

Electronic School



Leading the Leap

A toolkit helps gauge your ability to deliver online assessments

ONLINE ASSESSMENTS ARE HERE

to stay, regardless of whether or not your state has embraced the Common Core Standards. While not fully extinct, use of bubbled-in test sheets that are sent to a central location and scored is fading.

But, as Tom Ryan sees it, schools and districts face a rude awakening in implementing Common Core assessments successfully if they can't address

a crucial reality: institutional silos.

"Information technology can't solve a problem in a silo. Curriculum and instruction can't solve it. The board can't solve it," says Ryan, who worked for 31 years as a teacher, high school principal, and chief information officer for the Albuquerque Public Schools. "You've got to have cross-functional teams that work together with one goal and one purpose

in mind, and that is how to develop the type of school that kids deserve."

Ryan, now CEO of the eLearn Institute and president-elect of the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN), and others are trying to break through those silos with a toolkit that will help schools and districts assess their readiness and ability to effectively deliver online assessments. The toolkit, developed by CoSN with the support of NSBA and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), will be unveiled in December.

"It will allow you to assess the current state of how you are using online assessment tools and get to where you really want to be," Ryan says. "We're really looking at how you can use formative assessments to guide instruction, using a step-by-step plan that takes you from your current state to your end state."

RAISING THE BAR

The toolkit is an extension of "Leading the Digital Leap," a collaborative effort launched by CoSN, AASA, and NSBA in 2014 to "speak with one voice" about technology's ability to transform student learning.

"The focus of the first year, for lack of a better term, was on compliance," says Susan Van Gundy, who served as technology director for the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, more commonly known as the PARCC Assessment Consortium. "There was a lot of concern about whether schools and districts would be ready in terms of devices and bandwidth, and whether they would have enough exposure to the sample test. It really was the basics of building awareness around what's needed to administer the exams."

Two years ago, the three groups issued a white paper and toolkit, “Raising the Bar: Becoming Assessment Ready” that included technical requirements as well as the types of operating systems and browsers that could be used to administer the tests. The new toolkit will include a comprehensive self-assessment checklist that can help school leaders evaluate their own district’s readiness to deliver online assessments.

“Most of the big fears at the time, that districts would not have enough infrastructure or the tests wouldn’t work, didn’t come true. But some other factors have,” Ryan says, pointing to the silos that still exist. “If your mission and goal is to provide students with an environment where they will be successful, whether it is in college or in a particular career path, the environment needs to have the tools that kids need so they can be successful. And you need to have embedded instruction with the technology that’s there.”

Two years after the first “Raising the Bar” was issued, Van Gundy admits she is concerned that some districts still are struggling to meet the minimum requirements for administering online exams. But her larger concern is helping schools to “best leverage the data they need so they can be more efficient.”

“Some districts are still very concerned about meeting those basics,” she says. “Where those minimum requirements have been met, it’s not a concern any more. Problem solved. For those districts, it’s about how the tools can be implemented more effectively for student achievement, and how you can put what you know into regular systemic practice at any point on the calendar.”

The new toolkit, Van Gundy says, will serve as a framework for schools to make sure they are complying with national and local policies “that have to complement each other.”

“Where we’ve seen the greatest success in the implementation of the PARCC assessments, especially in the early years, is when districts take a coordinated approach instead of remaining in their traditional silos,” Van Gundy says. “The importance of that can’t be overemphasized. When you are working together in a cross-functional way, with a common set of objectives and a common agreement about the importance of this work, from the board all the way down, that’s where you’ll be most successful.”

EMBEDDING RESOURCES

Ryan believes districts have not made more progress in embedding technology into instruction because, “We’ve engaged in arguments that take us down the wrong path.”

“The shift to digital isn’t a fad,” he continues. “There’s plenty of evidence that it is much more effective and efficient, not just in education but in other industries as well. But if you’re not embedding your digital resources within the traditional classroom environment, you’re not preparing them to be successful.”

Districts need to be clear on why they are purchasing technology in the first place: to help students learn. “If the only purpose of purchasing a computer is so you can improve test scores, then that leads us down a path that defeats the purpose for doing it in the first place,” he says. “Or if all of your discussions are around the platform you use — Mac or PC, Microsoft 365, or Google — you’re not focusing on the right discussion.”

Not surprisingly, Ryan and Van Gundy believe online assessments — properly implemented — can be a game changer for student learning.

“I believe we’ve just scratched the surface of what technology can do in these areas,” Van Gundy says. “It’s not about cost savings or administrative efficiencies, but a real opportunity to understand what students know in different and more authentic ways. It gives them a different way of expressing themselves and being creative in demonstrating what they know.”



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Want to know more about your role in “Leading the Digital Leap”? Visit <http://leaddigitalleap.org>, a website developed by NSBA, AASA, and CoSN that includes resources for school boards, superintendents, and district technology leaders. Included in the school board section are COSA’s “Data in the Cloud Privacy Guide,” information from the Center for Public Education on “Talking About the Facts of Education Data,” and key technology articles from *ASBJ*.