
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Colorado Assessment Implementation Study

Phase I Findings — May 2014

Introduction

The Colorado State Assessment System is designed to measure student mastery of the state academic content standards. Revised standards were adopted in December 2009 and August 2010. Since that time several new tests have been introduced. In 2012 the state implemented the Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) to reflect changes in the academic content standards and provide better information to educators. As the state assessment system is refined and continues to evolve, intended and unintended outcomes may arise for educators, students, and parents. These outcomes become complicated when viewed in light of early literacy assessments, local district assessment systems, new online assessments, and additional education reform initiatives. To address concerns raised by educators, parents, and other stakeholders, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) decided to gather information about the implications of the entire assessment system. Lacking the resources for such a study, CDE turned to its Regional Comprehensive Center for assistance.

CDE worked with the Regional Comprehensive Center to design a multi-phase study at no cost to CDE or the state. The purpose of the study is to discern and examine issues and concerns associated with implementation of the new state assessment system, and provide feedback that informs policy, practice, and future directions. The first phase of the study captured perceptions and sentiments about current and new state tests, challenges and needs associated with transitioning to the new assessment system, proposed solutions that address key challenges, and ideas for implementing a high-quality assessment system.

Methodology

Conducted in two phases, this report includes findings from phase one, which took place between February and April 2014. The first phase involved a review of documents and district artifacts, survey of district assessment coordinators, and district and role-alike focus groups. The second phase of the study began in May and includes a brief, follow-up survey of district assessment coordinators; follow-up conversations with district focus groups; and a focus group of large, metro-area districts.

Survey

A voluntary survey was sent to 178 district assessment coordinators (DAC) on March 12. DACs were encouraged to consult other district leaders to ensure that responses reflected those of the district as a whole. The survey had three sections. The first section asked for demographic information to assist in the analyses. The second section allowed respondents to provide feedback on general readiness issues related to the new assessment system. The third section requested information on the value and burden of state and other assessments. Each district could submit one completed survey. The survey closed March 28.

Focus Groups

CDE sent invitations to every district during the last week of January 2014. Twenty-three districts responded to the request. The Commissioner's Superintendent Advisory Council helped to select the following districts from the list of 23 respondents: Archuleta, Buena Vista R-31, Cherry Creek 5, Delta County, La Veta RE-2, Platte Valley RE-7, Strasburg, and Woodland Park Re-2. CDE also identified teachers from across the state to participate in a separate focus group and reached out to various concerned parent groups as well as the Colorado League of Charter Schools to identify participants for two additional role-alike focus groups.

Research Constraints and Limitations

The state assessment system is the primary focus of the study. Study participants also raised accountability issues, such as whether the results of new tests are sufficiently valid and reliable to support school accountability and teacher evaluation decisions. These issues were noted and are discussed in the report. For analyses of the survey data, districts were weighted equally. Since all districts, regardless of location or size, need to perform similar transition activities, each had an equal voice during survey administration and analysis. As a consequence, however, it should be noted that the views of rural districts with small student populations have a proportionally higher impact on the results.

Results

Eighty-seven DACs submitted complete surveys for a 49% response rate. Surveys were submitted by districts in each region with the highest rates for the northeast (23%) and southwest (20%) regions. Districts were predominantly rural (73%) with suburban and urban districts accounting for 16% and 8% respectively of the sample. More than half of the districts are small with 54% serving less than 1,000 students. A majority (78%) of districts participated in assessment field tests (i.e., new English language arts and/or mathematics tests, science and/or social studies tests) and/or the educator effectiveness pilot. Ninety-three individuals participated in focus groups with a majority (nearly 80%) representing rural districts. Twenty percent of focus group participants were parents, and another 20% were teachers. Eleven percent of participants were principals, 11% were either superintendents or assistant superintendents, and an additional 11% represented charter schools.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Analyses revealed the following areas of consensus across survey respondents and focus group participants regarding the state assessment system:

Value Most — Participants value local interim assessments more than statewide summative assessments. State assessment results and the information provided in reports, however, as well as the emphasis on growth are valued. Additionally, participants value the common metric and basis the assessments provide for the state's accountability system.

Value Least — Participants dislike the high stakes associated with state assessment results. They report that results are delayed and general, and do not inform instructional practice, programming, and student placement decisions (i.e., utility). They also question the timing of statewide summative tests which are administered prior to the end of the school year.

Challenges — Time is the theme that summarizes the challenges associated with implementation of the new assessment system. Issues related to this theme include the impact on instructional time, frequent schedule disruptions, computer and device access for non-testing students during test windows, and the burden associated with test preparation and administration.

Needs — To facilitate the transition to the new assessment system, participants identified the need for efficient methods to administer tests while minimizing disruptions to instructional time, sufficient numbers and types of devices to meet instructional needs and technical requirements, and enhanced staffing and capacity to support the process.

