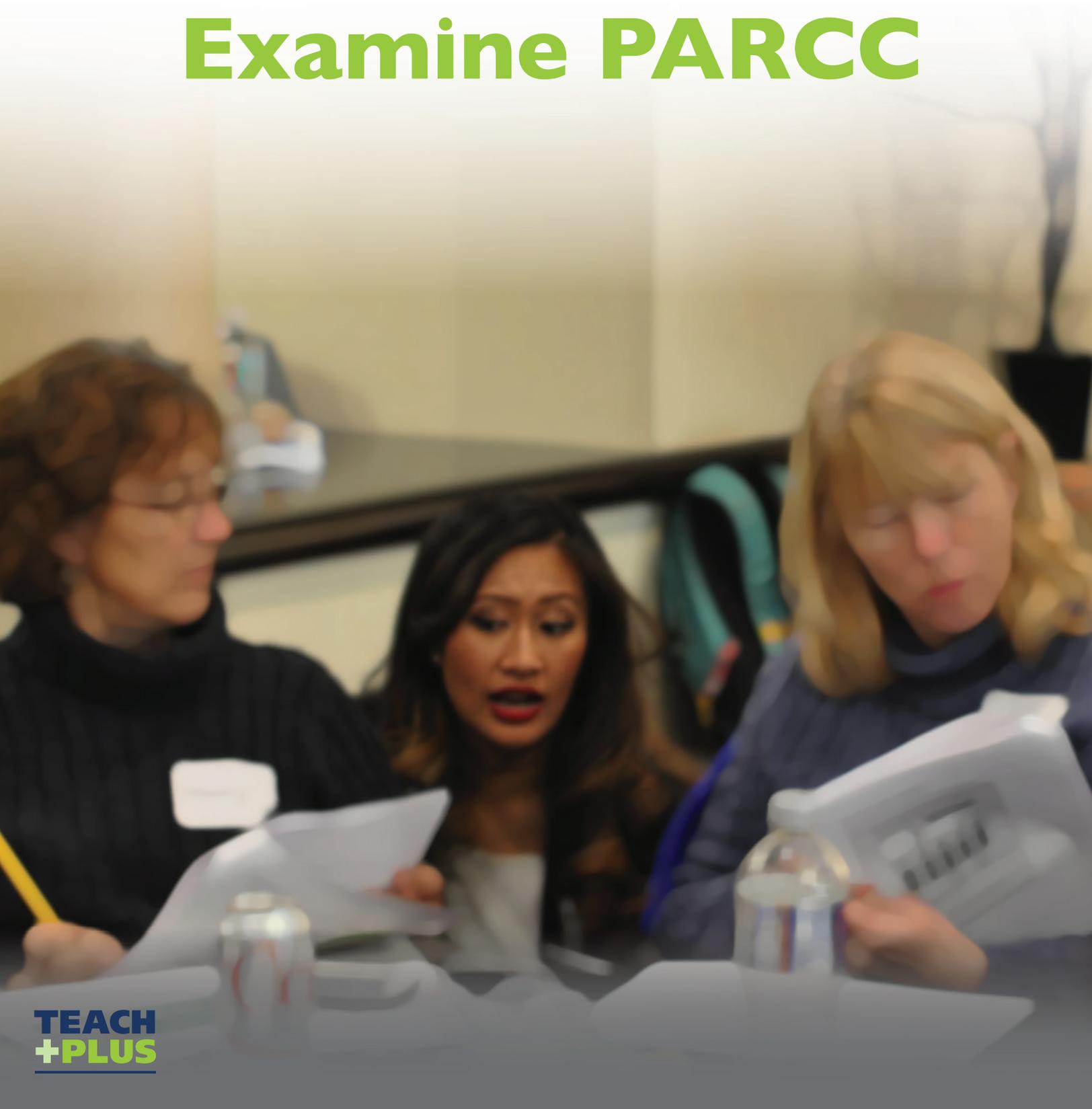


Massachusetts Teachers Examine PARCC



Teachers Examine PARCC

As a diverse group of 23 teachers from high-needs schools and districts across the Commonwealth participating in the Massachusetts Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellowship, we are committed to ensuring that teachers and students can thrive. We teach students from kindergarten through high school graduation, cover a wide range of subjects, and serve a range of students from general education to English language learners and students with special needs.

