Rhode Island Teachers Respond to PARCC: A White Paper

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When students have an IEP goal in the area of reading...it doesn't matter how much I prepare them, they still cannot read the test. As an educator, I would never give a student a test that I know he/she cannot read. I would modify it so [he/she] can show the knowledge [he/she] has. That's part of my job to provide accommodations and modifications...It breaks my heart when one of my students says to me, "I don't understand the question" and there's nothing I can do in this situation to help [him/her]. This contributes to the cycle of self-doubt, struggles and potential failure for my students.

This special education teacher's story reflects the frustrations of many Rhode Island teachers regarding the PARCC test, according to a survey given in April of this year. The purpose of the survey was to discover how teachers perceived the test and its effects on student learning and well-being, their own teaching, and school climate. We share the results in this paper.

Problem

According to the current dominant narrative on public education, an "achievement gap" separates those who are academically successful from those who are not. An examination of the standardized test data used to fuel this narrative reveals specific patterns: a student's race and socioeconomic status (SES) strongly predicts his or her academic achievement. Yet, educational reform efforts have focused on what happens inside of school, ignoring the impact of the economic and social inequities that occur outside of school, what Nygreen calls the "consequence gap" (2013, p. 171). This consequence gap negatively affects students from

low-income households and students of color, who may have literacy and social practices that are not valued in public schools (Hicks, 2002; Campano, 2007).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was designed to address the social and economic disparities of the consequence gap by making public education accessible to all. Accountability measures were put into place to support federal efforts toward civil rights and poverty alleviation. However, as far back as 1974, it was clear that tracking student achievement data, including standardized test results, had negligible effects on improving education, especially for underserved students (Hall, 2015).

Standardized tests, in theory, provide objective criteria to accurately measure student learning. However, even statisticians point out this is a faulty assumption: "Historical research has shown that what is studied, and what findings are produced, are influenced by the beliefs of the people doing the research and the political/social climate at the time the research is done" (Muijs, 2010). The result of the "audit culture's" reduction of data to quantitative measures such as test scores, has, as Hall writes, made a social and political problem into a technical one (2015, p. 10).

Educator Perspectives

In addition to ignoring socio-economic effects on learning and the inadequacy of test scores as a means of accurate, comprehensive assessment, current educational policies in Rhode Island disregard teacher perspectives. Given that teachers are the ones who prepare students for and administer the test, this is a problem. We seek to rectify that situation by disseminating results from a survey given to Rhode Island public school teachers.

The purpose of the survey was to document teachers' experiences with the PARCC in Rhode Island. The survey was shared from April 6 to April 20, 2015 via email, Twitter, and Facebook using a link to a Google Form. 298 teachers responded to the survey. 107 (36%) respondents were elementary school teachers, 95 (32%) were middle school teachers, and 96 (32%) were high school teachers. 117 (39.5%) teachers taught in urban districts, 68 (23%) taught in urban ring districts, 79 (26.5%) in suburban districts, and 32 (11%) in rural districts.

The questions and answers to the Likert scale items are available in the Appendix. The final question was: "I would like policymakers, school leaders, and parents to know the following about my experience administering the PARCC test." 162 teachers wrote responses, and the quotes in the Findings section all come from answers to that last question. We analyzed the qualitative data by looking for themes and patterns, creating separate codes, and then combining our codes to show the separate themes, discussed below.

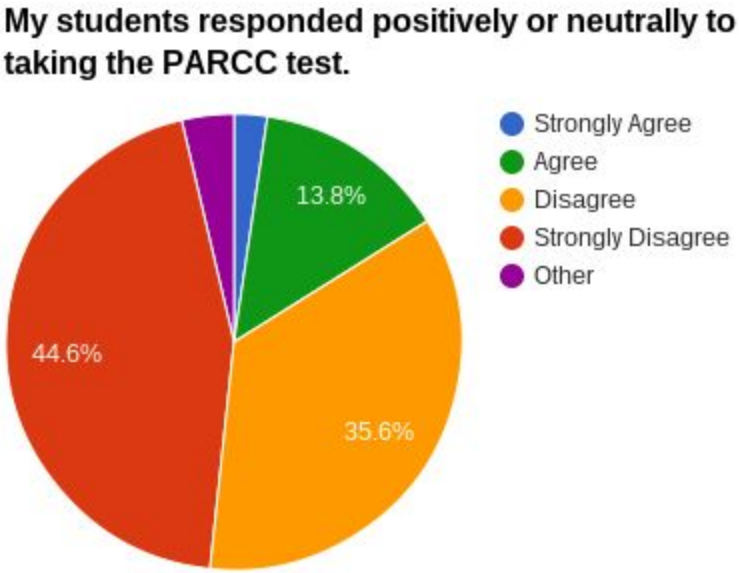
Findings

We focus on four major themes in the data: student perceptions and responses to the PARCC test; the effect of the PARCC test on teaching; impact of educational policies that marginalize teachers; and opportunities for change.

Student Perceptions and Responses

Students had an overwhelmingly negative response to the test. Teachers reported that the questions were not grade-level appropriate, nor were they suited for students with diverse learning styles and abilities.

