

Background & Purpose of Study

CDE understands that the state's assessments bring a range of intended and unintended implications on districts, schools, teachers, students and parents. These implications become more complex when viewed in light of the new online assessments, early literacy assessments, local district assessment systems, and other reform initiatives.

To address concerns raised from several superintendents, including a recent meeting held with 20 superintendents, CDE determined it needed to exercise its due diligence by quickly gathering information about the implications of the entire assessment system occurring across the state. CDE recognizes that the legislature is considering the topic of assessments; however, with the state's new science and social studies assessments occurring shortly, along with other assessments, CDE felt it needed to move quickly so information would be relevant. Not having available resources for such a study, CDE turned to its Regional Comprehensive Center, WestEd, a nonprofit education research agency, to research the state's assessment requirements, gather data from a representative sample of districts across the state including teachers and parents, survey district/charter leaders and assessment coordinators, synthesize the findings, and present a range of options to address those findings to the department. The department plans to vet the findings and options with the Commissioner's Superintendent Advisory Council to solicit their feedback and input on next steps. Based on the study findings and input from the advisory council, the department plans to use the information to make any needed changes to administration policies and procedures and to highlight any policy changes that might emerge from the findings that would address unintended consequences of the new assessment system.

Study Design

The study will be conducted in phases so that the department can capture information, lessons learned, and options for improvement throughout the implementation of the new assessment system. The aim is to have initial study findings and related options to help address unintended implications of the new system by late April so that the state can act on those options and respond thoughtfully to the greatest identified needs and concerns facing districts.

The first phase of the study will involve focus groups of a representative sample of districts and a statewide survey of districts/charters. In addition, teacher, parent, and charter school focus groups will be held. The focus groups will be conducted between late-February and early April. The district focus groups will consist of approximately 7-10 members (selected by the districts without any CDE involvement) with people who fill the following types of roles (recognizing that in many districts the same individual holds multiple roles): superintendent, assessment coordinator, curriculum coordinator, technology coordinator, principal, teacher, parent, and student. The additional teacher, parent, and charter school focus groups will allow the researchers to delve deeper into issues and concerns of these constituents. The focus groups will last approximately two hours and will be facilitated on site by WestEd researchers. WestEd will also be conducting a survey of all districts/charters to get broad participation and feedback on assessment implementation challenges and opportunities.

The focus groups and survey will encompass all components of local and state assessment systems (including the new state science and social studies assessments, PARCC-developed assessments in English language arts and math, state-mandated assessments in such areas as the READ Act and school readiness, as well as local assessments used by districts) and the interplay/interaction of these assessments on instruction, time, teachers, and students. WestEd will synthesize the findings from the focus groups and survey in late April and provide CDE with a range of options (with the consequences of such options) for consideration to address the findings. CDE will share the synthesized findings and annotated options

with the Commissioner's Superintendent Advisory Council to solicit their reactions and will use their feedback to inform next steps that the department may take.

The second phase will include follow up focus groups and surveys in May after the online administration of the new science and social studies assessments and field testing of the PARCC-developed assessments to see how challenges/opportunities may have changed since the February-April focus groups and to gather lessons learned from the state's first administration of online assessments. It is anticipated that WestEd will provide findings from the second phase of the study in June. Again, these findings and related options will be vetted with the Commissioner's Superintendent Advisory Council to inform next steps. The department envisions additional phases of this study during the 2014-15 school year to inform ongoing implementation of the new assessments.

Districts Selected to Participate in the Study

CDE sent an invitation to all districts in the state the week of January 27th. Twenty-three districts responded to the department's request representing all regions of the state. The Commissioner shared the list of interested districts with the Commissioner's Superintendent Advisory Council at the CASE Winter Conference on February 6. This advisory council represents all superintendent regions throughout the state. The superintendent representative from each region who serves on the council helped select the district from the list of volunteers in his/her region to participate in the study. The districts selected for the focus group portion of the study include: Cherry Creek 5, Platte Valley RE-7, Strasburg, Buena Vista R-31, Woodland Park Re-2, Delta County, La Veta RE-2, and Archuleta.

