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MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' ASSOCIATION

33 Forge Parkway • Franklin, MA 02038

P: 508-541-7997 • F: 508-541-9838 • E: msaa@msaa.net • www.msaa.net

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MCAS Testing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

October 2020

MSAA Position

DESE must apply for a waiver for the statutory and regulatory student testing requirements of the federal Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (ESSA). Once a waiver is granted, DESE must work with the Legislature to waive the statutory and regulatory testing requirements for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) for the 2020-2021 school year.

History

As a result of President Johnson's 1964 War on Poverty initiative, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and subsequent education reform agendas were designed explicitly to (1) mitigate the socio-economic obstacles to an equal education for all public school students, and to (2) improve and resolve structural conditions that exacerbate the socio-economic inequities. Conceptually, improving school (the great social equalizer) has been tied to student performance on assessments and funding. To that end, annual student performance assessments as outlined in both national and state education reform agendas are administered in order to: 'level the playing field', improve the quality of instruction, and hold schools and educators accountable for student performance.

Rationale

Equity: The vast range of instructional delivery models across Massachusetts's 289 school districts, in and of itself, invalidates the use of MCAS as a measure to compare schools. *Conditions for learning* vary from full in-person for those districts able to absorb the financial burden of 3-6 foot spacing, appropriate HVAC systems, increased transportation, etc. to districts unable to enter buildings at all, forced to rely on technology that may or may not be accessible to families/students. Even within the same districts, equity is undermined, as some families are able to afford tutoring pods and childcare while others are not. In person instructional time in pandemic circumstances is an advantage not available to more

urban and more dense communities with higher positivity rates and less space. Some districts were unable to provide summer school to support students who needed the extra time and help or to prevent regression.

The quality of instruction will also vary widely as some districts are relying on paraprofessionals and/or substitutes to support classrooms where teachers are on leave. Finding highly qualified teachers is intensified in less advantaged districts or districts with higher positivity rates.

Instructional Time: School districts are working hard to determine the impact on student learning that the loss of instructional time inflicted due to school closures in March 2020 and subsequent program and schedule modifications. Under these conditions we cannot afford to trade valuable instructional time to futile testing when we are able to gather that data in alternate ways. Imposing traditional testing protocols on already understaffed and overwhelmed systems is unreasonable.

School Based Leadership Time: Currently a significant portion of Massachusetts educational leaders' day is spent managing COVID-19 safety. Under these conditions we cannot ask school based leadership to take the time to administer the test, as it will take time away that they should be managing student and staff safety.

District Wide Logistics Concerns: Within a hybrid setting, school administrators have found that there is not enough time to test. While the three-week window barely allows time for the testing in January, providing no student absences, the 10th grade window cannot be met without closing the school completely and only bringing in those to test. This would place the rest of the students on asynchronous learning without staff for several days. Another issue with January is that there will be no cumulative assessments for 1/2 courses and no mid-term assessment for full year courses since this will fall within the January time frame. This is just adding to the reduction of instructional time. Additional financial burdens will be placed on districts. With smaller classrooms, districts will need to hire additional proctors and train them.

Gratuitous: The anomaly of both school and home conditions since March 2020 renders performance assessments irrelevant. The scores will not provide a valid measure of student growth or achievement against norms and standards of any previous year. Districts, schools, and educators will not be able to use these student assessment results to evaluate teaching and learning, to develop annual goals, or to write district and school improvement plans.

Emotional Health – Students are struggling to manage the complete upending of school as they know it. Anecdotally, we know attendance is down, resources and staff are down, and anxiety and depression are on the rise. The access to emotional support that schools were so apt at providing is now less accessible and less frequent. Some families have done all they can do to cope with employment, housing, food stability, transportation and staying healthy. Adding superfluous state testing to the plate during a pandemic is unconscionable. We talk about the importance of SEL (Social Emotional Learning) as a Commonwealth and as an educational department, yet is this just politicking? We should be in the business of caring for the whole child, but sadly as we continue to stress testing, we put our children and their welfare second behind their scores.

Resolution

The MSAA Board of Directors requests that the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) seek a waiver from the United States Department of Education pursuant to the assessment and accountability requirements as defined by the *Every Student*

Succeeds Act (ESSA). Seeking this waiver will show all students and stakeholders that “we are all learning new ways of doing things...and that we [The Commonwealth Massachusetts] remain committed to the well-being and growth of every student” (DESE). Seeking this waiver will also model forethought and empathy, two skills that will help all Commonwealth students to succeed in life (DESE). Furthermore, seeking this waiver prioritizes students’ health and well-being over the discrete standardized testing, thus allowing for the focus on the development of the whole child.

Unanimously approved by the MSAA Board of Directors on October 22, 2020.