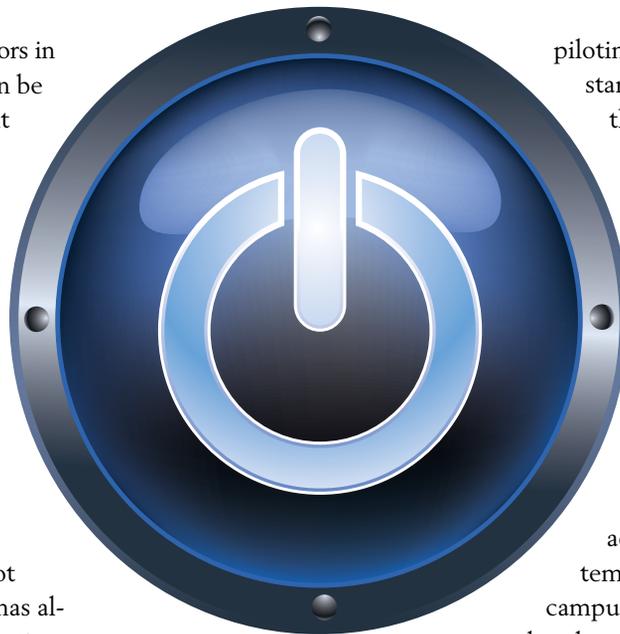


# START Your Online Testing Engines

**R**eady or not, educators in most states will soon be asked to implement online testing to meet NCLB or common core standards requirements or simply to make better use of student data and ensure that it is used to improve learning. All but five states—Virginia, Texas, Alaska, Nebraska, and Minnesota—have joined two consortia that will share \$350 million in Race to the Top funds to develop online assessments. (See figure 1.)

Of course, many states are not waiting. Delaware, for example, has already rolled out statewide summative assessments. The Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System (DCAS), an online web-based assessment, was put in place during the 2010–11 school year. That was the first year that students at Middletown (DE) High School took Delaware’s adequate yearly progress (AYP) test online, but it wasn’t the school’s first stab at the tech-enabled assessment process.

Principal Jim Comegys and his staff members put about two years of preparation into the big event. “About two years ago, we did a few tests online [from the Northwest Evaluation Association] as a secondary indicator for our school,” said Comegys, who was recently selected as Delaware’s 2012 principal of the year. “We then did some

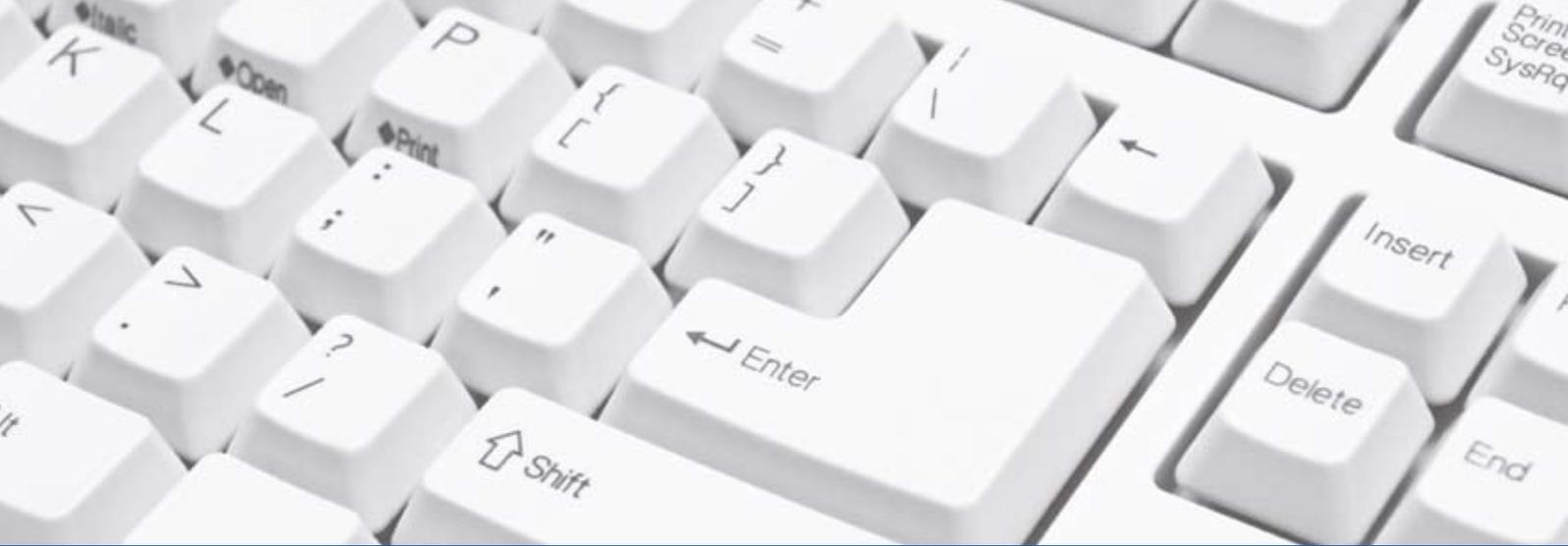


piloting last spring, and officially started using online assessments for the high-stakes AYP testing for the 2010–2011 school year.”