Teachers, Parents, and Charter Schools Selected to Participate in the Study

CDE worked to identify teachers from across the state to participate in the teacher focus group. CDE is reaching out to a range of concerned parent groups who represent both viewpoints regarding testing. Several of these groups have already been identified based upon public comment at the State Board of Education meetings and written correspondence. In addition, CDE is reaching out to the Colorado League of Charter Schools to identify charter school representatives to participate in the charter school focus group.

Findings and Related Options

CDE will share the findings and related option analysis from each phase of the WestEd study with the Commissioner's Superintendent Advisory Council to vet the findings and solicit feedback on next steps. CDE will share the study findings and advisory council feedback with the State Board of Education, districts/BOCES, interested policymakers and stakeholders and post all information on CDE's website. As noted earlier, the department plans to use the information to make any needed changes to administration policies and procedures and to highlight any policy changes that might emerge from the findings that would address unintended consequences of the new assessment system.

Outside the Scope of the Study

The study is focused on assessment implementation issues and is in direct response to concerns raised by the field with regard to challenges/burdens of implementing the new assessments. It is not a formal cost/benefit analysis; nor is it a study of the Colorado Academic Standards or the selection of the PARCC consortium assessments.

Background on WestEd

WestEd is a non-partisan, non-profit, research, development, and service agency that works with education and other communities to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults.

The roots of WestEd go back to 1966, when Congress funded regional laboratories across the country to find practical ways to improve the education of our nation's children. Two of the research laboratories - the Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory (SWRL) and the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (FWL) – merged in 1995 to form WestEd.

WestEd provides consulting and technical assistance, evaluation, professional development, and research and development services to schools, districts, state education agencies, and education organizations across the country.

WestEd's Work with the Colorado Department of Education

The U.S. Department of Education funds a network of regional comprehensive centers that are charged with providing technical assistance and support to state departments of education to implement statewide initiatives. Colorado, along with Kansas and Missouri, is served by the Central Comprehensive Center which is based at the University of Oklahoma. The Central Comprehensive Center subcontracts with WestEd (which also runs a comprehensive center for Arizona, Nevada, and Utah) to provide technical assistance and support to Colorado.

The Colorado Department of Education has successfully worked with WestEd for the past several years. CDE meets with WestEd to develop an annual work plan focused on such areas as: standards and assessments, educator effectiveness; priority improvement and turnaround schools/districts; English language learners; college and career ready supports; and closing the achievement gap. Over the course of the year, WestEd performs a range of agreed-upon services and support in these areas that are provided at no cost to the state. Examples include: providing technical assistance from national experts on research-based strategies for improving the performance of and strengthening services to English language learners; building capacity of leaders in Colorado's turnaround districts through a training partnership with the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business; and convening leaders from neighboring states who are working on implementing new educator evaluation systems to share promising practices across state lines.

A key benefit of the partnership with WestEd is the ability to adapt the workplan as needs change in the state. As CDE began to hear concerns from districts about implementing the new assessments, CDE worked with WestEd to redirect their resources and support on helping CDE study, understand, and respond to the needs in the field. This resulted in creation of the multi-phase study outlined in this document. The study is being completed within the existing workplan and scope of services provided by WestEd at no cost to CDE or the state.

WestEd's Services Beyond their Work with Colorado

In addition to serving as a comprehensive center, WestEd provides a range of services and support to schools, districts, and states across the nation. They offer services in the following areas: college and career readiness; early childhood development and learning; English language learners; health, safety and wellbeing; literacy; STEM; special education; standards, assessment, and accountability; teachers and leaders. They are funded through a variety of funding sources including federal grants/contracts, foundation grants, school/district contracts, and fees from books and other resources. They provide a range of resources and professional development, many of which are free and some of which are fee-based.