March 2, 2021

Ian Rosenblum
Assistant Secretary, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Interim Acting Secretary Ian Rosenblum:

We write to encourage you to take immediate action to address the issue of standardized testing in public schools during the pandemic. As you know, Michigan, New York, and several other states are seeking waivers due to the unprecedented impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on their students, teachers, and schools. Our parents, students, and educators have been pushed to the brink as they try to learn and safely teach our students during this challenging time. With students suffering through a once-in-a-century pandemic, we must do everything in our power to heal the wounds of the last year and prepare our students for future success. Students have fluctuated between in-person and remote environments as educators have been forced to adapt on the fly, continually disrupting learning for all children. Considering the immense atrophy experienced throughout the student population and continued remote and blended learning environments, we believe that this work demands bypassing all federally-mandated standardized testing. As such, we urge you to approve and issue waivers for any federal testing requirements for all states who request them for this school year.

While we appreciate the position of those who support administering standardized tests this spring, we believe that the harms will outweigh the benefits. Though the guidance does provide flexibility for states in regards to assessments, we believe a streamlined process absolving all states of these requirements would ultimately benefit the student population. We must learn from the past decades of institutionalized testing and take advantage of the data collected by experts in the field. Researchers have come to a consensus that poverty represents the most reliable indicator of long-term student success.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the preexisting divide in our country between those with and without accumulated wealth. The same communities that have suffered from generationally compounding traumas such as redlining have faced the brunt of the pandemic as well. At the same time, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest this type of testing more reliably measures socioeconomic status than

student achievement, especially in the context of extreme circumstances such as these.\(^2\) This is why many colleges throughout the country have made the SAT and ACT optional.\(^3\)

The research is clear: report card grades are the most effective means of identifying areas of student strengths and those in need of growth.\(^4\) In the classroom environment, teachers consistently assess student strengths and growth areas on a daily basis and can make real time adjustments to their teaching-style optimizing opportunities for tracking student success. Administering standardized tests this year on the other hand would fail to provide any new, actionable information. It is long past time for us to invest in and support the formative assessment that occurs within curriculum and instruction in our classrooms, and end the flawed practice of annual high stakes state standardized tests -- beginning with providing waivers to all 50 states that request them.

Just as this pandemic has disproportionately affected low-income communities and had a disparate impact on Black and Brown people across the country, we can readily identify those most at risk of learning loss and thus better target greater local and federal investment. Over 40% of low-income households lacked high-speed internet access at the outset of the pandemic, making it next to impossible to truly benefit from remote learning.\(^5\) Black and Brown students have suffered from lower engagement rates with remote learning with just 60% of Black students and 70% of Latino students logging on for classes regularly.\(^6\) This means that Black and Latino students have fallen roughly 10 and 9 months behind respectfully - essentially losing an entire year of instruction. Nationwide, approximately 3 million students have fallen off the grid entirely - largely explained by the difficulties faced by English-language learners and students with special needs who have struggled the most with adjusting to remote learning.\(^7\) Taken together, it becomes clear that this pandemic has exacerbated many of the existing inequities in our public education system. As such, our response should not begin with reassessing the situation, but rather with providing the resources schools need to safely reopen and address the learning loss from the past year.

Making matters worse, maintaining current federal standardized testing mandates will only work to compound the existing youth mental health crisis caused by the pandemic. Children were not built to operate in a remote learning environment. At this critical stage in their development, they need a social environment to ensure they can comfortably develop into well-functioning adults. As the Kaiser Family Foundation reports, “Children may experience mental distress during the

\(^2\) Goldhaber, Dan; Ozek, Umut. “How Much Should We Rely on Student Test Achievement as a Measure of Success?” *Educational Researcher.* 2019
\(^3\) Strauss, Valerie. “Dozens of colleges and universities are dropping SAT/ACT requirements for fall 2021 applicants, and some for longer.” *Washington Post.* April 10, 2020
\(^6\) Dorn, Emma; Hancock, Bryan; Sarakatsannis, Jimmy; and Viruleg, Ellen. “COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime.” *McKinsey.* June, 2020
pandemic due to disruption in routines, loss of social contact, or stress in the household.”

With students at home, away from the support service apparatuses housed in schools, it has been difficult to accurately gauge just how damaging this pandemic has been to the mental health of our students. Existing research suggests children are facing higher rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic symptoms related to the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, test anxiety represented a pervasive challenge throughout the education system impacting up to 40% of students with the potential to cause physical, emotional and behavioral symptoms.

Therefore, the high stress nature of standardized tests would not only fail to provide unique information on the student populations most at risk, but they would also subject all students to further psychological harm that will potentially have serious long-term consequences.

With this in mind, we urge you to utilize the powers of your future office to protect our children from the unnecessary burden of federally mandated standardized tests. The Biden Administration and Congressional Democrats have already worked together to build a path forward for public schools across the country. Passing this reconciliation package will allow students to safely return to schools and begin the difficult work of repairing the damage done over the last year. Forcing schools to navigate the logistical maelstrom of administering standardized tests in a remote learning environment will only work to demoralize students who have already faced the toughest year of their young lives. We must continue to be partners with families and students alike by focusing on aid and care rather than wasting time and resources on administering and scoring standardized tests. We implore you to provide a national waiver for all federally mandated testing and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

RASHIDA TLAIB
Member of Congress

ANDY LEVIN
Member of Congress

HALEY STEVENS
Member of Congress

DEBBIE DINGELL
Member of Congress

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8 Panchal, Nirmita; Kamal, Rabah; Cox, Cynthia; and Garfield, Rachel. “The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use.” Kaiser Family Foundation. Feb. 10, 2021