

Clarifying PARCC for Ad Team – Questions and Answers

Q. With the district’s focus on Global-Ready Skills, Problem/Project-Based Learning, and other authentic forms of student engagement and accompanying measures, do we care about PARCC results?

Yes – and for a number of reasons.

While not a complete or perfect measure of the Global-Ready Skills, PARCC does ask students to think critically, problem solve, access and analyze information, and demonstrate effective written communication. This is a subset of the Global-Ready Skills.

PARCC is also anchored against the Common Core and Colorado Academic Standards for English Language Arts and Math, which are internationally benchmarked standards. As one of our *Big Three* is “teaching all kids to high standards,” PARCC results give us a measure of how well our lessons and student tasks are aligned to these standards.

Our kids are as smart as any in the world and there is absolutely no reason our students can’t compete and do well on these exams. This is an opportunity to show everyone what we are made of and should be a matter of personal and professional pride.

Finally, the state and many in our community “keep score” of how schools are doing using these measures. Our aspirations as a system are far above good test scores, but we need to do well on the test to stave off undesirable state interventions and maintain the trust of the community. In short, we need to stay off these lists so we can do what we really want.

Q. There are a number of known issues with the PARCC tests (and standardized measures in general) that create some dissonance for me as a professional. How do I “sell” my kids and community on these tests when I’m skeptical or oppositional to them?

For the reasons stated above, PARCC results are important regardless of what you think about them.

We can and should acknowledge inherent problems such as questions about the developmental appropriateness of the exam, the biases that emerge for several different student subgroups (poverty, language, race, disability), and use of the results for accountability purposes. You are not being asked to white-wash the problems associated with the test.

However, this does not absolve us from our responsibility to encourage our students, our staff, and our community to take the exams seriously and for each student to do their best. You are being asked to model seriousness and real engagement with the tests and to professionally and educationally demand that of others.

It is possible to say “there are real issues with this exam,” and in spite of this also say “we need everyone to take it seriously and to do their best.”

Q. What are the short and long-term consequences of doing poorly on the exam, from an accountability perspective?

Short-term: The school receives a derogatory label, which necessitates additional work and makes the recruiting of upwardly mobile families more difficult.

Intermediate-term: The school's label creates a community myth about the quality of education within the school that can take years to turn-around. The community and Board of Education will demand changes in leadership from numerous points in the organization in order to get off the accountability lists. The results can be used in the community to advance certain reform-agendas which are not parallel with the path we are currently on.

Long-term: The school (and possibly district) will need to be closed, significantly re-organized, chartered and possibly privatized, or taken over by the state.

Q. What is our message for families that do not wish to take the exam and does a refusal hurt our ratings?

Our message is simple – we encourage and expect students to take the exam and do their best.

However, if a family does not wish their student to take the exam, we also respect this and will accommodate the student into another positive learning activity.

It is a professional expectation that we encourage students to take the exam and do their best. It is professionally irresponsible to judge or retaliate against a family who opts their student out of the exam.

Currently, low participation does not penalize a school in the accountability ratings. However, schools with low participation are flagged on their state report cards.

We should also be concerned that low participation is correlated with socio-economic status. If a school has a high levels of refusals, it is typically more affluent families who are opting out. As results on standardized measures are also highly correlated with results, who opts out has an impact on the ultimate school rating.

To counter this, we should stay on the simple message that we encourage and expect students to take the exam and do their best.

Q. How concerned are the Board and you (the Superintendent) about PARCC results?

We know our elementary results were disappointing. Middle and high school results were better, but still below our System Academic Indicator goals.

I expect us to engage with the data, infer meaning, and intervene appropriately. To the extent this leads us to better curricular alignment, better support for staff, and improved learning customization - this is a good thing. I believe we are better than what we have shown.

I am not panicked. There is no knee-jerk or exasperated reaction. I expected us to deliberate, determine root cause, and act (primarily out of concern for our students' futures). I believe we have responded appropriately.

The Board's wants are simple – they want all our schools off any of these lists. They are patient (for now) but they expect results and for things to get a lot better this year.

If we are successful in that effort, I would expect the Board to allow us room to focus more on the innovative work we have planned. If we are not successful, I do not know what the Board will want to do, but we should expect it to be disruptive and unpleasant (on possibly a number of levels).