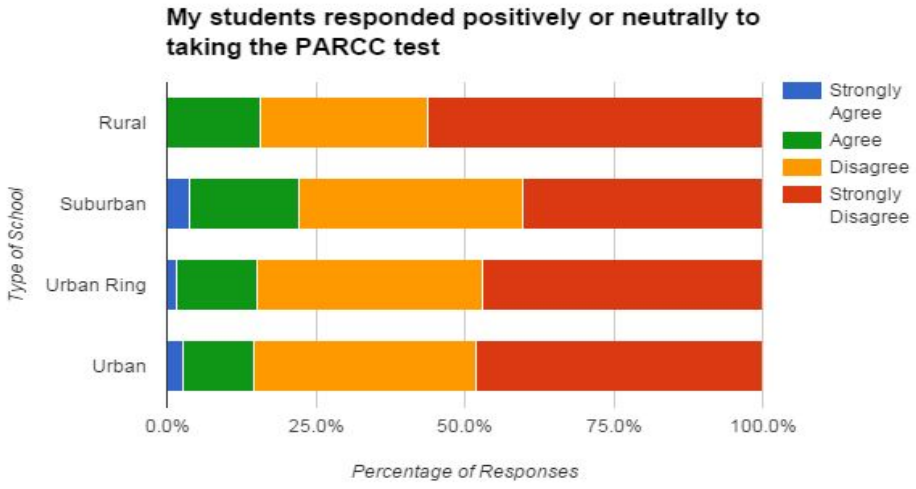
Only 16% of teachers said that their students responded positively or neutrally to taking the PARCC test. This means that 80% of teachers believed that PARCC test was a negative experience for their students.



Much of this negative experience might be linked to the developmental inappropriateness of the computer-based platform as well as the questions themselves. One elementary level teacher wrote, "Students in grade 3 are not prepared enough to do the required amount of typing. Children did not have the stamina [to] write a [story] and be busy looking on a keyboard for the next letter in a word!" Although there was a paper and pencil option, according to the PARCC manual's Appendix A (2014a) this option was limited to students with previously documented accommodations on IEPs or 504 plans, students who recently entered school and had little or no experience with technology, schools that previously documented a lack of technology readiness, and students whose religious beliefs preclude access to online assessment (p. 1). This means that the large majority of students were required to take the computer-based option regardless of readiness.

Furthermore, whether schools participated in paper-based or computer-based testing, teachers noted that students encountered texts and problems that seemed challenging for the students' grade level. One middle school teacher discussed the "wildly inappropriate" use of excerpts from James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, pointing out that those texts are typically reserved for high school students. Although it is unclear whether these were scored questions or sample questions for future tests, the students do not know the difference, which could lead to negative feelings about their ability, decrease their motivation, and invalidate their results.

When reactions were compared among various school communities, teachers in suburban schools reported having the most positive experience. This might be connected to the culture of suburban schools where students are most familiar with the content and the format of such testing. Also, in suburban schools, the achievement and consequence gaps are least extreme. However, 78% of those suburban teachers still did not believe that the experience was favorable. Additionally, less than 15% of urban and urban ring teachers reported that their students had a positive or neutral response.



This difference in teacher reporting aligns with another survey question in which 91% of urban teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that "My students feel they did well on the PARCC test." One teacher explained, "Standardized testing is biased and unfair, and does not give a representative sample of student ability. Additionally, it reinforces the differences between affluent and urban students, without recognizing or taking into account many of the factors that determine success or failure on the tests themselves." Other research supports this teacher's statement, showing that urban students' have diverse literacy practices not valued in schools or academic testing situations (Hicks, 2002, Papa, 2015).

When asked more specifically about their students' understanding of the test, the results are even more disheartening. Of the 263 respondents who work with students with IEPs, 90% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that those students understood most of the questions on the test. The students' lack of understanding was made real by the tears teachers had to see fall from students' faces. As one teacher said, "Watching students with learning disabilities cry…negates any positive data outcomes. We must now spend weeks helping students feel in control of their learning again." Another added, "These students have solidly made a year's gain in their reading ability and are working to close the gap. Putting them in this situation did nothing to help close the gap but rather decreased their self-confidence and reminded them how far behind they are. The time wasted on this test could have been better spent working to boost their skills!" From these stories, the desire for students to learn and teachers to teach is obvious. The emphasis on standardized testing, especially as seen in the amount of time spent - 585 minutes (9.75 hours) in Grade 3 and up to 675 minutes (11.25 hours)

in Grades 9-11 (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2014b) - gets in the way of these goals.

The story is similar with ELLs (English Language Learners). Again, of the 167 teachers that work with ELLs, 95% of them disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that their ELLs understood most of the questions on the test. One teacher recognized this as "unethical" and "discrimination," pointing to a specific example of the math test being available only in English and Spanish - when, according to RI Kids Count (2014), there are 84 additional languages being spoken in Rhode Island public schools (p. 138). This raises validity concerns. If students are not understanding the test, how can accurate inferences be drawn from the results?