In the fall of 2014, Teach Plus brought together over 1,000 teachers in Massachusetts, Illinois, Tennessee, and the District of Columbia for an intensive day of professional development where teachers could learn more about the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment questions and analyze their alignment to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the characteristics of high-quality assessments. The teachers then used this knowledge to review PARCC sample test items, discuss them with fellow teachers, and provide feedback about the quality of the test.

The “Testing the Test” events were open to all public school teachers in Massachusetts, and teachers from 74 school districts across the Commonwealth participated.¹ In total, 351 Massachusetts teachers completed surveys at the events held. Several Teach Plus Massachusetts Teaching Policy Fellows served as facilitators, organizers, presenters, and participants.

In March 2015, Teach Plus released a report, “1,000 Teachers Examine PARCC: Perspectives on the Quality of New Assessments,” with findings from the feedback of teachers in the three states and the District. In this report, we highlight three of those findings and discuss the results as they pertain to Massachusetts, followed by our recommendations. We also include a number of side-bars from Massachusetts teachers that provide insight into how PARCC and Common Core State Standards play out in our classrooms.

“1,000 TEACHERS EXAMINE PARCC” REPORT FINDINGS AND MASSACHUSETTS DATA

The views of Massachusetts teachers who attended the “Testing the Test” events are similar to the views of the teachers across the sites. Below are three key findings from the “1,000 Teachers Examine PARCC” report, along with the data from the Massachusetts teachers.

“1,000 TEACHERS EXAMINE PARCC” REPORT FINDING #1: Teachers believe that PARCC is a better assessment than their prior state tests.

MASSACHUSETTS DATA:

Across the “Testing the Test” event sites, the majority of teachers indicated that PARCC is a better assessment than their prior state tests. Similarly, the majority of the Massachusetts educators who completed surveys indicated a strong preference for PARCC over the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Seventy-two percent of the teachers reported that PARCC is a higher quality assessment when compared to the MCAS, while only seven percent think MCAS is higher quality than PARCC. (see Figure 1)²

Figure 1³

Question: “How would you rate the quality of MCAS to PARCC?” (n=324)



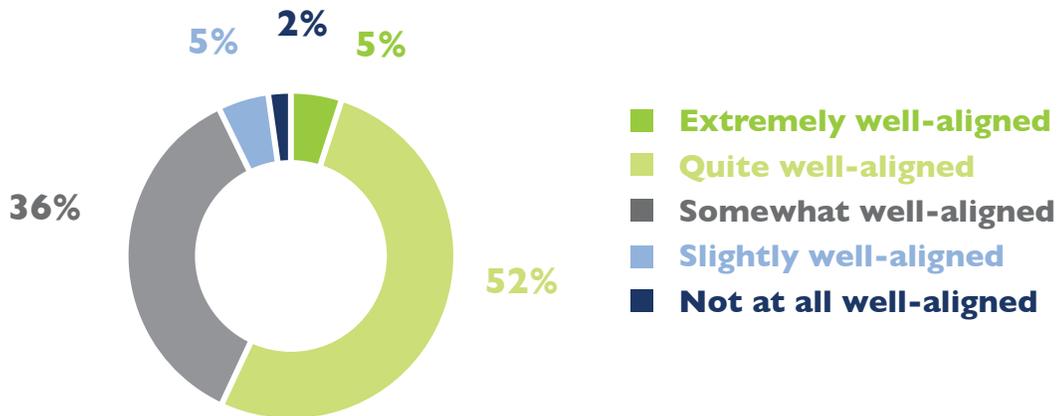
“1,000 TEACHERS EXAMINE PARCC” REPORT FINDING #2: Teachers find clear alignment between PARCC and what they are teaching.

