



Large-Scale Assessments in Illinois: A Research Study

A Report for the P-20 Council of the Illinois State Board of Education

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ABSTRACT

The Consortium for Educational Change (CEC) and Illinois State University (ISU) were requested by the P-20 Council to conduct a study to determine stakeholder perceptions of current large-scale assessments, as well as the requirements, expectations, and goals needed as the State of Illinois transitions to new large-scale assessments. Data from a stratified sample of seven categories of stakeholders with vested interests in Illinois education were collected through a two-phase research study: a) an online survey and b) face-to-face and teleconferenced focus groups. A total of 937 stakeholders completed the survey which was available between February 5 and on April 22. Nine (9) face-to-face and four (4) call-in focus groups with a total of 61 participants were conducted from March 16 through May 8, 2014.

In the survey, individuals responded to statements about their level of understanding and valuing of current large-scale assessments, next generation assessments, and the New Illinois Learning Standards/Common Core State Standards (ILS/CCSS). The major finding was that understanding does not necessarily lead to valuing when it comes to assessment, but seems to do so for ILS/CCSS in this data set.

Based on the comments from the survey and focus group discussions, eight (8) themes were identified. The relative importance of each theme is based on the frequency of comments across all groups; the first five themes below are of highest priority.

1. **Uses of Data** – Reveals both acceptance of legitimate uses of data for decision-making and accountability, and fears of how data will negatively reflect upon evaluation of schools and employment of educators if the data are erroneously interpreted or applied or don't account for mitigating and intervening variables and flaws in the implementation of the test.
2. **Alignment and Rigor** – Reflects hopes that the next generation large-scale assessment will be an improvement compared to the current large-scale assessment, comments about the impact of the new system beyond the state of Illinois, and benefits of an assessment system aligned to a common set of standards across the United States.
3. **Impact on the Classroom** – Includes concerns about the loss of instructional time for teaching and learning, the validity of extensive testing, the optimal scheduling of the test, and the need to provide collaboration time for teachers and administrators.
4. **Timing and Timelines for Preparation** – Contains uniform concerns for more time and later timelines, especially for implementation of CCSS and preparation of students by teachers, for development and communication of schedules by

administrators, and adoption of new measures for admission, placement and retention by higher education faculty.

5. **Communication of Information** – Indicates an absence or insufficiency of information needed to plan organizationally for the new assessments and to properly prepare students, resulting in low levels of understanding of next generation assessments, a sense of uncertainty and sometimes a lack of transparency.
6. **Diverse Populations** – Consists of concerns about accommodations needed for English Language Learners (ELL) and students with disabilities, impact on their academic self-confidence, and the possibility of a reduction in the number of students from lower socio-economic status applying to college.
7. **Technology** – Expresses concerns about the extent of broadband and equipment, cost of upgrades, and time for instructional technology to develop students' technology skills, as well as the benefits of bringing technology into schools across the state.
8. **College and Career Readiness** – Includes concerns about losing the opportunity for students to take the ACT during the school day, the removal of the WorkKeys and the resulting NCRC certificate, and the predictive validity of the ACT.

In summary, the eight themes reveal a wide range of viewpoints. Positive outlooks for the future were articulated, as well as many hopes for the upcoming change to a new large-scale assessment system. However negative or mixed perspectives tended to dominate the survey comments and focus group discussions. This is due to 1) negative experiences with the current assessment system, and 2) the claim that little is known or understood about PARCC itself and, further, how it will be used and for what purposes in the future.

The researchers' recommendations focus on the second factor and suggest that the most critical pieces to be addressed with immediacy by the P-20 Council are strategies to counter lack of knowledge and fear through a variety of communication strategies. These include informational campaigns to specific stakeholder groups, broad communication through media outlets, development of a guide on the use of data, and advocacy for educator collaboration time.

Additional research strategies to augment the work of this study are also recommended for the purposes of understanding the perceptions of students and parents about large-scale assessments, hearing the voices of stakeholders with low participation rates on the survey and/or focus group sessions, and circling back to any of the stakeholder groups, or sub-groups within them, with very individualized and specific questions that address issues raised in this report that need more explanation.

INTRODUCTION

The Illinois P-20 Council is seeking to better understand the use, value, and challenges of current large-scale assessments (LSA), as well as the requirements, expectations, and goals needed as the state transitions to new large-scale assessments. As a result the P-20 Council has asked the Consortium for Educational Change (CEC) and Illinois State University (ISU) to conduct a two-phase study which can help inform ISBE priorities and decisions, conversations with Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and other vendors, and interactions with legislators.

The state recognizes that the transition to new assessments will be an important and challenging process. To help with this transition, ISBE is collecting data to ensure that well-informed decisions are made. In this effort, data collection was accomplished through a two-phase research study: a) an online survey and b) focus groups.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

This research study was designed to gather the opinions of a sample of identified stakeholder categories with vested interests in Illinois education. No attempt was made to attain a sample representative of stakeholder populations in the State of Illinois. Instead the researchers responded to the request of the P-20 Council to seek a stratified sample from seven (7) categories of educational stakeholders: “Employees” (K-8 teachers, 9-12 teachers, superintendents, and district/school administrators) and “Non-Employees” (board of education members, businesspersons, and higher education faculty). Given the constraints of fiscal resources and timelines, the Non-Employee stakeholder categories of parents and students were not included.

The researchers originally sought volunteers from the seven stakeholder categories to form 18 role-alike focus groups distributed geographically across the state. The number of focus groups for each stakeholder category was proposed to be either three (3), to be distributed across the southern (S), central (C), and northern (N) regions, or two (2), to be located in the central and northern regions.

The researchers intended to populate each focus group with 10-12 individuals, which would result in the following totals for each of the seven stakeholder categories in the stratified sample:

TABLE 1
Desired Focus Group Population

Stakeholder Category	# Focus Groups - Locations	# Focus Group Participants	Percent of Total Participants
1. K – 8 Teachers	3 - N, C, S	30-36	16.65%
2. 9 –12 Teachers	3 - N, C, S	30-36	16.65%
(Total for Teachers)	(6 - N, C, S)	(60-72)	(33.3%)
3. School and District Administrators	3 - N, C, S	30-36	16.65%
4. Superintendents	3 - N, C, S	30-36	16.65%
(Total for Administrators)	(6 - N, C, S)	(60-72)	(33.3%)
5. Board of Education Members	2 – N, C	20-24	11.1%
6. Higher Education Faculty	2 – N, C	20-24	11.1%
7. Businesspersons	2 – N, C	20-24	11.1%
(Total for Non-School District Employees)	(6 – N, C)	(60-72)	(33.3%)
Overall Total	18 – 7N, 7C, 4S	180-216	100%

Online Survey

The first step in gathering data was accomplished through an online survey. (See Appendix A) There were eighteen questions on the survey, with the majority focused on demographic information such as race, gender, role in education, years of experience, highest degree earned, and current district affiliation. This section of the survey was followed by questions querying participants' understanding of current and next generation large-scale assessment, and value of current and next generation large-scale assessment. An open-ended question asking for thoughts on next generation large-scale assessment followed.

The survey asked interested stakeholders to volunteer for the focus group portion of this study. Survey respondents indicated if they would like to participate in a focus group. If yes, they provided their email address and the times and dates they would be available to participate.

Initial Recruitment and Selection of Participants

On February 10, 2014 Advance Illinois sent an email to the P-20 Council Data, Assessment & Accountability Committee asking them to distribute the survey to their organizational constituents. An email was scripted for them to send with the documents prepared by CEC and ISU. (See Appendix B) The survey was opened on February 5, 2014. The goal of the committee was to get 1,000 stakeholders to respond. The survey closed on April 22nd with 972 stakeholders entering and 937 completing and submitting. Participation and consent were explained in the informed consent language on the first page of the online survey. (See Appendix C)

Of the 937 respondents, 172 (18%) volunteered to participate in the second phase of the study focus groups. Of the 172 stakeholders 124 (72%) were initially invited through an email from CEC and ISU researchers to participate in focus groups. (See Appendix D) Forty-eight (48) volunteers were not originally invited to a focus group due to one of two reasons. First, some were not invited because of their stated inability to attend at the chosen date and time for their category in their geographic region. That is, they were available for a time and day not shared with anyone else in their role category. Second, some districts had very large numbers of survey takers and focus group volunteers, such as Batavia, Aurora West, U46, and Indian Prairie. Only two individuals were initially invited from each of those districts to avoid over-representation from a single district. Refer to Appendix E for a break-down of invitations issued and participation in focus groups by stakeholders.

