

California Department of Education

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California State Board of Education

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April 2, 2021

The Honorable Ian Rosenblum, Deputy Assistant Secretary
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Deputy Assistant Secretary Rosenblum:

The California Department of Education (CDE) and the State Board of Education (SBE) are grateful for the opportunity to work with U.S. Department of Education staff during this time of major change for students, educators, and families across the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic has completely redefined everyday life for students, families, educators, and administrators. While we are optimistic about the current efforts to bring more students back into classrooms safely, there are still significant challenges that we face as a state. California has suffered multiple COVID-19 surges resulting in nearly 3.7 million cases to date and the loss of over 58,000 lives. With communities navigating this crisis, local educational agencies (LEAs) have delivered instruction to students through different models at an unprecedented scale. As of late February, students were engaging in some form of distance learning in approximately 80 percent of all elementary and middle schools and in 90 percent of all high schools in California. Now, thanks to progress on multiple fronts, thousands of schools across our vast state are in the midst of planning to return more students to in-person instruction but are continuing to navigate the complexities and uncertainty that have become all too familiar in the past year.

At this critical juncture, California is focused on addressing the varied and often urgent needs of the more than six million students who attend over 10,000 public K–12 schools. Governor Newsom and the California State Legislature recently enacted an early budget bill to quickly deliver \$6.6 billion to schools to support in-person instruction and provide extended learning time, supplemental instruction, and support for integrated pupil supports, including mental health services, access to school meal programs, and programs to address pupil trauma and social-emotional learning. Starting this spring, schools will implement their related support plans, prioritizing students from low-income

families (nearly 60 percent of all California students); students with disabilities; English learners (nearly half of our students speak a language other than English at home); foster youth; homeless students; students at risk of abuse, neglect, or exploitation; disengaged students; and students who are below grade level, including, but not limited to those who did not enroll in kindergarten in the 2020–21 school year, credit-deficient pupils, high school students at risk of not graduating, and other students identified by certificated staff.

Valid, reliable, and meaningful data on student learning will help direct these and other resources and supports to where they are needed most. To that end, since the beginning of the pandemic, California has strategized to develop an assessment plan that would provide data to parents, educators, and the public regarding the progress of students, including the provision of interim assessment tools through the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the use of other nationally developed diagnostic tests aligned to state standards.

Extraordinary efforts have been made over the last few months to provide additional flexibilities in the administration of statewide assessments, including all three flexibilities specifically recommended for consideration in your February 22, 2021, letter. In the fall of 2020, California made both Summative and Initial English Language Proficiency Assessments available to all LEAs through remote and in-person administration. Over the course of the next several months, based on feedback from stakeholders, the remote administration options were refined and improved to offer additional options for administration in LEAs where such administration is feasible. (Stakeholders report that bandwidth limitations, inconsistent testing environments, and the lack of secure browsers on computers hurriedly acquired and made available when the pandemic hit create challenges for remote testing in many of our communities.) Additionally, on November 5, 2020, the SBE approved the use of an adjusted blueprint (authorizing the use of a shortened test form) of the ELA and math summative assessments. The adjusted blueprint reduced the assessment time for each test by about one-and-a-half hours. And finally, on February 24, 2021, the SBE approved the extension of the 2020–21 assessment window for all LEAs through July 31, 2021, for all state summative assessments.

When the SBE met in February 2021 to consider the flexibility offered by the U.S. Department of Education with respect to assessment, accountability, and reporting systems for the 2020–21 school year, a broad coalition of the statewide associations representing California’s teachers and administrators presented petitions and letters calling for a suspension of all state assessments due to the incredibly challenging conditions facing educators, students, and families. After additional stakeholder engagement sessions, discussion of the flexibilities that could accompany statewide assessments, and another round of extensive written comments and oral testimony from stakeholders in March, the SBE unanimously approved an assessment policy for 2020–21 that includes universal availability of statewide assessments and is responsive to the conditions in California. This policy received broad support from organizations

The Honorable Ian Rosenblum

April 2, 2021

Page 3

representing educators, parents, government officials, community-based organizations, and civil rights organizations. A partial list of organizations endorsing the features of the adopted policy is attached.

Under this policy, California will continue to provide the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments and the California Alternate Assessments (CAA) for English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics as well as the California Science Test (CAST), the CAA for science, and the Summative English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) to all LEAs. The CDE will continue to offer weekly office hours and real-time technical assistance to facilitate administration of the assessments. In addition, to collect and report quality data regarding student learning and progress to parents, educators, and the public where circumstances do not make administration of the state summative assessments the most viable option within the local context, the SBE approved the use of other diagnostic or interim assessments that are aligned with California Standards and provide results that can be reported to parents/guardians, educators, and the public. The Summative ELPAC will continue to be administered to all English learners.

During a conversation with U.S. Department of Education staff on March 25, 2021, CDE and SBE staff affirmed that California will continue to offer state summative assessments. In response, U.S. Department of Education staff indicated that California's plan does not require that a general assessment waiver be submitted. This letter is intended to confirm this communication so that California can continue to focus on providing support to our LEAs in assessing and addressing the learning needs of our students.

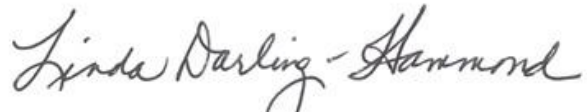
If additional information is needed, please contact Joseph Saenz, Federal Policy Liaison, Government Affairs Division, by telephone at 916-591-6391 or by email at jsaenz@cde.ca.gov.

We appreciate your support and look forward to continuing to work with you to support the students and educators throughout our state.

Sincerely,



Tony Thurmond
State Superintendent of Public Instruction
California Department of Education



Linda Darling-Hammond
President
California State Board of Education

cc: Patrick Rooney, Director, School Support and Accountability Programs,
U.S. Department of Education

List of Organizations in Support

California Teachers Association
California School Board Association
Association of California School Administrators
California County Superintendents Educational Services Association
California Association of School Business Officials
California County Superintendents Educational Services Association
California Federation of Teachers
Alameda County Office of Education
Riverside County Office of Education
California Association of Suburban School Districts
Kern County Superintendent of Schools
Orange County Department of Education
Central Valley Education Coalition
Santa Clara County Office of Education
California IT In Education
San Francisco Unified School District
Small School Districts Association
Children Now
Education Trust–West
California Business Roundtable
CA LULAC
Canal Alliance
Our Voice: Communities for Quality Education
Cultivating Hope
Parent Organization Network
Future Leaders of America
Restorative Justice League
Greater Sacramento Urban League
Salinas Building Healthy Communities
Great Public Schools Now
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center
Innovate Public Schools
Speak UP
National Action Network Sacramento Chapter
Teach for America—California
Public Advocates
California Association for Bilingual Education
Dolores Huerta Foundation
Families In Schools
Californians Together