MASSACHUSETTS DATA:

Teachers across the sites that hosted “Testing the Test” events found PARCC to be aligned with their classroom teaching, and Massachusetts teachers felt the same. Overall, 57 percent of teachers at the Massachusetts events reported that the PARCC assessments are “extremely well-aligned” or “quite well-aligned” to the Common Core, with just seven percent of the teachers saying that PARCC was either “slightly well-aligned” or “not at all well-aligned” to the standards. (see Figure 2)⁴

Figure 2

Question: “Overall, how well-aligned is PARCC to the Common Core State Standards?” (n=347)



The plurality of teachers, 42 percent, reported that PARCC sample questions more accurately measure the content they teach in their classrooms as compared to the MCAS. Twenty percent said it did not, and 38 percent said they were unsure.⁵

“1,000 TEACHERS EXAMINE PARCC” REPORT FINDING #3: While the majority believe PARCC measures skills needed to be college- and career-ready, teachers were mixed on whether the test was grade-appropriate or too challenging.

MASSACHUSETTS DATA:

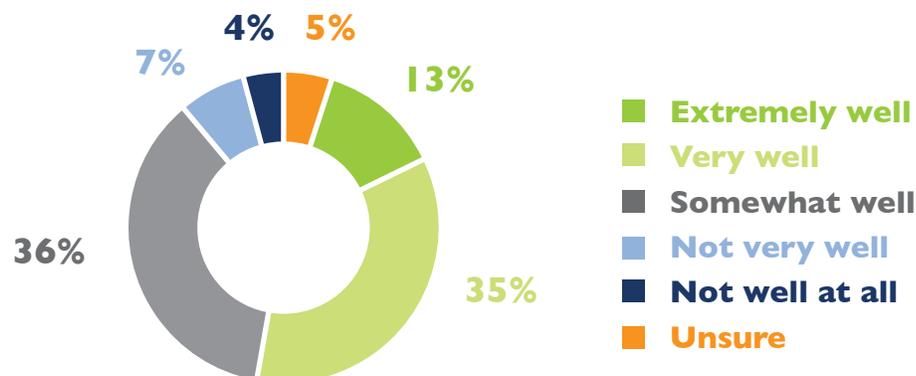
Teachers across the sites that hosted “Testing the Test” events believed that PARCC is an appropriate measure of college and career readiness, but they were mixed on whether it was grade-level appropriate. Massachusetts teachers felt the same way.

67% of teachers believe that PARCC does extremely well or very well in measuring critical thinking skills.

- When asked about how well PARCC sample items do in measuring students’ critical thinking skills, 67 percent of Massachusetts teachers said it did “extremely well” or “very well,” as opposed to just five percent who responded “not very well” or “not at all well.”⁶
- Forty-eight percent of Massachusetts teachers said that the test did “extremely well” or “very well” in measuring college- and career-ready skills of students, with just 11 percent of teachers responding “not very well” or “not well at all.” (see Figure 3)⁷ These findings are consistent with the recent report, “Educating Students for Success: A Comparison of the MCAS and PARCC Assessments as Indicators of College- and Career-Readiness,” which finds that MCAS is not an effective measure — and that PARCC holds promise — as a measure of readiness.⁸
- Forty percent of Massachusetts teachers responded “extremely well” or “very well” on PARCC being appropriately rigorous for the grade level, while 26 percent said PARCC does “not very well” or “not well at all” at being appropriately rigorous for the grade level.⁹

Figure 3

Question: “Based on your prior experiences and what you have seen today, how well does PARCC do in measuring skills that students must have to be college and career ready?” (n=342)



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education should adopt PARCC statewide.