The initial invitations sent from the research team on March 7, 2014 yielded very low response rates and even lower acceptance and attendance rates. In the opinion of the researchers, these low rates were due to the timing of other concurrent events, such as ISAT and PSAT testing, and the fact that spring breaks were distributed across several weeks in March.

Additional Recruitment and Selection of Participants

The low turnout from initial recruitment and selection of focus group participants prompted an attempt to solicit additional stakeholders. To increase focus group numbers and provide more diversity of role and location, additional invitations were sent to stakeholders in a variety of ways:

- On March 14, twenty-three (23) administrators in the Chicago Area Directors of Curriculum and Assessment (CADCA) participated as a focus group. The participants did not know about or volunteer for the focus group in advance and it is unknown how many, if any, took the survey.
- Forty-eight (48) teachers who completed the survey and volunteered, but were unable to attend a face-to-face focus group on a particular day or time, were invited by emails from the researchers to attend call-in focus groups. Five (5) took part in a call-in focus group on March 20.
- Ten (10) individuals participated in a call-in focus group on April 2 after communications from, in part, the Illinois Business Roundtable: eight (8) businesspersons, one of whom was also a Board of Education member, and two (2) district administrators. It is unknown how many, if any, took the survey.
- Outreach from professional organizations resulted in a call-in focus group of four (4) community college faculty members and one (1) district administrator on April 7. It is unknown how many of them, if any, took the survey.
- Outreach from the Illinois Education Association and the Illinois Federation of Teachers to teachers resulted in a call-in focus group on May 7 attended by three (3) teachers.

As a result, nine (9) face-to-face and four (4) call-in focus groups with a total of sixty-one (61) participants were achieved. (See Appendix F) The focus groups began on March 16 and concluded on May 8, 2014.

Focus Group Protocol and Consent

The email communication to focus group participants included date, time, and location of the focus group as well as a consent form for each participant to review. (See Appendix G) Prior to beginning each focus group session the moderator reviewed the “consent to participate” form, obtained signatures or verbal consent, and provided each participant with a number to use in place of his or her name in the discussion to maintain anonymity. The number was given to ensure anonymity when transcribing the audio recordings and conducting data analysis for the final report. A moderator and note taker were assigned to each focus group. (See Appendix H)

All focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were saved for analysis, with the original audio recordings destroyed. The interview protocol was given to each participant prior to the start of the face-to-face focus group sessions. (See Appendix I)

POPULATIONS

Survey

As described in the Design of the Study, an invitation to complete a survey was sent by professional organizations represented on or connected to the Illinois P-20 Council to their members. It is unknown how many individuals received an invitation to participate. Therefore a response rate cannot be reported. However, a total of 972 stakeholders entered the survey and 937 completed and submitted the survey.

Role in Education

In an optional question, 916 respondents revealed their roles in education. Individuals were allowed to check more than one role and, as a result, 1192 total role responses occurred which makes it impossible to precisely ascertain the exact numbers and percentages of each stakeholder category. This difficulty is confounded by the fact that 176 people marked “Other.” Some may have done so in order to be specific about, for example, their teaching role, but it is unclear whether another stakeholder category was marked in addition to the “Other” category. It is worth examining the survey population distribution attributable to the seven stakeholder categories:

TABLE 2
Survey Population by Stakeholder Category

Stakeholder Category	% (#)
K – 8 Teachers	63.03% (440)
9 – 12 Teachers	22.63% (158)
Total for Grade Level Teachers	85.67% (598)
School/District Administrators	4.87% (34)
Superintendents	1.15% (8)
Total for All Administrators	6.02% (42)
Board of Education Members	1.28% (9)
Higher Education Faculty	6.02% (42)
Businesspersons	1.01% (7)
Total for All Non-School District Employees	8.31% (58)
Total	100% (698)

Looking at the grade level responses alone, teachers comprised at least 85.67% of the participants. That percentage would be even higher if the other teacher specializations were sole, not multiple, responses. Only 6.02% of All Administrators and 8.31% of Non-Employees (Board of Education members, businesspersons and higher education faculty) contributed to the survey. The low number of survey responses for Superintendents (8), Board of Education members (9), and businesspersons (7) posed particular hardships in creating role-alike focus groups to delve more deeply into their perceptions.

Location in the State

For the purpose of this study, the State was divided into three geographic regions: North, Central, and South. Each region was further divided into three areas (West, Central, and East) to create nine geographic areas. This schema was used to label the location of survey respondents by locating their affiliated school districts within one of the nine areas, as seen in Appendices J and K, and as summarized below:

TABLE 3
Affiliated School Districts by Area

Area	Number	Percentage
North and West	14	1.7
North and Central	51	6.1
North and East	637	76.2
Total North	702	84.0
Central and West	22	2.6
Central and Central	35	4.2
Central and East	18	2.2
Total Central	75	9.0
South and West	17	2.0
South and Central	33	4.0
South and East	9	1.0
Total South	59	7.0
Total	836	100

As depicted on Table 3, 836 of the 937 participants indicated a school district with which they consider themselves affiliated. The desired percentages for all survey respondents, regardless of role, were 38.9% North, 38.9% Central, and 22.2% South. Final numbers indicated 84% of respondents affiliated with the Northern region, 9% in the Central region, and 7% in the Southern region. The majority of survey participants indicated an affiliation with a school district in the North and East areas of the State (76.2%). It is important to note that, while the percentage of survey participants from the North and East areas of the State appears disproportionately high in comparison to the remainder of the State, 69% of the students in Illinois attend school in those same two geographic areas. (Student Data Source: Illinois State Board of Education)

Diversity

While desired targets of participants by demographic factors were not established in advance, the preference of the P-20 Council was for diversity among the respondents in the survey and, ultimately among the participants in the focus groups, in terms of years in education, highest degree earned, ethnicity and gender. The tables below illustrate the diversity represented by the survey respondents:

TABLE 4
Total Years Employed in Education

Years	Number	Percentage
Not Applicable	8	.87
1 – 4 years	36	3.93
5 – 9 years	125	13.65
10 – 14 years	178	19.43
15 – 19 years	183	19.98
20 – 24 years	143	15.61
25 or more years	243	26.53
Total	916	100

What can be concluded is that the survey respondents are predominantly senior in terms of their experience, with 81.55% having served for 10 years or more.

TABLE 5
Highest Earned Degree

Degree	Number	Percentage
HS Diploma	2	22.00
Associate	2	22.00
Bachelor	104	11.35
Master	706	77.07
Professional	24	2.62
Doctorate	78	8.52
Total	916	100

Not surprisingly, given the large number of teachers who completed the survey, the greatest number and percentage of responders reported having earned Masters degrees (77%).

TABLE 6
Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage
White	838	92.70
Black	13	1.44
Hispanic	34	3.76
Asian	7	.77
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	.11
American Indian	0	0.00
Two or more ethnicities	11	1.22
Total	904	100

The survey population is overwhelmingly white at 92.7%, while persons of color represent 6.08% of respondents.

