

Statewide Standardized Assessment & COVID-19

Executive Summary

The number of states throughout the country instituting state-wide school closures grows by the day as the science community urges social-distancing to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the state of New Jersey, we have already seen district closures and remote-learning plans being instituted in every county and Governor Murphy and Commissioner of Education, Dr. Lamont Repollet, have ordered a [statewide closure of schools](#) by Wednesday, March 18, 2020.

On March 12th, 2020, the United States Department of Education released a [broadcast](#) providing guidance on the statewide standardized assessment system. This broadcast states:

“Section 8401 of the ESEA (20 U.S.C. § 7861) permits the Secretary to grant waivers of certain ESEA requirements and, thus, allows the Department to provide some flexibility to schools, districts, and States that may be necessary due to the impact of COVID-19 on the provision of educational services.”

“Assessments - ...due to the unique circumstances that may arise as a result of COVID-19, such as a school closing during the entire testing window, it may not be feasible for a State to administer some or all of its assessments, in which case the Department would consider a targeted one-year waiver of the assessment requirements for those schools impacted by the extraordinary circumstances.”

At the time of publication of this report, the following states have suspended statewide standardized assessment for the 2019-2020 school year:

- Alabama: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Alaska: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Arkansas: [Seeking waiver](#) to suspend testing
- California: [Governor issued executive order suspending testing](#) for 2019-20 pending federal waiver
- Colorado: [Put tests "on pause"](#) for remainder of school year
- Connecticut: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Florida: [Cancelled tests](#) for the remainder of the school year
- Georgia: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Hawaii: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Illinois: [Seeking waiver](#) to suspend testing
- Indiana: [Seeking approval of delay](#) in testing
- Iowa: [Seeking waiver](#) to suspend testing
- Kansas: Seeking waiver to suspend testing
- Kentucky: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Louisiana: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Maine: [Suspended testing](#).
- Michigan: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Minnesota: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Mississippi: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Missouri: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Montana: [Seeking waiver](#) to suspend testing
- Nebraska: [Delayed testing](#)
- Nevada: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- New York: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- North Dakota: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Oklahoma: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Oregon: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Pennsylvania: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- South Carolina: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- South Dakota: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Tennessee: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Texas: [Cancelled spring STAAR tests](#)
- Utah: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Vermont: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Virginia: [Seeking waiver](#) to suspend testing
- Washington: [Cancelled tests](#) for remainder of school year
- West Virginia: USDE granted initial approval of waiver
- Wisconsin: [Seeking waiver](#) to suspend testing

- Wyoming: U.S. DOE granted initial approval of testing waiver

**NJEA will update this list daily. For a current EdWeek listing of all states suspending testing/seeking waivers, please visit [HERE](#).*

A Call to Action & Rationale

Due to the increasing concerns with the spread and impact of COVID-19, NJEA urges the New Jersey Department of Education to immediately submit a waiver application to the USDOE that:

1. Suspends ALL statewide standardized assessment requirements for the 2019-2020 school year, including, but not limited to, NJ-SLA assessments, alternate pathway assessments, Dynamic Learning Map, ACCESS for ELLs, Ed-TPA, etc.
2. Waives the New Jersey Exit-Testing Requirement for all current 12th graders who have yet to meet their assessment graduation requirement (alternate pathways and portfolio waivers)
3. Waives the standardized Ed-TPA assessment requirement for pre-service teachers during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years.

Typically, scientific research demands that anomalous data is either accepted, resulting in a change in theory, or discounted in order to preserve previous data collections and resulting analysis. ***Given the required approach to addressing anomalous data, why would the state of New Jersey knowingly administer a statewide assessment system that will yield unreliable results that must eventually be discounted?***

Remote learning is not equivalent to face-to-face learning and presents significant inequities for students in historically marginalized communities. ***If there is not a consistent and equitable application of remote learning plans, why would the state of New Jersey knowingly administer a statewide assessment system based in a one-size-fits-all approach?***

The mental health implications of standardized assessment are vast in a typical school year. Existing research on the impact of natural disasters on student mental health and achievement indicates that students may experience higher levels of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder that will greatly influence their performance. ***If the existing research on the mental health implications of standardized assessment reveals heightened student stress and anxiety, most notably for historically marginalized populations, why would the state of New Jersey knowingly administer a statewide assessment system in a time of crisis?***

The Purpose of Statewide Standardized Assessment

NJEA is not anti-assessment. Assessment is an essential aspect of instruction because it allows educators to determine if learning goals are being met. Assessment affects a multitude of decisions about grades, advancement, placement, student needs, curriculum design, and more. Assessments are critical for teachers to determine if their teaching is resulting in the desired impact and whether or not there might be a better way of instructing their students. Curriculum-embedded, classroom-based assessments that educators can analyze and act upon in real time provide value in ways that a statewide standardized assessment cannot. We must carefully consider the actual purpose of **state-level testing**. Thomas Guskey wrote:

