

February 9, 2021

Dear Acting Secretary Cardona:

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact every corner of our state. The gross inequity the pandemic has reinforced, both in health and economic outcomes, means our least resourced students feel the brunt of the pandemic's impact. Even as our newly elected national leadership signals that providing sustained COVID relief is a priority, we are still faced with the consequences of the paucity of relief and guidance provided by the former administration.

These consequences include a slow, inequitable rollout of vaccinations. Communities of color are disproportionately dying from the virus but very few people from these communities have been vaccinated. This is especially problematic as new, more infectious variants of COVID become more prevalent. Despite the committed efforts of educators to provide the most robust, appropriate and safe educational experience for our students, the pandemic's disruptive force has meant that students have had inconsistent and uneven experiences within schools, across districts, and among regions. As our students and communities continue to navigate through instability and uncertainty, we **implore you to provide a federal ESSA (Every School Succeeds Act) waiver for standardized testing for the 2020-2021 school year.** Suspending standardized testing will allow us the opportunity to expend our time, energy and resources on efforts that will help our communities heal, recuperate and recover from this devastating pandemic.

There are several reasons why a waiver of standardized testing is needed immediately. First, testing will further exacerbate the inequities that existed pre-COVID. Students who attend under-resourced schools traditionally score lower on standardized tests. These are the same students who have suffered most from the pandemic. Conditions have worsened for students who faced food insecurities, lacked quality healthcare, housing, and technology pre-COVID. These students require intensive support—not standardized testing. Our resources need to be centered on providing them with the physical and mental health supports they need to perform academically. Testing students in the midst of a health, economic, and social crisis is not compassionate or trauma-informed and will not promote whole child well-being and development.

Second, given this last year of instability, standardized tests will yield inaccurate and unreliable data. Not only have students and communities experienced various levels of trauma and loss, students have experienced different versions of schooling—in person, remote, hybrid, and variations of all three.

This has required that educators re-prioritize academic goals and curricular focus. Standardized tests do not reflect these altered expectations and experiences and so will not provide an accurate or realistic picture of students' strengths and needs. There is no way to compare students' scores across districts, nor is it valid to compare students' scores to previous years when schooling was remarkably different. The effects and impacts of COVID have not been "standardized" across school communities.

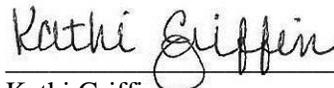
It is unfair, then, to utilize standardized metrics to make assessments across such widely diverse circumstances. The significant time, effort, and resources that will be required for in-person testing—only to produce inaccurate and unreliable data—can and should be more thoughtfully invested into real relief for our students and school communities.

Third, in-person testing will require time-consuming, complicated and potentially dangerous scheduling decisions for school leaders. Over half of Illinois’s students are learning remotely. This suggests that a significant number of families believe that conditions are not yet safe enough for in-person instruction. To require in-person testing after families have opted for remote learning is unfair. If it is unsafe for students to return to school buildings for in-person instruction, it is unreasonable to demand that they return for in-person testing. Additionally, many schools have remained remote because they do not have the ability to follow necessary social distancing and safety protocols. In-person testing will require school leaders to spend an inordinate amount of time arranging staggered testing schedules to limit the number of students and staff in the building at one time. It may take weeks to complete testing under these circumstances, resulting in weeks of lost instructional time. It will also disrupt the vital socioemotional support educators are providing as they work to build, rebuild and re-establish trusting relationships with students.

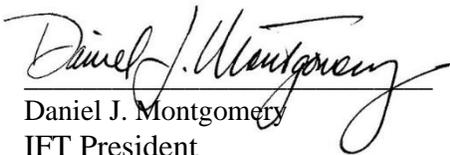
As school leaders and practitioners, we are committed to the students and communities we serve. Since the start of the pandemic, we have never stopped working to ensure the safety and well-being of our school communities. While the COVID-19 pandemic has caused chaos and devastation, it has also provided an opportunity for us to “build back better.” **We implore you to provide relief for our educators and students with a U.S. DOE testing waiver process.** Rest assured that we will strongly urge the Illinois State Board of Education to apply for this waiver when provided the opportunity. As advocates and vanguards for public education, we invite you to work alongside us as we strive to build a better, stronger and more equitable education system for students and families across this nation.



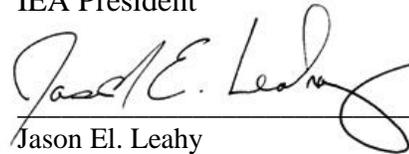
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Cc: Dr. Carmen Ayala, IL State Superintendent