Solutions — Proposed solutions clustered under the themes of flexibility and results. Flexibility involves options based upon district needs, size, and location as well as local decisionmaking regarding whether, when, where, how, and how often students are tested. Study participants also expect timely, high-quality, relevant, and useful feedback about student performance that informs educators, parents, and students.

Unique Survey Results

Respondents (80%) value local interim assessments most followed by early literacy assessments associated with the READ Act (50%). More than half (57%) of urban districts consider their local interim assessments as high burden compared to 37% of rural and 23% of suburban districts. Few respondents (21%) value the social studies and science assessments. School readiness assessments impose the greatest burden (76%) followed by social studies (74%) and science (73%) tests. The least burdensome tests include the Colorado ACT and other district postsecondary readiness assessments. These tests, however, are identified as high burden to half of the urban districts compared to 19% of rural and none of the suburban districts.

Districts generally view current English language arts and mathematics assessments (i.e., TCAP) as low value with suburban districts valuing these assessments more than urban and rural districts. Two-thirds of rural and suburban districts view all TCAP assessments as high in burden compared to 29% of urban districts. Urban districts (50%) value the science assessments at higher levels than suburban (38% believe the tests inform student progress, 25% say they support school improvement) and rural districts (20%). And although the burden of school readiness assessments is high, urban districts (100%) consider it highly valuable in informing student progress compared to 38% of rural and 13% of suburban districts.

Regarding overall readiness to administer state assessments, 27% of districts appear fully prepared, 53% reported moderate readiness levels, and 20% are not yet ready. The two primary factors influencing district readiness are management (62%) and devices (60%). This holds for rural districts with 63% citing management and 57% noting devices. Devices have a greater impact on suburban (71%) and urban (71%) readiness. Suburban districts appear to be the least prepared with 79% citing management and IT staff and personnel issues. Also, nearly two-thirds of suburban districts reported network infrastructure challenges compared to 49% of rural and 43% of urban districts.

Unique Focus Group Results

In addition to the cross-cutting themes, each role group articulated unique concerns and potential solutions. Students, for example, fear that new exams will be challenging, include unfamiliar content, and be unfair or inadequate measures for some students. They worry about the amount of screen time involved and want simpler tests with one section per subject area. Parents dislike the pressure placed on students, want more transparency about test items and the assessment process, and prefer fewer summative tests. Teachers are familiar with the current system and fear the unknown. They also dislike the stress that high-stakes tests place upon students and teachers. Principals value the READ Act because choices are provided and useful, diagnostic information obtained. Assessment coordinators fear that new tests will not be user-friendly and view social studies exams as problematic due to timing and lack of incentives for high school seniors. Technology directors hope that their districts are well prepared to administer new assessments and view feasibility (i.e., capacity, complexity, scale, resources, and timeframe) as a major challenge. And superintendents raise accountability issues and concerns about how assessment results will be used. They question the quality of new tests, want fair and accurate measures that reflect student learning, and view communication about the process and results as a challenge.

The solution noted most frequently by focus group participants was that of holding schools and districts harmless until all components of the system are validated and functioning effectively. Flexibility is another key theme. Participants, especially rural districts, want more local control and differentiated options based upon district needs, size, and location. Funding flexibility to repair and improve school facilities, support teachers, and meet other deferred needs was also mentioned. Finally, because participants feel overwhelmed and under-resourced, they desire a more gradual pace and seek to slow the roll-out of the new assessment system.

Conclusion

Phase one of this study examined the issues associated with implementation of the state assessment system. While differences were observed among districts located in rural, suburban, and urban areas, several cross-cutting themes and common challenges emerged:

- Impact on instructional time
- Moderate levels of readiness (i.e., management, devices, and capacity)
- Quantity, frequency, and duration of assessments
- Need for timely, relevant, and useful results
- Burden and utility of assessments at the secondary level
- Recognition of local assessment systems and practices

Based upon the findings four implementation approaches are proposed for consideration:

1. Stay the course and implement the transition plan as scheduled
2. Stay the course with added supports and policy adjustments
3. Purposefully delay parts of the system
4. Strategically eliminate specific assessments

Study findings and potential solutions that address common challenges were discussed among members of the Commissioner's Superintendent Advisory Council on May 1, 2014. The council's feedback informed the implementation approaches and helped clarify options for minimizing the assessment burden on districts. Several council members expressed an interest in limiting statewide summative assessments to the federal minimum and making optional any assessments beyond that minimum.

The second phase of the study began in May following online administration of the new science and social studies assessments and field testing of the new online English language arts and mathematics assessments. The objective of the second phase is to understand whether and how the challenges and opportunities may have changed, gather lessons from the state's first online administration, and solicit feedback on strategies for facilitating a smooth transition. The Colorado Department of Education will use the findings, input, and additional feedback to address unintended consequences of the new assessment system and adjust administrative policies and procedures.