TO: District Superintendents  
Charter School Lead Persons  
School Business Administrators  
FROM: Evo Popoff  
Assistant Commissioner  
RE: PARCC Technology Readiness Update: Budget Preparation

In our November 6, 2013 PARCC Technology Readiness Update, we described the New Jersey Department of Education’s (NJDOE) commitment to provide support and guidance to help districts and charter schools as you establish the digital infrastructure necessary to support the Common Core State Standards, the administration of PARCC assessments and the overall readiness of their students for the Information Age. We are encouraged by the overwhelming response of districts that have volunteered to pilot the new PARCC assessments in the spring, which will give roughly 70% of districts the opportunity to learn more about the content and technology requirements of the new assessments. This memo provides an update on that work, as well as some new information to help you develop technology plans to meet the instructional goals of your district.

Since the November update, NJDOE’s Office of Educational Technology has launched the new NJTRAx system to help districts assess, plan and monitor their technology readiness for the PARCC assessments. In addition, following the announcement of the availability of individual District and School Reports Regarding Technology Readiness for Online Assessment in our November 12, 2013, update, the NJDOE Office of Educational Technology conducted three Regional Meetings (attended by over 400 individuals from approximately 266 districts), where we held 83 one-on-one sessions with individual districts, 66 in-depth consultations with districts either in person or by phone and 13 site visits to help districts and schools not only to better understand the data in their individual Report, but also to assist in their planning to address any identified gaps. This work is ongoing, so we will continue to reach out to districts and schools in the upcoming months to assist them with their planning, and we urge districts and
schools to reach out to the Office of Educational Technology at parcctr@doe.state.nj.us should any questions arise regarding their technology planning or readiness.

With districts across the State actively developing their budgets for the 2014-15 school year and preparing for the PARCC field test this spring, I want to focus this PARCC Technology Readiness Update on providing guidance to you about the budgeting process.

**Budget Planning Guidance**

A recurring theme in these PARCC Technology Readiness Updates is the central role that technology plays in our ever-changing world, and the need for our schools to adapt accordingly if we are to sufficiently prepare our students for the future. It is for this reason that, in developing school and district budget models that informed the state’s funding formula, the Professional Judgment Panels (PJPs) incorporated annual allocations for technology, as well as telephone/communications, both at the elementary, middle and high school level, and at the district level. Similarly, each district and charter school, in developing its own budget, needs to allocate funds for the procurement of technology and communications to support its instructional goals and to ensure that students are prepared for the digital age. To facilitate this process, we encourage each district and charter school to create a long-term plan for developing and maintaining a sustainable technology infrastructure that supports their instructional vision and needs, and that incorporates technology as a recurring line item in their budget, and not just as a one-time expenditure.

We know that there are some districts and charter schools that believe they currently lack the necessary technology infrastructure, and the financial means to develop the necessary infrastructure, to administer the online PARCC assessments in 2014-15. Before you reach this conclusion, however, we urge you to review all of the technology guidelines that PARCC has released (http://www.parcconline.org/technology) as well as your own readiness data within the NJTRAX system (available at https://app.njtrax.org). One of the lessons learned from our one-on-one discussions with district and school administrators over the past months is that many districts and schools, when they review and understand the minimum criteria for the administration of the PARCC assessments and look at their own data, realize that they either may already be prepared or are much closer to being ready than they previously believed.

For example, PARCC has recently put out guidance relating to the use of proctor caching (http://tinyurl.com/ParccProctorCaching) which involves pre-downloading the test content to a district or school computer (or computers) and then distributing the test to individual student test-taking computers from the caching “computer” rather than directly from the Internet. By utilizing proctor caching for the delivery of the PARCC assessments – which is strongly recommended for all districts, not just those with minimal bandwidth, to ensure an optimal testing environment for students – a district would lower their bandwidth need significantly from 50 kbps per test taker to 5 kbps per test taker.

PARCC has also released capacity planning tools that provide guidance on the number of devices needed to administer the assessment (http://tinyurl.com/ParccCapacityPlanning). An example may help illustrate how the capacity planning tool can help a school or district determine the number of devices needed to be ready for PARCC assessments. If we look at a
model elementary school with 600 students - of which 300 students in grades 4, 5 and 6 would take part in the PARCC assessments next year – the school would need approximately 50 devices and 2 charging stations to be “PARCC ready” (assuming enrollment of 100 students per grade level). At a cost of approximately $250 for an individual cloud-based device, the cost for the 50 devices would be $12,500 with an additional $3,000 for the charging stations, for a total of $15,500\(^1\) assuming that the school does not have any devices that meet PARCC specifications already (Device specification guidance can be accessed at: http://tinyurl.com/ParccTechSpecsV3).

