Date: May 24th, 2018

To: Minneapolis Public Schools School Board

From: Eric Moore, Chief of Accountability, Innovation, and Research
      Kelly Stewart, Director of Research and Assessment

RE: Assessment

The purpose of this memo is to provide information about best practices in assessment and how assessment in Minneapolis Public Schools aligns to these best practices.

Why do we assess?
Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) has struggled for several years to make gains on important measures of student success. Since 2014-2015, Math and reading achievement levels have remained flat and are much lower than statewide achievement rates. Graduation rates have slowly increased, but still lag behind state rates and rates for neighboring districts. Additionally, achievement gaps persist on nearly every measure of student success, between white students and students of color, between general education students and students receiving special education services, between students who do not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and those who do, and between students who are native English speakers and those who are developing English proficiency.

Assessments answer key questions such as: “Are we teaching what we think we are teaching?” “Are students learning what we intend for them to be learning?” and “Are all students improving and being appropriately challenged?” However, we will not increase student learning by simply assessing students. The powerful impact of assessments comes in how we use the data from the assessments. Assessment data is used as part of a meaningful cycle of reflection about our systems and practices at the classroom level, school level, and district level. The systematic collection of evidence of student learning through assessment is essential to ensuring that we are meeting all student needs, and while it doesn’t capture every nuance of teaching and learning, data-driven instructional cycles allow schools and the district to see if each step they make is a step in the right direction.

These data-driven instructional cycles are an essential element of a strong Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) designed to meet the needs of all students (see additional research basis for data-driven decision making as part of a MTSS system here). MTSS is a district priority that establishes and refines strong data-driven instruction cycles founded on collecting and responding to evidence of student learning and thinking. In practice, this cycle is evidenced by the use of collaborative teams, backwards planning, aligning curriculum, and monitoring and adjusting instruction. An effective data-driven instructional cycle supports core instruction for all students and therefore represents a high impact area to focus on for 2018-19, and will lead to a positive impact on outcomes for all students.
What are the different purposes of assessment?
We have identified the following six types of assessments:

1. Standardized state accountability assessments are used with all students to determine if students are proficient in grade level standards and to monitor systems at a school, district, state, and federal level.
2. Universal Screeners are used with all students to determine which students are on track for their grade level and are making growth. It can also be used to monitor strategies at a school and district level.
3. Summative Classroom Assessments are used with all students to determine if students mastered the skill, learning target, and/or standard that the teacher was targeting.
4. Diagnostic Assessments are used with some students who are low performing and students who are not showing growth to identify which particular skills to target with particular students.
5. Progress Monitoring Assessments are used with some students who are receiving targeted interventions on a regular (weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly) basis to determine if the student is making enough progress as the result of a skill-based intervention.
6. Formative Classroom Assessments are used with all students on a daily basis to reflect on immediate effectiveness of current instruction and determine if students are meeting daily learning targets.

While one particular assessment can serve multiple purposes, each of these types of assessment are unique and distinct in the purpose that they serve. It is critical for the use of these different types of assessment to be connected together across multiple teams as part of a strong MTSS process.

What assessments do we use in MPS?
While we use a number of different assessments within MPS, especially at the summative and formative classroom assessment level, there are a limited number of required assessments at the state and district level. The state mandated assessments include: MCA or MTAS, ACCESS or Alternate ACCESS for English Learners only, and ACT for All. District required assessments include FAST for K-8 and MAP for Grade 9, the Benchmark curriculum interim or end-of-unit assessments for K-5, and the CogAT assessment as part of the advanced learner identification process. The main change for next year will be the addition of the Common English Language Proficiency Assessments developed for English Learners (K-5).

Our District Assessment Calendar shows additional detail about the required assessments and indicates which grade levels are required to take each one. The District Assessment Calendar for 2018-19 will be released soon.

How much time do our students spend taking assessments?
The amount of time that students spend taking state and district required assessments has dramatically decreased since 2014-15. In the 2017-18 school year, students in Grades 1 – 5 are required to take approximately 12 hours of district-required assessments (which is down 75 hours from the 2014-15 school year) and 6 hours of state-required assessments. Students in grades 6 – 8 are required to take approximately 1 hour of district-required assessments (which is down 86 hours from the 2014-15 school year) and 9 hours of state-required assessments. See Slide 38 from the October Committee of the Whole presentation for additional detail.
Our estimates show that students spend approximately 0.6% - 0.9% of their instructional time for the school year on state-required assessments and 0.1% - 1.1% on district-required assessments.

