MDE

Michigan Receives Federal Waiver to School Accountability Requirements

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LANSING – The U.S. Department of Education (USED) has waived the federal requirements for school accountability in Michigan for the 2020-21 school year due to the disruption of instruction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Michigan Department of Education announced today.

In the federal waiver approval letter sent to State Superintendent Dr. Michael Rice on Friday evening, USED said that it is still considering the state's request to waive the federal requirement to administer statewide summative assessments to public school students and will be responding separately on that issue.

"This has been an extremely challenging year for students and educators," Dr. Rice said. "USED's waiver of federal accountability requirements recognizes that our schools are still navigating their way through a deadly pandemic that continues to grip our state and nation."

The Michigan legislature passed and the governor signed into law last summer the requirement that local districts administer locally chosen, national benchmark assessments to provide parents and educators with the knowledge of where children are academically and to help target resources and supports as a result.

"This is not the time to engage in state summative assessments," Dr. Rice said. "Educators can determine where kids are academically for parents and for themselves with our benchmark assessments, and can use those assessments to target resources, interventions, and supports for our kids in our districts. Our schools need this time to focus on the social emotional and academic needs of children."

Earlier this school year, USED cancelled its scheduled national assessment of educational progress (NAEP) test due to the pandemic. Just as it is currently impossible for USED to get representative results from NAEP assessments, so too with rising COVID numbers is it impossible to get representative results from state summative assessments.

While a substantial majority of school districts have been open much of the school year, large percentages of students in many districts, including many in the larger districts in the state, have been learning remotely.

In spite of the clear desire on the part of many to return students to in-person instruction, a growing number of COVID cases recently reported in Michigan —including 5,000 cases in each of the last three days—may affect this goal. One way or the other, state summative assessments for roughly half of the students in the state will have little utility, nowhere near the utility of benchmark assessments this year.

Based on Michigan's waiver request, USED has waived the following federal accountability and school identification requirements:

- that the state measure progress toward long-term goals and measurements of interim progress;
- that the state meaningfully differentiate, on an annual basis, all public schools;
- that the state assess with a participation rate of at least 95 percent; and
- that the state identify schools for comprehensive, targeted, and additional targeted support and improvement based on data from the 2020-2021 school year.

In its letter, USED also encouraged the state and local school districts to consider other steps to further reduce the high stakes associated with assessments this year, such as excluding their use from students' final grades, grade promotion decisions, educator evaluations, and local school ratings.

MDE has been working with the legislature to set aside state laws for high stakes accountability tied to assessments during the pandemic, including but not limited to educator evaluations and the Read By Grade Three student retention requirements.

MDE is asking the state legislature, assuming approval of the assessment waiver request, to also set aside the state law requirements for state summative assessments. Until USED rules on the assessment waiver request, MDE has informed local school districts that the statewide summative assessments will be administered this spring.

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