

STATE ASSESSMENTS & EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN THE PANDEMIC

This school year has been exceptionally challenging for New York students and educators — with the ongoing effects of the pandemic, ever-evolving adjustments to teaching and learning, and the continued national reckoning with the impact of systemic racism. In this extraordinary context — where according to a [data analysis](#) by The Education Trust–New York from the fall, New York State students enrolled in the schools with the greatest share of students from low-income backgrounds were 1.7 times more likely to be learning remotely than students in schools with the smallest share of students from low-income backgrounds and students in the schools with the greatest share of students of color were 1.4 times more likely to be learning remotely than students in schools with the smallest share of students of color — we remain deeply concerned that the same students who were subject to educational inequity *before* the pandemic remain most underserved by our education system now and appreciate that the New York State Education Department (NYSED) recognizes these same realities. However, we — The New York Equity Coalition a group of civil rights, education, parent, and business organizations committed to fighting for greater opportunities for all students in New York State — also oppose NYSED’s decision to seek a federal waiver on state assessments for grades

3 through 8. Our main concern is that interrupted instruction has had disproportionate impacts on underserved students and by not measuring their educational progress we are only left with unanswered questions about both the true impact of the pandemic on students and how to effectively plan for a stronger, more equitable education system.

State assessment data is vital to understand what the real academic impacts of the pandemic have been — and how they differ across districts, schools, and student groups. The results of these summative assessments are essential to designing a path forward for New York State. It’s also key to fulfilling our education system’s fundamental responsibility to provide families with consistent, accurate information about whether their children are making progress towards meeting state academic standards — which parents say is more important than ever.

Opponents of state assessments argue that students have all fallen behind as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, and that it is not worth putting children through the stress of state assessments to confirm what we already know.

But the fact is some students and families are at a greater disadvantage than others and face more

THE NEW YORK EQUITY COALITION



significant challenges as a result of interrupted instruction making it even harder to keep up and keep making ground academically. Eliminating state assessments will not make these opportunity gaps go away — it just makes them harder to identify and address.

State assessments are our best tool to ensure that every student is counted – especially students who our education system has failed to engage during the pandemic.

Assessment results will give us meaningful data about what students are learning, a look into the impact of last spring’s unfinished instruction, and information that can drive how the state and school districts can best direct the assistance, support, and resources to the students who most need them.

In The Education Trust–New York’s [poll](#) of public school parents this fall, **more than 90% of parents statewide** said that each of the following is an **important use of state assessments this year:**

- To provide information about **whether my school is doing a good job teaching my child;**
- To provide my child’s teachers with more **information about how well my child is doing;**
- To provide information about **whether my child is meeting state academic standards;**
- To provide information about whether my child is **on track to be ready for college and a career;** and
- To help me make the case for **more resources for my child’s school** or school district.

Even if the federal government allows NYSED to cancel state assessments this year, we urge New York State to preserve Spring assessments in grades 3 through 8, Alternative Assessments for students with disabilities, and the June and August Regents exams as part of the state’s commitment to building back stronger. In fact, doing so is essential to ensuring the equitable allocation of support and resources.

In addition, any and all assessments should be administered in a way that reflects the complexities

Parent Perspectives on Standards and Assessments

85%

of parents are concerned that their child is not meeting state academic standards

93%

of parents consider assessment results important information for them to know

94%

of parents say state tests provide their child’s teachers with more information about how well their child is doing

Survey conducted by Global Strategy Group on behalf of The Education Trust–New York. The survey was conducted from 10/16/2020 to 10/21/2020 and had a confidence interval of +/-3.5%. Learn more at EdTrustNY.org/Coronavirus.

of the current context and that the results can be as useful as possible for students, families, and educators in these unique circumstances:

1 Offer remote assessments. NYSED



has indicated that any assessments this year will be given in school buildings, not remotely. However, by allowing parents and families

to choose between either an in-person or remote assessment the state can increase participation and capture more students than if tests were just in person. NYSED should also offer support to districts and schools to implement remote testing, including addressing device and connectivity issues and supporting outreach and communication efforts to families. For transparency purposes, school districts should also collect information on student participation, whether they did remote or in-person assessment, and, for those who do not participate, the reason for not participating, which should include an option if the district was unable to make contact with the family/student. This type of information can help both NYSED and school districts plan for the future of assessments.