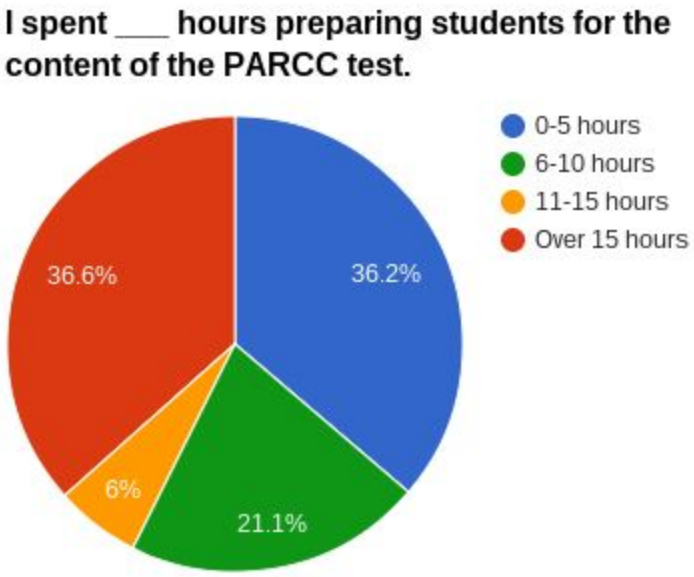
In the case of all students - especially those with special needs or those facing language barriers - this negative academic experience cannot be separated from the students' self-perceptions. Research shows that students with greater self-efficacy set higher goals for their own achievement and are also more successful in reaching those goals . However, simply setting higher expectations on a new or revised standardized test will not increase achievement. Academic experiences must be designed to increase students' sense of self-efficacy as well (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992, p. 673). Though the scores remain to be seen, based on the stories from teachers about their students' reactions to the test, it seems clear that the experience did not have a positive influence on students' self-perceptions.

Impact on Teaching

The PARCC test also had a negative impact on teaching. Survey data revealed excessive time spent preparing students for the technical and content aspects of the test, leading to

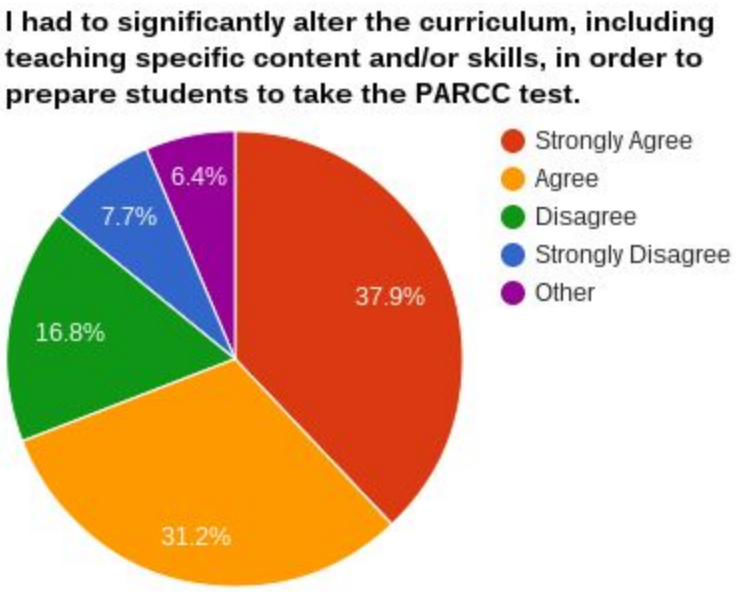
significant alterations to the curriculum. Teachers expressed that they do not feel this time spent was worthwhile or that the data will help support their teaching.

On average, about 36% of the teachers reported spending over 15 hours preparing students for the content of the test.



As one teacher explained, “disruption to teaching is huge because schedules were changed on a daily basis even when not testing [and it’s] hard for kids to adapt to these changes.” The PARCC Consortium has acknowledged that the number of tests required and the time allotted for them was too much. In May, they announced reductions in the 2015-2016 school year administration, explaining that they will “consolidate the two testing windows into one and to reduce total test time by about 90 minutes” (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2015). This means that Grade 3 students would have 495 minutes (8.25 hours) allotted rather than 585 minutes while Grades 9-11 students would have 585 minutes (9.75 hours) allotted instead of 675 minutes.

However, these changes do not go far enough or make up for the lost time due to preparation and administration in the 2014-2015 school year. On average, 69% of teachers surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they had to significantly alter the curriculum as a result of PARCC testing.

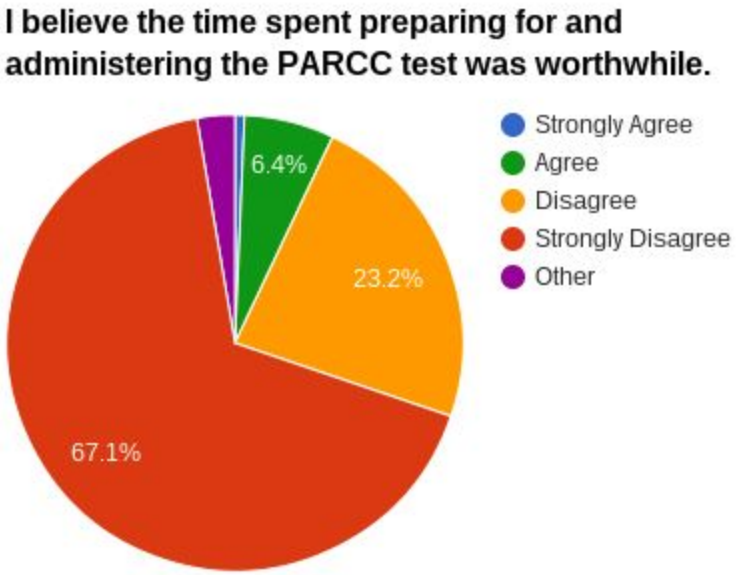


While it is unclear what was being altered and whether it was due to technical/content preparations or the actual administration of the test, these were not positive changes. A common concern was that "students still had to take end of quarter evals, so required curriculum elements had to be jammed in." In some cases, teachers reported that "whole curriculum projects were put on hold and maybe cancelled because tech was reserved for PARCC." Essentially, teachers had two options: speed through content too quickly or skip certain content altogether. Either way, both situations were detrimental to learning. By speeding too quickly, teachers risk conflating "coverage" with "understanding" (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005, p. 229). Or, in the case of skipping content, one teacher remarked, "time with my ELLs is precious… [I] want to spend time with my ELLs teaching them valuable skills and lessons they need; not how to navigate

