



January 28, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

Congratulations on being part of a bright, new beginning for our country. We extend our very best wishes for success in the critically important work ahead of you.

The Connecticut Education Association is an affiliate of NEA and is the largest teachers' union in the State of Connecticut. AFT Connecticut is the American Federation of Teachers' local state federation. Together we represent over 55,000 active and retired teachers and school-related personnel and advocate for high quality, equitable educational experiences for public school students in Connecticut. On behalf of our members, we commend you on the selection of a strong administration that includes a champion for public education in Dr. Cardona. It is refreshing to know that our nation's schools will be overseen by professionals with experience in the classroom.

We are writing to respectfully request that your administration suspend the U.S. Department of Education's annual statewide standardized testing requirement for the 2020-2021 school year. We have long been concerned about the impact of over-testing on the educational experiences and social-emotional well-being of Connecticut's children. The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified these concerns.

Student assessment data can be a useful tool to understand equity and achievement gaps if it is valid and reliable. However, the massive disruptions for students at school and at home, as well as other factors unique to the pandemic, cannot be accounted for in assessment tests. Assessment results are unlikely to provide accurate and reliable snapshots of what students know and are able to do. According to Daniel Koretz, one of the country's leading experts on assessment states, "Even for diagnostic testing, there is a pretty high risk that we would not be able to trust comparative data." He adds, "I wouldn't want to see what little instruction we're able to give kids now consumed by test prep."

Even under the most optimal testing conditions, federally required standardized testing does not provide teachers with actionable information to help their students. At best, the tests only tell what we already know – that inequities based on race, income, language acquisition, and bias exist in educational opportunity. Overcoming inequities requires focused attention on the unique learning and social-emotional needs of each child. The amount of time spent prepping and administering federally required testing results in less time being spent on what matters most to student growth and development.

Additionally, children who are most likely to be negatively impacted by inequities are also more likely to have their well-being negatively impacted by the statewide testing experience – a condition of test stress that will be exacerbated by the pandemic.

The pandemic has put tremendous stress on our educational system, our students, and the teachers who serve them. Rather than add to the trauma of this year with testing, students would be better served by allocating time and resources toward reconnecting them to teachers and their schools in ways that support their social and emotional well-being that have been so deeply compromised during the pandemic.

For example, districts could partner with organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters or college programs preparing social workers to develop and implement mentoring programs. Programs promoting social and emotional learning could also be emphasized as a way to help students recover from the pandemic's effects and to become stronger learners. Focusing on the social-emotional support would also help schools address secondary trauma experienced by school staff providing a healthier school climate for all. We believe that this should be the focus of our districts, without the distractions and alienating effects that come with statewide testing.

Additionally, we believe that there are many alternatives to federally required standardized testing that address inequity while also providing information to teachers to assess the effectiveness of instruction. Current strategies used by schools include:

1. Formative Assessments

Formative assessments are short, frequent assessments that teachers use to quickly inform instruction, as opposed to high-level end-of-the-year exams that are primarily used for holding districts accountable. Formative assessments provide real time data that allow teachers to identify specific learning deficits and provide appropriate remediation before those deficits can widen. Summative data, on the other hand, comes late in the year, making it far less useful at the individual student level. Quick, periodic assessments are also generally less stressful for students and consume less valuable instructional time.

2. Student Engagement Surveys

The pandemic has put tremendous stress on our educational system, our students, and the teachers who serve them, and federally required testing will only exacerbate this. Resources and time may be better spent on supporting student and educator social-emotional well-being. Surveys like the *Gallup Student and Educator Engagement Survey* may yield more useful and reliable data than standardized test scores. According to Gallup's research, hope is a stronger predictor of college success than standardized test scores. The Gallup Survey may also be particularly useful in identifying which schools need the most support recovering from the impact of the pandemic. It could be used to inform the allocation of mental health resources (such as funding more school psychologists and social workers), implement programs to engage and motivate students (such as mentoring and enrichment programs), and provide social-emotional support to ameliorate the effects of trauma too many children have experienced over the past 12 months. Without addressing these underlying issues, learning may well be stunted, and learning gaps will only widen, likely disproportionately impacting children of color.

3. Alternative Accountability Indicators

Alternative measures of academic progress and accountability, such as student and teacher engagement, attendance, and access to advanced level courses and enriching educational experiences, can be utilized, potentially yielding more useful data than summative test scores.

We also believe that there are options for change that should be considered to diminish or eliminate the use of statewide standardized testing into the future. Among these options are:

- Sampling Strategies
Rather than test every student, utilize a statistically representative sample across grades, similar to the approach used by NAEP and PISA.
- Targeted Waivers
Allow states and districts to select their own local assessments to determine skill deficits and inform curricular decisions at the local level.
- Direct Support to Underserved Students and Communities
Given the pandemic's clear and disproportionate impact on underserved students and communities, education leaders should automatically direct more resources and support to students and families in need based on the assumption existing inequities have widened during the pandemic.
- Portfolio Assessments
Portfolio assessments such as those utilized in New Hampshire and New York could be explored on a pilot basis through better flexibility options for states and/or school districts.

The costs of administering federally required testing this spring, in the midst of the worst of the pandemic, far outweigh the benefits. The scores would not be reliable, and any decisions based on this unreliable data are likely to be flawed. In addition, there is a dire mental health crisis afflicting our youth. Anxiety, trauma, food insecurity, and substance abuse are pre-existing conditions exacerbated by the pandemic. Testing will only compound the high levels of stress teachers and children are currently experiencing. The weeks spent preparing for and administering these tests would also consume valuable instructional time, time better spent addressing learning gaps and attending to students' social-emotional needs. We respectfully request that you allow states to determine what is in the best interest of its students, educators, families, and communities by suspending the federal requirement for testing this school year.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. You have our very best wishes and support. Together we can do much to secure the bright future that each and every one of our nation's children deserves.

Respectfully Yours,



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