

Are You Tech-Ready for the Common Core?

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School districts are raising concerns about their ability to be technologically ready to give Common Core State Standards assessments to students online in two years. Administrators say they remain uncertain about the types of devices to buy, the bandwidth they need, and the funding available for technology improvements.

An initial round of data collection launched to determine technology gaps for schools preparing for the common-core online assessments has so far had limited participation from districts and many states. And state and national education groups are detecting a rising level of anxiety among school and district leaders regarding the technology they feel is necessary to implement online testing by the 2014-15 deadline.

Some districts “are panicked about getting ready for it, but some are not even in a place where they know enough to be panicked yet,” says Ann Flynn, the director of educational technology for the Alexandria, Va.-based National School Boards Association. “I won’t say they’re in denial, but it’s going to be a real challenge for a lot of districts.”

Superintendent Kaylin Coody of Oklahoma’s 1,800-student Hilldale school system says her district doesn’t have the staff or technology it will need to implement the common-core assessments. For example, though the district’s elementary school has 400 students, the building has only 43 computers.

“With the current financial constraints facing Oklahoma public schools, I do not see how most of us will be able to provide adequate hardware and prepare staff to manage the level of testing being planned, especially in a short testing window,” Coody writes in an e-mail.

The vast majority of states have adopted the new standards in English/language arts and mathematics and have also signed on to provide online testing under the standards starting in the 2014-15 school year. Two consortia received federal funding to create

online tests; both intend to use technology for interactive test questions, simulations, new graphics, and faster exam results.

The two groups—the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC—are also in the process of sketching out the technology standards schools will need for the assessment process. Both consortia have released some technology guidelines that call for having specific technologies in place, such as computing devices that have at least 1 gigabyte of computer memory, a screen display size of 9.5 inches or greater, and access to the Internet.

Thin on Tech. Data

But a free, Web-based Technology Readiness Tool—introduced earlier this year to collect information about the types of technology schools and districts now have—has not gathered as much data as the consortia had hoped.

At a meeting in early August of the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for the federally sponsored National Assessment of Educational Progress, Jeff Nellhaus, PARCC’s director of assessment, reported that only 36 percent of schools in the states backing his coalition responded to the first round of the survey, which closed July 15.

Joe Willhoft, the executive director of Smarter Balanced, said his consortium had “thin results” as well.

According to the consortia, 32 states and the District of Columbia each submitted information on five or more schools. About 25,000 schools submitted comprehensive information about their technology status. The two consortia have a combined 44 states and the District of Columbia as members.

Readiness Questions to Ask

- What are your digital-conversion planning objectives and how will they support implementing the common core and preparing for the new college- and career-ready assessments?
- Have you developed a phased plan for improved access that incorporates textbook and open-resources savings?

- What resources can be reallocated to support deployment? What savings can be secured through adoption of digital resources?
- Have you supported adoption of blended-learning models that leverage teacher talent?

SOURCE: Digital Learning Now!

A low response rate to the survey of schools' current technology profiles could point to a lack of infrastructure and the ability to assemble the technology data, some observers say.

However, Tony Alpert, the chief operating officer for Smarter Balanced, cautions that it was just the first of several rounds of data collection, and that the two coalitions expect to collect significantly more information. "We're limiting the conclusions we make based on the data," he says.

The consortia released few findings from the initial round of data-gathering, but did say that computer memory capacity, or RAM, does not appear to be a problem for most schools responding to the survey, and that neither does screen size of computer devices. Most districts are using desktops and laptops or netbooks, although the use of tablets is growing, Alpert says.

Louisiana, though, took the data collection one step further. With the information collected through the readiness tool, the parameters provided by the consortia, and the state's own estimates of how long the testing window is likely to be and how many hours the testing may take, Louisiana estimated schools would need a 7-to-1 ratio of students to devices.

The state found its schools have 197,898 devices available for online testing, but only 67,038 met new device standards, which excluded machines using Windows XP, for example, since Microsoft has said it plans to stop supporting the program. Only five districts met the minimum device-readiness requirements, and only two districts met both the device- and network-readiness guidelines for online testing, says Carol Mosley, the K-12 E-rate director and a management consultant for the Louisiana Department of Education.

But Mosley says she's working closely with districts and feels confident that small upgrades and investments will put many more schools in the "ready" category. The state is also being creative about helping districts find refurbished devices to purchase, grouping districts together for buying power, and pushing districts to share technology know-how.

The districts "don't have to depend just on the state. They can rely on each other, too," Mosley says. "We're all in this boat together."

'Source of Anxiety'

The reality is there's a vast range of common-core technology readiness among states. Some already do their state assessments online; others still use paper and pencil. And some states have collected significant data on schools' technology profiles, while others have not.

Georgia, for example, already had a statewide technology survey in place and submitted that information through the readiness tool. The state offers districts the ability to administer state assessments online, though many haven't done so.

"Some districts haven't dipped their toe into online testing, and they are really, really hesitant," says Melissa Fincher, Georgia's associate superintendent for assessment and accountability. "There are so many unknowns about the [common core] assessment. We know there's going to be a deficit, but we don't yet know where we stand."

In neighboring Tennessee, the assistant commissioner for curriculum and instruction, Emily Barton, predicts that inadequate bandwidth and devices will be two big technology problems for schools.

"Overall, this is definitely a source of anxiety for everyone in the country, not just Tennessee," she says.

Since schools still do not know how long the common-core tests will take to administer, it's hard to determine the number of devices that might be needed.

"There are many answers that are not yet firm, so we can't easily fix on the number of devices we're going to need," she says.

Some of those uncertainties are causing problems for school districts in South Dakota, says Jim Holbeck, the superintendent of the state's 3,000-student Harrisburg district, who is also president of the School Administrators of South Dakota and the South Dakota School Superintendents Association. Schools still aren't sure which devices to buy, but want to make sure students are familiar with using those devices well before they have to take the online common assessments, he says.

"Our fear is, are we going to have a test that accurately shows what our kids know, or will the results be unreliable because the kids are taking it in a different format?" he says.

In addition, bandwidth is a huge concern for districts, Holbeck says. The state provides a minimum level of bandwidth, he adds, "but if we want more, we have to pay for it," and school budgets have little extra money.

In Washington State, Raj Manhas, the superintendent of the 14,000-student North Thurston schools, says districts must turn to the voters for approval on tax levies for technology purchases. Twice in recent years, voters have rejected technology levies for his district.

A general fund levy was approved, however, and Manhas is using part of that money to buy new devices for the common core. But he's concerned about the "technology gap" between districts that serve wealthier communities and districts with lower-income families.

While he fully supports the concept of common standards, Manhas says that "sometimes when national policies are made, the corresponding resources are not planned for."

Education Week Assistant Editor Catherine Gewertz contributed to this article.