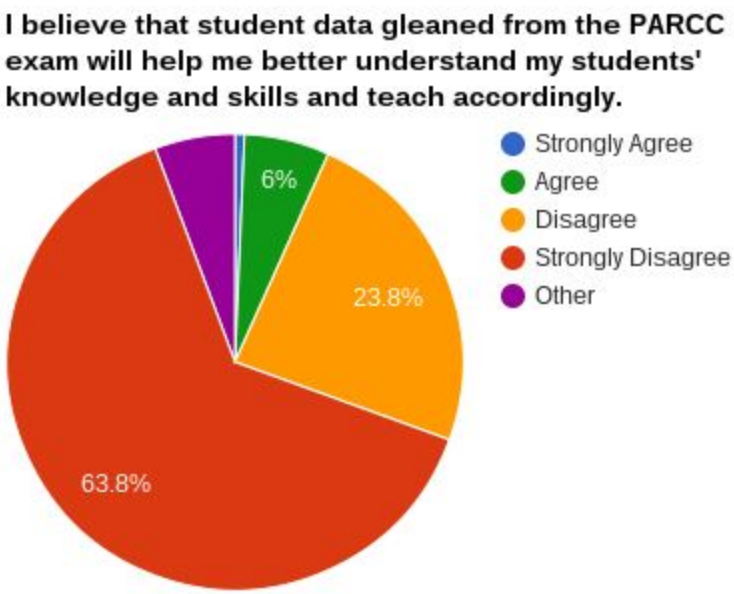
through a computer-based tests." If students are not being exposed to the academic content they need, how can they be expected to perform?

Another important question posed by a teacher was about the test's alignment with STEM-based curricular approaches that are currently being encouraged by local businesses and Rhode Island civic leaders. This teacher said, "Lit[erature] explains that math anxiety is a real thing, [the PARCC] test exacerbates it as we are encouraging students in STEM." It seems that standardized tests threaten the development of what Governor Raimondo says are "the skills [students] need to succeed in the 21st century economy" (Rhode Island Small Business Journal, 2015).

Furthermore, teachers are not confident that their already limited instructional time was used wisely or that the results will be useful. On average, 90% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the time spent was worthwhile.



Likewise, 87% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the data will help support instruction.



Teachers went into further detail about this, emphasizing the idea that the "data [is] not available until fall," meaning that it "doesn't help me teach my current students." If so much time is going to be put towards an initiative, teachers want to ensure that it will be useful for their planning and their students' growth.

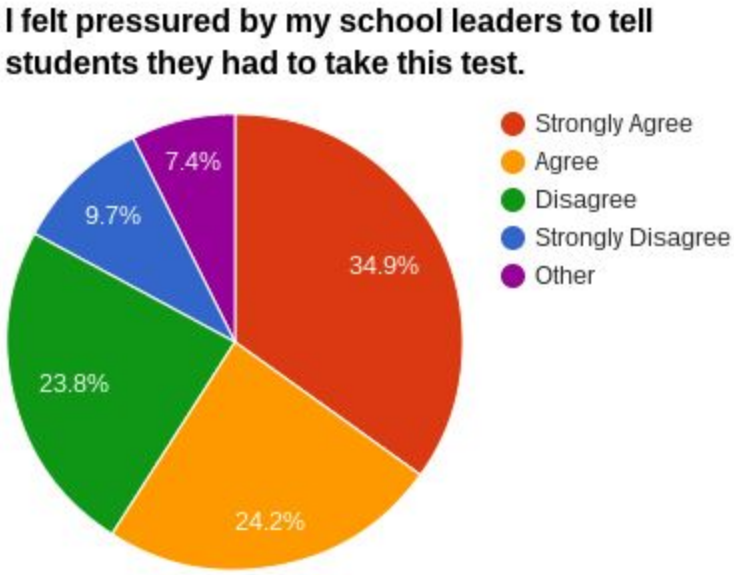
Teachers characterized the PARCC as age and culturally inappropriate, time consuming, and a classroom assessment tool of negligible use. They suggested that the time and effort devoted to PARCC could be better spent on effective instruction and assessment for students as well as appropriate professional development for teachers.

Impact on Teacher Autonomy and Agency

As the data above show, PARCC testing has negatively impacted how teachers teach. Pressure to teach to the test has transferred power over curriculum and instruction from individual professionals, trained in their craft, to state and federal government agencies and corporations, such as Pearson, creator of the PARCC test (Brass, 2015). In this section, we

document the impact of the PARCC on teacher autonomy and in turn, how that affected school climate.

Ethical compromises. One of the early controversies was about whether students would be allowed to opt-out of taking the test. Despite the fact that Rhode Island has no formal policy for opting out, the data show that 59% of teachers felt pressure to tell students they had to take the test.



One teacher wrote, "Teachers [were] strongly cautioned not to respond to parents about opting out. [They were] told they would face consequences if they did." As a result, some felt they were behaving in an unethical manner. "When teachers are pressured to lie to parents and students they loose [sic] the integrity [and] respect of the parents, students and taxpayers," wrote another. This fear was justified as was reported in the case of Bill Ashton, who, after telling students about the option, was suspended (Borg, 2015a). He was reinstated after students protested, but it shows that teachers' fears were legitimate (Borg, 2015b).