Based on the strong responses in support of PARCC on the “Testing the Test” event surveys and our own experience as teachers, we recommend that the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopt PARCC as Massachusetts’ test in place of the MCAS. We believe that, with proper professional development around the Common Core and PARCC, teachers will be able to better prepare students not only for a rigorous assessment, but also the demands of college and career. Massachusetts should adopt PARCC because it is aligned with the Common Core, and teachers need an assessment that evaluates students’ understanding of these important standards.

PARCC Prep is Good Preparation for Life

By Jeffrey Cipriani

Last year I led the second grade team at my school in improving reading instruction using the Common Core. With this improved instruction, we planned to prepare our students for the more rigorous PARCC exam. We crafted 10 units of study, including a four-week course on something we knew would provoke a passionate reaction – bugs. One standard I chose to focus on in my class was determining unfamiliar word meaning using clues from books’ pictures, something not required for second graders in the old Massachusetts standards.

A student of mine who struggled with reading but loved insects squealed with joy and disgust one day when she analyzed a picture of a praying mantis eating another and inferred the definition of the word cannibal. “Yuck! Cannibals are gross!” she wrote on a sticky note. She then made it her personal reading quest to discover every example of insect cannibalism available in the classroom library.

It is no secret in education that what gets tested is what gets taught. This is the kind of skill that makes young readers feel confident with text and gets them hooked on nonfiction, but without PARCC testing it, teachers may not think to teach it.

The new assessment will also press students to respond to texts in writing. To do so, students will read two texts on the same topic, and then compose an essay in which they lay out their thinking on the subject matter using information from the texts. This task is much more challenging than previous MCAS test prompts required, because MCAS did not require students to compare texts. With preparation, even our youngest learners are ready for this.

Halfway through a reading unit dedicated to animal research, a righteous seven-year-old in my class approached me asking who the senators of Massachusetts are. She explained she had read a book about otters and a book about oil spills and wanted to encourage Elizabeth Warren to do more to protect oceans by writing a persuasive letter.

She wrote the letter unassisted. Not only is this the kind of writing that PARCC values, it is the kind of writing that has real-world value.

Another reason to embrace the new assessment is that PARCC promises to report data before the academic year finishes. I applaud this because, as an elementary school teacher, I need to know quickly where my students stand in their development as readers, writers, and mathematicians in order to help them. MCAS finalizes data the summer after testing, making reports feel more like an autopsy of a school’s performance than a timely diagnosis of teaching and learning designed to help schools improve. My classroom experience illustrates the importance of timely test scores.

The same student who discovered her love for entomology consistently showed below-proficient reading skills on bi-weekly exams. Through data analysis, I noticed she had a specific challenge with literature. I tapped into her love for insects and related narrative structure to a life cycle. Characters, I explained, are like caterpillars. They move through a pattern the same way insects change from one stage to another. “Got it,” she said. “Larva, chrysalis, butterfly. Character, problem, solution.” With timely test data, teachers can see and address student needs, and schools can diagnose bigger trends and problems.

Adjustment is never easy in teaching. Students, especially young ones, depend on routines, and changing routines can be challenging. If I am apprehensive at all for PARCC, it is only because I fear we will reject it before we give it a chance to take root. What does not worry me is whether students will be ready for the test. With good instruction, I know they can be.

An excerpt of an op-ed previously published in Commonwealth Magazine.

Recommendation 2: Provide teachers with more professional development and knowledge of PARCC before the full-scale implementation of the new assessment system.

As teachers, we know very well that transitions are very rarely smooth and executed to perfection. We believe that transitioning to PARCC is a goal in which it is worth investing our time and resources. One of the keys to a smooth transition is strong professional development.

