
PARTNERSHIP FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF READINESS FOR COLLEGE AND CAREERS

Battle lines have been drawn for the new Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), which kicked off March 3.

New online-only testing for the first round of PARCC, covering Grades 3-8 and 11, ended March 27 in the district's approximately 40 schools. Superintendent of Schools Dr. Marcia Lyles' spokeswoman, Chief of Staff Dr. Maryann Dickar, said the End-of-Year Assessments begin April 27 and run through May 22. Statewide results are not expected to be available until October.

New Jersey was one of 12 states to launch PARCC, considered to require far more rigorous problem-solving in measuring achievement than the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (Grades 3-8) and High School Proficiency Assessment (Grade 11).

About 20 states are currently expected to use PARCC, a test that helps those states qualify for certain types of special federal funding. They are based on testing proficiency for the Common Core Content Standards the participating states have developed and which, they believe, better prepare children for college and careers.

Thus far, district parents upset with how testing has been rolled out and imposed have scored significant concessions from a superintendent who originally repeatedly championed PARCC's cause.

The board of education approved a policy in February allowing their children to "opt out" of the tests assessing language arts and math skills provided they send a letter. The two words have become a rallying cry for parents wishing to boycott the exams throughout New Jersey's 21 counties.

In Jersey City, critical teachers contended all during the debate that the district poorly planned for PARCC, placing unreasonable demands on their work-time in mandating preparation when they are already burdened with administering other proficiency tests, including some only the district imposes.

Such demands, they said, have significantly detracted from what the teachers see as their primary role - teaching the children directly through their designed lesson plans and applying the professional skills and talents they worked so hard to acquire through college and to attain professional certification.

While there has been some uncertainty as to when the tests will officially be used to measure student progress, the New Jersey Department of Education is holding to use the exams immediately in starting to determine issues that can make or break a teacher's career, namely future job security and tenure.

Given what it sees as great uncertainty over the efficacy of the current PARCC, the New Jersey Education Association persuaded the State Assembly to pass a bill calling for delaying using them for such purposes for at least three years, legislation that was still pending in the State Senate as of early April.

Despite their concerns, Superintendent of Schools Dr. Marcia Lyles commended teachers for more than meeting the challenges in launching testing early last month, characterizing the initial effort in a statement as a success.

"Teachers, administrators and our tech teams worked hard in preparing for the tests, as evidenced by there being only a few issues during their administration," Lyles stated.

Dickar said that, following the initial phase one testing, 360 children, or about two percent (18,000) skipped the tests, a number that increased to 460 as of the most recent estimate issued (March 13) as more schools and students began taking the first round (a specific percentage of the larger pool was not provided).

Parents unhappy with their child's experiences during the first round of PARCC can still decide to pull them out of the second by following district requirements.

To make such choices possible, the board voted 8-1 Feb. 19 to endorse the resolution creating the "opt out" policy for the first year. It's a position the Christie administration does not endorse but is tolerating in bending to intense statewide public pressure.

Titled, "Parental Withdrawal from Mandated Statewide Testing," the resolution noted, *"The board of education recognizes that parents have the right to make decisions for their children with educationally appropriate responses that are not punitive in nature."*

Further, the measure assured, "All educational responses will be designed not to be punitive in nature. This may include, but is not limited to a quiet educational study period."

It said they are decisions "to be determined by the superintendent and implemented by the schools."

However, the resolution makes very clear the board is not endorsing withdrawal, pointing out, "It is the policy of the board of education to provide the student the greatest opportunity to succeed at meeting the state learning standards in the Common Core Content Standards and Core Curriculum Content Standards."

In a major change of heart, Board Member Ellen Simon, perhaps the board's foremost advocate of using extensive standardized tests to gauge student progress, noted before voting on the measure, "Some parents have been questioning, 'Are we over-testing?' And I said my initial feeling was yes."

"I want parents to know their concerns have been heard," Simon said.

Joining Simon in support were her 2013 running mates, Jessica Daye and Micheline Amy, Board President Vidya Gangadin, Vice President Marilyn Roman and Board Members Joel Torres, Lorenzo Richardson and Gerald Lyons.

