Georgia resubmits testing waiver request; Supt. Woods: The middle of a global pandemic is no time for high-stakes tests

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Only three months from now, Georgia's schools will start closing out the 2020-21 school year. The close of the second semester also brings about federally required standardized testing. But the middle of a global pandemic is no time for high-stakes tests – especially high-stakes tests that must be administered in person. **That's why today, Governor Brian Kemp and I resubmitted Georgia's request for a waiver of standardized testing and accountability requirements to the U.S. Department of Education.**

Like other states, Georgia's testing and accountability systems were developed and designed to measure the effectiveness of traditional instruction in a traditional learning environment. This unprecedented school year has been anything but traditional, and experts know tests cannot be completely redesigned and revamped overnight.

Additionally, test security concerns mean students must take standardized tests in-person – even those who are medically fragile and for all families who have opted for virtual instruction. We have worked to provide flexibility that allows for the safe administration of tests, and to reduce student consequences so that students who simply cannot report to an in-person school building are not penalized, but school districts are placed in a difficult position due to the federal requirement that standardized tests be administered to all students.

Despite these common-sense realities, there are those who cling to compliance. Proponents of high-stakes testing and heavy-handed accountability point to the need to identify student learning loss. Learning loss is a real and pressing concern, and a long-term challenge we will need to aggressively tackle as a state and nation. Contrary to the rhetoric that learning loss is not being addressed, our educators are capable of, and have been, identifying learning gaps without subjecting students to the risks and stresses of administering high-stakes, end-of-year tests.

Formative tools give teachers the flexibility to administer assessments when it makes sense instructionally and use the results only to support student learning. To ensure school districts had the resources to identify learning loss, the Georgia Department of Education provided a formative assessment aligned to Georgia Milestones to every district in the state at no cost. A recent survey of Georgia school districts shows 93% are using formative assessments this school year to pinpoint learning loss, and at least 88% plan to add back instructional time through summer learning opportunities, before- and after-school programs, and/or an extended 2021-22 school year. GaDOE plans to develop a grant opportunity to support these locally-led efforts, and our school improvement team is working

directly with underperforming schools to ensure supports are in place to address learning loss.

Supporters of pandemic-era high-stakes testing also point to the need to know how different instructional models – in-person, hybrid, and virtual – are working. The reality is that students and educators are still in the middle of a pandemic, and the instructional models being provided do not fit neatly into boxes. With rolling quarantines, connectivity issues, and varying case counts, no two districts or schools are the same. Do we need to know what works best for students? Absolutely – but those eager to start researching a crisis the rest of us are still experiencing need a reality check.

Giving high-stakes tests solely for the sake of data collection shows the continued disconnect between those desiring to establish a narrative about public education and the reality of the students, educators and families who are forced to endure the impact of these decisions. This is not a grand lab experiment; this is a global crisis happening right now. Those students and teachers, along with parents and school leaders, are doing everything they can to keep teaching and learning going – is this really the time to pull out the measuring stick? Furthermore, it is quite ironic that the U.S. Department of Education decided not to administer its own national test, NAEP.

Though we must abide by the federal requirement to test, as long as it stands, we will continue to call out those who champion compliance and ignore the crisis at hand. That's what we did when then-Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos directed states to continue testing this school year. We gave school leaders the flexibility to use other factors to make promotion and retention decisions for students; extended flexibility on the “when" and “how" of administering tests; and reduced the testing weight for high-school students to .01%, protecting them from damaging consequences to their GPAs, class ranks, and access to scholarships and postsecondary opportunities.

As a uniquely taxing school year approaches its end, parents, teachers, and school leaders should be able to focus on safety, well-being, and delivering the highest quality of instruction. Since the restart of school, I have been in classrooms listening to those on the frontlines and walking the hallways talking to students and school leaders. I have seen firsthand the work that has gone into making education work during this pandemic – and amid that, the last thing we should be requiring is high-stakes testing.

Since March, traditional educational structures like how we deliver instruction and meals have radically changed. Can't our leaders at the federal level adapt, as those at the local level have, to meet this moment?

The need to pause high-stakes testing and data collection is clear – and supported by 96

percent of Georgians. This new administration has a moral obligation to extend full testing and accountability waivers for the current school year. I implore them to put the adult issues aside and do what is best for students.

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