



February 22, 2021

Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond, President  
 California State Board of Education  
 1430 N Street, Suite 5111  
 Sacramento, CA 95814

Via email only

**Re: Administration of statewide summative assessments**

Dear President Darling-Hammond:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we affirm the importance of administering the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) suite of assessments in spring 2021 and provide the below recommendations. As parent, community-based, educational equity, civil rights, and business organizations sharing a commitment to advocating for equitable access to a quality education for English learners, students of color, and students living in poverty, we consider assessments to be an important tool for understanding student progress and making equity-focused decisions. We recommend that:

1. The State Board of Education (SBE) maintain its decision to administer short-form assessments for math and English language arts (November 2020) and the revised science assessment (January 2020);

2. The California Department of Education (CDE) implement a thorough and intentional communications plan to inform education stakeholders about the administration of assessments; and
3. State education leaders prioritize using assessments to inform California's education recovery and the allocation of resources over using them for accountability purposes.

### **I. We urge the SBE to maintain the path toward administering assessments this spring.**

While the SBE approved revisions of the assessment blueprints for English language arts/literacy, math, and science in order to reduce testing time, there are education stakeholders advocating for California to seek a complete waiver from assessments if the opportunity arises. We support the SBE's November 2020 decision to revise the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for ELA and mathematics blueprints to allow for a short test form despite appeals to seek a waiver from administering the CAASPP assessments in any form. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting implementation of distance learning has taken a significant toll on California's students, and we have scant information to understand the impact of these extreme circumstances. Moreover, we know students who were already marginalized before the pandemic have been disproportionately impacted by the negative aspects of distance learning and COVID-19. School and district leaders, students, parents and community members need as much information as possible to better understand these impacts and develop solutions centering the needs of these students. The planned CAASPP assessments are one source of much-needed data to begin to understand how to best meet the needs of students during the pandemic and into the recovery period.

During these times of academic uncertainty, it is even more important that parents have a clear understanding of their children's academic status based on the state's standards, especially compared with other students in their school, district, and in the state. Without these assessments, parents may have very little information about what their children's academic needs are and how to best serve them. Families should also receive test reports with clear guidance about how to interpret and use the results to advocate for their children.

### **II. For the assessments to be as successful as possible, the CDE must develop a comprehensive administration and communications plan and provide the necessary supports to schools and districts to implement it.**

Many educators, parents, and students question the value of administering assessments during this challenging time. We have observed that this is due, in part, to a lack of clarity about how data from assessments will be collected and used. For example, partners at a community-based organization shared that the parents she works with are concerned their children will be penalized in some way for receiving low test scores, similar to receiving a low grade. This example illustrates that effective communication regarding spring assessments is crucial to clarifying the role assessments will play in best serving student needs. It is important that educators, parents, and students understand that assessments will provide valuable information about individual and collective student academic needs and will help decision-makers at the local and state levels effectively allocate resources to support the most vulnerable students.

Educators, parents, and students must also understand the logistics of participating in the assessments – remotely or in-person – to increase the possibility that assessment results will be valid and reliable. It will also be important for students and people supporting students, particularly English learners and students with disabilities, to know how to access the test accommodations to which they are entitled. During COVID-19 when communities most affected by distance learning are also experiencing disparate health outcomes, logistics must also take into consideration any undue burdens, such as economic losses or health and safety concerns, that may be imposed on communities to participate in the assessment.

In order to ensure that the communication plan is as effective as possible, we recommend that the state work in partnership with community-based organizations that understand both the most effective ways to communicate with communities – marginalized communities in particular – and how to best address the concerns and priorities of those communities, including tending to students' well-being as they prepare for and participate in assessments.

**III. We support the decision to abstain from using assessments in the next year for accountability purposes, so long as local and state leaders use assessment results to allocate resources and to inform state and local educational recovery efforts from the pandemic.**

We understand that it's unlikely that this year's state assessments in California will provide the robust data on school and district performance necessary for accountability decisions, due to the unprecedented circumstances resulting from the pandemic. For this reason, we would support the state's decision to refrain from using this year's assessment results for accountability purposes. In this context, we refer to accountability as the identification of schools and local education agencies (LEAs) for differentiated assistance through color-coded ratings on the California Schools Dashboard based on assessment results.

However, we think it is likely that assessments will reflect the impact the pandemic has had on students academically. Districts should rely on this information in partnership with community stakeholders to help in their allocation of local resources in their Local Control Accountability Plans. And, the state should use the insights gained from assessments to plan the most effective use of resources to address the academic needs of students caused by the pandemic. The assessments should also inform the state's approach to guiding districts and schools in the crucial work of academic recovery once the pandemic subsides and all students are attending school in person.

Thank you for your consideration of our views. We look forward to working with CDE to support the successful administration of assessments this spring.

Sincerely,

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cc: Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond  
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