Further Considerations

As changes are made to Colorado’s public education system, schools and districts across the state are going to have to determine how to best allocate their resources to meet new state requirements. Understanding that good instruction and good assessments go hand in hand, some districts are taking the first steps in developing standards-based curriculums that align with the revised state standards.

Given the large discrepancy in the frequency, type and purpose of existing assessments, there may be opportunities to explore efficiencies such as: resource banks, group purchasing of commonly-administered assessments and collaborative curriculum development.

Teachers reported an overall lack of sufficient time and support for evaluating and applying data.

It will also be important to explore the impact that changes may have on student time, district and school assessment choices and alignment of instructional practice. Other important questions to consider include:

- What role should the state play in supporting comprehensive and improved district assessment practices?
- How should data be made available to parents?
- What additional supports can be offered to teachers so they have more time to effectively analyze and apply data to inform instruction?

As changes to state assessments and requirements are finalized, education leaders across the state need to explore these questions and more as they work towards more strategic and supportive testing practices for Colorado.

Spotlighting Student Assessments

Executive Summary of “Study of Assessment Use in Colorado School Districts”
In 2009, the Colorado State Board of Education adopted new academic content standards in 10 different content areas (the Colorado Academic Standards). The Colorado Academic Standards set out clear expectations of what all Colorado public school students should learn during the course of their schooling. These standards include early school readiness and postsecondary competencies, as well as reflect workforce readiness and 21st century skills. In order to measure the new content standards, Colorado is moving to implement a new assessment system. In an effort to better understand what this new system of assessments would mean for Colorado school districts, The Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) undertook a study to get a clear picture of what is currently happening in classrooms and schools across the state. In November 2011, CEI commissioned Augenblick, Palaich and Associates (APA) to conduct a comprehensive study of the frequency, type and purpose/use of district-wide student assessments that are given across Colorado.

Methodology

APA distributed an online survey to all 178 districts in Colorado. The survey was designed to generate an inventory of the assessments currently used across the state and provide a starting point for interviews with district staff. Seventy nine districts (44% of all the districts in the state) completed the survey. Those that responded were representative of the varying geographic regions and size categories of districts across the state.

Individual interviews and focus groups were also conducted with district and school-level personnel from different-sized districts and regions. Areas of examination included:

- Common assessments used across classrooms;
- The amount of time students spend taking and preparing for assessments;
- Assessment training practices for teachers and administrators;
- The effectiveness of assessments for various purposes; and
- District preparation for future assessment requirements.

Key Findings

In addition to those assessments that state law requires be administered (e.g. CSAP/TCAP), the vast majority of districts choose to administer additional district-wide assessments in all grades. However, the frequency, type and purpose of these additional assessments vary widely across districts.

Frequency: How often do districts administer assessments? Overall, the number of assessments varies by district and there is considerable variation in the amount of testing by grade level. Twelfth grade reported the least number of assessments (43% of participating districts report using no assessments and 49% report using only 1 or 2), whereas third grade reported the highest (84% of districts using three or more). On average, students in grades 2 through 10 spend anywhere from 2 to 4.5 days taking assessments.

Assessment Type: What kinds of assessments do Colorado school districts use and what do they measure? Most districts reported that they purchased rather than created their own assessments. Most of the assessments purchased by districts test the same subjects that are currently tested by state administered assessments. It is worth noting that a number of school districts are using more than one assessment in different grades to fulfill a given state requirement (e.g. The Colorado Basic Literacy Act). Additionally, fewer than 2% of districts reported having any district-created assessments, indicating a general reliance on vendor-created assessments. This statistic is interesting when you consider that teachers participating in focus groups reported having a preference for locally-developed assessments that can be closely aligned with locally-developed curriculum. The ability to develop those assessments locally is limited by local resources and capacity.

When it comes to content areas, districts are currently administering the highest number of assessments in Reading and Math, often testing those same two content areas with five or more assessments in various grades. Only one-third of districts have Social Studies exams and less than 5% have an assessment in another content area outside of the currently state-mandated areas of Reading, Math, Writing and Science. This is significant because these areas have not historically been measured by state-mandated assessments, but districts will be required to assess them under new legislation.

Assessment Purpose: How do districts use assessments? APA also explored the effectiveness of assessments for serving purposes related to student performance and instruction. Each type of assessment studied (formative, interim and summative) is considered effective at different levels of evaluation. Formative assessments, for example, are seen as most helpful to measure ongoing mastery of standards throughout a year, whereas summative assessments are considered helpful for measuring end-of-year total learning. Interestingly though, tests are sometimes used for purposes other than originally intended. For example, many respondents indicated they use CSAP/TCAP to measure student progress within the school year, even though these tests are considered summative.

The majority of participating districts also responded that they do not currently use an assessment for measuring teacher impact on student learning. The majority of participating districts also responded that they do not currently use an assessment for measuring teacher impact on student learning. This is important because under new state law, beginning in the 2013-14 school year, the annual evaluation of all educators in Colorado is required to be determined 50% by the academic growth of their students.

APA also looked at how teachers and schools use and share assessment data. While most teachers use assessments to inform instructional practices, teachers reported an overall lack of sufficient time and support for evaluating and applying data. Additionally, very few districts and teachers reported having access to instructional tools to use in selecting, administering and applying results from the tests they use. In terms of data sharing, almost all results are shared with teachers, but assessments in the earliest grades are generally not shared with students and are shared with parents only infrequently.