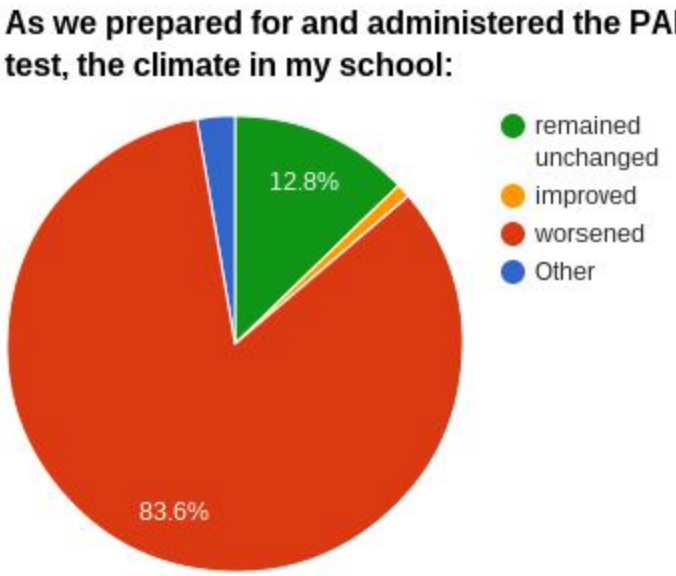
Another ethical challenge arose because teachers were strictly admonished not to answer even basic questions from students during or after testing. One teacher said she felt "dishonest" in telling her students to do their best on a test she had not seen before. Another wrote, "It was awful to have [students] take the test and then have to refuse to answer their questions after." As professionals, teachers know how to support students in ways that do not provide answers, but assist them in understanding the question. The preparation for and administration of PARCC went against what teachers have been trained to do and what educational research has demonstrated works best.

Distrust of RIDE and Pearson. In addition to feeling ethically compromised, a distrust of RIDE and Pearson was evident in the data. One educator reported that RIDE officials told parents that the PARCC would need no extra practice or preparation, but they told teachers the opposite. Another wrote that RIDE did not acknowledge the problems with field testing and that those same issues arose during the actual testing.

Many teachers also documented their suspicions about Pearson, noting that the multibillion corporation is benefitting financially from the tests. One teacher wrote, "The intent is clear by this consortium—to privatize education and profit off our students." Another forecasted that Pearson will roll out a curriculum that will allegedly prepare students for PARCC, lining Pearson's pockets with even more money, and thus more power, over public education. The power of creating assessments has already led to control of content, and teachers are fearful of what is on the horizon. As a corporation, Pearson's profit motive is at odds with the aims of public education. Rhode Islanders should be concerned that the shift from public to corporate control ignores unique local contexts and educator expertise, leads to increased

surveillance and external controls, and positions students and teachers as mere "data" (Taubman, 2009, p. 144).

These data demonstrate the problems that resulted when teachers were excluded from decisions about assessment. Teachers felt compromised in their pedagogy and in the trust-building that is essential to relationships among teachers, students, parents, administrators, and policymakers. This created a negative climate in schools.



Scheduling disruptions, student sadness and anger, and regulations that prevent teachers from supporting their students led to tensions in the schools as noted by the chart above. 249 out of 298 teachers, or 83.6%, said that their school climate worsened. Only three teachers said climate improved. Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009) found considerable empirical evidence indicating "that positive school climate is associated with and/or predictive of academic achievement, school success, effective violence prevention, students' healthy development, and teacher retention" (p. 180). In addition, a healthy climate is essential for maintaining high quality teachers (Johnson, 2007). In this small state, providing teachers with a voice in policy

could improve school climate. Teachers want to be listened to, and they are also professionals who know what contributes to a positive atmosphere where students feel safe and ready to learn.

Teacher Agency

Despite these feelings of powerlessness and de-professionalization, many teachers spoke out against the current audit culture. One teacher asked, "Am I enabling the government to dictate how my classroom will run even though I know it is not best practice?" Another noted, "We have turned into factories producing the same product. This is against American ideals." A third wondered how state officials and district administrators could feel that PARCC is in the best interest of students. These teachers are pointing out the conflict between excessive standardized testing and the realities of individual student progress, which is often nonlinear and incremental.

Teachers are also aware of the consequence gap (Nygreen, 2013), or the role SES and race play in standardized test scores. One pointed out, "Students in financially challenged districts will perform poorly." As witnesses to the consequences of inequality on student engagement and learning, teachers want flexible policies that consider their students' diverse learning styles and backgrounds.

In addition to their objections to PARCC, teachers offered hope and concrete solutions. One invites all of us to her classroom: "Come visit me, meet my great kids, see the absolute calm, peace, joy, rigor, and engagement that...is a natural part of my classroom." Another writes, "Let's be more creative and work harder to create a better system of assessment that is not solely based on multiple choice tests and that would be much more fair and valid for students of all economic backgrounds."

Potential Solutions

The survey data document teacher perspectives on the negative consequences of the recent PARCC test. We would like to be part of the conversation on how to address the issues, and offer these suggestions as a starting point:

1) Hold public conversations with teachers and parents regarding the problems with PARCC, with the goal of finding solutions or abandoning the test altogether;
2) Offer authentic opportunities for teachers and educational researchers to help plan an assessment system based on the local and diverse student population;
3) Create political structures that ensure meaningful teacher participation and resist corporatization in educational policy; and
4) Work to alleviate oppressive political and economic structures that disproportionately harm students of color and from poverty, thus leveling the playing field.