TABLE 7
Gender

Gender	Number	Percentage
Female	725	79.76
Male	184	20.24
Total	909	100

Four-fifths of the respondents are female, which is not surprising given the gender orientation in the field of education and the large percentage of teacher respondents

Focus Groups

Nine face-to-face and four call-in focus groups were conducted with a total of 61* participants. The numbers by stakeholder category are indicated on Table 8:

TABLE 8
Actual Focus Group Population

Stakeholder Category	# Focus Group Perspectives	Percent of Total Participants
K – 8 Teachers	9	14.4
9 –12 Teachers	5	7.9
(Total for All Grade Level Teachers)	(14)	(22.3%)
School and District Administrators	6	9.5
Chicago Area Directors of Curriculum and Assessment (CADCA)	23	36.5
(Total for All Administrators)	(29)	(46.0%)
Board of Education Members	3 (1 is also Business and 1 also Higher Education)*	6.3
4-year Higher Education Faculty	5 (1 from IBHE and 1 is also Board Member)*	7.9
2-year Higher Education Faculty	4	6.3
Businesspersons	7 (1 is also Board Member)*	11.2
(Total for All Non-School District Employees)	20	(31.7%)
Total	63*	100%

*Two people are placed in double categories (Higher Education/Board Member and Businessperson/Board Member) as they actively represented both perspectives. The total number of focus group members (61) is therefore 2 fewer than the total number of perspectives (63).

Summary of Focus Group Population

The actual focus group population differs from the desired population in the following ways:

- 13 focus groups were conducted instead of the desired 18.
- All focus groups, with the exception of one for higher education faculty and call-in groups that attracted a few individuals from central and southern Illinois, were populated by stakeholders in north and east which is the geographic location of most students in Illinois.
- It was envisioned that the categories of teachers and administrators would each comprise one third of the participants and the remainder of the categories the final third. The Non-Employee combined category comprised close to a third, 31.7%. However, administrators comprised 46% of the participants, and that category is significantly over-represented by curriculum directors (79.3% of the administrators). Teachers comprise only one-fifth of the participants (22.3%).
- No role-alike focus groups were able to be conducted for the stakeholder categories of superintendents and board of education members, and only one (1) for businesspersons and higher education faculty members instead of the two (2) desired for each of them.
- It was envisioned that teacher participants would be evenly split between K-8 and 9-12 grades, but in actuality 64.3% were K-8 and 35.7% were 9-12.

In summary, a stratified sample of stakeholders with vested interests in Illinois education that are distributed geographically across Illinois was not accomplished for either the survey or the focus group phase of the research study. However, the perceptions by stakeholders about their understanding and valuing of current and next generation large-scale assessments and the “thoughts” they shared about them in the survey and the more in-depth exploration of the issues through the focus groups led to valuable findings.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Survey

In the survey, 830 individuals responded to statements about their level of understanding and valuing of current LSA, PARCC, and New Illinois Learning Standards/Common Core State Standards (ILS/CCSS). Table 9 details the percent of responses for each of these survey questions. Additional analyses of this information are provided in Appendix L.

TABLE 9
Survey Responses for Understanding and Valuing

Question	None	Little	Some	Substantial
What level of understanding do you have of the current Illinois large-scale assessments - Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT), Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE), ACT, WorkKeys?	2% (13)	11% (92)	42% (351)	45% (374)
What value do the current Illinois large-scale assessment results have for you?	11% (94)	37% (311)	40% (330)	11% (95)
What level of understanding do you have of the next generation large-scale assessments (PARCC)? (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers)	11% (89)	32% (269)	45% (373)	12% (99)
What value do you perceive the next generation assessment results (PARCC) may have for you? (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers)	11% (94)	32% (263)	37% (304)	20% (169)
What level of understanding do you have about the new Illinois Learning Standards/Common Core State Standards?	2% (13)	7% (58)	44% (367)	47% (392)
What value do the new Illinois Learning Standards/Common Core State Standards have for you?	4% (37)	14% (117)	44% (363)	38% (313)

In summary, the data indicate:

- Understanding doesn't necessarily lead to valuing when it comes to assessment, but seems to do so for ILS/CCSS in this data set.
- ILS/CCSS reflects comparable levels of both substantive understanding (47%) and substantive valuing (38%).
- PARCC is little understood or valued at this point.
- The understanding of PARCC (43% with little or no knowledge) is so low as to be of concern.
- What is hopeful is that value of PARCC is higher than the value placed on the current large-scale assessment, even with less understanding of it.

Survey respondents were also provided an opportunity to answer the following question with an open-ended narrative: “Can you share some of your thoughts on next generation large-scale assessments?” These 568 comments proved to be an invaluable source of insights into the perspectives of the stakeholders, augmenting information gathered from the focus group conversations.

Focus Groups

The focus group questions were designed to progress through three themes in a sequential order:

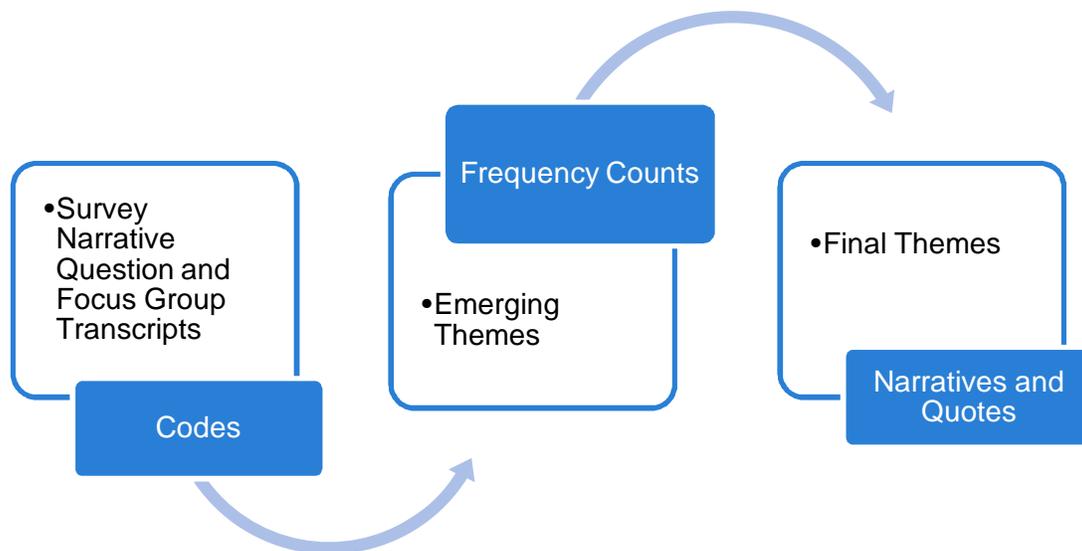
- A. Purposes and Uses
 - a. As a (n) XXX, what do you think are the purposes of large-scale assessments?
 - b. As a (n) XXX, how do you use the results of large-scale assessments?
- B. Challenges and Benefits
 - a. What are the benefits of current large-scale assessments?
 - b. What are the challenges of current large-scale assessments?
 - c. As a (n) XXX, what do you perceive the benefits may be with the PARCC assessment?
 - d. As a (n) XXX, what do you perceive the challenges may be with the PARCC assessment?
- C. Transition
 - a. To assure a successful transition from the current to the next generation large-scale assessments, what would you need and from whom?
 - b. If ACT and WorkKeys are phased out as required large-scale assessments in Illinois high schools, what are the implications for you? (specialized groups: higher education, high school teachers, superintendents, administrators, BOE, business)

The methodology used to analyze the perspectives shared by Illinois stakeholders is described in the next section of the report.

Data Analysis Methodology

Concurrent mixed methods procedures were used to help the researchers converge quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the findings. There were three major phases of data analysis resulting in increasingly complex and rich findings.

FIGURE 1: METHODOLOGY



Phase 1 – Coding

Using an informal mode of investigation the research team organized the responses to the survey open-ended narrative question and focus group questions into individual segments of text in order to develop a general meaning of each segment. The segments of text were sorted and coded in order to discover emerging themes.