“Those used in most states today are designed to rank-order schools and students for the purposes of accountability ... But assessments designed for ranking are generally not good instruments for helping teachers improve their instruction or modify their approach to individual students ... [those] best suited to guide improvements in student learning are the quizzes, tests, writing assignments, and other assessments that teachers administer on a regular basis in their classrooms.”¹

Therefore, ***when New Jersey students are able to return to school we should rely on the curriculum-embedded assessments best suited to guide improvements in their learning, not on those designed to hold schools accountable.***

The question of assessments’ value upon reconvening after school closure is supported by Economic Policy Institute research into the impact of absenteeism on performance:

“The gaps in math scores between students who did not miss any school and those who missed three or more days of school varied from 0.3 standard deviations (for students who missed 3–4 days of school the month prior to when the assessment was taken) to close to two-thirds of a standard deviation (for those who missed more than 10 days of school).”²

Clearly, a disruption in learning results in anomalous data. Typically, scientific research demands that anomalous data is either accepted, resulting in a change in theory, or discounted in order to preserve previous data collections and resulting analysis. ***Given the required approach to addressing anomalous data, why would we knowingly administer tests that will yield unreliable results that must eventually be discounted?***

One use of statewide testing is to compare district performance between districts and longitudinally within districts. Due to a wide variation in district approaches to closure, support for students during closure, and equity issues in terms of student access to technology and resources, any 2020 testing cannot be considered comparable. ***By insisting on statewide standardized***

¹ Guskey, T. (February 2003). How classroom assessments improve learning. *Educational Leadership*.

² Garcia, E. & Weiss, E. (September 2018). Student absenteeism: Who misses school and how missing school matters for performance. *Economic Policy Institute Report*

testing after students have missed a substantive amount of instruction, we no longer have a valid audit opportunity in place.

In the best interests of students, we recognize the research cited by Dylan Wiliam:

“... in every single instance in which high-stakes accountability systems have been implemented, adverse unintended consequences have significantly reduced, and in many cases have completely negated, the positive benefits of such an assessment system ... [T]he most important assessment happens minute-by-minute and day-by-day in every classroom, and that is where an investment of time, and resources will have the greatest impact on student learning.”³

When truly considering what is best for students, standardized testing after a long absence from school can only serve one purpose: to satisfy the bottom line of the industries profiting from test administration.

Remote Learning

Quality virtual/remote education can create or extend learning opportunities but is not an alternative to or replacement for traditional education that allows for regular face-to-face interaction among students, peers, and educators in the same location. Virtual/remote education should supplement, and not supplant, the existing curriculum and in-person teaching and learning environment. In the most well-designed circumstances, high quality online learning is extremely difficult to accomplish.

“At present there are serious questions about the effectiveness of many models of virtual schooling. Until these questions can be adequately addressed, policymakers should limit or consider a moratorium on their growth.”⁴

Due to the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic, New Jersey public schools have been thrust into crisis response, hastily constructing plans to “get by,” without the time, professional training, and resources necessary to construct plans that are grounded in research or principles of effective distance learning.

Anecdotally, reports are coming in that New Jersey educators are being directed to review past material only in the virtual/remote environment and to NOT introduce new material or content of any kind. Therefore, students are no longer on pace with the curriculum as it was intended to be implemented. As closures lengthen, the gaps will only widen. We're looking at a scenario where next year will be impacted as well.

³ Wiliam, D. (September 2011). What assessment can and cannot do. *Pedagogiska Magasinet*.

⁴ Molnar, A. (May 2019). Virtual Schools in the US 2019. *National Education Policy Center*.

Participation in virtual/remote learning presents significant equity issues when students and/or educators do not have equitable access to devices, wifi, and hardware/software. The remote learning plans throughout the state of New Jersey do not equitably address the needs of all populations. While some districts are able to provide emergency instruction and remote learning via technology, others are left to deliver paper-based packets and students are left to self-teach. This structure may represent the best possible emergency response that schools can provide to their diverse populations at this time, however, it further exacerbates inequities in preparation for statewide standardized assessment.

Special Education and 504 accommodations and modifications in a virtual/remote environment cannot possibly replicate the full range of accommodations and modifications available and accessible in a face-to-face environment.

In order to be in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), upon return to school-based instruction, compensatory educational services will need to be provided to students with disabilities to make up for the lost services. If schools are closed and remote learning continues for 4-, 6-, 8-weeks or more, the depth and breadth of compensatory services needed for students will be immense.

