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January 11, 2016

TO: Chief School Administrators
Charter School and Renaissance School Project Lead Persons

FROM: David C. Hespe
Commissioner

RE: Student Participation in Statewide Assessment

Over the past few weeks, schools statewide have been mailing out to parents PARCC score reports and convening school learning communities focused on using this new assessment data to improve learning. Educators are analyzing district and school summary reports to identify areas where students are performing well and where adjustments to the curriculum and instruction or instructional supports are needed. When the data is missing for a child because he or she did not participate in the test, we have lost an opportunity to help him or her succeed in school.

Last spring, between the PARCC administration windows, we provided you with preliminary information concerning the performance-based assessment component of PARCC in regard to students who were marked as “Not Tested - Other.” In this broadcast, I have updated the data to include both assessment components – the performance-based (PBA) and the end-of-year (EOY) – to provide contextual information regarding the students in this category. There are three categories of non-tested students: Not Tested – Absent, Not Tested – Medical Emergency, and Not Tested – Other. It is important to understand that the “Not Tested - Other” category includes parent refusals as well as students not tested for other circumstances, as New Jersey has never coded parent refusals separately. As such, we cannot calculate the exact number of those cases.

The “Not Tested – Other” Category

For a variety of reasons, districts used the “Not Tested - Other” category to account for students who did not take the PARCC assessment. Below is a list of reasons why students may be reported in this category based on what we’ve heard from the field and what we see in the data:

- Students may be participating in an alternate assessment, such as the ACCESS for ELLs or the Dynamic Learning Maps assessments;
- Students may have either moved or transferred to other schools;
- High school students may have been enrolled in a math course for the first part of the semester and were administered the PBA component, then transferred to another course before the EOY component began;
- Students may have chosen not to take the test because they already met their assessment graduation requirement; or
- Students’ parents refused their child’s participation on the state assessment.

The updated information is very consistent with what was released by the Department last spring, with participation higher in the lower grades but much lower in high school. The data also suggest that a relatively small number of districts accounted for a substantial portion of the students who were marked “Not Tested – Other.”

This updated information may be useful to local school officials as they reach out to parents and students regarding the upcoming test administration. To view additional information on students who were marked “Not Tested – Other,” click [here](#).

Adjustments to PARCC for 2016

In response to the participation data and feedback from the education community, the Department has taken a number of steps to address a variety of issues, such as:

- Restructuring PARCC to have only one administration window instead of two;
- Reducing testing time;
- Exempting some 11th graders who take another valid test from needing to take PARCC ELA;
- Modifying the testing window to minimize the conflict between PARCC and AP testing;
- Providing statewide sessions illustrating how to use the data; and
- Providing extensive online information to parents and educators regarding how to understand and use the PARCC scores.

We continue to explore ways to encourage participation in the assessment, such as developing and disseminating informational and analytical tools that underscore the assessment’s usefulness as a key learning tool. We are also focusing on the needs of student subgroups, specifically students with disabilities and English Language Learners. To ensure that school staff and parents understand how the new assessments can be a powerful tool to appropriately assess students with learning challenges, we will:

- Conduct a webinar for educators on selecting DLM or PARCC and appropriate accommodations (February 2016);
- Identify districts with low subgroup participation and target them for specific interventions;
- Review PARCC accessibility features and accommodations, participation requirements and appropriate test selection with advisory groups, county office staff and at county roundtables;
- Provide evening sessions for parents at the LRCs and schools focused on the use of assessments to prepare students for post graduation life;
- Disseminate information to parents and school staff through broadcasts, advisory groups, e-newsletters, Facebook, etc.; and
- Collaborate with advisory and support groups for dissemination.

As we move toward the second administration of PARCC, we all must recommit to robust communication with parents and the school community regarding the benefits of student participation and the positive testing experience that we saw last year with PARCC. You can find many useful resources for doing this here: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/>.

The recently reauthorized *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*, which is now the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, continues to require each state that receives funding under Title I, Part A to implement a high-quality academic assessment system and that all children in tested grades participate. The USDOE has reemphasized the importance of meeting the participation target and provided guidance for states on the need for remedial action in a recent letter. Within coming weeks, we will send you preliminary data for your district and schools regarding the federal accountability data required under the *ESEA* waiver, including participation rate. As in the past, the data will be presented in your *ESEA* District/Schools Profile report.

Clearly the newness of PARCC, requiring students to be present for both administration windows, and the “Not Tested - Other” data will have significant impact on the federally-required Participation Rate, especially at the subgroup level. As a result there will be many districts/schools this year that will not meet the required 95% participation rate for all subgroups. These districts/schools will need to develop action plans to increase participation rates. The department will provide more information and assistance on the development of these plans in the coming weeks.

I have no doubt that the lessons we learned in 2015 will ensure that the 2016 administration of PARCC will go smoothly and will serve all of our students well as we make good use of the test data to help each student become college and career ready by the time he or she graduates from high school. As always, on behalf of the Department, we are all partners in preparing our students for their future.

DCH/JH/hl

c: Members, State Board of Education
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