Georgia Department of Education receives federal assessment waiver; other COVID-19 updates

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April 7, 2020 – Georgia has received formal approval from the federal government to waive testing and accountability requirements for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year, State School Superintendent Richard Woods announced today. No state testing – including Georgia Milestones EOGs and EOCs, GAA 2.0, and GKIDS – will be administered in Georgia for the rest of the school year. Additionally, there will not be a 2020 CCRPI.

“It became clear as the COVID-19 pandemic progressed that there was no realistic path to offering state assessments this year – and, frankly, that testing is not what students, parents, and educators should be focused on at this time," Superintendent Woods said. “I appreciate the U.S. Department of Education hearing the concerns of states, school districts, parents, and students and providing this flexibility. Georgia's public-school community will continue to focus on keeping students safe and providing opportunities for learning and growth as we weather this storm together."

On March 16, Superintendent Woods suspended the state assessment window along with teacher and leader evaluation requirements and state-level, attendance-related consequences. Following an announcement March 20 from the U.S. Department of Education inviting states to request waivers from federal assessment requirements, the Georgia Department of Education

(GaDOE) immediately applied for a waiver. GaDOE received notice of the U.S. Department of Education's intent to approve its request the afternoon of March 20, and formal approval from US ED on Monday, March 30. Click here for the notice of approval.

Other updates on COVID-19 and Georgia public schools

State-Level Waivers: At the March 26 State Board of Education meeting (recording here), Superintendent Woods recommended and the board approved a comprehensive package of waivers for school districts in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The waivers address state assessment and accountability requirements; grading and graduation requirements; credit recovery; and counseling. Click here for more information and click here for the detailed guidance that was issued to school districts.

GaDOE is directing districts, as they develop local guidelines, to ensure students are not penalized for circumstances over which they had no control. Students should not be held back in their expected progression – graduation, advancement to the next grade, etc. – as a result of the COVID-19 school closures. The state has granted the necessary flexibility to make this possible.

Grading: How to calculate final student grades is a local district decision, but the guidance issued to districts includes options they can consider, and GaDOE is directing districts to be sensitive about the realities students and staff are dealing with during this time. Possible strategies outlined in GaDOE guidance include adopting a “no zero" policy for all assignments since school closures began; allowing students to redo, resubmit, and/or retake assignments; and evaluating key content and competencies taught prior to school closures to establish a “cutoff point" for grades/assignments and a benchmark for measuring course completion and performance.

The state-level waivers approved on March 26 include a waiver of promotion/retention requirements, the 20% course-grade requirement for EOCs, and other requirements related to graduation and course completion. This will ensure that students are still able to advance to the next grade in spite of the COVID-19 closures.

“Pass/Fail" Options: For subjects and courses taught in grades K-8, school districts may choose to issue course designations of “pass" or “fail" in lieu of final grades or numeric scores. While GaDOE explored the possibility of offering a “pass/fail" option for grades 9-12, we ultimately determined this is not a viable option due to the potential impact on higher education acceptance requirements (in and out of state), scholarships and financial aid opportunities, and other GPA-related requirements from colleges and universities. This also applies for high school subjects/courses taught in middle school for high school credit.

While districts must issue numerical grades for high school courses, they may still adopt any of the other policies outlined in GaDOE guidance, including adopting a “no zero" policy for all assignments since school closures began; allowing students to redo, resubmit, and/or retake assignments; and evaluating key content and competencies taught prior to school closures to establish a “cutoff point" for grades/assignments. Parents should be assured their high-school student will not be penalized for circumstances outside their control.

Graduating Seniors: 2020 graduating seniors cannot control the disruption to school schedules caused by COVID-19, and GaDOE has issued guidance to school districts to ensure no senior will be held back from graduating on time due to the COVID-19 school closures.

GaDOE is collaborating with the University System of Georgia, Technical College System of Georgia, Georgia Student Finance Commission, and others to ensure graduating seniors are not penalized due to the COVID-19 closures.

Regarding graduation ceremonies, school districts should follow CDC and DPH guidance for any public meetings. The COVID-19 crisis is an ever-evolving situation. Districts may choose to graduate and issue diplomas to seniors as planned, but hold formal ceremonies later in the summer if necessary. The Georgia Department of Education does not set school calendars or dictate the last day of the school year and does not set graduation ceremony requirements.

Internet & Device Access: On March 30, Governor Brian Kemp and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs launched a new website to inform Georgians about ways to connect to high-speed internet throughout the state. Visit broadband.georgia.gov to find internet access points near you.

GaDOE continues to work with the Governor's Office of Student Achievement, the Georgia Foundation for Public Education, and corporate funders to connect students and families with devices and Internet connections. If you would like to contribute to the effort to get digital devices into students' hands, please make a secure tax deductible online donation at www.gfpe.org/invest.

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