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April 15, 2015

TO: Chief School Administrators
Charter School Lead Persons
School and District Test Coordinators
School and District Technology Coordinators

FROM: David C. Hespe
Commissioner

RE: Update on PARCC Performance Based Assessment (PBA) Completion

While some high schools continue to participate in the PBA of PARCC as part of the spring block schedule, for the rest of our schools, the PBA portion of PARCC has been completed.

I want to again thank you and your local school leaders for the overall successful first administration of the PARCC assessments. I recognize the extraordinary efforts that you undertook to make the administration successful in each of your schools, particularly in a dynamic and challenging climate. I am proud of the way that the vast majority of you worked through these issues with your local communities and would like to thank you for these efforts.

This year, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) and last week saw renewed efforts in the Senate to reauthorize it. One of the pillars of the ESEA was that in order to serve all of our students, especially our most vulnerable students, every student must participate in our state assessment. This is also evident from New Jersey's own longstanding experience with high standards and meaningful assessments. We know that all students need to participate in high-quality assessments that can help prepare them for success in school and after graduation.

And I know you realize that this is about much more than just a test. It is about a vision of student learning that encompasses an interconnected system of educational strategies involving academic expectations aligned with the expectations of colleges and employers; instructional improvement through teacher preparation and professional development; an effective and efficient system of assessments; educator empowerment through professional learning communities; and using technology to drive innovation in the school and classroom. PARCC – to a greater extent than any assessment in New Jersey history – will focus our energies on student learning by releasing 40% of the test questions with exemplars of student work so that educators can discern where students are both excelling and struggling.

A few weeks ago, the presidents of New Jersey's 19 Community Colleges announced their commitment to utilizing PARCC scores as one factor in determining student placement in coursework beginning in 2016. Their commitment, along with your hard work over the last eight years to redesign our high schools through the implementation of higher course-taking requirements and the implementation of end-of-course assessments, promises to make the transition from P-12 to postsecondary more seamless for our students.

As we enter the second half of the test administration, we need to renew our communications with parents and students regarding the importance of taking the End-of-Year (EOY) portion of the assessment. It is important for parents and stakeholders to understand that the EOY portion of PARCC is not a separate test. Instead, it is the second part of PARCC. Students who participated in the PBA portion, but not in EOY, will not receive a score report nor count as a participant. The reason for separating the assessment into two portions in 2015 was to allow scorers to begin work on the PBA portion of the assessment while the EOY portion captures student learning later in the school year. In this way, we can start to return results to you much faster than in the past.

As you renew your engagement with parents, students and the school community you should consult our online PARCC resources, which even includes a link to a library of news stories, editorials and op-eds that explain why these efforts will help kids. These resources can be found at: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/>.

In order to assist superintendents and school administrators in community-outreach efforts regarding PARCC, I want to provide you with some preliminary information regarding the recently completed Performance Based Assessment portion of the PARCC:

Parental Refusal by Grade Level

In spite of predictions to the contrary, parental refusal rates in our elementary grades were very low. If your district included grades 3-6, the average parental refusal rate across those grades (all tests marked as “not tested, other”) was approximately 3.8%. If your school included grades 3-8, the average parental refusal rate across those grades was approximately 4.6%.

As expected, high school grades were more challenging due to the disconnection of passing the test as a high school graduation requirement and varied by grade level. For example, for 9th grade ELA and Algebra 1, we saw parental refusals at approximately 7%. In grade 11 ELA and Algebra II, the combined parental refusal rate was approximately 14.5% – the highest among all grade levels. I want to share these preliminary numbers with you now, although the official calculation of participation rate – according to NCLB guidelines – including the parental refusals that I discussed above, will take place after the EOY portion of PARCC. We also expect these data points to change as districts and schools work through their record verification processes. The official participation rates for the 2014 administration of the statewide assessments can be found as part of a school’s Title I profile at: <http://www.nj.gov/education/title1/accountability/progress/14/pt/>.

Looking toward the EOY administration, local school leaders should reemphasize to parents and students the importance of students taking the assessment. The assessments will provide parents with more detailed feedback on their child’s academic progress than any of New Jersey’s previous tests. (A presentation detailing the difference between prior student score reports and PARCC score reports, with annotations, can be found at the link below.) Moreover, the information will help schools identify strengths and areas to improve learning in your community. The department has developed new communication tools to help you message about the value of the new PARCC score reports and you can find them here: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/symposium/>.

Computer-based Assessment

We as a state should also be very proud that more than 98% of New Jersey schools provided PARCC assessments on computer, the highest rate among all PARCC states! During the PBA, New Jersey was regularly logging approximately a quarter of a million students taking the PARCC assessment on most days. Calls to the Pearson help desk peaked on the first day of testing, March 2, as expected.

We did not hear of widespread problems with school technology or the PARCC testing platform. Instead, a small number of technology issues emerged from some districts related to server configurations, viruses, malware, and specific test administration. Other than an issue with the call-in center in the first week, which was resolved within a few hours, technology issues tended to be localized and corrected fairly rapidly.

Student Experience

We have seen dozens of news reports where students and superintendents have stated that students not only said they did not struggle with technology, but also that they found it engaging. Moreover, students said the difficulty of the test questions ranged from challenging to being easier than expected. Please note that students are regularly finishing the assessment in approximately half of the Unit Testing Time (or close to the Estimated Time on Task – ETOT). As with last spring's field test, a formal survey of students' reactions will take place during the EOY PARCC administration.

Looking Forward

You should know that we are committed to working with you to improve the PARCC test administration, especially in the high school grades, and are exploring a number of ideas to do so. We are well aware of the difficult decisions that were made by many of you, especially in terms of scheduling issues in order to ensure that students had a smooth PARCC experience, and we will be focused on using the lessons learned in this first administration to improve. Assistant Commissioner Bari Erlichson will be providing you with additional information on this.

As the Study Commission on the Use of Student Assessments continues to explore the quality and effectiveness of student assessments in New Jersey, we will be providing additional resources and opportunities to work with you on ensuring that every school has in place an effective and efficient system of assessments.

DCH

c: Members, State Board of Education
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