

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 9th, 2021

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary of Education
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona:

We would like to congratulate you on your confirmation as Secretary of the Department of Education. Considering the agency's recent experience with leadership that did not value public education, we find it encouraging that the Department will have a former educator at the helm. More than anything else, we believe that this experience will give you a great sensitivity to the everyday struggles of our students, staff, and educators.

We write to urge you to take immediate action to address your predecessor's recent actions on testing. Recent guidance maintaining the federal testing mandate will undermine our ability to best serve students and fails to heed the warning of educators across the country. With students suffering through a once-in-a-century pandemic, we must do everything in our power to heal the wounds of the last year and prepare our students for future success. Students have fluctuated between in-person and remote environments as educators have been forced to adapt on the fly, continually disrupting learning for all children. During this critical time, we must dedicate all of our efforts to a return to safe, in person learning, and we cannot divert our time and expenses to "teaching to," implementing and administering federally mandated testing. **As such, we urge you to update federal guidance to provide all states with waivers for all federal testing requirements for this school year.**

While we appreciate the position of those who support administering standardized tests this spring, we believe that the harms will outweigh the benefits. Though the guidance does provide flexibility for states regarding assessments, we believe a streamlined process absolving all states of these requirements would ultimately benefit the student population. We must learn from the past decades of institutionalized testing and take advantage of the data collected by experts in the field. Research suggests that poverty represents the most reliable indicator of long-term student success.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the preexisting divide in our country

¹ Sirin, Selcuk. "Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Review of Research." *Review of Educational Research*. 2005

between those with and without accumulated wealth. Marginalized communities have faced the brunt of this pandemic and likely have suffered the most academically as well. At the same time, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest this type of testing more reliably measures socioeconomic status than student achievement, especially in the context of extreme circumstances such as these.² This is why many colleges throughout the country have made the SAT and ACT optional.³

Overall, report card grades are the most effective means of identifying areas of student strengths and those in need of growth.⁴ In the classroom environment, teachers consistently assess student strengths and growth areas on a daily basis and can make real time adjustments to their teaching-style optimizing opportunities for tracking student success. Administering standardized tests this year on the other hand would fail to provide any new, actionable information. It is long past time for us to invest in and support the formative assessment that occurs within curriculum and instruction in our classrooms and end the flawed practice of annual state standardized tests -- beginning with providing waivers to all 50 states this year.

Just as this pandemic has disproportionately affected low-income communities and had a disparate impact on Black and Brown people across the country, we can readily identify those most at risk of learning loss and thus better target greater local and federal investment. Over 40% of low-income households lacked high-speed internet access at the outset of the pandemic, making it next to impossible to truly benefit from remote learning.⁵ Black and Brown students have suffered from lower engagement rates with remote learning with just 60% of Black students and 70% of Latino students logging on for classes regularly.⁶ This means that Black and Latino students have fallen roughly 10 and 9 months behind respectfully - essentially losing an entire year of instruction. Nationwide, approximately 3 million students have fallen off the grid entirely - largely explained by the difficulties faced by English-language learners and students with special needs who have struggled the most with adjusting to remote learning.⁷ Taken together, it becomes clear that this pandemic has exacerbated many of the existing inequities in our public education system. As such, our response should not begin with reassessing the situation, but rather with providing the resources schools need to safely reopen and address the learning loss from the past year.

² Goldhaber, Dan; Ozek, Umut. "How Much Should We Rely on Student Test Achievement as a Measure of Success?" *Educational Researcher*. 2019

³ Strauss, Valerie. "Dozens of colleges and universities are dropping SAT/ACT requirements for fall 2021 applicants, and some for longer." *Washington Post*. April 10, 2020

⁴ Morrison, Nick. "It's GPAs Not Standardized Tests That Predict College Success." *Forbes*. Jan. 29, 2020

⁵ New American Economy. "Back to School: A Look at the Internet Access Gap." New American Economy Research Fund. Aug. 6, 2020