This is an important opportunity to build teacher expertise and support student learning. In particular, Massachusetts teachers reported that the following types of professional development would be “very useful” or “extremely useful”:

- Professional development on the test and how to prepare students for it (88 percent)¹⁰
- Professional development on how to create formative assessments that measure students’ progress towards success on PARCC (89 percent)¹¹

Key Best Practice: Core Collaborative (C2 Initiative)



One model for Common Core-specific training is already occurring through the Core Collaborative (C2) Initiative in Massachusetts. The Core Collaborative, designed by Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellows and launched in partnership with the Massachusetts Teachers Association, is a set of teacher-led university courses led by current classroom teachers with expertise in the Common Core. With training from Teach Plus, C2 Teacher Leaders lead courses to facilitate teacher learning on Common Core instructional strategies in subjects such as close reading, Common Core math shifts, literacy in science and social studies classrooms, preparation for the PARCC assessments, and more.

Courses are offered in conjunction with University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston Public Schools, and the Five District Partnership (Chelsea, Revere, Malden, Everett, and Winthrop) for urban teachers in Massachusetts. The Core Collaborative provides leadership roles for highly effective teachers and gives educators the opportunity to learn best practices from the experts they trust most — fellow teachers.

Programs like the Core Collaborative or other locally organized trainings should be expanded throughout the state with a focus on PARCC in order to build capacity of a larger portion of Massachusetts' teachers. As programs like the Core Collaborative expand, resources and trainings should focus on the study and development of PARCC-aligned formative assessments and analysis of student performance.

Recommendation 3: In order to help ensure adequate alignment of these initiatives to the new assessment system, we strongly recommend that PARCC release a larger sample of questions.

When asked how useful they would find other PARCC assessments for diagnostic and formative purposes, 54 percent of Massachusetts teachers said it would be “very useful” or “extremely useful.”¹² And 95 percent of teachers said they would find more sample questions to be “very useful” or “extremely useful” in preparing their students for PARCC.¹³

Teachers and administrators can take the sample items from English Language Arts (ELA) and math that are currently available through PARCC and embed these into their current curriculum. To ensure that there are sufficient resources to draw upon, however, a larger sample of questions needs to be available. Educators need student response samples with scores and explanations in order to best understand how to prepare our students to master the important skills measured by PARCC. Empowered by this information, locally-led professional development and larger collaborative efforts like Teach Plus' teacher-led professional development program the Core Collaborative and the “Testing the Test” events would more effectively equip teachers with the specific strategies they will need to ensure student success.

Recommendation 4: The state of Massachusetts should create a diverse teacher council to address implementation challenges, interface directly with test and policy makers, and create a continuous dialogue and refinement process throughout the PARCC transition.

During the events, Massachusetts teachers indicated a strong desire for additional resources. For example, 74 percent of teachers reported that more materials to help explain the shift to PARCC to families would be “very useful” or “extremely useful,”¹⁴ and 90 percent of teachers said they would find “access to more/better technology than my school currently has” to be “very useful” or “extremely useful.”¹⁵

In addition, 84 percent of teachers reported that it would be “very useful” or “extremely useful” to have more time to collaborate with fellow teachers in preparation for the test.¹⁶

Massachusetts must address issues such as technology access and parent communication within the new assessment to successfully implement PARCC. We also must ensure that implementation is strong in high-need schools to ensure equity for vulnerable populations. We clearly have the capacity to solve these issues, but they must be addressed through a continuous forum focused on implementation concerns. Teachers, local and state administrators, and PARCC staff must create a more regular forum for identifying action items, and studying and refining the implementation process.

The Massachusetts PARCC Educator Leader Fellows -- a group of Massachusetts educators selected to support the rollout of PARCC -- have played an important role as ambassadors, facilitators of professional development, and more; there is also a need for a body of teachers dedicated to making policy and implementation recommendations.

Ensure Strong Implementation in High-Needs Schools

By Julia Beaufait

After my second year of teaching, I attended a summer institute for teachers at Stanford University. This was the first time I had attended a training with teachers who worked outside of my district and outside of an urban setting. Alongside colleagues who worked in a more affluent district and with a different student population, I learned more about using high-quality children's literature in my fourth grade classroom and providing students with a choice of tasks to show mastery. I became aware of these best practices because I was working with a group of diverse peers who shared a similar professional goal. I believe that the Common Core State Standards and next-generation assessments like PARCC provide a similarly expansive opportunity for teachers across the country; it can serve as a major thrust for equity for all kids.

