



THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION
WASHINGTON, DC 20202

September 3, 2020

Dear Chief State School Officer:

During the past several months, we have experienced unprecedented challenges across this nation, and I thank you for your efforts to meet the needs of all your students and safely reopen America's schools. I've benefited from talking with each of you as this pandemic has gone on, and please know that your ideas, contributions, and suggestions have all been put to good use. As we look ahead, I want you to know my perspective on the importance of assessing student performance.

Research shows that school closures this past spring disproportionately affected the most vulnerable students, widening disparities in achievement for low-income students, minority students, and students with disabilities.¹ Almost every student experienced some level of disruption. Moving forward, meeting the needs of all students will require tremendous effort. To be successful, we must use data to guide our decision-making.

Several of your colleagues recently inquired about the possibility of waivers to relieve states of the requirement to administer standardized tests during School Year (SY) 2020-2021. You will recall that, within a very short time, waivers were granted to all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the Bureau of Indian Education this past spring following the declaration of a national emergency. That was the right call, given the limited information available about the virus at the time and the need to stop its spread, as well as the practical realities limiting the administration of assessments. However, it is now our expectation that states will, in the interest of students, administer summative assessments during the 2020-2021 school year, consistent with the requirements of the law and following the guidance of local health officials. As a result, you should not anticipate such waivers being granted again.

As you'll recall, statewide assessments are at the very core of the bipartisan agreement that forged ESSA. They are among the most reliable tools available to help us understand how children are performing in school. The data from assessments can help inform personalized support to children based on their individual needs and provide transparency about their progress. There is broad and consistent support for assessments because there is general agreement among the public that a student's achievement should be measured, that parents deserve to know how their children are performing, and that it should be no secret how a school's performance as a whole compares to other schools.²

¹Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, Viruleg. "COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime". McKinsey & Company. June 1, 2020 <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>

² Gallup, NWEA. "Make Assessment Work for All Students: Multiple Measures Matter". May 2016 https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2016/05/Make_Assessment_Work_for_All_Students_2016.pdf

Organizations to which many of you belong, including the Council of Chief State School Officers and Chiefs for Change, researchers, and advocates have all recently expressed support for administering assessments during the upcoming school year. A letter signed by a bipartisan coalition, including the Center for American Progress, the Education Trust, the Foundation for Excellence in Education, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, among others, clearly noted:

The challenges posed by this crisis only underscore the value of collecting and reporting on a standard measure of student performance. Leaders should not have to continue to steer recovery efforts in the dark, and families and communities should be able to access the information they deserve about how schools are serving all students.³

Parents agree. A recent survey conducted by the Data Quality Campaign showed that nearly 90 percent of parents want information about how school closures affect students.⁴ Additionally, 77 percent of parents agree that states should resume administration of statewide summative assessments in math and reading in 2021 to better understand how well schools and students are meeting academic standards in the wake of the pandemic.⁵

I understand that presently it might be difficult to imagine the administration of statewide assessments in the same manner as they have been administered in the past. In fact, it may be that the assessments will look different. I am reminded of the old saying: necessity is the mother of invention. Now may be the perfect time for you to rethink assessment in your state, including considering competency and mastery-based assessments, to better gauge the learning and academic growth of your students

My staff and I are prepared to work with you to help ensure every state can meaningfully assess student performance during SY 2020-2021, including providing technical assistance and identifying and sharing best practices among states. We are open to discussions about what, if any, actions may be needed to adjust how the results of assessments are used in your state's school accountability determinations.

Make no mistake. If we fail to assess students, it will have a lasting effect for years to come. Not only will vulnerable students fall behind, but we will be abandoning the important, bipartisan reforms of the past two decades at a critical moment. Opponents of reform, like labor unions, have already begun to call for the permanent elimination of testing. If they succeed in eliminating assessments, transparency and accountability will soon follow.

In closing, let's remember that Americans are resourceful people and can accomplish great things even during the most challenging of times. Just as doctors, nurses, police officers, grocery clerks, and other essential workers have demonstrated their resolve, now is our opportunity to show that the same spirit is present in America's education leaders as we work to safely reopen schools and to successfully educate our nation's children.

³Alliance for Excellent Education, Center for American Progress, Collaborative for Student Success, Data Quality Campaign, Foundation for Excellence in Education, National Urban League, Education Trust, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, UnidosUS, *et al.*, to Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, July 31, 2020. https://dataqualitycampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Assessment-Coalition-Letter-to-ED_7.30.20.pdf

⁴Data Quality Campaign, "National Poll Finds Parents and Teachers Want More Data and Better Support to Use It Effectively to Help Students during COVID-19", June 24, 2020. <https://dataqualitycampaign.org/news/national-poll-finds-parents-and-teachers-want-more-data-and-better-support-to-use-it-effectively-to-help-students-during-covid-19/>

⁵*Ibid.*

If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact the Office of School Support and Accountability by e-mail at OESE.TitleI-A@ed.gov. Thank you.

Sincerely,


Betsy DeVos