Before any online testing took place, the school took inventory of its desktop and laptop computers to look specifically at what would and wouldn’t work for group testing. The existing inventory was supplemented with computers provided by the state and the school district. In addition, the school’s wireless system was upgraded to cover the entire campus so that computers didn’t need to be plugged into servers or routers during the testing period.

Teachers were then briefed on the testing process: how it would work and what a typical testing day schedule would look like. This was particularly important because Middletown operates on a block schedule. “We can’t just take all of our math classes at once; it’s a bit more complicated than that because we work in semester blocks,” Comegys explained. “So, we talked to teachers about how we were going to physically get 300 freshmen through the fall, spring, and winter tests.”

Teacher training took place in computer labs through one-on-one, face-to-face interactions. Training was designed to satisfy DCAS-mandated teacher training and include



## Three principals share how they handled the preparation for and transition to online assessments.

Delaware's new AYP measures. Understanding and using data to inform instruction was at the core of those sessions. "We made sure we were emphasizing those points [about using data] loud and clear," said Comegys.

With three rounds of online testing behind him, Comegys said that the months spent preparing for the assessments paid off. The ability to get instantaneous results alone was enough to make him smile, knowing that teachers would be able to address (and, in many cases, correct) individual student issues much more quickly. Comparing the new system to the old once-a-year setup, Comegys said he especially likes having three shots (Delaware's testing schedule) to demonstrate growth. "As this online model moves forward, we'll be looking at each student's growth throughout the school year, and not just the growth of a student from one grade to the next," said Comegys. "Ultimately, it works in the student's favor when we can immediately identify where he or she is (or isn't) progressing and then provide the necessary support."

### Talking and Showing

Kettle Run High School in Nokesville, VA, also has significant experience in online assessment. Virginia has been testing some grade levels online for 10 years. Principal Major Warner said that Kettle Run just wrapped up its third year of online assessments—an advancement that was made possible by the sheer newness of the institution. Established in 2008, the school was built with "as much new technology as possible," Warner said. "We started this school with the philosophy of investing heavily in online testing, with the cornerstones being our 16 computer labs and 5 mobile

computing labs."

After ensuring that the equipment was in place, Warner and his team were able to focus on teacher training. Working with a mix of veteran and first-year instructors, the strategies included briefings on how the testing process and the technology itself worked, hands-on demonstrations, and Q&A sessions. "You really can't put enough man hours into talking and showing during this phase," Warner said. "When test day rolls around, everyone has to know what they're doing in order to get hundreds of kids tested at one time."

Warner identified the biggest challenge as the technology itself. In the school's most recent session, for example, the state's server failed right when the testing was about to begin. "The students were in the labs, ready to get started, and the state called to say it couldn't administer the test because of the server problems," Warner said. "We had to shut down the whole session."

When the technology works, online testing works far better than any previous methods, Warner said. For starters, it condenses the testing schedule and frees up more school days for classroom instruction. It also eliminates paper-and-pencil logistics and generates immediate feedback. "We can strike while the iron is hot," said Warner, "and immediately get at remediation for students who didn't pass, work with them intensely for two or three days, and then retest them."

### Cultivating the Culture

Only a year ago, students at St. Georges Technical High School in Middletown, DE, spent two weeks in March using paper and pencils to complete their state assessments. Students and teachers then went back to their regular class



## Are You Ready for Online Assessment?

Two big questions that school leaders must answer loom over the upcoming assessments from the two state consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of College and Career Skills (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC):

1. Do I have enough and the right kinds of hardware to administer online tests to all the appropriate students?
2. Do I have enough bandwidth and Internet access to have a large number of students online taking these tests simultaneously?

Help in answering these questions is on the way. For the short run, the State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA) has developed a paper, *Technology Requirements for Large-scale Computer-based and Online Assessment: Current and Issues* ([www.assess4ed.net](http://www.assess4ed.net)) that identifies the states that are currently conducting large-scale online testing; the technical specifications, including broadband, that each state requires for testing; and the key issues that the states, the school districts, and the consortia must consider as they start online assessment. The paper cautions that the technical specifications are what are needed now, not what may be needed in 2014—the year that the consortia have committed to make their tests available online. Issues include ensuring that the technology required for testing does not make instructional technology obsolete, coordinating online assessment initiatives and digital content and online professional development to leverage a single infrastructure, and ensuring that teachers and students are sufficiently prepared for online assessment.

Thinking long-term, the consortia have issued a request for proposals to create an online assessment readiness tool. The tool will contain a survey for schools and districts that must consider hardware, bandwidth, browser types, and other factors in online assessment; compare the current capabilities with what will be needed for the online assessment; and offer suggestions for closing the gap between current capabilities and those needed for 2014. The tool is expected to be deployed in late 2011 and can be found on the consortia's websites.