The survey demonstrates that Rhode Island teachers are knowledgeable, compassionate professionals who object to standardized tests that disenfranchise students with special needs and from underserved communities, take substantial hours away from teaching and learning, and contribute to teacher marginalization at the hands of non-educators. While there are multiple perspectives on how to support and improve student learning, the ESEA requires that quality public education is offered to all. Unfortunately, the PARCC test, as currently administered, interferes with that mandate. Teachers know what quality education and assessment look like. They should be respected contributors to conversations on public education in Rhode Island.

We are happy to answer questions about the survey, and look forward to working with you to develop a more equitable and just assessment system that is based on sound educational research and teacher expertise.

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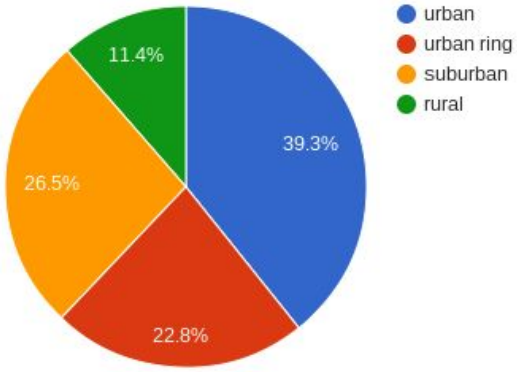
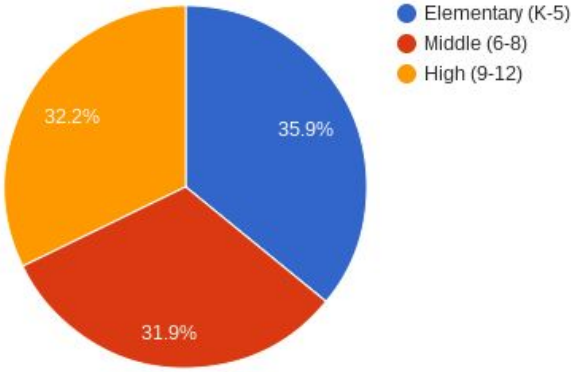
Appendix

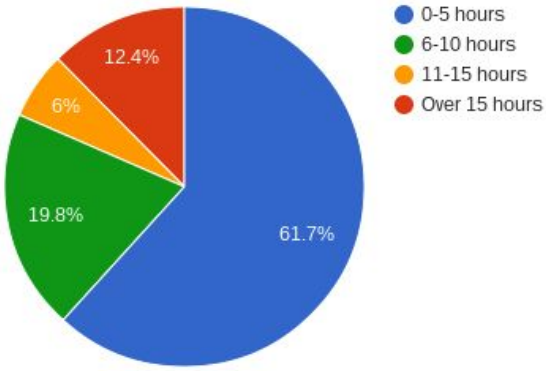
This best describes my school:



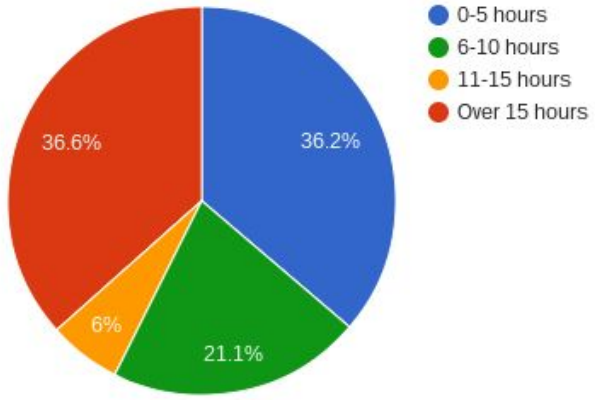
This best describes the grades I teach:



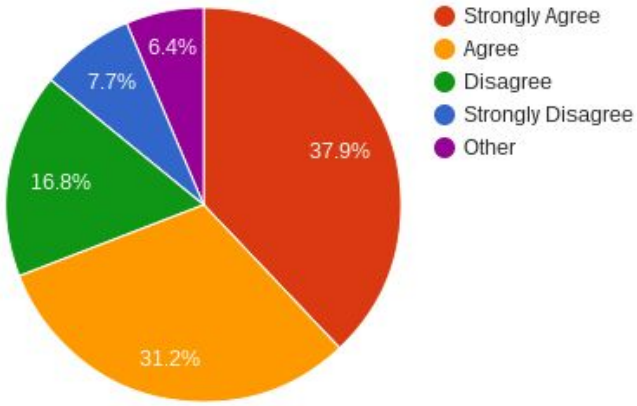
I spent ___ hours preparing students to use the computer/technical aspects of the PARCC test.



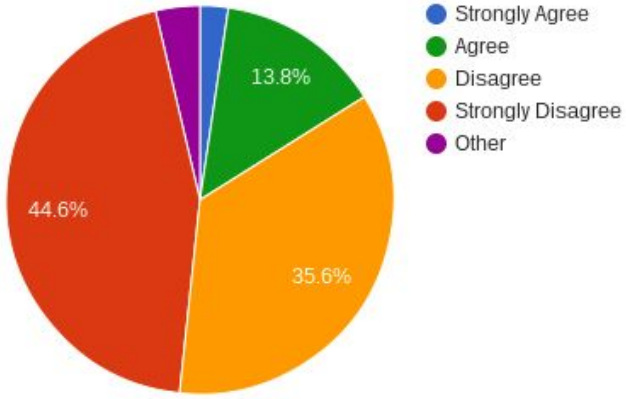
I spent ___ hours preparing students for the content of the PARCC test.