⁶ Dorn, Emma; Hancock, Bryan; Sarakatsannis, Jimmy; and Viruleg, Ellen. "COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime." *McKinsey*. June, 2020

⁷ Korman, Hailly; O'Keefe, Bonnie; Repka, Matt. "Missing in the Margins: Estimating the Scale of the COVID-19 Attendance Crisis." *Bellwether Education Partners*. Oct. 21, 2020

Making matters worse, maintaining current federal standardized testing mandates will only work to compound the existing youth mental health crisis caused by the pandemic. Children were not built to operate in a remote learning environment. At this critical stage in their development, they need a social environment to ensure they can comfortably develop into well-functioning adults. As the Kaiser Family Foundation reports, “Children may experience mental distress during the pandemic due to disruption in routines, loss of social contact, or stress in the household.”⁸ With students at home, away from the support service apparatuses housed in schools, it has been difficult to accurately gauge just how damaging this pandemic has been to the mental health of our students. Existing research suggests children are facing higher rates of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic symptoms related to the pandemic.⁹ Even before the pandemic, test anxiety represented a pervasive challenge throughout the education system impacting up to 40% of students¹⁰ with the potential to cause physical, emotional and behavioral symptoms.¹¹ Therefore, the high stress nature of standardized tests would not only fail to provide unique information on the student populations most at risk, but they would also subject all students to further psychological harm that will potentially have serious long-term consequences.

With this in mind, we urge you to utilize the powers of your office to protect our children from the unnecessary burden of federally mandated standardized tests. The Biden Administration and Congressional Democrats have already worked together to build a path forward for public schools across the country.

As we begin to work together towards building back better, we must do everything in our power to build an equitable education system that will prepare our students for success. It is critical that we are judicious on how we utilize our funds, resources, and most importantly the students’ precious education time. We remain hopeful that you will lean on your experience as a former educator to inform your decisions and do what is in the best interest for our children. In order to better understand the Department’s policies and approach moving forward we request the following information:

- How will the Department ensure states, districts, and schools communicate with families and communities, especially communities of color and low-income families, about the assessments students will be required to take and how the assessment results will be used?
- What guidance will the Department provide states, districts and schools to minimize the stress students experience when taking assessments?

⁸ Panchal, Nirmita; Kamal, Rabah; Cox, Cynthia; and Garfield, Rachel. “The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use.” *Kaiser Family Foundation*. Feb. 10, 2021

⁹ Marques de Miranda, Debra et. al. “How is COVID-19 pandemic impacting mental health of children and adolescents?” *Elsevier Public Health Emergency Collection*. Dec. 2020

¹⁰ Legg, Timothy. “What Is Test Anxiety?” *Healthline*. April 25, 2017

¹¹ Anxiety & Depression Association of America. “Test Anxiety: Causes and Tips.” *Anxiety and Depression Association of America*. 2016

- What guidance will the Department provide states to help them use a comprehensive array of data, not solely assessment results, to target resources toward schools and students who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic?
- What guidance will the Department provide states, districts and schools regarding how to correctly interpret the results from the assessments, especially considering the fact that many students may not take the tests?
- The Department has decided to preserve the statewide annual assessments. What guidance will the Department provide states, districts, and schools on other forms of assessments, such as formative assessments, that can help educators make real-time adjustments to their teaching-style optimizing opportunities student success?
- Given the alarming lack of validity of test data, particularly with the interruptions and absenteeism caused by COVID, how will the Department be accounting for inaccurate data and what measures will it take to prevent misallocation of resources?

Passing this reconciliation package will allow students to safely return to schools and begin the difficult work of repairing the damage done over the last year. Forcing schools to navigate the logistical maelstrom of administering standardized tests in a remote learning environment will only work to demoralize students who have already faced the toughest year of their young lives. We must continue to be partners with families and students alike by focusing on aid and care rather than wasting time and resources on administering and scoring standardized tests. We implore you to provide a national waiver for all federally mandated testing and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D.
Member of Congress



Thomas R. Suozzi
Member of Congress



Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress



Mark Takano
Member of Congress



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator