

September 30, 2020

**To the Members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly:**

COVID-19 has disrupted public education. Schools in the Commonwealth are working overtime and adapting in all sorts of ways to meet the needs of students and families. In this uncertain environment, administering statewide summative assessments (PSSA for grades 3-8 and Keystone exams for high school students) will be a significant challenge, but delaying these assessments for a second straight year risks the loss of critical information that would highlight opportunity gaps and help schools learn and improve upon their virtual or hybrid learning systems.

In recent years, thanks to leadership at the state and local levels, schools in Pennsylvania have made positive strides in improving educational outcomes for students. As one example, Philadelphia—where the majority of students come from low-income and minority backgrounds—saw multiple years of modest but steady student growth from 2015 to 2019. How do we know about this progress? Because of the data from the PSSA, Keystone and PVAAS systems.

When the 2019-20 school year began, we were all looking forward to building on this momentum. Unfortunately, when school buildings closed in response to the pandemic and pivoted to online instruction, not only did progress likely stall, but in many cases schools and students may have been pushed off their starting point.

The pandemic put students, families, teachers, communities and government officials in an unprecedented situation. With schools scrambling to adjust, it made sense last spring to skip a year of summative assessments. Even so, the decision came with a cost. We do not know how much learning loss students experienced last year or how much wider achievement gaps grew. To skip the assessments for a second year would slow Pennsylvania's recovery from COVID, leaving schools and policymakers without an understanding of how effective education during the pandemic has been—and to what extent it has created gaps that must be addressed.

Summative assessments are the best means we have to gather and report comparable data about student achievement and growth. Families, schools and policymakers need this data to inform good decision-making:

**Transparency:** Parents deserve clear information about how schools are serving students so they can make the best decisions for their children. The Data Quality Campaign's [national parent poll](#), conducted in spring 2020, found that 77% of parents agree that states should resume end-of-year assessments in math and reading in 2021.

**Resource Allocation:** The pandemic is wreaking economic havoc that could limit tax revenues for years to come. With public dollars a precious resource, statewide assessments will help the General Assembly and educational leaders to direct efforts to the students and communities most in need, and behind the evidence showing which educational strategies are delivering for students.

**Fair Share of Federal Resources:** [The U.S. Department of Education has indicated that it will not grant assessment waivers](#) in 2020-21. Thus, canceling Pennsylvania's summative assessments could

put the state at risk of not receiving its full share of federal support for schools.

**Learning What Works:** Assessment data will help educators to identify schools and districts whose approaches during the pandemic are working for students, and to study, understand and elevate best practices.

Without question, administering PSSA and Keystone exams will be a significant challenge in this environment. However, we are only one month into the new school year, and we have a state full of thoughtful and dedicated educators, not to mention nearly 2 million students who are counting on all of us. We urge the Assembly not to act hastily. Student assessments are a source of vital information for parents, educators and fiscal decision makers. Let's figure out a way to administer them safely and smartly. We welcome the opportunity to help do that, and to explore other steps that can help Pennsylvania get back on the road to progress.

Signatories:

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