While Common Core and PARCC offer an opportunity to increase equity and opportunity, that vision has not yet been fully realized. After working in a district for several years that had adopted the Common Core early and quickly began developing teachers' understanding of pedagogical and content shifts associated with them, I moved to a turnaround school. As I shared the math curriculum and discussed new curriculum priorities aligned to the Common Core with the school leadership team, a school leader looked at me in shock and asked, "Are you saying the tests are changing?" Throughout the year, the school continued to use outdated formative assessments and struggled to support teachers to implement Common Core-aligned practices. Students at my school were not seeing rigorous, open-ended assessments that reflect the Common Core shifts and thus we, as teachers, were not reflecting on student data that would push us to implement new and promising practices.

Our most vulnerable schools are often the least well equipped to implement these important shifts. We must work hard to ensure that high-needs schools have access to strong support to ensure that our students are also college- and career-ready. It would be a missed opportunity to allow high-needs schools to fall behind throughout the first years of PARCC implementation. A council of teachers, school leaders, and district administrators from a representative sample of schools and districts throughout the state should work together with decision makers to help us ensure equitable implementation throughout the transition to the new standards and assessments.

Recommendation 5: Massachusetts should encourage districts to eliminate unnecessary tests that were used before PARCC, taking advantage of the fact that PARCC is rigorous and aligned to the Common Core — and protecting essential time for instruction.

Massachusetts teachers have adopted rigorous, cutting-edge standards. When considering their classroom instruction, more than three-fourths (76 percent) of teachers who attended the Massachusetts “Testing the Test” events indicated that they are already teaching a curriculum that is aligned to the Common Core.¹⁷ We believe that the PARCC assessment is sufficient on its own for assessing students’ mastery of these standards. Reducing the number of other assessments, which sap teaching time, will help teachers prepare students for success on PARCC, the Common Core, and in college and their careers.

In their report, “The Student and the Stopwatch: How much time do American students spend on testing?” Teoh, Coggins, Guan, and Hiler report that third graders in Boston spend 15.5 hours annual on district- and state-mandated math and ELA testing, while seventh graders spend 17.2 hours on such assessments.¹⁸

Streamlining district-mandated assessments and state assessments to take advantage of the higher quality of PARCC would help teachers shelter the time they have with students for what matters most: teaching. This increased time spent on teaching will help students master the Common Core in order to achieve success on the PARCC assessments. Our state’s new standards focus on depth, not breadth. Our approach to testing should be the same.

CONCLUSION

The participants at the “Testing the Test” events made clear that PARCC is a better assessment for Massachusetts than the MCAS. It is time to adopt it statewide. With our recommendations, we believe PARCC can deepen the rigor of state assessments, create a common language through which states can compare student achievement, and provide student assessment data that better equips teachers to support students’ college and career readiness. We believe that the process of implementing PARCC would be most effective with the guidance of an expert counsel of teacher leaders and more feedback on sample questions from the educators who will be administering the assessment. As teachers implement the Common Core standards within their classrooms, a body of educators would be an asset to the conversation around types of questions, creating questions, and providing student exemplars of piloted questions.