2 Provide results fast. We recommend the

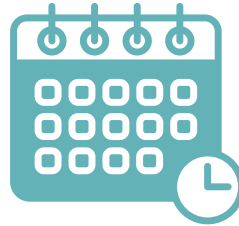


New York State Education Department partner with its testing vendor to place meaningful information from the state assessments into the

hands of parents and educators as quickly as possible and earlier than usual. This will ensure that stakeholders — families, school and district leaders, and policymakers — have the information they need to align supports in the summer of 2021 and prepare for the 2021-22 academic year. NYSED

can support schools to communicate the value of state assessments with families by providing communication templates or toolkits, in multiple languages, that show how the results will be used to support students in the classroom and at school and how the results can be used to support students at home.

3 Explore shortening the tests and giving them later in the school year. To meet



social distancing requirements (for in-person assessments) and recognize the challenges facing students in taking assessments this year, we recommend that

NYSED stretch the testing window and consider giving the assessments later in the school year so that they can reflect the impact of more instructional time. NYSED should also work with its testing vendor to shorten the assessments while preserving reliability and usefulness — as California is doing. We also recommend that NYSED ensure that school districts communicate with parents about the measures schools are taking to ensure students’ health and safety when returning to school buildings for assessments.

4 Continue to lower the stakes. New York



State does not have “high-stakes” testing: state law prohibits school districts from making state assessments in grades 3-8 the sole or

primary factor in deciding student retention, grade promotion, or placement; state assessments are no longer required to be part of a teacher’s evaluation; and the state’s

accountability system now includes multiple measures of student success in addition to state assessment results. During this time, it is important to intentionally continue to lower the stakes and clearly communicate with all stakeholders, including through multiple modes of communication and in families' preferred language, about how state assessments provide a snapshot of student learning and how the results will be used — even while recognizing the barriers to engagement and technology that many families are still facing. In addition, we agree with NYSED that additional schools not be formally identified this year for “targeted support and improvement” or “comprehensive support and improvement” under the state’s accountability system. Instead, we urge the state to create an early warning watch list to provide support to schools that would otherwise be newly identified, as described in recommendation 5 below — while continuing to provide support to schools that were previously identified before the pandemic.

5



Direct resources and support. We recommend that state assessment results — alongside measures of college and career readiness, chronic absenteeism, and other indicators — be used to target funding and technical support to the schools with the greatest needs. The valuable information that can come from state assessments should be connected to resource allocation decisions that can better and more equitably serve students, providing additional support for students outside of regular instruction such as through tutoring and extended learning time. In addition, state

assessment results can also help identify students who have excelled in remote or blended learning — ensuring that schools can support their learning needs after the pandemic ends.

6

Commit to transparency. We recommend



that the state commit to publicly reporting the assessment results at the school, district, and state levels as quickly as possible, including disaggregated data

for all student groups including by race/ethnicity, income status, English learner status, disability status, and housing status. The state should also publicly release data broken out by whether students were learning remotely, in person, or in a blended setting this year, and by whether they had access to sufficient technology devices and high-speed internet access. Transparency is essential in order to inform strategies for investment and support at the state, district, and school levels.

State assessments are just one part of understanding school performance — but they are an essential one. We share the goals of educators and policymakers for continuing to enhance assessments so that they are more authentic, timely, and useful in determining student aptitude. In the meantime, we also know that state assessments provide invaluable information right now to help us understand how students are progressing and what they need from their education system. Protecting summative exams is an important safeguard for students who are in under resourced schools and who have been most impacted by interruptions in instruction, pandemic school closures — especially as we work to build a stronger and more equitable education system coming out of the pandemic.