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DEPUTY SECRETARY FOR ELEMENTARY
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Dear Colleague,

The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) recently issued a [number of decisions](#) in response to individual state requests to relax certain requirements from Federally required school year 2020-21 assessments. These decisions have generated questions from education leaders, families, the media, and other stakeholders about possible implications for [Pennsylvania's approach to assessment administration](#). Given that some school entities will begin assessment administration this week, I want to respond to the three most common questions below.

1. What flexibility has USDE provided to states?

USDE has issued a series of waivers in response to individual state requests. The most notable is a complete waiver of school year 2020-21 assessments for the District of Columbia's public schools, where nearly 90 percent of students are learning remotely. All available evidence, including denials of waiver requests from other jurisdictions, suggests that the relief provided to Washington, D.C. will not extend to other states.

Next, USDE has denied multiple state requests to replace statewide assessment administration with results from locally administered or formative assessments.

Finally, USDE has granted other, state-specific requests—for example, allowing New Jersey to revise its assessment and granting Colorado and Oregon the flexibility to alternate the administration of English language arts and math assessments, grade by grade.

2. Will these decisions impact Pennsylvania's plans?

No. Our team has closely monitored USDE's waiver determinations and reached the conclusion that significant, additional flexibility from USDE is unlikely. Further, pursuing additional flexibility would require PDE to 1) narrow the extended assessment windows communicated earlier this spring, 2) develop a formal waiver request of USDE, and 3) await USDE action on this waiver. We appreciate that leaders of key statewide education groups—including the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, the Pennsylvania Principals Association, the Pennsylvania State Education Association, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units, the Pennsylvania Association of Career and Technical Administrators, and the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools—served as a critical sounding board as we evaluated the developments out of USDE.

3. Why not ask to narrow the assessment to a single content area for each grade?

With USDE maintaining its position that a statewide assessment administration must occur, the focus must remain on how best to manage that administration while prioritizing staff and student safety and safeguarding the technical quality of an assessment that already faces significant comparability and sampling threats. Given this, a one-time shift to an alternating, grade by grade achievement measure, even if granted, would disrupt local planning, further erode data quality, and reduce the information available to individual students and families.

So much of the past year has required difficult decisions as the ground keeps shifting. In this case, we think the best approach—for our students, educators, and systems—is to stay the course with an assessment administration that meets Federal requirements, provides school entities with flexibilities in administration, and ensures that results are disconnected from any high stakes decision and rather used only for instructional and other planning purposes.

As always, our team will continue to support in any way we can. Thank you for your responsiveness, thoughtful planning, and leadership throughout this process.

Sincerely,



Matthew Stem
Deputy Secretary