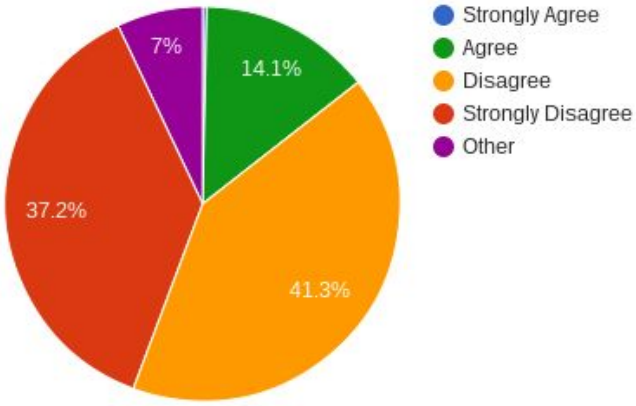
I had to significantly alter the curriculum, including teaching specific content and/or skills, in order to prepare students to take the PARCC test.



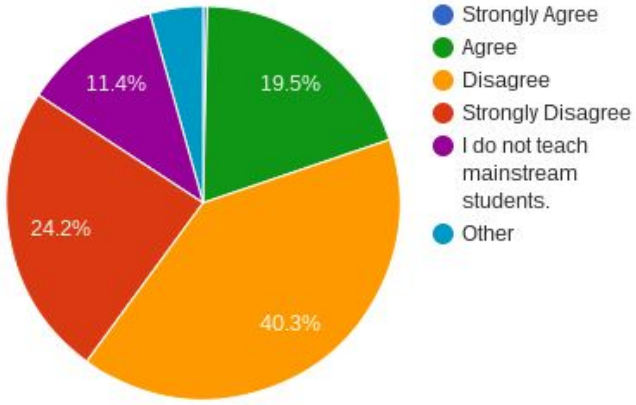
My students responded positively or neutrally to taking the PARCC test.



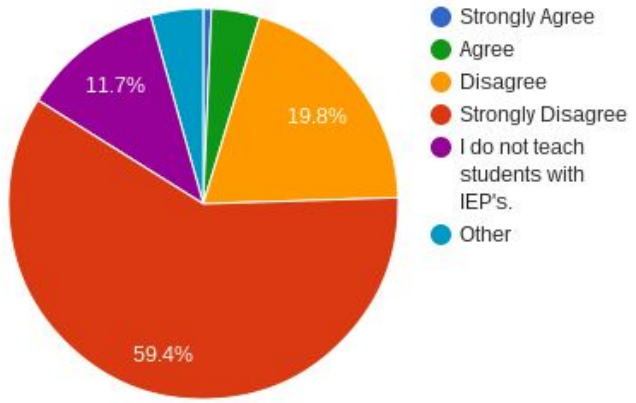
My students feel they did well on the PARCC test.



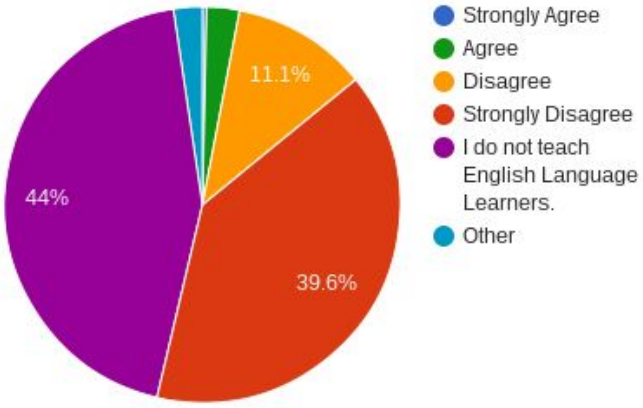
My mainstream students reported understanding most of the questions on the PARCC test.



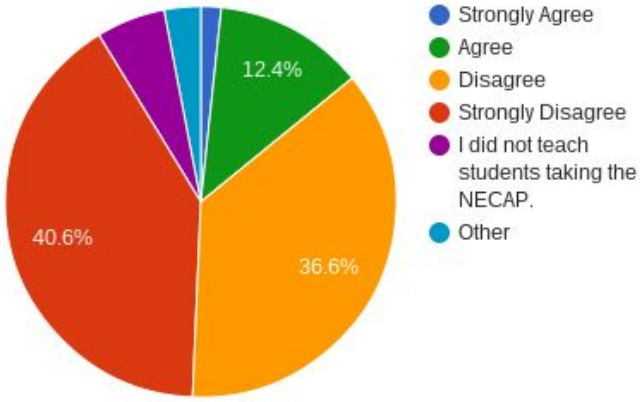
My students with IEPs reported understanding most of the questions on the PARCC test.



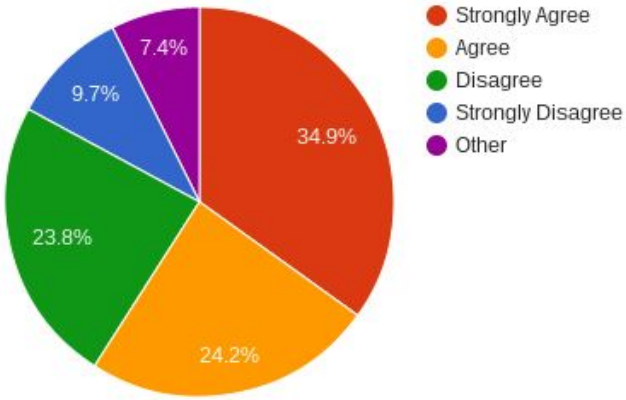
My English Language Learners reported understanding most of the questions on the PARCC test.



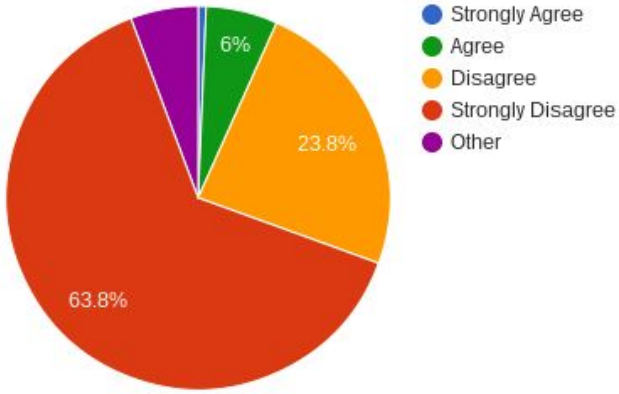
Preparing students for the PARCC was similar to preparing them for the NECAP.



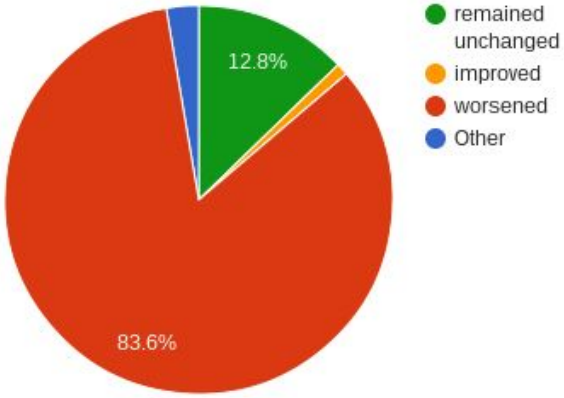
I felt pressured by my school leaders to tell students they had to take this test.



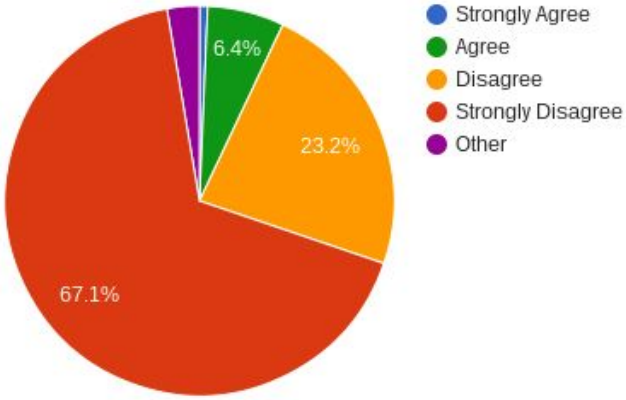
I believe that student data gleaned from the PARCC exam will help me better understand my students' knowledge and skills and teach accordingly.

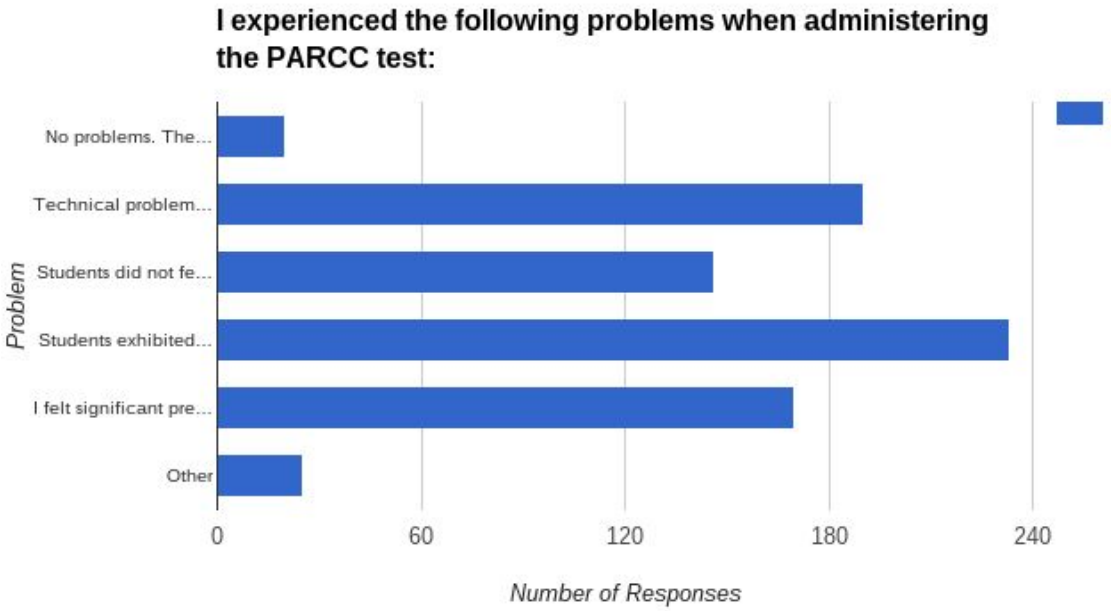


As we prepared for and administered the PARCC test, the climate in my school:



I believe the time spent preparing for and administering the PARCC test was worthwhile.





No problems. The process was smooth.	**20**	**6.70%**
Technical problems with the computers.	**190**	**63.80%**
Students did not feel prepared to answer the questions.	**146**	**49%**
Students exhibited stress, sadness, fear, and/or anger.	**233**	**78.20%**
I felt significant pressure and stress.	**170**	**57%**
Other	**25**	**8.40%**