



CASE IN POINT: HOW VIRGINIA MADE THE LEAP

Virginia began the transition to online testing in 2001, starting with high school students and one large-scale test. Today, the state is almost 100 percent online. Below is the story of how that state's program arrived at this point and of lessons learned along the way, as told by Lan Neugent, Assistant Superintendent of the Division of Technology, Career & Adult Education for the Virginia Department of Education; Shelley Loving-Ryder, Assistant Superintendent of the Division of Student Assessment & School Improvement for the VDOE; and Sarah Susbury, Director of the Office of Test Administration, Scoring & Reporting for the VDOE.

Shelley Loving-Ryder: One very important aspect in Virginia was that there was a commitment to move to online testing from all parties, from the governor and the state superintendent, to the legislature. When you are moving to something that is this new, it is important that everyone be committed.

Sarah Susbury: Buy-in from the community was significant, too. Students go home every day, and their parents hear about the changes. And school board members are asked about them. So we put in a lot of legwork in terms of communication and hand holding. And we made sure we had early successes so other schools felt good about the change and were motivated to put energy and effort into going forward themselves.

Getting down to business

Lan Neugent: The first thing we did was to develop architectural guidelines. And that became critical down the line because one of the things we discovered about the technological point was that we had to have some uniformity of technology throughout the state.

As we were going through, we discovered that we were not allowing school divisions to have direct access to the test. [That] really caused bandwidth issues, and so we put in place a proctor-caching scenario where schools could basically download tests, have them just like they would a paper test, on a server or on a lab server, or something of that sort. And then we developed a whole protocol for them to get rid of the test, so that they were not on machines in the future. Plus, Pearson encrypted all of those tests for security. To date, I don't think we've ever had any kind of a breach.

After establishing the architectural guidelines, we asked schools to certify that they had met them by ensuring that the computers they were going to be using, and the bandwidth, and everything else was all in place. After they self-certified, we required them either to certify with some kind of software that proved what they were saying to us was true, or to have an outside company come in and provide independent certification. So they had to go through a fairly extensive review process.



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Once we knew a school was ready, then just before the test, we had something we called the 96-hour checklist. That helped us a lot, because without that, we would have just been taking a chance on children's futures—having them take these tests without being positive that everything was going to work correctly. Sometimes there were problems, but none was insurmountable, thanks to the certification program.

Effects of change

Shelley Loving-Ryder: Moving to online testing requires an entirely different way of thinking about things. Now that we've completed the transition, I feel that it's probably the best thing Virginia ever did. It's provided so many benefits for us and we're just beginning to be able to completely utilize the power of being online.

I think in general our students love online testing because most of their interaction these days is with a computer or a hand-held device. In the beginning, teachers were somewhat more resistant. They were concerned about students' abilities to interact with an online assessment. And I think one of the things we quickly learned was, it was often an adult's problem. The students had no issues with taking a test online, but the teachers were concerned! Now our teachers are very appreciative of online testing, particularly because it allows them in most cases to get results back very quickly.

Parents were somewhat like teachers, in that there was some resistance in the beginning. But over time, that's become less of an issue. And again, they like the fact that they're getting results back more quickly.

Meanwhile, those assigned to set up testing sessions very much appreciate that we've gone online. The burden on them administratively has been greatly reduced. Some of our large districts actually had warehouses that were dedicated to keeping test materials! Now we have none of that.

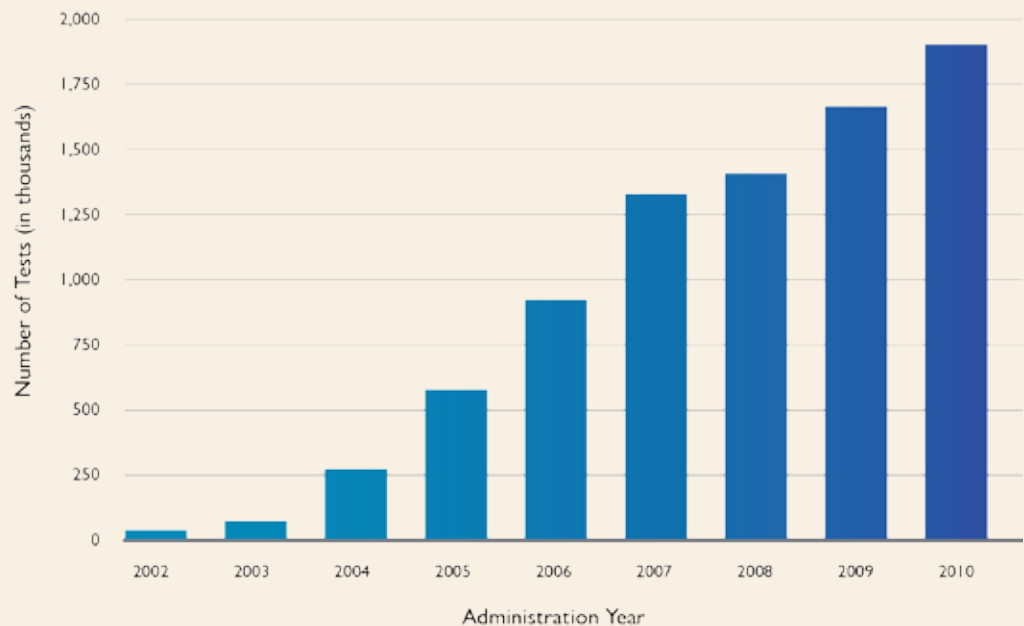
Lessons learned

Shelley Loving-Ryder: We started by taking an existing test and putting it online. That made the transition achievable and something that could be successful quickly, allowing us to gain some momentum. From here, we have the luxury of really exploring some of the technology and getting to that spot where we can do some really cool things.

A major benefit of the phased approach is that it gave us a chance to determine where we might have issues when we were still dealing with fairly small-scale testing. During this time, we worked very closely with Pearson in identifying issues that we needed to think about.

Another lesson we learned is that online testing requires a different level of support. So we learned that we needed to provide much more

Number of Standards of Learning Tests Administered Online



real-time support at the State Department level, and also realized quickly that the help desk support we needed from Pearson was somewhat different: If someone had a normal problem, then Level 1 could help them, but if there was a technology problem that was more serious, then the Level 2 people needed to be there to assist.

Sarah Susbury: To keep morale and enthusiasm high and anxiety and resentment low, we did not pressure schools to move forward with online testing. We provided some templates that gave them the important points but didn't box them into a particular plan.

Shelley Loving-Ryder: Schools had to be capable of doing online testing by particular dates, but it was never mandated that, beginning at this point, we will move completely to online testing. But once we had a couple of school divisions participate in online testing and they talked about how wonderful it was, we had no difficulty getting others to participate.

Sarah Susbury: Once districts were on board with the project, we asked them to do the same type of planning that we had done. We asked them, "What is going to be your implementation plan? Which schools are you going to transition first? Are you going to do all of your high schools at first, or are you going to just try one? Are you going to do all of the tests that we have available, or are you going to try a portion of them with a portion of students?"

The education community must come to terms with the fact that this is the way kids are learning now—I think you'll find they're more comfortable in an electronic-type environment.