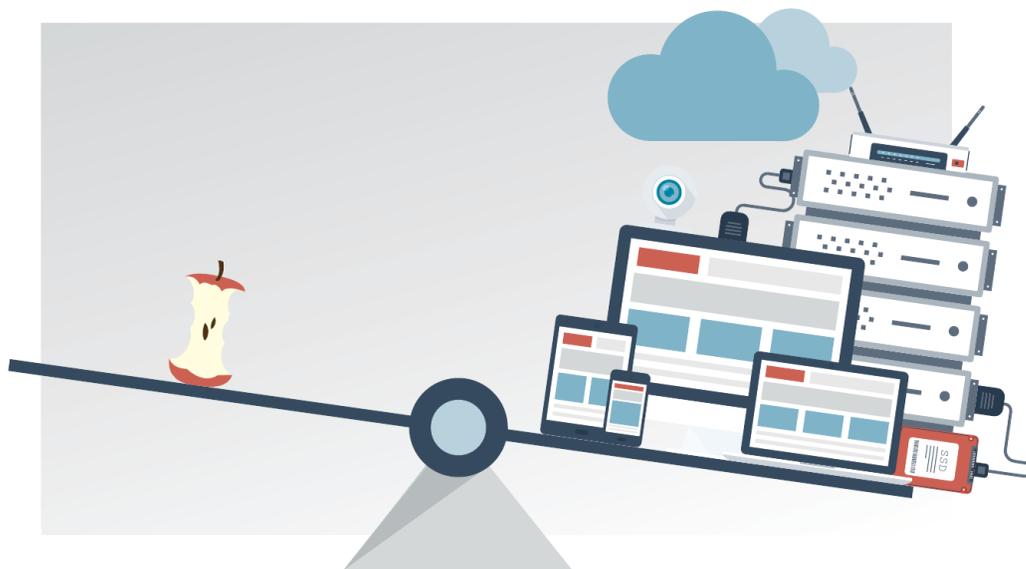


Electronic School



Testing Goes Digital

Common Core testing comes with a heavy emphasis on technology

KEITH BALLARD KNOWS ALL OF THE arguments surrounding the Common Core standards being put in place this school year. But the superintendent of Oklahoma's Tulsa Public Schools believes the new standards will rise or fall on one thing: how the tests are administered.

"Assessment is what brought the initial problems with the Common Core, especially when you look at it from the parents' and students' point of view," Ballard says. "How many tests are we going to give? How often? Should we look at a much simpler program so that we're not overassessing kids? And going beyond that, can we ensure that the testing administration is going to work?"

This spring, 43 states will administer tests based on the Common Core, a set of standards developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association that outline what students should know in English and math by the end of each school year. Initially decided upon with limited opposition, the standards have been consumed by controversy over the past year as parents, anti-test critics, and lawmakers have questioned how they are being implemented.

A large part of implementation is testing, of course. With it comes a heavy emphasis on technology, from the software required to teach the lessons and take the exams to the infra-

structure required to ensure the tests are securely administered.

As schools move away from pencil-and-paper tests to computer-based assessments, districts are faced with serious questions about their infrastructure. In the December issue of *ASBJ*, I wrote a feature story on the challenges districts face, as well as some of their success stories. This column, which kicks off a new series of pieces focusing on district technology issues, is a continuation of that piece, with a specific focus on the Common Core.

BIG BUSINESS, HIGH STAKES

With the advent of real-time online and formative assessments, testing has become a \$2.5 billion business. A study released this fall by the Software & Information Industry Association says the pre-k through 12th-grade testing market has grown by 57 percent since 2012.

Two groups are in charge of assessments in more than half of the states signed on to the Common Core. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium is developing tests in 17 states, while the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) is administering the exams in nine states and the District of Columbia. The rest of the participating states are setting up independent contracts with the major test providers.

In most cases, contracts for the Smarter Balanced and PARCC programs have been awarded to huge testing companies and organizations—with Pearson, McGraw-Hill Education, and the Educational Testing Service among them. For these companies, the stakes for financial success are as high as the stakes for students taking the tests. Hundreds of millions of dollars are in play here.

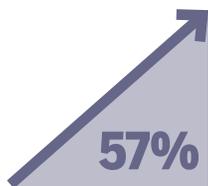
Geoff Fletcher, deputy executive director at the State Educational Technol-

ogy Directors Association, notes that the differences between traditional, multiple choice tests and the Common Core exams, plus the different requirements placed on teachers, are making the implementation difficult.

“A major transition or change like this isn’t easy,” he says. “It’s a different way of teaching and a different way of assessment. If you dump all of the accountability stuff on top of these assessments, the concerns that people may have about assessments in general, and the need to make sure the technol-

test directions, training manuals, and testing procedures.

“I was surprised how well things went with the field test,” Fletcher says. “Sure, they had little problems, and the tests were generally given to the overachieving school districts that were comfortable, ready, and excited to make it work. It’s going to be interesting to see what happens when you add in those who have been reticent about assessments in general. I don’t that it’s going to be that easy when everyone jumps in.”



The market for pre-k through 12th-grade testing has grown by 57 percent since 2012.

SOURCE: SOFTWARE & INFORMATION INDUSTRY ORGANIZATION

ogy is working perfectly on testing day, then you have a lot of fear about how it’s all going to work.”

Last spring, each of the major testing providers came under fire for various glitches in administering online assessments, prompting several already skittish states to pull out of the Common Core program entirely or shy away from full implementation. In June, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—a major funder in developing the Common Core—recommended a two-year moratorium on requiring that the tests be tied to teacher evaluations and student promotions.

PARCC conducted a pilot program last year in which 1.1 million students in 16,000 schools took field tests of a Common Core assessment. While the tests generally went smoothly, a PARCC report issued in November suggested several areas for improvement, including the need for better

FREE OR LOW-COST TECH

Fortunately, districts making the move to digital assessment have a variety of free or low-cost technology tools at their disposal. Already, you can access enough free content on the Web to teach the entire Common Core curriculum. Companies are developing apps, extensions, and technology add-ons that help make instruction more effective.

In addition to Google Apps for Education (www.google.com/apps/education), a suite of free tools for classroom collaboration, teachers can use Citelighter (www.citelighter.com), a free service (with costs for add-ons) that helps teachers and administrators develop a platform to track and manage students’ writing growth.

Each of these products is designed to help teachers be more effective in teaching to the Common Core and standards in individual states. For superintendents like Ballard—who believes that trying



ONLINE EXTRA

For more information and articles on school technology issues, go to www.asbj.com/topicsarchive/technologyfocus.

to achieve rigor through testing is “the tail wagging the dog”—finding ways to improve instruction in a cost-efficient manner is critical.

“What you need is a great and effective teacher in every classroom, a great leader in every school, rigorous standards, and the resources necessary to support them in their work,” Ballard says. “That’s how you get rigor.”

Fletcher says he does not expect the Common Core assessments to go off without a glitch this spring, noting that the “scalability of them is a big concern.” At the same time, he says, districts can’t succumb to their fears about how the tests are being administered.

“Testing has become a proxy for what we don’t like about the Common Core, and politically, it becomes, ‘We spend too much time in testing,’” he says. “We need to be looking at the quality of the instruction we are providing to these students. Does the instruction match the assessment? Is it quality instruction, or are you just checking off boxes to make sure something is covered? You can choose any method you want to test kids, but you’ve got to make sure the instruction and the assessment go hand in hand.”



Glenn Cook

Glenn Cook (glenncook117@gmail.com) is a freelance writer and photographer and former executive editor of American School Board Journal.