

Honorable Members of the New Jersey State Assembly and Senate Education Committees:

I am writing to express concern with the conflicting information that has been disseminated by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) regarding assessments. Not only does it appear that the public may have been receiving incorrect information for over a decade regarding the nature and quality of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK), but it may be that our State Education Agency has not fulfilled the assessment requirements of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

I respectfully ask that you review the following, and investigate the source of what appears to be a fundamental disparity.

1. Historical NJ ASK Remarks

The NJ ASK was first rolled out in Spring of 2003. Through over a decade of use, the NJDOE has used this assessment to satisfy the federal No Child Left Behind Act requirement for yearly statewide assessment, as well as to reportedly improve instruction and identify student proficiency and weakness.

Below are examples of the claims that have been made by NJ DOE regarding the NJ ASK over the years:

- *"The NJ ASK is designed to give an early indication of the progress students are making in mastering the knowledge and skills described in the Core Curriculum Content Standards. The results are to be used by schools and districts to identify strengths and weaknesses in their educational programs. It is anticipated that this process will lead to improved instruction and better alignment with the Core Curriculum Content Standards. The results may also be used, along with other indicators of student progress, to identify those students who may need instructional support in any of the content areas. This support, which could be in the form of individual or programmatic intervention, would be a means to address any identified knowledge or skill gaps."* – This statement is from the Grade 4 NJASK Spring 2004 Executive Summary, but is a narrative that appears in virtually all NJASK reporting documents over the lifetime of the test.
- *"A directory of test specifications and sample items was developed for each content area. These specifications describe the test, format of the items, and the scores to be generated by the test. The material in the test specifications is designed for use by curriculum specialists and teachers to improve instruction at the district, school, and classroom levels."* - NJASK Technical Report 2009
- *"New Jersey's State Assessments – Goals:*
 - *To measure and promote student achievement of challenging state curriculum standards*
 - *To provide accurate and meaningful information about student performance*
 - *To meet state and federal accountability requirements"*
 - "Final_NJ_ASK_Test_Design_Update_Dec_19_2008.ppt", presentation from NJ DOE Division of Educational Standards And Programs, Office of State Assessments, 12/19/2008
- *"The purpose of these assessments is to provide indicators of student progress and to identify students who need additional instructional support"* – NJASK Technical Report 2006

- *"The NCES report 'Mapping State Proficiency onto NAEP Scales: 2005-2007' demonstrates the high caliber of New Jersey's Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (ASK)" - NJ Race To The Top Application for Initial Funding (Phase 2), June 2010.*

Clearly, NJ DOE wanted the public to believe that NJ ASK was a high-quality test capable of identifying individual student strength and weakness and informing classroom learning.

2. What Are We Learning Now About NJ ASK?

Most recently, however, we are learning new information about NJ ASK from NJDOE. Primarily in the context of defending the ostensible merits of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) assessment being rolled out this spring, the NJ Department of Education has on numerous occasions described flagrant failures of the NJ ASK assessment being replaced. Some examples include:

- *"Let's just start with a flat admission that NJ ASK and HSPA were not assessments that informed student learning." - Asst. Commissioner Bari Erlichson, NJ.com, 2/5/15 "What will PARCC results look like? New Jersey gives preview"*
- *"(NJASK)..didn't really provide information that could improve classroom instruction... For the first time in decades of statewide assessments, New Jersey will have an assessment, through PARCC, that is designed provide meaningful feedback to schools and parents." – NJ DOE Commissioner David Hespe, Star Ledger, 2/24/15, "An Open Letter to Parents on PARCC"*
- *"While NJASK and HSPA fulfilled our federal testing requirements under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), they did not play a significant role in the improvement of instruction or the advancement of student learning outcomes. Our tests were short, in that they had relatively few questions and did not fully incorporate the full range of grade level standards each year. This resulted in cluster scores that could not be translated into school-wide strategies for instructional improvement or meaningful longitudinal trend data." - Erlichson, 9/29/14 Letter to Superintendents et al, "Test Administration Times for PARCC Assessments, Spring 2015"*
- *"For the first time in the history of statewide testing, New Jersey will have an assessment that is designed to actually improve schools and give parents meaningful feedback about their child's academic progress. The old paper tests [NJ ASK] never could provide that level of feedback to parents, or information to improve the classroom" - Mike Yaple, NJ DOE Spokesman. NJ Herald, 3/4/15, "41% in some schools refuse PARCC testing"*
- *"When I was in the classroom and received NJ ASK data, little of it was actionable or informative in order for me to make actual changes in my classroom. As a parent... reports would come home and give me a general overview, but I had no idea how to further support my sons in their*

areas of weakness.” – Kimberley Harrington, Chief Academic Officer NJ DOE. Webinar from NJ DOE site, “PARCC Update, February 4, 2015”