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“TESTING THE TEST” EVENTS

In the fall of 2014, Teach Plus held seven “Testing the Test” events in five locations to offer teachers an opportunity to delve deeply into PARCC test items. Highlights include:

- Events were open to all public school teachers and were held in Boston, Massachusetts; Chicago, Illinois; Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee; and Washington, D.C. from September to November 2014.
- In total, 1,028 classroom teachers participated. Teachers were provided a small honorarium for their time and expertise.
- Amongst the 1,014 survey respondents, 50 percent teach in elementary school (pre-kindergarten to grade 5), 31 percent teach in middle school (grades 6 to 8), 19 percent in high school (grades 9 to 12), and less than one percent in other grades. When asked about their teaching subjects, 38 percent responded elementary generalist, 23 percent ELA, 18 percent math, four percent science, and 17 percent other.
- Participants were invited to attend through a combination of emails sent by schools, districts, state agencies, and charter school networks in participating cities. Teachers were also informed about this opportunity through social media.
- While many of the participants (66 percent) had seen PARCC sample questions in the past,¹⁹ just 14 percent had field-tested PARCC with their classes during the prior spring semester.²⁰
- The focus of the events was on the quality of the test and not on the adequacy of the technology used to give the tests or whether the tests were being added to an already-crowded testing landscape in teachers’ districts, two common issues cited by teachers.
- The events consisted of three two-hour sessions, as follows:
 - Session I was structured to ensure necessary background knowledge. Topics covered included:
 - The shifts expected by the Common Core in math and ELA.
 - The goals of next-generation assessments compared to current state tests.
 - Principles of high quality assessment developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and Student Achievement Partners.

Teachers were introduced to the rubric and materials they would use to evaluate assessment quality. They were also provided the Common Core for reference. The rubric and materials were developed by current classroom teachers.

- Session II allowed time for structured analysis of PARCC test items using the Common Core and the rubric introduced in session I. Teachers worked in small, content- and grade-based groups of 5-10 participants. The sample test items were drawn directly from the PARCC website. Items for analysis were divided by grade bands, and included a variety of question types and related passages. Attendees analyzed the items collaboratively with other teachers from their grade bands. Teachers recorded the results of their analyses after discussing the material with their fellow teachers.
- Session III, the last component of the event, consisted of a whole-group discussion about their general experiences preparing for actual PARCC test administration. Teachers were asked to complete a paper survey. The results from the 1,014 completed surveys were used as the data for the “1,000 Teachers Examine PARCC” report, and the results from the 351 Massachusetts teachers from 74 districts were used for this report.

ENDNOTES

1. A few of the participants declined to provide their school district, so the number of districts represented may be slightly higher.
2. Question: How would you rate the quality of MCAS to PARCC? (n=324) Responses: “PARCC is a higher quality assessment when compared to MCAS” (71.6 percent), “PARCC is about the same as the MCAS” (21.0 percent), “PARCC is a lower quality assessment when compared to the MCAS” (7.4 percent).
3. Some of the percentages in the charts may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.
4. Question: “Overall, how well aligned is PARCC to the Common Core State Standards?” (n=347) Responses: “Extremely well-aligned” (4.6 percent), “Quite well-aligned” (52.5 percent), “Somewhat well-aligned” (35.7 percent), “Slightly well-aligned” (5.5 percent), “Not at all well-aligned” (1.7 percent).
5. Question: “Do PARCC sample questions more accurately measure the content you teach in your classroom as compared to MCAS?” (n=348) Responses: “Yes” (42.0 percent), “No” (20.4 percent), “Unsure” (37.6 percent).
6. Question: “Based on your prior experiences and what you have seen today, how well does PARCC do in measuring critical thinking skills?” (n=346) Responses: “Extremely well” (22.5 percent), “Very well” (44.5 percent), “Somewhat well” (26.6 percent), “Not very well” (4.6 percent), “Not well at all” (0.9 percent), “Unsure” (0.9 percent).
7. Question: “Based on your prior experiences and what you have seen today, how well does PARCC do in measuring skills that your students must have in order to be college and career ready?” (n=342) “Extremely well” (13.2 percent), “Very well” (34.8 percent), “Somewhat well” (36.3 percent), “Not very well” (7.3 percent), “Not well at all” (3.5 percent), “Unsure” (5.0 percent).
8. Center for Assessment and Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education. (February, 2015). *Educating Students for Success: A Comparison of the MCAS and PARCC Assessments as Indicators of College- and Career-Readiness*. Retrieved from <http://www.mbae.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MBAE-MCAS-PARCC-Report-Web.pdf>.
9. Question: “Based on your prior experiences and what you have seen today, how well does PARCC do in being appropriately rigorous for the grade level?” (n=341) Responses: “Extremely well” (12.9 percent), “Very well” (27.0 percent), “Somewhat well” (32.8 percent), “Not very well” (21.1 percent), “Not well at all” (4.4 percent), “Unsure” (1.8 percent).
10. Question: “How useful would professional development on the test and how to prepare students for it be to you as you help your students prepare for PARCC?” (n=337) Responses: “Extremely useful” (66.5 percent), “Very useful” (22.0 percent), “Somewhat useful” (8.6 percent), “Not very useful” (1.5 percent), “Not at all useful” (0.9 percent), “Unsure” (0.6 percent).