Phase 2 – Counting Frequencies

During the second phase of the research, counts were made of the frequencies in responses. Initially, as per Creswell, those with a high occurrence of responses (5 or more for stakeholder groups up to 150 stakeholders and 15 or more for groups over 150) were categorized as emerging themes. These were revised or merged as the researchers attempted to produce a limited and meaningful set of significant themes for use by the P-20 Council

Samples of responses were coded and counted by two or more researchers for inter-rater reliability checks. Further the research team reflected about their own biases, values, and personal background when defining the themes for this study. This method of reflectivity enhanced the reliability of the coding process and frequency counts.

Phase 3 – Writing Narratives and Selecting Quotes

In the final stage of reporting out the themes, the research team wrote narratives that, where possible, reflected the frequency of responses, the identity of stakeholders, and characterization of the responses as generally positive, negative, mixed and neutral. These data were inexact due to the difficulty of precisely linking survey comments to particular stakeholders and the ability of the same focus group participants to repeat their perspectives multiple times. Finally representative quotes were selected to share the “voices” of stakeholders. Quotes from focus group participants are identified with the stakeholder group to which they belong; again, the same cannot be done for the anonymous responses to the survey question.

Overall Themes from Survey and Focus Groups

After examination, eight themes were identified with five being of highest priority based on the frequency of comments across all groups. Themes are presented below in three categories of relative importance:

Themes with 250-300 Comments:

1. Uses of Data
2. Alignment and Rigor
3. Impact on the Classroom
4. Timing and Timelines for Preparation
5. Communication of Information

Themes with 100-125 Comments:

6. Diverse Populations
7. Technology

Themes with 25-50 Comments:

8. College and Career Readiness

Participant perspectives from the survey and focus group sessions covered a range of viewpoints. Positive perceptions were articulated, as well as many hopes for the change to the new large-scale assessment system; however negative perspectives

dominated the information gathered from the study. It is important to emphasize that many concerns and fears expressed about the upcoming large-scale assessment system are due to negative experiences with the current system. The following quote expressed by a focus group member representing higher education illustrates the intersection of the current fears with the hopes for a change:

“An important purpose of assessments going forward is that it will begin to repair some of the damage that has been done in terms of the way information has been reported so far.” (Higher Education Faculty)

Theme 1: Uses of Data

This theme reveals a mix of both positive and negative responses that is clearly shown in two of the major subtopics: acceptance of legitimate uses or fear of inappropriate *Uses of Data*.

With regard to legitimate and appropriate use of PARCC, many believe that real-time data will lead to productive instructional decision-making and changes. All stakeholder groups described their hope for or, in pilot districts, their experience with the use of data to see student growth patterns and inform instructional strategies and interventions.

An important caveat is that the data need to be “timely” and detailed enough so as to permit the adjustment of curriculum and instruction for current students and that periods of time are made available for educators to analyze data prior to planning and change efforts.

A less prevalent, but equally positive, outlook on the legitimate use of assessment data is for the purpose of informing the public about the level of student performance. The “public” is defined narrowly as district parents and local taxpayers and community members, but also more broadly as policy makers, politicians, and the “public at large”. It is generally hoped that PARCC will be perceived by the public as a consistent, meaningful, and legitimate method for measuring accountability in public schools.

However, some stakeholders are fearful of how data will negatively reflect upon schools and educators if they are erroneously interpreted or applied, or don’t account for mitigating and intervening variables and flaws in the implementation of the test. Such fears are exacerbated by the perception that current performance data are not properly analyzed or used, given little or no time, training, or support to do so.

Numerous comments from teachers indicated grave concern about testing being used to determine educator hiring and retention decisions. These decisions cause great anxiety for teachers especially as the PARCC assessment is an untried test. While teachers said that they are willing to be held accountable for their work and educational outcomes, they expressed their fear of the influence of PARCC on teacher evaluation. Further, rushing to make other high-stakes decisions such as student advancement or graduation, school performance designation, or state funding awards based on assessments of the standards before they and the testing system have been fully and properly implemented is considered by respondents to be an unwise and unsettling move.

There are also some fears about the inappropriate use of data by individuals and groups who are perceived as driven by ulterior motives or personal gain. They include commercial entities that profit from selling assessments and intervention programs, as well as charter or private school advocates and special interest and political groups who could point to a presumably failing public education system for their own economic or policy purposes. For example, some teachers spoke of the inappropriate use of data for school boards to rate and close public schools and authorize charter schools, for developers to build on or avoid property within certain school boundaries, and for legislators to make decisions that negatively affect unions and schools.

Some stakeholders asked whether professional educators were even involved in the development of ILS/CCSS and PARCC and therefore questioned the integrity of both. While related to lack of communication or understanding of the standards and their measures, these questions also reflect the cynicism and suspicion of this theme.

Representative Quotes:

Legitimate Use for Instructional Decision-making, Change and Accountability

- *“Scores from standardized tests are helpful to see growth patterns.” (Survey)*
- *“Have a purpose if they lead to instructional change.” (Survey)*
- *“I also think it is incredibly important that the student data be reported in a way that makes it useable by schools/districts and teachers so that they can make responsive instructional changes.” (Survey)*
- *“These assessments need to give immediate feedback to be of use in planning and delivering instruction and interventions.” (Survey)*

- *“If we can actually test the standards reliably, then I believe the students may benefit if the data is collected and analyzed.” (Survey)*
- *“The assessments will be valued if they can be implemented easily and we get the data back in a timely fashion in order to guide our instruction.” (Survey)*
- *“Hopefully the new tests will prove to be beneficial to the students and be a useful guide to facilitate instruction.” (Survey)*
- *“In the current ISAT form, we don’t receive results in a timely enough fashion in order to utilize that to inform our instruction.” (Teacher)*
- *“I just gave ISAT’s to a group of students that won’t be in my building next year, and I’ll get the results in the fall and even when their results come back, I get overall results as to how they did but how they did on certain skills. (Teacher)*
- *“I think we have no data in time to use it to inform instruction, and if we do get the data we also do not have time to analyze how it can/could best be used to inform our instruction.” (Teacher)*

Legitimate Use for Informing the Public

- *“I think their greatest promise lies in the quality of information that they will be capable of reporting back to parents, educators, policy makers and the public at large. They will also help us begin to restore public trust that annual reports on school effectiveness are not just an annual smoke and mirrors ritual.” (Survey)*
- *“Definitive testing in the areas of reading and math are obviously necessary and beneficial.” (Survey)*

Fears of Data Use for Teacher Evaluation

- *“I am concerned about how the results will be used in teacher evaluation.” (Survey)*
- *“As a special education teacher who teaches children that do not perform at grade level, I am very concerned about having these test results determine my effectiveness as a teacher and my ability to stay employed.” (Survey)*
- *“My biggest worry is that the tests will be used to make determinations that have nothing to do with what the tests are measuring – including teacher effectiveness.” (Survey)*

Fears of Use for Negative Agendas

- *“Essentially, these tests are a collaboration between special interest groups*

and politicians who want to be able to quantify things that are often unable to be quantified.” (Survey)

- *“Standardized testing is a money maker that has never helped any teacher close the gap.” (Survey)*
- *“I am questioning exactly what role professional educators had in forming this common core and in informing the PARCC assessments?” (Survey)*
- *“I think any system of assessment has embedded values and measures according to those values. I am not sure that I agree philosophically with the values embedded in any of the assessments used in education. I certainly don’t agree with the direction of education reform. While I understand that some people feel the need to have data, I think few understand how to interpret it. Far too many of the assessments are too deeply flawed at an ideological level for their results to be interpreted well. I see these assessments as a tool of power used by the privileged in society.” (Survey)*
- *“Large-scale assessments are being used for larger political decisions. One that affects schools directly is whether or not to close schools and open up charter schools, especially in urban areas. Other political decisions is how real estate is being used in conjunction with these schools. Developers in Chicago decide whether to develop property or not based on the ratings of the schools in the area closest to the real estate. I think also they are being used for political decisions about unions and for decisions being made legislatively about schools. All purposes for which these tests are not designed.” (Teachers)*

Theme 2: Alignment and Rigor

The theme of *Alignment and Rigor* includes hopes that the next generation large-scale assessment will be an improvement compared to the current large-scale assessment and comments about the impact of the new system beyond the state of Illinois. Thoughts about an assessment system aligned to a common set of standards across the United States, and assessment of college and career readiness skills were additional areas within this theme.

