



February 23, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Acting U.S. Secretary of Education
Department of Education Building
400 Maryland Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear President Biden and Mr. Cardona,

Earlier this year, several leaders of the Education community here in Pennsylvania wrote to you voicing their concerns regarding conducting education assessments in the thick of a pandemic and seeking a reprieve from federally mandated standardized testing for the 2020-2021 school year. As the Majority and Minority Chairs of the Education Committee in the Senate of Pennsylvania, we would like to echo the sentiments of our education colleagues and respectfully request the United States Department of Education offer states an assessments waiver for the 2020-2021 school year.

Over the past few months, we have spoken to many parents, students, and teachers who are concerned about the additional stress that this testing will place on our already overwhelmed students, who are navigating an ever-changing school landscape and vastly different learning models than in past years. What's more, as COVID-19 mitigation strategies will require our teachers to administer tests multiple times to small groups of students, the larger class will be left without a teacher available for synchronous learning for the entire duration of the test administration. We've heard from many school districts that these COVID-19 mitigation strategies mean that they will need a significantly longer period of time than the six weeks currently allotted for testing, further limiting the precious amount of instruction time that teachers have with their students.

Many of our schools are beginning to return to more in-person learning. We should let our teachers use this opportunity to give students the supports that they need—to focus on teaching our kindergarteners how to be students in a real classroom, to teach our second graders how to handle money, to help our eighth graders navigate interpersonal relationships, and to give our twelfth graders as much of a senior year as we can.

Our students, teachers, and families have put in herculean efforts over the past 11 months to ensure that our students are safe, secure, healthy, and learning. We've emphasized the values of resiliency, community, and working together to solve the problems that we all face. Forcing these students into isolation within a school building through the sterile conditions required by

the testing environment is counterproductive. What our students really need right now is time to feel like part of their community again—to have as much normalcy as we can give them. That doesn't include six weeks of bare walls, strict testing schedules, and the rigors of institutional assessments.

We understand that there is a feeling of urgency by adults to find out as soon as possible how much learning our children have missed during this period, to quantify the learning gaps, to reduce the entire COVID-19 period to statistics. But there is a danger to rushing to this evaluation before we've made any effort to treat our children like human beings who need care and nurturing first. They are not data points in a funding formula. They are people who are going through a turbulent, confusing time and we need to give them some sense of stability before we thrust additional stress on them in the name of determining what schools "deserve" more funding. We know where those inequities in our system are and how we can begin to invest in repairing them. We do not need additional assessments this year to figure that out.

Thank you for your time and attention in this matter.

Respectfully,



Senator Lindsey M. Williams
Thirty-Eighth Senatorial District
Minority Chair, Education Committee



Senator Scott Martin
Thirteenth Senatorial District
Majority Chair, Education Committee