**How much money do we spend on assessment?**
The percent of the district’s overall budget that is spent on standardized testing is estimated to be between 0.33% and 0.70%. The primary cost associated with assessment is for test coordinators, who are responsible for attending training and administering the state- and district-required assessments. The majority of the staff serving as Test Coordinators are Associate Educators (AEs) followed by Teachers on Special Assignment (TOSAs). There is no cost to take the MCA/MTAS or ACCESS/Alternate ACCESS. The cost for the FAST assessment is $5.40 per student, which comes to a total of $138,600 for the district. The cost for the MAP assessment is $11 per student, which comes to a total of $23,500 for the district.

**What about assessment bias?**
The National Testing Standard require that statistical tests for bias are conducted, the most common test for bias items is called differential item functioning or DIF. DIF examines each individual item to see if it functions differently for any particular student group (gender, race, etc.) for individuals with the same underlying ability. For example, if we systematically see that there is an item that English Learners (EL) are getting wrong more often than students who are not EL, even though they have the same underlying ability (overall reading or math performance), then test writers revisit the item and either revise or remove. DIF analysis is used to examine and reduce bias in standardized assessments like the MCA, FAST, and MAP.

Concerns about stereotype threat are also sometimes raised in association with assessments. Stereotype threat refers to being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group. This may lead to an impairment of performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). To date, over 300 experiments on stereotype threat have been published in peer-reviewed journals (see Nguyen & Ryan, 2008 and Walton & Cohen, 2003 for meta-analyses). There are ways in which stereotype threat can be addressed; for example, encouraging self-affirmation (writing prompt); providing role models and positive images; emphasizing high standards with assurance of capability; review homework and materials which pertain to test topics (opportunities for confidence). We are committed to providing increased training for our test coordinators about stereotype threat and ways to address it.

**What happens when families choose to opt out of the MCA assessments?**
When it comes to why families choose to opt their students out of taking the state standardized tests, there are many different reasons, specific to each individual case. Generally, we have seen higher rates of opt-outs of the MCAs at the high school level over the past several years, but much lower levels of opting out at elementary and middle schools. Under the previous state accountability system informed by No Child Left Behind, students had to take and pass the high school MCAs in order to graduate. This was a significant burden on many students, and after the state changed the law so that this was no longer a graduation requirement, opt-out rates have risen.

Largely, the increases in opt-outs at high schools seems to stem from families and students not seeing the value of taking the tests. Especially for high school students who may be taking AP or IB exams at the same time, or juggling post-secondary dual enrollment courses, a standardized test that has no bearing on whether they can graduate or go to college, may not seem valuable to them as an individual.
Students are also given the opportunity to take the ACT (without cost) in 11th grade, and data reveals minimum opt-out rates of this assessment, even at the high schools with the highest MCA opt-out rates.

The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MNSCU) system recently announced that students can use their MCA scores to show that they do not need to take remedial courses. We send the largest proportion of MPS graduates to Minneapolis Community & Technical College (MCTC), which is part of the MNSCU system, so the MCA could be helpful in preventing students from having to spend time and money on college classes that won’t count toward a degree. However, this is a new incentive, and we haven’t seen the impact on student MCA participation at this time.

The MCA tests have been developed by content experts and have been verified to measure students’ mastery of the academic standards that the state of Minnesota has established for each academic subject at each grade level. While students, and their families, may not see the value of taking the MCA for them as an individual, there are huge benefits to us as a district, and as a broader community. As a district, having enough students take the MCAs is important, so that we can know whether the education we’re providing to students is helping them build the skills and knowledge that the state has tasked us with providing (state standards), and that we believe will prepare students for success as community members and citizens in the future. The district uses MCA results to support continuous improvement efforts specifically when making policy, program, and budgeting decisions.

As a larger community and a state, we need standardized measures of academic performance that all students take, in order to identify the opportunity gaps that exist between students of color and white students, and between students from low-income families and their wealthier peers. When so many students opt-out of the tests, it makes it that much harder for us as a community to keep these important, and widening, gaps front-and-center in our decision-making. In order to drive policies, programs, and investments that will disrupt these disparities, we need to know where they exist, and we need to be able to measure whether our efforts to disrupt them are working.

This link will take you to some communication that the state has provided about the importance and purpose of the MCAs.