The current large-scale assessment system is perceived by respondents as a low level assessment with an over-reliance on multiple-choice questions. Respondents feel the new assessment will measure higher order thinking skills and exhibit an increased level of rigor. Both survey and focus group respondents perceive the new large-scale assessment to be one that will measure knowledge, skills, and application more authentic to classroom instruction. Respondents commented on the increased level of rigor evident in the sample items that have been released by PARCC.

Survey and focus group session participants discussed the effective practice of large-scale assessment being aligned to state standards. Most role groups perceive the current large-scale assessment system as lacking alignment with the adopted state standards. A general feeling of frustration with the current lack of alignment between standards and assessment was expressed by many respondents. Participants expressed high hopes that the next generation assessment system will evidence strong alignment to the new Illinois Learning Standards, but confidence in that content validity has not yet been achieved.

In addition to the importance of alignment with Illinois Learning Standards, participants commented on the benefits of the state collaboratively working with other states to develop a common large-scale assessment system. Participants feel the ability to track student learning regardless of where schooling has occurred for a student is an important step for teaching and learning.

Representative Quotes:

Improvement over Previous Large-Scale Assessment

- *"I feel the nature of the questions on the PARCC and the format of the test will be more beneficial than ISAT."* (Survey)
- *"They do seem to be a better, stronger step in the right direction, and better for our students than previous standardized tests."* (Survey)
- *"I've heard that the test is more rigorous than the current test. It's not exactly all multiple choices. It drills down to whether or not the individual student has not only learned the material, but can put the material to use in situational questions."* (Board Of Education)
- *"I think the essence of the ELA Common Core Standards focusing on the integration of language arts and promotion of higher level thinking is excellent, I am very concerned that the PARCC assessments will steer teachers toward test-prep type teaching which I believe goes against the standards."* (Survey)
- *"It is nice to have one evaluation model aligned from grade 3 through grade 11. In this respect next generation large-scale assessment is promising, and certainly better than the disconnected model we've been using for the last 13 years."* (District Administrator)
- *"We are very interested in standardized test as an adjunct to student grades as a prediction of future performance, aligned to the standards, and driving instruction. If the next generation large-scale assessment accomplished this, we'll have a good tool."* (District Administrator)
- *"If the LSA is done where it is aligned with standards that have been established, and it's looking at what educators and experts in those areas consider valuable, the state is on the right path. Current LSA does not do*

this." (Teacher)

- *"As a unit district perspective there is no correlation between ISAT and PSAT. We have been forced to use other assessments to aid (NWA, MAP, or Explore Plan). My hope is that PARCC will be cohesive, aligning the standards, and comprehensive so we don't have to use other assessments to aid understanding of student levels of academic skills." (Teacher)*

Common Curriculum and Assessment Across United States

- *"I understand the assessments are going to truly up the rigor and level of instruction needed in our classrooms. The tests are also aligned with Common Core and are therefore challenging students in the areas of college and career readiness. I have looked at the sample PARCC assessments and am certain the future of education will change based on these tests." (Survey)*
- *"I was encouraged by the thought that students wouldn't 'get lost' using this assessment system as results would be accessible even if students move." (Survey)*
- *"I believe these assessments will paint a picture of great deficiency across the United States which will in turn spark the debate about School Choice and Charter Schools." (Survey)*
- *"My understanding is the PARCC exam and Common Core standards are meant to create a common curriculum and assessment for students across the United States. A student who moves from Texas to Illinois should be learning similar material." (Survey)*
- *"If PARCC drives full implementation of ILS/CCSS, more Illinois HS graduates will likely be college-ready in mathematics and English/language arts." (Survey)*
- *"I feel that PARCC will give direction to teachers on what skills students need to be college and career ready." (Survey)*

Theme 3: Impact on the Classroom

The theme of *Impact on the Classroom* includes subtopics such as loss of instructional time for teaching and learning, the validity of extensive testing, and the need to provide collaboration time for teachers.

The nature and intent of high-stakes testing decisions has impacted the amount of quality classroom instructional time available to teachers and students. Teachers feel the amount of time devoted to testing takes away from critical time for teaching. Many

respondent comments detailed the negative impact on student learning when more and more instructional time is taken away from teaching and given to the task of assessing. They are also concerned that the test be scheduled at a time in the school year when skills and knowledge have been already been taught to students, not beforehand.

The number of hours needed to complete the new large-scale assessment system causes skepticism around whether the results will be valid and reliable, especially for the youngest students. Teachers and administrators spoke of concerns with students experiencing test fatigue. They suggested that this possibility needs to be addressed in order to ensure that results generated from the assessment experience are seen as accurate reporting of student knowledge and skills.

Stories were shared about teacher teams meeting during the school day to collaborate around meaning of, and expectations for, student learning as written in the new Illinois Learning Standards. The comments reflect an understanding of the power of job-embedded collaboration to enhance fidelity of implementation of standards in a district. Teachers and administrators expressed a strong desire for all schools to provide collaboration time for teachers to develop a common understanding of standards in order to lead to increased achievement levels demonstrated by students on the large-scale assessments. Finding a way to encourage, support, and possibly require time during the school day for teacher teams to collaborate in analyzing data prior to planning and change efforts would be embraced by teachers and administrators.

Representative Quotes:

Loss of Instructional Time

- *“I am concerned with the number of hours the PARCC assessments will take away from instruction/learning time as it will be given more than once a year and at this time appears to be incredibly time consuming.” (Survey)*
- *“I do not mind ONE large-scale assessment per year. However, when standardized testing takes up to 19 days within a school year (ISAT, ENCORE, PARCC, interim, etc.) as it did last year, testing then interferes with actual learning.” (Survey)*

Collaboration Time for Teachers

- *“PARCC assessments are going to be a large burden for schools, especially consider the excessive amount of time students will be required to spend testing. Students will lose valuable instructional time because of these*

assessments. The assessments need to be scaled back.” (Survey)

- *“I think one of the benefits of heading toward PARCC is that we have implemented “Professional Learning Communities and as a result we’re forming teaching guides and starting to realize that we need better communication among the teachers who teach the same subjects to have some consistency and to work together as a staff.” (Teacher)*
- *“In our school district, which is piloting PARCC, we have team time to have discussions around the findings and what we need to be teaching as a result. We are getting at those deep things that they’re asking kids to do that we’ve never had before. I do not think this is a direct benefit of ISAT, but rather a benefit of what is to come as a result of PARCC.” (Teacher)*

Theme 4: Timing and Timelines for Preparation

There are not identifiable subtopics for this theme as nearly all responses focused on the critical issue of *Timing and Timelines for Preparation*. What is clearly discernable is that many stakeholder groups requested more time, albeit for different purposes. Therefore it is most instructive to look at their concerns and requests broken out by group.

Teachers reported the need to unpack, repack, and implement the Common Core State Standards curriculum, differentiate that curriculum, identify benchmarks, and for every district to pilot the PARCC assessment before high stakes evaluation takes place. They expressed that it is nonproductive (and very frustrating) to assess curriculum before that curriculum is well established.

District and school administrators reported that their academic and co-curricular schedules are “set in stone” and readjusting them rapidly would take on nightmarish proportions for management. They are concerned that teachers, parents, and students will have difficulties in adjusting to new schedules, especially for a testing program for which they themselves have many questions and cannot explain well.

Administrators requested that detailed directions and clarification of the unknowns be explicated before the testing requirements are mandated (See Communication of Information Theme). They also indicated that collaboration is necessary for success within schools, districts, the state and even, as one indicated, across states and that best practices are shared as an alternative to every district acting on its own. Some businesspersons also remarked that reform of this magnitude takes time.