11. 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=336) Responses: “Extremely useful” (59.2 percent), “Very useful” (29.5 percent), “Somewhat useful” (8.0 percent), “Not very useful” (1.5 percent), “Not at all useful” (1.2 percent), “Unsure” (0.6 percent).

12. Question: “Based on your experience with PARCC sample summative assessment items, how useful would you find other PARCC assessments for diagnostic and formative purposes?” (n=342) Responses: “Extremely useful” (19.9 percent), “Very useful” (34.2 percent), “Somewhat useful” (33.0 percent), “Not very useful” (6.1 percent), “Not at all useful” (1.8 percent), “Unsure” (5.0 percent).

13. Question “How useful would more sample questions be in helping prepare your students to take PARCC?” (n=334) Responses: “Extremely useful” (79.9 percent), “Very useful” (15.0 percent), “Somewhat useful” (4.5 percent), “Not very useful” (0.3 percent), “Not at all useful” (0.0 percent), “Unsure” (0.3 percent).

14. Question: “How useful would materials to help you explain the shift to PARCC to families be in helping prepare your students to take PARCC?” (n=335) Responses: “Extremely useful” (51.0 percent), “Very useful” (23.3 percent), “Somewhat useful” (18.2 percent), “Not very useful” (5.7 percent), “Not at all useful” (1.2 percent), “Unsure” (0.6 percent).

15. Question “How useful would access to more/better technology than your school currently has be in helping prepare your students to take PARCC?” (n=337) Responses: “Extremely useful” (67.1 percent), “Very useful” (22.6 percent), “Somewhat useful” (6.8 percent), “Not very useful” (0.6 percent), “Not at all useful” (0.6 percent), “Unsure” (2.4 percent).

16. Question “How useful would time to collaborate with fellow teachers in preparation for the test be in helping prepare your students to take PARCC?” (n=339) Responses: “Extremely useful” (55.2 percent), “Very useful” (29.2 percent), “Somewhat useful” (12.7 percent), “Not very useful” (1.5 percent), “Not at all useful” (0.0 percent), “Unsure” (1.5 percent).

17. Question: “Do you currently have a curriculum for the 2014-2015 school year that is aligned to the Common Core State Standards?” (n=344) Responses: “Yes” (76.5 percent), “No” (14.0 percent), “Unsure” (9.6 percent)

18. Teoh, M., Coggins, C., Guan, C., & Hiler, T. (2014). *The Student and the Stopwatch: How much time do American students spend on testing?* Retrieved from http://www.teachplus.org/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/the_student_and_the_stopwatch.pdf. These numbers reflect only testing time, and do not include other considerations such as time spent on test preparation and data analysis.

19. Question: “Is this the first time you have seen PARCC sample questions?” (n = 1004) Responses: “Yes” (33.6 percent), “No” (66.4 percent).

20. Question: “Did you and your class pilot the PARCC assessments last spring?” (n = 751) Responses: “Yes” (13.8 percent), “No” (86.2 percent). The second question was not used in the survey administered in Memphis or Nashville, TN.