



Press Release

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MDE To Initiate Discussion with U.S. Department of Education on Waivers

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LANSING – The U.S. Department of Education (USED) announced on Monday that it would offer states flexibility to federal requirements for school accountability and student assessments this school year due to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unlike last spring, when USED offered a blanket waiver to federal requirements for statewide assessments and accountability for every state, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) understands the guidance shared yesterday to not be a blanket acceptance or rejection of anything, but instead an opportunity to submit state-specific waiver considerations.

State Superintendent Dr. Michael Rice expressed that USED seems very open to waiving federal accountability requirements in the pandemic and somewhat less receptive to consider waiving state summative assessment requirements.

“With a majority of our kids at home, with the challenges of getting kids back in school, and with the need for more instructional time to maximize academic and social and emotional focus and growth, this is not the time to engage in state summative assessments,” Dr. Rice said. “We are able to discern where kids are academically for parents and for educators with our benchmark assessments, and we can use the assessments to target resources, interventions, and supports for our kids in our districts.”

In its letter to state education agencies yesterday, USED said that it is inviting states to request a waiver for the 2020-21 school year of the accountability and school identification requirements in the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). A state receiving this waiver would not be required to implement and report the results of its federally approved accountability system, including annual differentiation among its public schools using data from the 2020-21 school year.

Relative to state summative assessments, USED wrote that some schools and school districts may face circumstances in which they are not able to safely administer state summative assessments this spring using their standard practices. USED also recognized that individual states may need additional

assessment flexibility based on the specific circumstances across or within the state, and that it will work with states to address their individual needs and conditions while ensuring the maximum available statewide data to inform the targeting of resources and supports.

“The letter says there’s going to be no cookie-cutter approach like there was at the beginning of the pandemic last year,” Dr. Rice said. “What USED basically said was that it is open to considerations on the accountability side and a little less open on the assessment side.”

MDE is initiating discussions with USED to allow Michigan to waive the federal requirement for statewide summative assessments this school year. A majority of Michigan students have received inconsistent to no instruction in an in-person format during the 2020-21 school year, and when these students return to in-person instruction, the focus should be on teaching and learning and ensuring social and emotional wellness rather than on preparing for and taking state summative assessments.

In January, MDE requested from USED a waiver from the federal requirement to administer the statewide summative assessments to Michigan students this spring and from the school accountability measures resulting from those statewide assessments. A response to that request is pending. Until a waiver or other flexibility is granted, MDE will continue to prepare for the administration of the state’s M-STEP assessments.

Given the U.S. Department of Education’s communication this week, this is the beginning of a new part of the process that could take some time.

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