February 15, 2021

Dear Secretary-Designate Miguel Cardona:

As the nation struggles to address the impact of the pandemic on public schools, we urge the U.S. Department of Education to waive federal ESSA student-testing requirements for all states for 2020-2021 (as was done for 2019-2020).

We, Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE), are an alliance of hundreds of deans of schools and colleges of education across the country who draw on our expertise as researchers and leaders to highlight three research findings to support our request.

First, problems abound with high-stakes standardized testing of students, particularly regarding validity, reliability, fairness, bias, and cost. National research centers and organizations have synthesized these findings about standardized testing, including the National Educational Policy Center and FairTest. For example, some of the harmful impacts of high-stakes testing include: distorted and less rigorous curriculum; the misuse of test scores, including grade retention, tracking, and teacher evaluation; deficit framing (blaming) of students and their families and ineffective remedial interventions, particularly for communities of color and communities in poverty; and heightened anxiety and shame for teachers and students. Researchers have also spoken specifically about annual state testing, like in California and Texas, arguing 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. The research brief, The Shift to Online Education During and Beyond the Pandemic, describes the “law of amplification” and ways that the shift to online education widens 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, whether in-person or online. For example, districts that administer computer-based tests in-person are now trying to determine how to recall computers that were loaned to students in order to have enough computers in school, which in effect, means that those students will not have computers for remote learning for weeks. In fact, with the vast changes and differences in curriculum and instruction that resulted from the shift to online education over the past year—that is, the reduction in opportunities to learn, particularly in schools that were already under-resourced—the content validity of the tests is almost certainly compromised, 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, supplemental tutoring, and enrichment and wellness programs, not stress-inducing, time-consuming tests that provide narrow data of limited use.

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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 less expensive and intrusive, more valid and reliable, and can disaggregate by state/region, race, income, gender, age, language status, disability status, and so on. NAEP was cancelled for 2021. Large-scale data on the impact of the pandemic can be documented by valid administration of NAEP in 2022.

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. However, state standardized testing provides data that are far too narrow. To ensure a more complete picture of student learning, states like California are developing a “dashboard” of indicators of school and district performance and impact. Yet another framework for assessing how schools and classrooms are closing the “opportunity gap” is that developed by the national Schools of Opportunity project. The billions of state and federal dollars spent on ESSA testing 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. The tests are far too disconnected from instruction for such evaluation, and 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 stand ready to work collectively with you as we reframe the conversation about testing nationwide and move policy and practice in these directions, and we request the opportunity to meet with you to discuss how we might be of service.

Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE)
Contact Person: Kevin Kumashiro, Co-Founder, kevin@kevinkumashiro.com

The following 201 education deans and leaders across the United States have endorsed this statement (affiliations are listed for identification purposes only):

Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE)
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A. Lin Goodwin, Former Vice Dean, Teachers College, Columbia University
Abbe Futterman, Director, Bank Street College
Ada Beth Cutler, Former Dean, Montclair State University
Adrienne Redmond-Sanogo, Associate Dean, Oklahoma State University
Alberto Lopez-Carrasquillo, Associate Dean, Northeastern Illinois University
Amanda Bozack, Director, Radford University
Amity Noltemeyer, Chair, Miami University
Amy Ginsberg, Dean, William Paterson University
Amy Kline, Associate Dean, Seton Hall University
Anita Susan Charles, Director, Bates College
Ann Cox, Assistant Dean, Bank Street College of Education
Anthony Conelli, Chair, Bank Street College of Education
Arnold Paguio, Director, Chabot College
Barbara Flores, Board Member, San Bernardino City Unified School District
Barbara Henderson, Director, San Francisco State University
Bob Hannafin, Former Dean, Fairfield University
Bob Hughes, Former Dean, Seattle University
Bree Picower, Co-Director, Montclair State University
Brenda S Fyfe, Dean Emerita, Webster University School of Education
Brian D. Schultz, Chair, Miami University
Brian P. Chinni, Assistant Dean, Ramapo College of New Jersey
Bruce Larson, Dean, Western Washington University
Bruce Marlowe, Chair, University of South Carolina Beaufort
Carol Batker, Former Associate Dean, University of San Francisco
Carol Ciotto, Interim Assistant Dean, Central Connecticut State University
Cecelia E Traugh, Dean, Bank Street College of Education
Charisse Cowan Pitre, Former Chair, Seattle University
Cheryl E Jones-Walker, Associate Dean, University of San Francisco
Cheryl L. George, Chair, Saint Joseph's University
Cheryl Stanley, Former Associate Dean, Westfield State University
Chris Ray, Head of School, North Dakota State University
Christian Z. Goering, Past Chair, University of Arkansas
Christine Sleeter, Former Director, California State University-Monterey Bay
Christopher B. Knaus, Former Director, University of Washington-Tacoma
Cindy Gerstl-Pepin, Dean, University of Massachusetts-Amherst
Cindy Juntunen, Dean, University of North Dakota
Colleen Mulholland, Dean, University of Northern Iowa
Cynthia Lewis, Chair, University of California-Santa Cruz
Darius Prier, Former Associate Dean, Duquesne University
David C. Berliner, Former Dean, Arizona State University
David Preston, Founder, Open-Source Learning Academy
David Rutledge, Head and Director, New Mexico State University
Deanna Sands, Former Dean, Seattle University
Debbie K Jackson, Chair, Cleveland State University
Delia C Garcia, Former Dean, Florida International University
Denise Taliaferro Baszile, Interim Dean, Miami University
Denisha Jones, Director, Sarah Lawrence College
Dirck Roosevelt, Director, Teachers College, Columbia University
Donald Corley, Former Vice Principal, Fresno Unified School District
Donna Breault, Dean, Ashland University
Elizabeth Meyer, Associate Dean, University of Colorado-Boulder
Elizabeth R. Hinde, Dean, Metropolitan State University of Denver
Elizabeth Stringer Keefe, Director, Stonehill College
Encarna Rodriguez, Chair, Saint Joseph's University

Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE)
https://www.educationdeans.org
Enrique Morales-Diaz, Associate Dean, Westfield State University
Evan Anderson, Principal, Voyager Public Charter School
Francisco Rios, Former Dean, Western Washington University
Gaetane Jean-Marie, Dean, Rowan University
Gil Schmerler, Former Chair, Bank Street College
Gilda Martinez-Alba, Assistant Dean, Towson University
Gina M Hill, Principal, Oakland Unified School District
Hanfu Mi, Former Dean, University of Illinois-Springfield
Hayriye Kayi-Aydar, Director, University of Arizona
Heather Lattimer, Dean, San José State University
Hope Longwell-Grice, Sr. Associate Dean, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Isabel Nunez, Director, Purdue University-Fort Wayne
James C. Lane, Former Dean, Columbia College
James O'Brien, Principal, Brooklyn Community Arts & Media High School (BCAM)
Jane S. Bray, Former Dean, Old Dominion University
Janna L. Scarborough, Dean, East Tennessee State University
Jason Lane, Dean, University at Albany, SUNY
Jean Haar, Dean, Minnesota State University-Mankato
Jennifer Austin, Principal, Vacaville Unified School District
Jennifer Mueller, Dean, St. Cloud State University
Jennifer Robinson, Executive Director, Montclair State University
Jesse P. Turner, Director, Central Connecticut State University
Jessica Charles, Director, Bank Street Graduate School of Education
Jessica Reed, Chair, Touro University California
Jessica Wontropski, Director, Bank Street College of Education
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Joelle Tutela, Director, William Paterson University
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José Cintrón, Former Chair, Sacramento State University
Joseph E. Keferl, Dean, Wright State University
Joy Ellebbane, Director, Bank Street College of Education
Julian Vasquez Heilig, Dean, University of Kentucky
Julie C. Luecke, Associate Dean, Edgewood College
Karen DeMoss, Chair, Denison University
Karen Santos Rogers, Associate Dean, Trinity Washington University
Kate Sjostrom, Associate Director, University of Illinois-Chicago
Katerine Bielaczyc, Director, Clark University
Katherine Ratcliffe, Chair, University of Hawai‘i-Mānoa
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Kathryn F Whitmore, Chair, Metropolitan State University of Denver
Kathy Kramer, Dean, Carroll University
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Kenneth Teitelbaum, Former Dean, University of North Carolina-Wilmington
Kevin Kumashiro, Former Dean, University of San Francisco School of Education
Kimberly White-Smith, Dean, University of La Verne
Kristen Turner, Director, Drew University
Lana Collet-Klingenberg, Associate Dean, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater
Laurie Mullen, Dean, Towson University
Lee Anne Bell, Director, Barnard College, Columbia University

Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE)
https://www.educationdeans.org
Leigh Patel, Former Associate Dean, University of Pittsburgh
Lesley Koplow, Director, Bank Street College of Education
Linda Haling, Dean, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh
Linda Haymes, Chair, Touro University California
Lisa Altemueller, Associate Dean, Metropolitan State University of Denver
Lisa Fragala, Board of Education Chair, Lane Community College
Lisa Norton, Dean, Touro University California
Lisa Smulyan, Former Chair, Swarthmore College
Louise J Santiago, Assistant Dean, Touro University California
Lynda D. Fernholz, Associate Dean and Head of School, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
M. Francyne Huckaby, Associate Dean, Texas Christian University
Marc Brasof, Director, Arcadia University
Marcie Osinsky, Director, Boston Teacher Residency
Marcie Wycoff-Horn, Dean, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
Marcos Pizarro, Associate Dean, San José State University
Margaret Finders, Former Chair, Augsburg University
Maria E Franquiz, Former Dean, University of Utah
Maria Hantzopoulos, Chair and Director, Vassar College
Marilee Coles-Ritchie, Director, Westminster College
Mark Davies, Dean, State University of New York-Oneonta
Mark Nagasawa, Director, Bank Street College of Education
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Mark Stern, Chair, Colgate University
Maureen Gillette, Dean, Seton Hall University
Megan S. Kennedy, Chair, Westfield State University
Mia Tuan, Dean, University of Washington
Michael C. Rodriguez, Interim Dean, University of Minnesota
Michael Dantley, Former Dean, Miami University
Michael Velasquez, Principal, Avanti High School
Michelle Bryan, Associate Dean, University of South Carolina
Michelle D. Young, Dean, Loyola Marymount University
Michelle Hall, Director, Chapman University
Michelle Samura, Associate Dean, Chapman University
Michelle Sobolak, Director, University of Pittsburgh
Nihat Polat, Chair, Texas State University
Nimisha Patel, Chair, Wright State University
Noah Borroto, Director, University of San Francisco
Noah De Lissovoy, Coordinator, University of Texas-Austin
Page Hersey, Assistant Director, Touro University California
Pamela Mims, Associate Dean, East Tennessee State University
Paul Parkison, Chair, University of North Florida
Peggy McNamara, Senior Director, Bank Street College of Education
Pia L. Wong, Associate Dean, Sacramento State University
Rachel Endo, Dean, University of Washington-Tacoma
Raja Gopal Bhattar, Former Assistant Provost, University of Chicago
Randy Bomer, Dean, University of North Texas
René Antrop-Gonzalez, Dean, State University of New York-New Paltz
Rhea Settles, Former Leader, Oakland Unified School District
Robin E. Hummel, Director, Bank Street Graduate School of Education
Roger Kiyomura, Director, Hawai‘i Pacific University
Roland Sintos Coloma, Former Assistant Dean, Wayne State University
Rose Rudnitski, Director, Mercy College
Sabina Vaught, Chair, University of Pittsburgh
Sandra Beyda-Lorie, Former Dean, Northeastern Illinois University
EDJE Letter to Cardona to Waive 2021 Student Testing Mandates, p. 6

Sara A. Levy, Chair, Ithaca College
Sara Patricia Chavarria, Assistant Dean, University of Arizona
Sarah Jean Baker, Coordinator, Missouri State University
Sarah Peyre, Dean, University of Rochester
Scott Ashmann, Associate Dean, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay
Scott C Bauer, Associate Dean, University of Colorado-Denver
Scott Fletcher, Dean, Lewis & Clark College
Scott W. DeWitt, Chair, Knox College
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Sharon Subreenduth, Associate Dean, University of Massachusetts-Lowell
Shelbie Witte, Head, Oklahoma State University
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Sherick Hughes, Former Chair, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
Sherrill L. Sellers, Associate Dean, Miami University
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Susan Roberta Katz, Former Chair, University of San Francisco
Suzanne Rosenblith, Dean, University at Buffalo, SUNY
Suzie Abajian, School Board Member, South Pasadena Unified School District
Tabitha Dell'Angelo, Coordinator, The College of New Jersey
Tamara F Lucas, Dean, Montclair State University
Tamabra O. Jackson, Interim Dean, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
Terrilani Chong, Former Administrator, University of Hawai‘i
Thomas Cornell, Interim Dean, Webster University
Thomas S. Poetter, Chair, Miami University
Timothy D. Slekar, Former Dean, Edgewood College
Timothy J. Frederiks, Chair, Centenary University
Tony Baez, Board Member, Milwaukee Public Schools
Tracy N. West, Dean, Columbia College
Valentine Burr, Chair, Bank Street College of Education
Vicki Bartolini, Former Chair, Wheaton College MA
Victoria F. Trinder, Director, University of Illinois-Chicago
Victoria Groves-Scott, Dean, University of Central Arkansas
Wayne Au, Former Dean, University of Washington-Bothell
Yvette Latunde, Co-Director, University of La Verne
Zachary A. Casey, Chair, Rhodes College

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