

MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents and Independent School Heads
FROM: Heather Bouchey, Ph.D., Deputy Secretary of Education
SUBJECT: Preparing for 2021 Statewide Assessment
DATE: December 15, 2020

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Purpose

Over the past few months, we have worked together as a community to support our students in unprecedented ways during a challenging time. As we approach the second half of the 2020-2021 school year, we remain focused on the health and wellness of students, staff and families, and also extend our focus to include upcoming statewide assessments.

This is by no means a typical year and there is still much uncertainty related to federal requirements for assessment, reporting and accountability. In many ways, we have risen to the challenges of imagining and planning for a series of assessment opportunities, holding strong to our commitment to equity, accessibility and fairness.

This memo is intended to inform districts and schools, both public and independent, about how we are planning for administration of statewide assessments as a community. Though there are still many unknowns, we can minimally begin to take action based on what we do know: currently, states are federally required to administer statewide assessments this year. This memo provides an overview of what we will embark on together over the coming weeks and months, to the best of our knowledge.

Overall, there is still much to learn about the parameters we will be operating within this year. As the situation around SY21 statewide assessment continues to evolve, we will continue to work together, keeping lines of communication open and implementing necessary supports.

What to Expect: Preparing for Administration of Assessments

Beginning in January 2021, districts and schools will engage in a large-scale assessment system: the ACCESS for English Learners 2.0 (including the Alternate ACCESS for ELs 2.0). Shortly thereafter, schools will administer assessments of ELA, Math and Science (March 2021). Please refer to documentation provided by the testing vendors for complete advisement on preparation activities and timelines.

There are a few logistical considerations that schools and districts should keep top of mind while engaging in test administration preparations:

- In planning to administer statewide assessments this year, schools and districts should consider and follow local and state guidance and regulations related to the COVID-19 response.
- Especially when hybrid instruction is taking place, but likely in all cases considering required social distancing, administrative support should be provided for scheduling test sessions.

Please note the following time sensitive updates:

- Statewide assessment will only be administered in person during SY21 (i.e., no remote administration (see: [Factors Under Examination](#))).
 - Please note: Guidance on delivering statewide assessments to fully remote students is forthcoming.
- The first test administration window for the 2020-2021 school year opens on Jan. 4, 2021. Schools in Vermont will administer the ACCESS for ELs 2.0 and the Alternate ACCESS for ELs 2.0 in-person. (Note: this is the only delivery mode available for this assessment). At this point in the school year, we must prepare for full administration of this assessment, which impacts the operations of schools and districts variably across the state.
- The state of Vermont is extending the ACCESS for ELs (including Kindergarten, Alternate, Paper and Online) testing window. The window will extend to March 30, 2021. Please consider the following suggestions for scheduling testing:
 - **Jan. 4 - March 9, 2021**
 - Prioritize testing students in Grades 3-9 and 11 who will be engaging in content area assessments during the latter part of the window.
 - **March 10 – March 30, 2021**
 - Extra room to complete testing for students in the following grades, who are not participating in ELA/Math/Science summative assessments: K-2, 10, and 12.
- The Physical Education (PE) assessments (both general and alternate) are officially canceled for the 2020-2021 school year and will not be prepared for, administered or reported on. The AOE is planning to include this request in the State Plan Addendum process.
- Please note that the PE assessment can continue to be used in-person in a formative way at district/school discretion and should only be done so in accordance to local and state guidance related to the COVID-19 response. It is important to note that assessment does not imply instruction. That is, though the PE assessment is canceled for the 2020-2021 school year, standards-based PE instruction is still required and the focus on maintaining health-related physical fitness to support the social-emotional well-being of students and their academic success should remain.
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been postponed and will not be administered this year. This assessment is anticipated to be administered during the 2021-2022 school year.

As a community, we will plan for the administration of the ELA, Mathematics, Science, and English Language Proficiency (ELP) general and alternate assessments. Again, the PE assessments are canceled.

What to Expect: Proposing Changes to Vermont's State Plan

Developing a State Plan Addendum

We anticipate that the US Department of Education will allow for limited modifications to states' ESEA Consolidated State Plans specifically for the 2020-2021 school year. State Plan Addendums proposed by individual states are tentatively due to be submitted by Feb. 1, 2021. An assembled team within the AOE is currently working on developing and defining a request for an Addendum to the Vermont State Plan.

More information related to this work will be shared as we continue to develop and finalize our submission. In the meantime, we will continue to work with vendors and monitor for any changes at the federal level and will remain available to support districts and schools in whatever ways possible.

Factors Under Examination

The following subsections describe some of the considerations being most heavily weighted in the process of developing a State Plan Addendum request and in the ongoing dialogue related to supporting schools and districts during this challenging time. This list is not exhaustive but is included to provide some direct insight into the steps being taken at the state level to amplify the collective voice of our education community.

Scheduling

- ELP assessments: We are limited in how far we can move the window because of the assessment vendor's operating system limitations. Too many consortium members administering the assessment simultaneously is outside of the vendor's capacity.
- General and alternate content assessments (ELA, Math, Science): the test window traditionally extends out to the end of the school year, so the only option for adjustment would be to begin testing earlier (e.g., after February break). This adjustment could give schools more time to schedule out testing, but vendors and schools/districts may not be ready for deployment this early in the year. This would also introduce greater variability in exposure to content/instruction leading up to the assessment (i.e., all students have experienced less in-person instruction leading up to the assessment this year and widening the window would allow for some students to perhaps experience even less prior to testing). The current window for content area assessments is vast and is likely sufficient for the current school year's administration of ELA, Math and Science statewide summative assessments.
- Overall, it is important to note that an earlier testing window may lead to less instruction being delivered before the assessment.