In the general educational environment, educators will need to make up for significant lost time as well. When being directed to simply review, and not to introduce any new content, educators will need to make up for lost instructional time. They will not merely reteach previous content, but also introduce content that was previously scheduled to be addressed during the time away from learning within the school buildings. The longer our school buildings are closed and students and educators must engage in remote learning, the more severe this will be.

Upon returning to face-to-face teaching and learning, district-based technology coordinators will need to recollect, re-inventory, disinfect, and troubleshoot all district devices prior to preparing them for the statewide assessment. This will take a significant amount of time and further impacts the testing timeframes.

Mental Health Implications for Our Students

There is an overwhelming body of research that not only captures the destructive impact standardized testing has on student mental health, but that also severely cautions against the inappropriate use of standardized tests for high-stakes purposes **under traditional circumstances. The circumstances before us with COVID-19 are unprecedented.**

The primary themes that have emerged from existing research on the mental health implications of standardized assessment include:

- On average, students are experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety than today's adult population. Students identify testing as a primary source of stress in their lives.

- Test anxiety is growing in the United States, in connection with the onset of Common Core Standards and aligned standardized assessments. As the emphasis on standardized testing continues to deepen, test anxiety continues to spread.
- Standardized assessments cause detrimentally high levels of stress and anxiety in students, most notably for those in elementary and middle grades and for those in historically marginalized populations.
- Standardized test anxiety results in damages to children’s psychological and emotional well-being; impediments to social functioning and the development of positive social relationships; development of negative attitudes toward school and learning; physiological reactions from students, including: crying, vomiting, loss of bowel/bladder control; Adverse emotional reactions, such as: loss of student sense of identity, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-worth; A correlation exists between the rising adolescent suicide rate and emphasis on standardized testing

An annotated bibliography of the mental health implications of standardized assessment for students - **IN GENERAL, NON-EMERGENCY SITUATIONS** - can be [found here](#).

While the circumstances before us with COVID-19 are unprecedented, we can look to the experience of students who have been displaced from their schools for extended periods of time, due to natural disasters. This allows for a deeper understanding of the heightened significance and dire need to fully suspend the statewide standardized assessment system, exit-testing requirement for Class of 2020, and edTPA requirements for pre-service educators.

- Following Hurricane Katrina and student displacement from school, 60.5% of New Orleans school children from sites participating in the study **tested positive for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms**.⁵
- “Children who live through a disaster usually have **two life-changing experiences**. First, they endure the trauma itself, which might forever alter their sense of security and their ability to cope with life’s problems. Second, they face ongoing disorder and dishevelment in their day-to-day lives.”⁶
- For students experiencing a natural disaster, **the trauma begins prior to the disaster’s occurrence and resulting damage**, when communities are making preparations in response to warnings. This preparation can cause hyper-vigilance, anger, denial, and withdrawal prior to the disaster’s occurrence.⁷

⁵ Jaycox, L. H., Cohen, J. A., Mannarino, A. P., Walker, D. W., Langley, A. K., Gegenheimer, K. L., ... Schonlau, M. (2010). Children’s mental health care following Hurricane Katrina: A field trial of trauma focused psychotherapies. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 23*(2), 223–231. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.20518>.

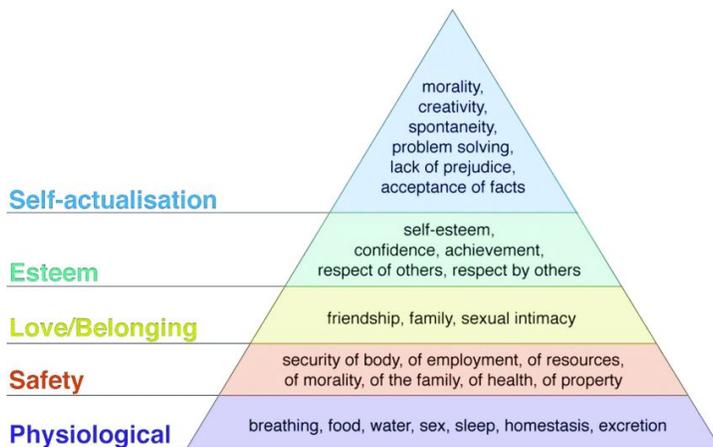
⁶ Black, S. (2001). Disaster’s aftermath. *American School Board Journal, 188*(4).

