

STATE OFFICIALS: FIELD TEST EXPERIENCE AUGURS WELL FOR FULL SMARTER BALANCED ROLLOUT

By Louis Freedberg, September 17, 2014

Last spring over 3 million students in California were able to take the field tests of new online assessments aligned to the Common Core state standards without major technical breakdowns or system crashes, according to state officials.

If the conclusions of state officials are correct, California is on track to avoid the widespread technological failures in administering the new assessments that **many had feared might occur**.

After the field tests were administered, some **news reports** documented a range of problems, including students struggling to master the technicalities of taking a test online instead of filling in bubbles with a pencil.

But just as California has avoided the massive online breakdowns that occurred with the federal healthcare.gov website, education leaders here are now optimistic that when the full battery of tests are administered this spring that the process will go relatively smoothly.

Because California has by far the largest number of students enrolled in its school system (over 6 million students, compared to the next closest state, Texas, with just over 5 million) what happens in California will have an impact on the overall implementation of the most prominent reform now underway in the nation's schools.

“People were very nervous to begin with, and through our partnership with the Education Testing Service, and friends in county offices, things went remarkably well,” said Sue Burr, a member of the State Board of Education at its meeting in Sacramento on September 4.

Leading up to the tests, districts were provided with **detailed instructions** about how to gain access to the **system**. For months beforehand, districts could **participate in workshops** or webcasts on any number of issues related to the new tests.

California Department of Education officials say their preliminary findings regarding the

tests are based on **online surveys** of school districts and eight focus groups of key education constituencies, including parents and students. Two of the groups focused on English learners and special education. The department will present an official report of its findings to the state board in time for its meeting in November.

Unlike other states that were only required to administer the field tests to a sample of students, California decided to administer the field tests to all eligible students. Of 8.9 million test sessions – some students logged in for two or three sessions to finish the various parts of the new assessments – 97 percent of students completed them.

At the same time, school districts are still working through a range of problems at the local level. A major challenge appears to be getting students accustomed to taking the online tests. Los Angeles Unified was one of the few districts to publish **a detailed analysis of its experience** with the field tests last spring. Principals and test coordinators identified a range of problems, including insufficient devices like iPads, laptops or computers at some school sites, log-in problems experienced by students, and problems connecting to the Internet. They also noted that devices should be brought into school earlier so that principals and teachers would have a chance to practice on them.

These problems notwithstanding, officials feel the overall experience was a positive one. **Diane Hernandez**, director of the assessment development and administration division at the California Department of Education.

Hernandez acknowledged that in terms of broadband access, there were “some gaps” at some schools, but mostly in small rural districts. To fill those gaps, the department announced a fund of \$26.7 million, known as the Broadband Infrastructure Improvement Grant program, to help fill in those gaps. The state last week released **a preliminary list of 300 schools** – many in remote locations – that may be eligible to apply for the money.

She said the major problem encountered by districts was resetting passwords they needed to gain access to the testing system, known as TIDES, **now renamed TOMS** (Test Operations Management System). Districts having difficulty were able to call the California Technical Assistance Center using an 800 number- to get help, Hernandez said. The state has contracted with the Education Testing Service to run the center.

This year districts have received updated – and detailed – instructions for administering the tests in the spring. Those are posted online on a website dedicated to the new assessment system, known as the California Assessment System of Student Performance and Progress (**CASSPP**).

Smarter Balanced officials also said they experienced few major problems with the field tests. “We did not have any interruption of service in 55 days of administering the field test,” Joe Wilhoft, the executive director of the Smarter Balanced consortium, said in a webinar last week.

He said some students had difficulties logging in due to unclear instructions that were given by test administrators. Some also had difficulties with “text to speech,” zooming, audio and other technical features of the online assessments, but he said the Smarter Balanced help desk was able to respond to those concerns, and those technical issues have been fixed. Wilhoft said there were disruptions due to inadequate bandwidth at some schools, but that in general the feedback has been “overwhelmingly positive.”

For a detailed analysis of Los Angeles Unified School District’s experience with the field test administration last spring, go [here](#).

For a PowerPoint presentation of “lessons learned” by the district, go [here](#).