- NJ ASK was “*inappropriate to track improvements or declines in clusters, preventing schools and districts from using cluster scores to demonstrate growth or effectiveness of instructional programs and/or supports.*” - <http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/parcc/SBOEPARCCUpdate0215.pdf>
- In the section “How Is PARCC Different from Previous Assessments”, the NJ DOE PARCC FAQ points out that PARCC is “*aligned to the Common Core State Standards and were created to measure how well students can apply their knowledge of concepts rather than memorizing facts. For instance, PARCC assessments require students to solve problems using mathematical reasoning and to be able to model mathematical principals[sic]... (NJASK) didn’t provide useful data to improve instruction.*”
- PARCC will “*address some of the challenges that New Jersey faces in education such as the dissatisfaction with current testing methods that do not fully measure state standards. An important part of problem solving is the development of critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills are necessary for success in every subject. As such, New Jersey is working to establish tests that will accurately measure those skills.*” – NJ DOE Website, “PARCC – A Change In New Jersey State Testing”
- “*PARCC is designed for students to demonstrate their understanding of a concept, not simply choosing a multiple choice or a true/false answer or reciting facts from memorization, as was common under previous assessments.*” – NJASA “What is the state’s response to parents’ concerns about teaching to the test?”, linked from NJ DOE Website “Resources from the Commissioner’s 2015 Symposiums with Superintendents”

Surely, for a test that has been in use since 2003, NJ DOE must have known some of this prior to last year. One wonders how long NJ DOE has been sitting on this information until they had a plan to replace the badly-flawed NJ ASK.

3. Federal ESEA Requirements

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is the reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). Section 1111(b)(3) of this law sets forth the State requirements for yearly statewide assessment. NJ is a “waiver state” per our approved ESEA Flexibility Request; this agreement provides NJ with relief relative to certain requirements of this law. However, there are absolutely no requirements under Section 1111(b)(3) that are waived.

Note in particular the following requirements of the yearly statewide student academic assessment:

- The State Educational Agency must implement “a set of **high-quality, yearly student academic assessments**” – Sec. 1111(b)(3)(A)
- “Such assessments shall be aligned with the State’s challenging academic content and student academic achievement standards, and **provide coherent information about student attainment of such standards**” – Sec. 1111(b)(3)(C)(ii)
- Such assessments shall involve “**measures that assess higher-order thinking skills and understanding**” – Sec. 1111(b)(3)(C)(vi)
- Such assessments shall “**produce individual student interpretive, descriptive, and diagnostic reports... that allow parents, teachers, and principals to understand and address the specific academic needs of students, and include information regarding achievement on academic assessments aligned with State academic achievement standards, and that are provided to parents, teachers, and principals, as soon as is practicably possible after the assessment is given, in an understandable and uniform format**” – Sec. 1111(b)(3)(C)(xii)

Given the NJ ASK flaws that have recently come to light, some examples of which are shown in Section 2 above, it is becoming clear that the NJ ASK would not have adequately fulfilled these kinds of federal requirements for yearly state assessment.

4. Action Sought

Misleading information is nothing new for NJ DOE; some of their current information on PARCC is clearly designed to misinform (see <http://danmasi.com/parcc-faq-response.pdf>). This NJ ASK issue, though, is one that goes back over a decade and has potential implication for NJ’s compliance with federal regulation.

Given the disparity we are now seeing between what we for years were being told about NJ ASK, and what we now find to be true, it would seem prudent that we should at least:

- Investigate how and why these flaws in our mandated statewide testing program were allowed to persist; why positive claims have been made for a decade regarding the quality of NJ ASK in spite of these flaws; and understand on what basis the public should believe the current similar claims about the quality of PARCC;
- Investigate NJ’s liabilities relative to the ESEA laws in the event that it is proven that NJ ASK did not fulfill the various requirements of Section 1111(b)(3).

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,



Dan Masi | Roxbury Township, NJ | March 9, 2015 | <http://danmasi.com/parcc-faq-response.pdf>

dan@danmasi.com