Higher education faculty are concerned about moving from their proven tools for admission, placement and retention. They argued that they have successfully used high school grades, ACT scores, student essays, and their individually developed ability measures over a long period of time to be able to determine which students are admitted, what initial courses students need to take, and the best indicators of student progress toward graduation. Some mentioned sophisticated algorithms or specialized expertise gained from decades of use that have served them well. They expressed reluctance to change due to the fear that, as a consequence, there will be negative impacts on student success.

The same timeline factor expressed by elementary and secondary education educators is echoed among higher education faculty. They claim that it will take extensive lead time for research, staffing, and investment in new measures before they can adopt PARCC. The fear of mandated and hurried change is a concern of many faculty members.

Representative Quotes:

Teachers

- *“Teachers need more time to get a grasp on what the expectations are.” (Survey)*
- *“CCSS needs years of implementation statewide to meet expected scores on PARCC.” (Survey)*
- *“Until the Common Core standards have been implemented for a number of years, and the curriculum has been scaffolded, the results of the assessments will not be a true picture.” (Survey)*
- *“My hope is that PARCC will take the standards and the timeline for the curriculum into account so that skills that have not been covered at the time of the test are not on the test.” (Survey)*

District Administrators and Businesspersons

- *“This work takes time. It takes collaboration at the local level; however I do think some direction and clarification on what the best practices look like and those being shared or those being collaboratively determined across the state and across the states would be one of the things we need in order for this to work, and this takes time.” (District Administrator)*
- *“They are rolling this out too fast. Reform takes time. We do not have the manpower or time for this type of reform.” (Businessperson)*

Higher Education Faculty

- *“PARCC seems like it is going to be very helpful (with subject level, better information). However we don’t know it; we frankly don’t trust it yet. And we don’t have the experience, the history, to know how to use it whereas we do with ACT and high school grades. We’ve built algorithms, we’ve built systems that we can put in the math courses that the students have taken in high school and compare those and use those. Part of this is we are just getting to the point where we know how to use PARCC and that the investment to get to where we are now with high school grades and essays and ACT. Getting to that point is going to be expensive. It’s going to take time. It’s going to take staff. It’s going to take research and I think there is some fear that we’re trying to move too quickly to the PARCC assessments – not that it’s not good and we don’t want something different – but getting there by mandate is troublesome.” (Higher Education Faculty)*
- *“We are concerned that if there’s a mandate that PARCC individual student results are used for placement, that we will, especially in math ...with an assessment of ability developed by a third party and adapted for our uses, ...lose a tool that has been very valuable to us in preserving student progress toward completion in the degree they came hoping to complete. ...Our resistance to a quick changeover is not some maligned opposition to PARCC or any large-scale assessment. It is a defense of the best interest of our students.” (Higher Education Faculty)*
- *“Assessments and standards need a longer lead time for adoption so that universities and schools can proactively prepare for changes in curricula rather than jumping from one requirement to another.” (Survey)*
- *“It’s not that we don’t think that PARCC is not good and we don’t want something different, but getting there by mandate is troublesome.” (Higher Education Faculty)*

Theme 5: Communication of Information

The reference to gaps in *Communication of Information* about next generation large-scale assessment is fairly universal. This is not surprising given that 43% of the respondents to the survey reported little or no knowledge of PARCC.

In general, stakeholders wrote or spoke of the absence of communication or insufficiency of what information has been communicated. Both, it seems, result in low levels of understanding. Educators desire information to plan organizationally for the new assessments and to properly prepare their students. The absence or paucity of communication also lead to a sense of uncertainty and is interpreted sometimes as a lack of transparency.

There are unknowns about the Illinois Learning Standards themselves, as well as about how they are assessed. In some cases individuals attributed their concerns about standards to concerns about the assessment of them, that is, to PARCC instead of CCSS.

In addition to expressing a strong desire for additional and more complete information, stakeholders indicated that communication should flow up as well as well as down, and that information should be sought from those in the field.

Operating without sufficient knowledge about PARCC and under a rapidly approaching deadline, stakeholders generally share a sense of uncertainty. Their uncertainty is driven by lack of adequate or accurate knowledge of what is to come and what is expected of them. This is fear, not from illegitimate or nefarious uses of data alone (See Use of Data Theme). It is an internal fear – fear of an inability to be able to conduct themselves as educators professionally and responsibly in a new system of accountability.

Representative Quotes:

Absence or Insufficiency of Communication

- *“I am concerned about the assessments because the use of them is less than a year away and no one really can explain them.” (Survey)*
- *“My biggest concern is how these new exams and the curricula are going to effect admission, enrollment and placement in higher education. I’ve already brought the topic of the Core Curriculum up with our Provost and VP of Enrollment, but it doesn’t seem to resonate or make a difference at this point. I want to know how we in admissions and higher education should be viewing the Common Core and PARCC...Generally, I feel there are a lot of unknowns.” (Higher Education Faculty)*
- *“I am concerned by the lack of communication and transparency in the transition process from current assessments to future assessments.” (Survey)*
- *“I wish more was known about them.” (Survey)*
- *“I would like to know more about the PARCC – very little has been communicated to the members of our district.” (Survey)*
- *“I am concerned that there is little information about the new PARCC assessment. I don’t know how to prepare my students.” (Teacher)*
- *“Not enough detailed information about what each standard really means and what is considered proficient.” (Survey)*
- *“I am very concerned that many of our school districts have not given teachers*

the supports necessary to properly prepare our students for taking these new rigorous assessments.” (Survey)

Two-Way Communication

- *“The element that is missing is the bottom up element from the classroom to help inform instruction.” (Teacher)*

Uncertainty

- *“It’s scary to think about this train bearing down on us fairly rapidly and what we are asking for is time to integrate this new information into existing systems or build new systems and have a transition period. ...And so this demand has an enormous amount of weight and it’s a huge ask. And it’s a huge ask to present in this big dark unknown, you’re putting blindfolds on people and putting them in a dark room and telling them to find the other side. It’s really difficult. I understand where a lot of the pressure is coming from but other entities need to understand that higher ed needs information and time before full integration is going to happen.” (Higher Education Faculty)*
- *My thoughts right now are very frustrating because every time we are given information about the PARCC, it has changed. I love the new common core standards, but where the assessment piece comes in I feel like I’m trying to hit a moving target.” (Survey)*
- *“We implement MAP, an online auto adjusting assessment and though we receive the results in aggregate in 24 hours, it doesn’t give us ample item analysis to understand and inform our instruction. Will PARCC give us item analysis, this is something I’d like to know.” (Teacher)*

Theme 6: Diverse Populations

This theme encompasses participants’ responses regarding *Diverse Populations*. Diverse populations included English Language Learners (ELL), students with disabilities, and students from lower socio-economic status.

Many stakeholders’ comments focused on available and appropriate accommodations and modifications for diverse populations to accurately evidence their learning. Already identified as marginalized groups, stakeholders fear the negative effect next generation large-scale assessment will have on the academic self-confidence of the learners within these specialized groups.

Many participants indicate lack of knowledge about accommodations that will be available for these populations during assessment administration. Participants who are aware of planned accommodations voice concern about students' ability to access and effectively use the adaptations.

Finally some stakeholders fear that the loss of free, in-school administration of the ACT will limit the progress toward college access of lower socio-economic students.