We are committed to ensuring that as many students, teachers and administrators as possible are able to take advantage of the benefits of the online PARCC assessment, so we are dedicating our resources over the upcoming months to support districts in their budget process to allocate sufficient funds to develop the infrastructure needed to support online testing. As mentioned earlier, we are reaching out directly to districts that, based on their self-reported data, identify gaps in their existing infrastructure, but we also ask that you reach out to us at parcctr@doe.state.nj.us if you believe, upon reviewing all of the available resources and guidance (links to PARCC guidance referenced in this memorandum are available at the end of this memorandum) that you will not be ready for PARCC testing. The goal of this outreach is to help inform discussions about how districts can overcome any technology gaps, including identifying opportunities within, and sharing information on, the district’s budget. This information will also be shared with the respective Executive County Superintendents and Executive County Superintendent Business Administrators to facilitate the budget review process. It is only after we complete this work with districts to support their budget process in the upcoming months that we will publish any guidance regarding paper and pencil test availability in New Jersey.

**Cost Saving Guidance**

Another aspect of our work to support your infrastructure readiness has been to identify potential opportunities for cost savings relating to the purchase of technology and bandwidth. In this update, we would like to highlight the benefits of participating in E-Rate and/or taking part in a purchasing cooperative or regional consortium.

Most New Jersey schools receive significant discounts on telecommunications and Internet services through the federal E-Rate program, with discounts averaging 64% for Priority 1 services across the state. To enroll, you need to visit the E-Rate website http://www.usac.org/sl/ and click on “Getting Started.” We recommend posting a Form 470 no later than February 23, 2014 in order to have sufficient time to evaluate responses, enter into contracts and file the Form 471 before the March 26, 2014 deadline. In upcoming weeks, we will provide additional information including an E-Rate self-help guide to assist you with the E-Rate process.

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\(^1\) A district should make its decision regarding device procurement based on its instructional needs. If a district decides not to use cloud-based devices, laptops can be purchased for as little at $480 for a total of approximately $25,000 (including 3 laptop charging carts).
Participating in a purchasing cooperative enables an individual district to take advantage of the benefits of scale by purchasing Internet access (or other technology services) through several of the statewide cooperatives that are open to K-12 schools in the state. For instance, one such cooperative, the Middlesex Regional Education Cooperative (MRESC), plans to publish new Internet access rates by the end of February. Similarly, regional consortia can serve as a sustainable, long-term solution to support not only bandwidth procurement but other challenges with establishing a digital learning and assessment infrastructure. Beginning this spring, districts and schools will be able to participate in the creation of more regional consortia organized to help purchase Internet access and other high-speed telecommunications services jointly with other schools. We will provide more information about purchasing cooperatives and regional consortia in upcoming guidance.

**NJTRAx Updates**

Since launching NJTRAx in November 2013, NJDOE has undertaken several system enhancements to not only keep up with updates from PARCC, but also to improve the usability of the system. For instance, the system has been aligned to PARCC specifications relating to proctor caching so that a user selecting the caching option can determine their readiness based on the 5 kbps/test taker requirement. In addition, the system has been updated regularly to reflect new industry releases for device operating systems that districts may be purchasing. To support large districts, a device export/import feature was added to enable those districts to more easily update their information in the system. Finally, various upgrades were made to the overall interface to make it easier for users to view their level of readiness and to navigate through the site.

These upgrades and enhancements will continue in the future to ensure that the system provides you with the information and resources you need to make decisions regarding your technical readiness. The next system upgrade, scheduled for release in a few weeks, will provide you with the ability to create and print real-time technology readiness reports at the school and district level, based on your current NJTRAx data. A webinar to review and explain the new NJTRAx interactive reporting capabilities will be held on February 19 from 10 AM to 12 noon. Please log in at [http://tinyurl.com/NJTRAxTA](http://tinyurl.com/NJTRAxTA) in order to participate.

For any questions regarding PARCC technology readiness please email parcctrt@doe.state.nj.us.

Links to PARCC Guidance Referenced in Memorandum:
Members, State Board of Education
Senior Staff
Executive County Superintendents
Executive Directors for Regional Achievement Centers
Executive County School Business Administrators
County Test Coordinators
District Test Coordinators
Directors of Approved Private Schools for the Disabled
NJ LEE Group
Garden State Coalition of Schools