

CARE-ED

California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education

A CALL TO CANCEL 2021 STUDENT TESTING IN CALIFORNIA

February 5, 2021

Dear Governor Gavin Newsom, Superintendent Tony Thurmond, and the California State Board of Education:

As the state and the nation struggle to address the impact of the pandemic on public schools, we urge California to cancel the 2020-2021 CAASPP student testing in English language arts, mathematics, and science by:

- a) Requesting a waiver by the U.S. Department of Education of federal ESSA student-testing requirements;
- b) Waiving additional state mandates and any consequences attached to their results; and
- c) Exempting ELPAC (English Language Proficiency Assessments for California) from such waivers because ELPAC can facilitate reclassification for English-language learners.

Our three requests reinforce the requests by the [California Teachers Association](#) as well as the national call to suspend spring 2021 testing by [FairTest](#), and mirror the proposal being considered by the [state of New York](#). If we act quickly and forcefully, California could lead the nation in pressuring the U.S. Department of Education to waive requirements nationwide.

We highlight three research findings to support our request. First, as we described five years ago in our research brief, [Common Core State Standards Assessments in California](#), *ample research exists on problems with California's CAASPP*, particularly regarding validity, reliability, and fairness, which are exactly the problems evident with standardized testing and high-stakes testing in general. We argued then that such assessments should not be administered, much less be the basis for high-stakes decision making.

Second, *these problems are amplified during the pandemic*. In another brief that we published a few months ago, [The Shift to Online Education During and Beyond the Pandemic](#), we described the “law of amplification” and ways that the shift to online education can widen long-standing inequities and injustices in education, particularly for groups already disadvantaged in schools. These challenges with technology, logistics, and safety would unquestionably apply to testing. In fact, with the vast changes and differences in curriculum and instruction that resulted from the shift to online education, the content validity of the tests is almost certainly inconsequential, as described by the [National Education Policy Center](#). Furthermore, with so much trauma in the lives of students and families, schools need to invest all they can into quality time with students, not stress-inducing, time-consuming tests that provide narrow data of limited use. We know that the Board already decided to shorten the math and English tests for 2021; we are urging you to go further and to cancel altogether.

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Third, in contrast to proponents of 2021 testing who argue that cancelling the tests would result in a lack of data to inform important decisions, ***we urge choosing more appropriate instruments and methods*** to learn what we need to know in order to make the best decisions for our students and communities:

- a) **Data for Longitudinal and Comparative Analyses:** We agree with those who argue that we need high-level and nationwide data to track student learning and performance longitudinally and comparatively, but state standardized testing does not provide such data. For such purposes, we already have the Nation’s Report Card, i.e., NAEP (the National Assessment of Educational Progress), which is far less expensive and intrusive, far more valid and reliable, and can disaggregate by state/region, race, income, gender, age, language status, disability status, and so on. The Trump/DeVos administration cancelled NAEP for spring 2021 but did not waive ESSA-mandated state testing, which was the opposite of what should happen: if any wide-scale testing is to resume later in 2021 or 2022, it should be NAEP, not state testing.
- b) **Data for School and System Improvement:** We agree with those who argue that we need district- and school-level data to ensure that certain groups, particularly historically underserved or high-needs groups, are not left behind or facing civil-rights discrimination, but state standardized testing provides data that is far too narrow. To ensure a more complete picture of student learning, California is leading the nation in developing a “dashboard” of indicators of school and district performance and impact; similarly, the national [Schools of Opportunity project](#) offers a far more research-based, comprehensive, robust, and equity-oriented framework for assessment than standardized testing. The hundreds of millions of state and federal dollars spent on ESSA testing in California every year should instead be aligned with such frameworks, namely, by investing in and prioritizing the aspects of schools and systems that we know to improve student learning and wellness.
- c) **Data to Improve Instruction and Student Learning:** We agree with those who argue that we need to assess where each student is succeeding and struggling in order to improve and tailor instruction and support, but state standardized testing fails to provide such data. Not only are the tests far too narrow for such evaluation, but also the test scores come back to teachers far too late. A range of alternative instruments and methods have been developed or identified to assess students more accurately, comprehensively, consistently, ethically, and equitably, including teacher-led assessments that can support formative interventions and/or summative milestones.

We, a statewide alliance of educational scholars and researchers that centers on equity, democracy, and justice, stand ready to work collectively with you as we reframe the conversation about testing and move policy and practice in these directions.

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