

## **ANTICIPATED FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (A-FAQS)**

With the release of the assessment information from PDE, we anticipate many questions from the field. In an effort to try to provide some answers, we have started to ask and answer the questions **we have** about the assessment issue. Please know this is still a moving target and if things change at the federal level, there could be some further changes at the state level. The answers to these questions are from Dr. Healey and Dr. Eshbach and do not reflect any official responses from PDE as they are just our beliefs at this point in time.

### **Why must we test at all this year?**

It is still a federal requirement that we assess for accountability as required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Therefore, it is not a state decision whether or not to administer the assessments. Only the US Department of Education (USDE) can grant a waiver to the testing requirement.

### **What about a waiver from the federal government?**

As of this writing, there is no federal waiver from the federal government to eliminate the administration of the assessments this year. It appears unlikely that any such waiver could be coming until the USDE Secretary of Education is confirmed. And even when Dr. Cardona is confirmed, it is not clear that they will approve an assessment waiver or invite states to submit assessment waivers. Ultimately, the granting of such a waiver takes time and wouldn't be approved before the current testing window arrives.

### **What are the current arguments not to have a federal waiver for assessments?**

As we understand it, there are some groups (especially in the special education, civil rights and parent advocate arenas) that are calling for the continued assessments as a means to identify significant learning gaps students have experienced as the result of the pandemic. In addition, some members of Congress want the assessments to move forward to strengthen their arguments for additional education funding if they can prove that students suffered as a result of the pandemic.

### **Some states have already applied for a waiver, did PA submit a waiver?**

It is correct that several states have submitted a request for a waiver from the federal government, Michigan and New York among them. PA did not apply for a waiver at this time. The rationale PDE has communicated for not applying for a waiver is that it would take about 60-90 days to get a ruling on the waiver and we are too close to our testing windows to wait to provide guidance to the field. Additionally, even if Pennsylvania applied it wouldn't tip the balance of states to force an answer faster. We'd simply be locked in to wait in the queue for an answer from USDE. PDE recognizes the field needs answers and a solution now.

**Will PA apply for a waiver if the federal government decides to offer one?**

It depends. PA will need to assess very carefully what all states will need to commit to for the waiver before making a final decision. However, it does remain a viable option for PA if a waiver were to be offered.

**What exactly does this new letter to USDE from PA mean for school districts?**

PDE is submitting the letter to USDE to alert them to the fact the assessment window in PA will be extended into September 2021.

**Will districts be required to administer the assessments this spring?**

No. Districts will have the flexibility to decide on whether to administer assessments this spring, fall, summer, or a combination of all of the above. Due to varying instructional models in place right now, it makes sense to provide school districts with the flexibility to make these decisions based on their own circumstances.

**What if a district is providing face-face instruction for elementary students but limited face-face instruction for secondary students, will they have the option of testing elementary students this spring and secondary students in the fall?**

Yes, we believe there will be flexibility for districts to decide what levels and when to administer the assessments within the new testing windows either spring, summer, or fall of 2021. Please note that we do not know the exact testing window for the fall at this time.

**Does this new guidance apply to all the assessments?**

Yes, it applies to all the assessments required for accountability through ESSA. In Pennsylvania, that includes the PSSAs and Keystone Exams.

**What about just shortening the tests at the various levels for this year as an option?**

That cannot be accomplished as Pennsylvania uses only paper/pencil exams and the tests were prepared well into advance of administration. The delay to construct new assessments would not align with current timelines established in the ESSA accountability requirements for 20-21.

**Will the assessments be used to identify schools in need of assistance (per PA state's accountability plan)?**

No, PDE has submitted a waiver in December to USDE on this issue stating that the assessments will not be used to identify Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) or Target Support and Improvement (TSI) for 2021. In addition, the assessments will not be used for the 20-21 teacher or principal evaluations.

**How will schools handle the administration of assessments to students who are being educated using a remote or hybrid model? Will PDE provide guidance on how assessments should be administered in the current pandemic environment? How do we maintain proper social distancing?**

We have requested and anticipate further guidance from PDE on how to safely and effectively administer the assessments. We have communicated that past guidance on the administration of assessment are not possible in these environments while adhering to CDC and State guidelines on safety and health.

**Will schools be held accountable for participation rates on these assessments? What about parent op outs?**

The USDOE in their issued letter suggested that the states have flexibility in the participation rates. We have not received word from PDE on this issue as of yet. As for parent op outs, it is very conceivable that there will be increased op outs this year due to the pandemic and/or parents objecting to testing.