⁷ Zenere, F. J., & Lazarus, P. J. (1999). Winds of terror: Children’s responses to hurricane and tornado Disasters. In A. S. Canter & S. A. Carroll (Eds.), *Crisis Prevention and Response: A Collection of NASP Resources* (pp. 223-229). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

- **“The process trauma in the wake of the disaster can last much longer than the event itself** as families try to deal with loss and rebuild their lives, and children often experience the aftermath right alongside the adults.”⁸
- When comparing student performance on standardized assessments following Hurricane Floyd and Hurricane Bonnie with performance from years prior to the disasters, North Carolina elementary **schools’ performance was significantly impacted**. “The study revealed that some 60 schools did not meet their performance goals but would have if the storms had not occurred.”⁹
- “In their study of children affected by Hurricane Hugo, Shannon et al. (1994) further compared the performances of students who exhibited PTSD symptoms to those who did not. **They found that 51% of PTSD students experienced a performance decrease** compared to 28% who did not, and the **average decrease in performance for the former group was three times greater** than for the latter group.”¹⁰
- “While high functioning schools generally maintain their performance trajectory, lower functioning schools experience a larger detrimental disruption brought about by a natural disaster...Absenteeism, which has been found to be an important factor in student performance, can be exacerbated by slow economic recovery in low SES areas.”¹¹

Maslow before Bloom

“*You have to Maslow before you can Bloom*” has become a common phrase in American public schools, marking the significant role schools have come to play in students’ lives far beyond the need for instruction and the goal of preparing educated citizens.



Over the past few decades it has become clear that schools are no longer simply places of learning but providers of critical support.

Schools must prioritize students’ health and safety before attending to instruction and assessment.

⁸Pane, John F., Daniel F. McCaffrey, Nidhi Kalra, and Annie Jie Zhou,(2008). Effects of Student Displacement in Louisiana During the First Academic Year After the Hurricanes of 2005. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1379.html>.

⁹Holmes, G. M. (2002). Effect of extreme weather events on student test performance. *Natural Hazards Review*, 3(3), 82-91.

¹⁰ Pane, John F., Daniel F. McCaffrey, Nidhi Kalra, and Annie Jie Zhou, Effects of Student Displacement in Louisiana During the First Academic Year After the Hurricanes of 2005. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1379.html>.

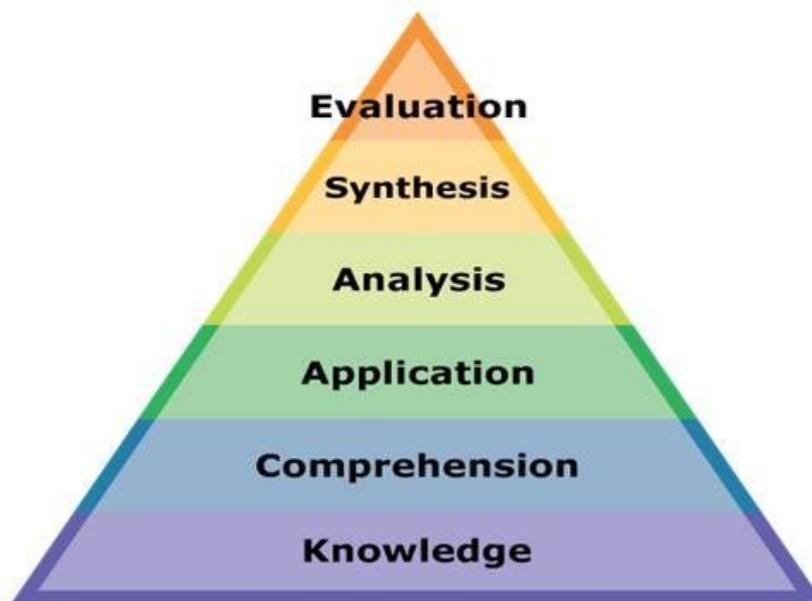
¹¹ Lai, B., A. Esnard, C. Wyczalkowski, R. Savage, H. Shah. (2018). Trajectories of School Recovery After a Natural Disaster: Risk and Protective Factors. *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, 10 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1002/rhc3.12158>

Schools ensure food security for our neediest students, often providing children with their only nutritious meals of the day. Schools provide ongoing health services such as speech, physical, and occupational therapy, as well as health screenings for vision, dental, and physical well being.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs (Finkelstein 2006)

Schools are essential in providing mental health services in the form of counseling and therapy. Schools provide for students with special education and exceptional physical needs. Many schools critically address issues of equity in providing learning resources and technology to students. It is not an understatement to state that school is often the only safe haven many students have in their lives.

Clearly our public schools are bearing the primary burden of ensuring children's well being. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted this significant shift by placing unreasonable expectations on public education institutions to continue providing these services during an emergency



Bloom's Hierarchy (Bloom, et. al 1956)

As school leaders, educators, educational support professionals, and families attempt to fulfill students' needs during this time of crisis, it would be irresponsible to divert time, resources, and energy to the logistical demand of preparing for and administering mandated statewide assessments. This diversion can only result in diminished efforts to continue providing for students' physical, mental, and emotional well being.

Please reach out to assessment@njea.org with questions.