Delivery Mode

- ELP assessments: The assessment vendor does not offer a remote version of these assessments. They are available for in-person administration only.
- General content assessments: A fully in-person administration would at least be comparable *to an extent* (noting the limitation that not all students have received the same dosage of in-person instruction and the assessment opportunity is distinct from other years' administrations). Results might be comparable if all students receive the same assessment experience, as opposed to some students engaging in a remote delivery (unstandardized) and some in in-person delivery (standardized). Within all scenarios, there are equity concerns (i.e., access to technology resources and the internet, homelife, etc.). The most significant concerns are around a fully remote administration.
- Alternate content assessments: These assessments cannot be administered remotely because of the nature of the supports needed by the participating students. These assessments must be administered in-person. Offering the general assessments remotely, while alternate assessments cannot be administered in this way, may compromise the equity and accessibility of the overall assessment program.
- Overall, we need to think about what teachers are doing for logistical reasons. Hybrid instruction models could theoretically require educators to instruct a class of students through one mode of instruction while proctoring an assessment to the remainder of the class using the other mode of instruction. This applies regardless of the mode of assessment and depends fully on the state of instructional operations at the time of testing.

Participation

- General content assessments: It is unlikely that 95% of students (the federal requirement) will participate in testing. This is an equity issue for all assessments when we consider participation, especially when quantified within and across subgroups of students.
- Alternate content assessments: Considering that the Alternate assessments cannot be delivered in a remote setting, it is critical to develop a system to ensure students have the supports they need to participate. Not meeting the federally required 95% participation rate will also impact 1% waiver necessity (i.e., lower participation may lead to alternate assessment participation below 1%).
- Overall, there may be a significant number of students who cannot participate in in-person testing due to medical fragility¹. This may occur more frequently within special populations (students with disabilities and English Learners). It is also possible that students may share their homes with another person who is medically fragile and more vulnerable to COVID-19. There may also be students who will not

¹ Medical fragility refers to a condition which, within the COVID-19 pandemic, prevents the student from engaging in in-person instruction. These students have been determined by a medical professional to be vulnerable/medically fragile/high-risk and are therefore receiving fully remote instruction.

be able to access statewide assessments due to other COVID-19-related reasons (e.g., relative exposure, diagnosis of COVID-19, mandated quarantine).

- The current process for considering medical exemption requests needs to be reviewed with consideration of unique situations that may present during the pandemic.
- A process for documenting non-participation specifically related to COVID-19 for fully remote learners (e.g., medical fragility of student or household member prohibits in-person participation) needs to be defined.
- A process for responding to the potential of a systematic shut down (at the school, district or state-level) during the testing window needs to be developed and communicated.
- This work, to some extent, will need to be informed by federal guidance which has yet to be received.

Results

- It is important to note that the reliability of results and the validity of their interpretations will not be fully understood until after assessments have been administered. Under typical circumstances, statewide assessments produce widely valued data. This year, within the context of a global pandemic, we cannot certainly know if this value will be realized until after the assessments have been administered.
- There may be value to the data resulting from statewide assessment administration and it will be crucial to communicate this value to the field and the public. We may be able to understand more about how learning has taken place across various modes of instruction, for example. This value depends on the quality of the data resulting from the assessment opportunity. Vendors have indicated that there is a possibility that results will be comparable across schools within this specific school year (given one mode of administration).
- ELP assessments: Results are traditionally used to match students with appropriate services through classification of students into various levels of English language proficiency. If results from the 2021 administration are not valid and reliable to the typical and acceptable degree, a process for reclassification of students through use of other measures may need to be identified.
- Limitation to the use of results from this year's administration of statewide assessments may include:
 - Our testing vendors have communicated that reporting dates will be delayed this year to allow for incorporating contextual data and reviewing data for overall measurement quality. Our vendors have also communicated that the quality of the data resulting from assessments this year (reliability, validity, etc.) is uncertain and we may not be able to use data from our ELA, Math, and Science assessments in traditional ways for local or federal reporting.
 - Results will not be comparable to previous (or future) years' performance. They will also not necessarily be comparable across modes of delivery (i.e., remote versus in-person).

- At this point in time we expect that the state will not reach the threshold of 95% participation. This poses the concern that the results will not come from a representative sample of the state, and therefore will not be appropriate for use as part of the accountability system. Federal and public reporting would also be a concern under such conditions.
- Overall, in some ways, we will need to wait to see what the data look like before we can consider how we can (or cannot) use the data and how our reporting platforms and systems might need to be adjusted. In other ways, we can start to think about changes that are more likely to be necessary in SY21 (i.e., changing score reports so they are visually distinct from other years, building channels for communicating regularly about assessment, reporting and accountability. Engaging in a community-wide dialogue focused on challenges and needs for SY21 statewide summative assessment will provide helpful information to guide provision of support and general decision-making. Conversations around reporting and assessment data should consider that the state will perhaps not meet the federally required 95% participation rate.

Existing Guidance and Resources Available

[Memo: 2021 Administration of NAEP Postponed to 2022](#)

[2021 NAEP Update Letter](#)

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