Representative Quotes:

Diverse Population Impact in Higher Education

- *“We are absolutely obsessed with increasing retention...We know there are persistent gaps between our general population and certain cell populations on our campus and we endeavor to close those gaps and what helps us to do that is the most finely grained possible information on a student's preparedness for academic success at our institution. ...So any change that would risk impacting negatively graduation and retention within the four year time frame, we are very concerned about.” (Higher Education Faculty)*
- *“PSAE has two parts, ACT and WorkKeys. Their name recognition is well accepted by just about everybody. It is what we do. One of the benefits for the State of Illinois is that every high school junior has the opportunity to take it as part of the schooling experience. I know that when they implemented it 15 years ago or so, the college going rate really surged...because young people who wouldn't pay to take it, took it, and saw their college potential. I think a benefit of the PSAE is that it ...makes college more accessible to particularly low income or first generation students.” (Higher Education Faculty)*

Impact on Diverse Populations

- *“I teach students who are struggling academically and after we finish taking the test the demeanor of my students is very different. This test shows them that they don't know as much as they thought, despite our successes all year in the classroom.” (Teacher)*
- *“A lot of my students know that they are struggling academically, and to have to sit in a room for three days just to reinforce that over and over and over again is detrimental. It takes weeks to recover from these tests.” (Teacher)*
- *“It seems like with PARCC they are pushing more and more of the students, or asking more and more of the students and it's just not always assessed at the right level, and at the right grade.” (Teacher)*

- *“There needs to be an alternate assessment for not only students with significant cognitive disabilities such as IAA but also students with learning disabilities.” (Survey)*
- *“This will be yet another standardized test which unfairly expects English Language Learners to perform at the same level as their native English speaking peers....” (Survey)*
- *“Students are frustrated. With the way the students with special needs receive the testing they are removed from their grade level peers and have to spend extra time taking the test.” (Teacher)*

Theme 7: Technology

Because PARCC is designed as a computer-based assessment, *Technology* emerged as a theme with four sub-topics: the extent of broadband and equipment, cost of upgrades, time for instructional technology, and student technology skills. While the benefits of bringing technology into schools across the state were noted, most stakeholders expressed concerns about these issues.

Many stakeholders questioned whether the current infrastructure of schools in terms of broadband capacity and number of computers was sufficient to support the test and complete it in a timely manner. They worried that the weak infrastructures in poor or small districts would make it necessary for those students to take the test with pencil and paper. The ability of districts to upgrade bandwidth and purchase additional and more powerful computers, and the space to house them, are seen as beyond the means of many, especially as they perceive the state continuing to provide fewer funds.

Another aspect of the concern about technology is the anticipated loss of time to infuse technology into instruction. According to stakeholders, the time and equipment needed for instructional use will be repurposed during PARCC administration in order to assess all students during the testing window and is therefore perceived as a negative impact on the use of technology in classroom instruction.

Further, the necessity of computers for PARCC administration will limit the time students have on computers to learn the technology skills needed to be successful on the assessments. There is great concern that their limited technological literacy and

proficiency, lack of familiarity with computers, and tendency to be distracted will mean students in some districts will perform poorly.

Representative Quotes:

Capacity, Use and Cost

- *“Though the state continues to provide fewer funds, school districts are expected to make significant infrastructure and equipment changes.” (Survey)*
- *“There are lots of discussions in the state about what we need to put funds into building/improving the infrastructure so that more schools can do the PARCC assessment in this computer based manner and if it brings technology to schools, then great. But the goal should really be for ...technological literacy. ...We need to get technology up to speed so that students are better educated and also assessed appropriately. Not to build the technology to test them - that’s just backward – but it could be the force that drives the change that’s useful for the more reasonable purpose.” (Higher Education Faculty)*
- *“Our district does not have the technology to support the test or complete it in a timely manner.” (Survey)*
- *“My district is scrambling to have that amount of tech in place for all of our students.” (Survey)*
- *“Our district doesn’t have the bandwidth to handle all the technology that are going to be done at the same time let alone the space or the ability to get the computers in the kids hands on a regular basis to have them become proficient and know how to use them.” (District Administrator)*
- *“My understanding is that PARCC was specifically created to align and measure whether or not school districts were hitting the goals under the CCSS. It was designed to be an online, real-time LSA test. One of the concerns I’ve heard is that more than half of the school districts in the state, representing 30% of all students, do not have the IT infrastructure necessary to take the test online and will be required to take the test with pencil and paper.” (B) “In my experience, students who take tests on the computer do not tend to perform as well because of distractions and inability to use the software.” (Survey)*
- *“For small schools like ours without daily time in a computer lab, our students will not be ready for a technological assessment.” (Survey)*

Loss of Technology for Instructional Purposes

- *“Luckily we have the computers and the bandwidth, but our concern is that the availability of computers outside of PARCC to be able to teach the students the skills that they are going to need to do on the test now (MAP and PARCC), the computers are going to be so tied up most of the year that we’re concerned with actually having them ready to do the skills they need to do the test.” (District Administrator)*
- *“If students are using the computers for the PARCC assessment there are no computers left for the teachers to use for instructional purposes.” (Teacher)*

Theme 8: College and Career Readiness

The theme of *College and Career Readiness* has three subtopics which are related to the Illinois Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE): ACT and WorkKeys, predictive validity, and limitations of the tool.

The PSAE measures the achievement of grade 11 students in reading, mathematics, science, and writing. The Spring 2014 PSAE included three components: (1) the ACT Plus Writing, which includes the ACT battery of four multiple-choice tests (English, mathematics, reading, and science) and a writing prompt, (2) an ISBE-developed science assessment, and (3) two WorkKeys assessments (Applied Mathematics and Reading for Information). In addition, in Spring 2014, ACT's WorkKeys Locating Information assessment was administered at district discretion after the three PSAE Day 2 tests. This allows students who earn qualifying scores the opportunity to be eligible for ACT's National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC). Scores for WorkKeys Locating Information assessment will not be used in any PSAE score calculations.

Some secondary educators and higher education faculty are concerned about losing the opportunity for students to take the ACT during the school day. Administering the assessment during the school day requires the participation of all students in the assessment, which is seen as a benefit to students who might not engage in the assessment if it is outside the school day. The NCRC is sought after by many businesses as a readiness for career indicator, and therefore removal of the WorkKeys and the resulting certificate is viewed as a potential loss to business leaders.

Predictive validity of the ACT for judging a student's future success in college is both supported, as well as questioned, by secondary educators and higher education faculty. The issue of predictive validity is seen as a limitation of the tool that has caused some higher education institutions to begin looking at alternative indicators of achievement for entry to college.

Representative Quotes:

Current Large-Scale Assessment

- *"Any movement away from the college preparedness factor of the ACT for all students will be a welcome thought." (Survey)*
- *"With the ACT being so ingrained at the HS level, districts are under pressure to keep it in addition to PARCC." (Survey)*

- *“For the students, the way that it is set up, especially with ACT; it gives students the opportunity to take this test for free. For students in areas where money is an issue for their families, having the ability to see that they might be eligible for some college scholarships, to see that when compared to their peers they do have the opportunity to use these scores in a meaningful way, is just a positive outcome for everyone.” (Distract Administrator)*

Validity and Measurement

- *“Our faculty, especially in English, has consistently said that the ACT score in English means absolutely nothing. It has no bearing on their ability to write a paper. All it does is measure grammar.” (Higher Ed)*
- *“If real curricular and pedagogical change is going to result from the implementation of the CCSS, PARCC must be implemented 3-11. ACT does not and never will assess learning aligned with CCSS because it is not performance based.” (Survey)*
- *“From the high school lens the biggest challenge is the misuse of the ACT and the misrepresentation of what it is – which I believe is partially due to people’s lack of analysis of it and part due to people don’t like being measured. I think the challenge of standardized assessment is getting people to believe that isn’t all you care about and yet it is an important thing.” (Teacher)*

Placement

- *“...I think it is fair to say that even at the admission site, on the business of PARCC and ACT, there’s probably concern about the overlap between the two simply because there’s no real sense of what PARCC numbers are actually going to produce yet, what they will mean for any placement or admission purposes, and so absent of a little bit of an overlap between the two exams, there is a little concern that we’ll be flying blind because we have no bridge between what’s been used before and what’s being used now even if at some point ACT was to disappear from the landscape,” (Higher Ed)*

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The research study was intended to assist the Illinois P-20 Council in better understanding the use, value, and challenges of current large-scale assessments, as well as the requirements, expectations, and goals needed for transition to new large-scale assessments, by hearing the perspectives of stakeholders with vested interests in Illinois education. The research design intended for 18 role-alike focus groups to be conducted among three categories of stakeholders: teachers, administrators and non-employee groups like board of education members, higher education faculty and business persons. Each category was to provide approximately 1/3 of the focus group participants and span the geography of Illinois. The stratified sample desired was not achieved, leading to a number of limitations in the study.

