WHAT THE MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CAN DO

MDE often receives the brunt of criticism about testing, but its role in improving testing is mostly a supporting one. MDE should focus its efforts on helping stakeholders, particularly parents, teachers, and school district leaders, better understand and utilize testing for its intended purpose—gauging student progress.

TO INCREASE TRANSPARENCY

✓ **MDE should create an easily accessible parent testing guide about state tests for use on its website and for distribution to districts.** Currently, state testing information on MDE's website is geared toward school districts rather than parents. There are specific parent guides for MAP, but these provide general information rather than testing times per grade. The parent guide we propose can be very short—a summary telling parents what to expect at each grade level and a table of testing times. MDE has recently produced a number of high-quality guides for stakeholder audiences, so this guide would be in line with that strategy.

TO PUT TESTING IN ITS APPROPRIATE PLACE

✓ **Press state test vendors on shortening turnaround time between test completion and score reporting.** Teachers expressed two desires for state testing that have historically been in tension: they want state tests administered as close to the end of the year as possible while at the same time wanting the results before they move on to the next school year. For 2017-2018, the state testing window is from mid-April to mid-May, and state test results are not expected until July. Teachers have usually left for the year by the beginning of June and do not return until the beginning of August. This leaves little time for teachers to analyze state test data before they must begin teaching a new set of students. Ideally, all state tests would have the same turnaround time as the MKAS^2, so that teachers could review data with their administration prior to leaving for the summer.

✓ **Consider test completion time when making state test decisions.** PARCC had an ambitious goal—design high-quality, "next generation" standardized tests measuring new state standards across dozens of states. As part of this next generation plan, PARCC prominently featured performance-based tasks completed during a separate test administration. While performance tasks are now the norm nationwide, the separate administration doubled not only the number of parts to the state assessment but also the time that students spent testing. Teachers we interviewed believe the additional time outweighed the value of the new information tested, a lesson to keep in mind for future testing decisions.

✓ **Over communicate big changes to the state testing program directly to teachers, and slowly implement those changes whenever possible.** Teachers repeatedly commented that the rapid change from MCT2 to PARCC to MAP (now MAAP!) was almost too much to bear. Having three tests in three years was no one's optimal scenario, including MDE, which got stuck in the unenviable position of having to scramble for a new test after the PARCC contract was delayed during the test's planned second year. From an educational perspective, teachers in our sample understood the need to replace the MCT2, not only because the standards changed but also because the MCT2 was not a good indicator of student knowledge. Nonetheless, PARCC ushered in several changes all at once, including testing entirely online, a performance-based assessment separate from the end-of-year test, new question types, and enhanced rigor. Because PARCC itself was new, the state did not have enough lead time to fully communicate the impact of all of these changes to teachers. Teachers felt that their own lack of knowledge about the test meant that they could not adequately prepare their

students for all of the changes. After testing, the long delay in receiving the data made teachers feel like all of the frustration and anxiety did not even have a good purpose. Teachers were happy to see PARCC go, but they felt similar uncertainty and frustration about MAP. The circumstances leading to the rapid succession of state tests will hopefully not arise again any time soon, but one takeaway is that MDE could reduce feelings of anxiety caused during the roll-out of new tests by overcommunicating directly to teachers, especially by disseminating sample test items demonstrating the changes as early as possible. MDE should also slowly transition through major test upgrades, if at all possible.

Build technical assistance capacity to help districts audit and redesign their testing practices. The school districts that we audited had never had a third party examine their testing practices to recommend improvements. What we found is that their testing practices had evolved over time, generally without specific strategic conversations as to why the district was employing certain tests or methods. In some cases, school-level administrators or even grade-level chairs had autonomy to choose assessment products, leading to an incoherent system districtwide that changed as personnel in decision-making roles changed, rather than by strategic design. This incoherence was especially acute in the lower-rated districts we studied. In these circumstances, both students and teachers experience testing as more of a burden than a help. MDE is well positioned to support districts in rethinking their testing programs and improving their effectiveness.

Apply for funds through the State Assessment Grant Program to conduct testing audits, if and when such funds become available. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the U.S. Department of Education (Ed) has the ability to earmark funds from the State Assessment Grant Program for testing audits. If Ed chooses to do this, state grants would be up to $1.5 million, with at least 20% directed to districts. Thus far, the feds have not chosen to make these grants available.[1] In the meantime, states can re-allocate funds they already receive by formula from the State Assessment Grant Program for this purpose.

Encourage teacher and administer preparation programs to develop and implement courses on understanding, designing, developing, and analyzing assessments. Far and away, teachers preferred their own tests for tracking student mastery of learning standards. From the perspective of teachers, their own tests were the most relevant and even the most rigorous. In a perfect world, teacher-created assessments—whether created jointly by grade-level teams or by individual teachers—would be all schools and districts need to evaluate student progress. In reality, teachers have varying levels of knowledge and skill in developing tests and analyzing results. This can lead to a muddied picture of student learning from classroom to classroom.

Research from the National Council on Teacher Quality shows that despite the heavy importance of data and assessment in modern education, teachers receive little to no instruction in teacher prep programs on how to develop a quality assessment or how to analyze data from one.[2] The logical conclusion is that any knowledge teachers have of how to write or use a rigorous, valid, and beneficial test comes from professional development teachers receive while in service. It makes far more sense to strengthen teacher assessment skills during teacher preparation, rather than relying on districts to fill in this knowledge.

TO END THE OVERRELIANCE ON TEST PREP

Publish model pacing guides for all grade levels, beginning with grades 3-8. Adults often learn best by seeing examples of effective practices. While MDE could invest staff resources in developing model pacing guides, we believe it may be more efficient to collect and publish exemplary pacing guides from high-performing school districts. MDE could also create a database of pacing guides that correspond to curricula in use by Mississippi districts so that districts using the same math curricula in fourth grade, for instance, could compare pacing guides and adjust when another district has a better model.

Provide technical assistance to districts in rewriting pacing guides. Even if districts adopt new, exemplary pacing guides created by their high-performing peers, the instructional planning skills required to develop pacing guides are necessary to every district. Districts with unique curricula in some or all subjects will also need support if there is no matching exemplary pacing guide.

[1] Klein, Alyson. 2018. "Answer Your ESSA Questions: What's Going on with Testing Audits?" Politics K-12, *Education Week*, January 3. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2018/01/answering_essa_questions_testing_audits.html.

[2] Greenberg, Julie, and Kate Walsh. 2012. *What Teacher Preparation Programs Teach about K-12 Assessment: A Review.* Research Report, Washington, D.C.: National Council on Teacher Quality. Accessed June 23, 2016. http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/What_Teacher_Prep_Programs_Teach_K-12_Assessment_NCTQ_Report.