Board Member Sangeeta Ranade, like Simon, a major standardized test proponent, held out in opposition, telling colleagues, "I'm not comfortable with the language."

At an earlier board meeting, Ranade expressed opposition to such a measure, saying, "We don't want to encourage kids not to take the tests."

Ranade expressed concerns that, at some point, failing to do so could hurt seniors seeking college admission - should a college mandate taking PARCC for consideration.

Perhaps Simon was paying attention to the concerns of PS #14 kindergarten teacher Erica Dubois, who addressed the board in the fall.

Though her grade level doesn't conduct PARCC, the new exams have also impacted Grades K through 2 as Dubois noted the district is imposing tests on them related to mastering the Common Core, including areas Dubois insisted her children were not ready to learn.

"I'm not a teacher of kids anymore," Dubois told the board. "I'm a test administrator. I'm a data collector. But beyond that, I really don't know what I am anymore."

Resident Theresa Delano, parent of a second grader at PS #28, also maintained the state's PARCC mentality is also a hindrance for her child - still a year away from having to take PARCC.

Delano told the board that she was not necessarily opposed to the Common Core. Yet she denounced using what she described as excessive high-stakes testing on students and teachers to master it. She warned the end result could be "frustrating students" into failing, claiming the tests are being administered without proper guidance and support from the state.

Citing her own parental experience, Delano said she found the district is using "developmentally-inappropriate curriculum materials" in the second grade that force unprepared students to try "reading two grade levels above" what they are currently capable of absorbing.

Lyles has long been an advocate of stressing standardized tests, as was her former co-worker in the New York City Public School District and fellow Broad Superintendents Academy graduate, former state education commissioner Christopher Cerf.

Cerf played a leading role having her hired during a highly controversial process in 2012 as Cerf repeatedly championed using PARCC. The state maintains that more challenging testing is needed to better prepare students post-graduation in the 21st Century - whether to immediately seek employment, enter a two- or four-year college or a trade school. Further, the state asserts that the more advanced material being tested will keep students competitive with those in other parts of the world, such as Europe and Japan.

As a PARCC advocate, Gov. Chris Christie appointed Lyles to the state's Commission on Assessments earlier this year, where she served with Commissioner of Education David Hespe and others. Christie set up the commission in response to the overwhelming pressure from parents and districts, requiring the commission to gather feedback concerning the exams for a report to be released. The commission held one meeting in Jersey City.

JCEA President Ron Greco harshly criticized Lyles' decision to accept the appointment rather than focusing all her energies in the struggling school district, including helping negotiate a new labor agreement as the association has been working without one for more than two years. Lyles countered the experience would help her gain helpful insights into better understanding district parental and employee concerns over PARCC.

During the fall, Lyles expressed strong support for PARCC's objectives and was a fervent opt out opponent, insisting, "I said we will prepare our children for college and career readiness and I also said that is our primary goal."

But by March, after spending time on the state commission and after her own district's initial experience, the superintendent noted she was not personally responsible for implementing PARCC.

"The Jersey City Board of Education did not create the requirement for PARCC," she declared to an audience. "It was not something mandated or inflicted on the students by us."

Board Member Gerald Lyons was willing to give Lyles some credit for relenting, pointing out she agreed to the terms of the "opt out" resolution with the district's two attorneys and eight of the nine board members.

Some teachers, notably PS #34 special education instructor Lisa Fantacone, maintained the district did a poor job providing the resources and programs the teachers needed to better align their instruction with the Common Core and PARCC before testing began.

Yet district Chief Academic Officer Jason Bing, a PARCC supporter, maintained he witnessed first-hand that a number of city schools had succeeded in helping children master some of the skills PARCC requires. But Fantacone told JCEA.org that was not her own experience because of alleged poor planning by - and a lack of communication with - the school administration.

JCEA.org tried contacting Bing to provide a list of the successful schools, but he failed to return repeated phone calls seeking comment after leaving messages with his receptionist.

Though a fan of PARCC, even Bing conceded Jersey City and many other districts may have been unable to immediately embrace it under the state's rollout timetable.

"This is going to be a two- to three-year process," Bing said.

By Chris Neidenberg