Significant challenges occurred with securing sufficient numbers of stakeholders to volunteer for and attend focus groups; only 61 individuals participated instead of the desired 180-216. The low number of responses to the survey for superintendents (8), board of education members (9), and businesspersons (7) posed particular hardships in creating even one role-alike focus group each to delve into their perceptions. With additional outreach efforts, one focus group each for higher education faculty and businesspersons was achieved, but this study cannot reliably distinguish the specific concerns of superintendents and board of education members due to low participation.

Similarly only 14 teachers participated in focus groups despite the 598 respondents identifying themselves as P-12 teachers in the survey. While teacher voice is strongly represented in the survey, and is a substantive part of this report, the depth, complexity, and breadth of teacher opinion about large-scale assessment cannot be ascertained with such small numbers of teacher focus group participants. Further, only five teachers of grades 9-12 contributed the opinions of that critical stakeholder group about the transition of ACT to PARCC.

All focus groups, with the exception of one for higher education faculty and call-in groups that attracted a few individuals from central and southern Illinois, were populated nearly exclusively by stakeholders in northern Illinois. Even though the majority of students are located in northern Illinois, these results do not adequately represent the unique concerns of stakeholders in other parts of the state.

Finally, given the constraints of fiscal resources and timelines, the stakeholder categories of parents and students were not included in the study and, as a result, their critical voices are not represented.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion the eight themes and the representative quotes reveal a wide range of viewpoints. Positive outlooks for the future were articulated, as well as many hopes for the change to the new large-scale assessment system. However negative or mixed perspectives tended to dominate the survey comments and focus group discussion. This is due to two factors. First, the concerns and fears expressed about the upcoming large-scale assessment system are due to negative experiences with the current assessment system. Second, little is known or understood about PARCC itself and, further, how it will be used and for what purposes in the future. Heard from individuals in every stakeholder group was a question about intent: “What’s driving this?” There is a lot of discussion in the state about PARCC, but unfortunately these conversations are not leading to clear answers which hold the potential to eradicate the myths and assumptions, gain trust and buy-in from key stakeholders, and drive instruction.

Our recommendations focus on the second factor and suggest that the most critical pieces to be addressed with immediacy by the P-20 Council are strategies to counter lack of knowledge and fear through a variety of communication and collaboration strategies. These include informational campaigns to specific stakeholder groups, use of media outlets, development of a guide on the use of data, and time for collaboration.

Informational Campaigns

Despite the efforts that have been made by ISBE, Advance Illinois, and PARCC about the next generation large-scale assessment, respondents reported many “unknowns” that, in some participants, led to fears. Some of these unknowns can be countered by campaigns that convey correct information and explanations in multiple, easily accessible formats from trusted sources. Some examples include:

- accommodations that will be available for diverse populations during assessment administration;
- the New Illinois Learning Standards themselves and their content validity;
- needed infrastructure of schools in terms of broadband capacity and number of computers to administer PARCC;
- level of technology literacy needed by students to take the assessment;
- number of hours needed to complete new large-scale assessment system and likelihood of test fatigue;
- validity and reliability of results, especially for the youngest students; and
- professional educator involvement in the development of ILS/CCSS and PARCC.

Other unknowns cannot be simply countered by facts and figures. The concerns must be raised to a conscious level and discussed openly, resulting in reassurances made or future actions outlined by the most appropriate and credible sources. Some examples of these more complex and controversial unknowns are:

- loss of free, in-school administration of the ACT and its effect on the progress toward college access of lower socio-economic students;
- use of PARCC results to determine educator hiring, evaluation, and retention;
- loss of the WorkKeys and the resulting NCRC certificate;
- use of PARCC results for other high-stakes decisions by schools; and
- use of PARCC as a measure of ability for college admission, placement, and retention.

We recommend messaging delivered directly to teachers by entities they view as credible, reliable, and supportive, most likely their representatives in the IEA or IFT. Information to parents should be conveyed by trusted organizations like PTA/PTO and other parent advocacy groups. Similarly, other groups that represent the administrator, board of education, business, and higher education stakeholder groups are the optimal messengers of correct, current and useful information and conveners of discussions about the future use of PARCC, ACT and WorkKeys.

Use of Media Outlets

We recommend ongoing and consistent communication to various media outlets, including social media, to both debunk myths and provide positive reactions to, and experiences with, ILS/CCSS and PARCC. A(n) FAQ document should be developed outlining the most common misconceptions and correcting them, with individual items or the entire list publicized broadly.

Additionally, a campaign to share success stories and examples of productive use of PARCC data should be designed and implemented on a regular timeline. For example, PARCC field-testing with teachers and students should be shared to provide positive reactions from their lenses and in their voices. Messaging that communicates the structure of the PARCC reporting system should be disseminated often and broadly to demonstrate how the cost of time and dollars results in useable and actionable data for the average classroom teacher to make instructional decisions. Reports on the successful use of PARCC as a college readiness tool at universities, and how that is accomplished, should be shared with the higher education community in Illinois to provide roadmaps for their operations in the future. There are numerous examples of

positive reactions to and hopes for PARCC in this report. All could serve as springboards for communications through varied and multiple media outlets.

Development of a Guide on Use of Data

We recommend that the P-20 Council work with a well-respected data organization to create an informational guide on appropriate use and analysis of large-scale data and, conversely, the inappropriate use and analysis of those data. This should be offered to media for wide-spread public distribution, as well as to inform media outlets how to most properly report results. The guide should be disseminated through trusted organizations representing the stakeholder groups in this study so that they are fully informed and can address issues with their constituencies. It should be made available to all Illinois districts and schools for their use when questions arise about PARCC data from their parents, staff, community members or local media. If data are used and reported inappropriately, districts can refute the messages with guidelines prepared by an outside reputable and expert source.

Time for Collaboration

One of the most positive reactions to ILS/CCSS and PARCC is from teachers and administrators who found enormous value in communicating through, and working in, a professional learning community, especially during the school day. They reported that time to collaborate with one another enhanced:

- understanding the meaning of, and expectations for, student learning as written in the New Illinois Learning Standards;
- success in unpacking, repacking, and implementing the standards, differentiating curriculum, and identifying benchmarks;
- fidelity of implementation of the standards in a district;
- connection of common understanding of standards and increased achievement levels demonstrated by students on the large-scale assessments; and
- analysis of data prior to planning and making changes in instruction.

We recommend that advocacy for time and support for these collaborative activities so crucial to the success of the ILS/CCSS and PARCC is one of the priorities for the P-20 Council.

Next Steps for Research

Finally we recommend two additional research strategies to augment the work of this study. First, it would be valuable to understand the perceptions of students and parents about large-scale assessments. Conducting focus groups with students and parents, as well as accessing and analyzing the feedback PARCC is receiving in its field tests, are two possible methodologies. For example, asking students about their comfort and skills with technology could confirm or clarify concerns expressed by teachers. Questions to parents about how to influence student motivation and preparation, as well as how the data can support ongoing learning at home, could improve assessments results and therefore learning.

Second, we suggest conducting additional teleconferenced focus groups of some or all of the stakeholder groups that were part of this study. Some can be for the purpose of hearing their voices, such as with school board members, businesspersons, and superintendents who had very low numbers of survey participation. Some might be with teachers who were well represented in the survey, but not in the focus groups, to get richer and more detailed descriptions of the concerns and possible solutions from the field. Others will circle back to any of the groups, or sub-groups within them, with very individualized and specific questions that address issues raised in this report that need more explanation. For example, detailed questions about ACT, PARCC, GPA, and other evidence for college entrance, placement and retention could be asked of higher education faculty or questions about accommodations necessary for special education or ELL students could be asked of teachers.