## None of the principals who were interviewed got online testing right the first time. Few will.

schedules, sometimes waiting up to five months to see the results of their efforts. That time lag made building a schedule for the coming year challenging at best and left teachers wondering whether their students were progressing academically. The scenario changed in 2011 when the school started using online assessments.

The online tests, which are administered three times a year, initially caused concern for Principal Terri Villa. "At first, the move to online assessments appeared to be challenging; there were so many unknowns," she said. "In reality, it's been beneficial for a high school administrator to be able to handle testing in this manner."

Villa said that the school kicked off its online assessment initiative by examining its master schedule and coming up with a workable way to meet the state's timing requirements. Using four carts of computers provided by the state, the school is able to accommodate all students, although some complain that the monitors are small. "There's nothing we can do about it because we can't go out and buy new computers," said Villa. What students *do* appreciate about the process is the way they receive immediate feedback for their efforts. The fact that each test taker immediately knows if he or she got a one, two, three, or four has affected the school's culture. "They go right to their teachers—or even to me—boasting that they moved up a notch to a three or a four," said Villa. "There's a buzz about it."

Villa and her staff members have parlayed some of that buzz into school pride that's spread throughout the vocational high school, which was established five years ago. Recently, for example, a lead teacher in one of the school's career programs reviewed the math and reading results for all electrical trade classes, identifying not only those pupils who passed the test but also those who were close to making the 830 passing score. "Some of them needed just five more points to make the cut and were motivated to bump themselves up for the next test," said Villa. "We've found this to be a great way to get students involved in their own success."

### Practice Makes Perfect

None of the principals who were interviewed got online testing right the first time. Few will. They experienced apprehension about moving from paper to computer, dealt

Figure 1

## State Affiliations

To prepare to implement online assessments, states formed consortia to bid for Race to the Top funds to create new assessments that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards. Two consortia—the Partnership for Assessment of College and Career Skills (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)—were successful bidders. Both PARCC and SBAC have committed to have their tests available online by the 2014–15 school year. When the new tests are rolled out, the states in each coalition will be able to compare results with and learn from one another.

### Partnership for Assessment of College and Career Readiness (PARCC) States

[www.achieve.org/PARCC](http://www.achieve.org/PARCC)

|                       |                            |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Alabama               | Maryland*                  |
| Arkansas              | Massachusetts—Board Chair* |
| Arizona*              | Mississippi                |
| California            | New Hampshire              |
| Colorado              | New Jersey                 |
| District of Columbia* | New York*                  |
| Delaware              | North Dakota               |
| Florida—Fiscal Agent* | Ohio                       |
| Georgia               | Oklahoma                   |
| Illinois*             | Pennsylvania               |
| Indiana*              | Rhode Island*              |
| Louisiana*            | South Carolina             |
| Kentucky              | Tennessee*                 |

### States in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) as of June 9, 2011

[www.k12.wa.us/smarter](http://www.k12.wa.us/smarter)

|                |                 |
|----------------|-----------------|
| Alabama        | New Mexico*     |
| California*    | North Carolina* |
| Colorado       | North Dakota    |
| Connecticut*   | Ohio            |
| Delaware       | Oregon*         |
| Hawaii*        | Pennsylvania    |
| Idaho*         | South Carolina  |
| Iowa           | South Dakota    |
| Kansas*        | Vermont*        |
| Kentucky       | Utah*           |
| Maine*         | Washington*     |
| Michigan*      | West Virginia*  |
| Missouri*      | Wisconsin       |
| Montana*       | Wyoming Nevada* |
| New Hampshire* |                 |

\*Governing states

Note: Some states have joined both consortia, and shifting will occur as specific plans develop.

with technology issues regarding hardware and capacity, and spent hours on end ensuring that staff members and students were up to speed on test day. In the end, however, they were all satisfied with the results of their efforts and are now enjoying fast access to test results; formative feedback; and streamlined, technology-enabled testing processes.

Achieving those goals comes down to solid preparation that includes substantial teacher training; the proper technology resources, including hardware and access; and student practice tests. Comegys offered this final piece of advice: “Get your ducks in a row, and be certain that all of the necessary steps are covered—and reviewed thoroughly—before test day. This level of preparation will be invaluable.” **PL**

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**Terri Villa** ([tvilla@nccvt.k12.de.us](mailto:tvilla@nccvt.k12.de.us)) is the principal of St. Georges Technical High School in Middletown, DE.

**Major Warner** ([mwarner@fcps1.org](mailto:mwarner@fcps1.org)) is the principal of Kettle Run High School in Nokesville, VA.

## More Help

The State Educational Technology Directors Association has created an online community of practice for the exchange of information, expertise, and observations regarding online assessment. Members of the community can access resources, readiness checklists, white papers, case studies, and other resources from states, districts, testing publishers, and other experts. Webinars, blogs, and other interactive tools will enable peers and experts to discuss online assessment. State-specific information, online discussions, and resources are available for many states.

