

Press Clippings 03-09-21

---Chicago Tribune--- 03/09/2021

Schools can't skip standardized tests this spring, Biden administration says. But Illinois educators want a pass because of pandemic disruptions.

By: Karen Ann Cullotta

Nearly a year after schools shut down statewide because of the COVID-19 pandemic, **School District U-46 Superintendent Tony Sanders** said it's been tough convincing many parents that the buildings are safe for their children's return.

So when Sanders recently learned that the U.S. Department of Education still expects every public school system in the country to administer federally mandated standardized tests to their students this spring, he was shocked and disheartened.

"I can't even get families to want to let their children come into the school building right now to learn, so how would we ask them to do that just to take a test?" Sanders said. More than half of all students in Elgin-based U-46 are still in remote learning full time.

"Nobody's listening," he said. "It still begs the question, why is this a year we must test?"



Fifth grader Evelyn Duran works on a writing assignment at O'Neal Elementary School in Elgin on Friday. The district superintendent is among hundreds in Illinois who want standardized testing waived this spring. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

But federal education officials, saying data from assessments will be an important way to gauge the pandemic's impact on student learning, issued a blanket denial of testing waivers in late February, shortly before the swearing-in Tuesday of President Joe Biden's new secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona. The announcement came despite pleas from school districts nationwide — including about 700 in Illinois, as well as the state's superintendent of education — to give them a reprieve from testing.

"To be successful once schools have reopened, we need to understand the impact COVID-19 has had on learning and identify what resources and supports students need," Ian Rosenblum, acting assistant secretary in the federal Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, said in a Feb. 22 letter sent to state school superintendents. "We must also specifically be prepared to address the educational inequities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. ... In addition, parents need information on how their children are doing."

Biden's "first priority is to safely reopen schools and get students back in classrooms, learning face-to-face from teachers with their fellow students," Rosenblum wrote.

The letter stressed that if it's unsafe, students should not be brought into schools "for the sole purpose of taking a test." Yet rather than forgoing the tests completely this year, the federal agency said it will provide "flexibility" that could include remote, shortened or delayed

assessments, and that waivers could be sought for some accountability measures, which could include the reporting of data on annual school report cards.

Even so, the letter to the U.S. Department of Education signed by hundreds of Illinois schools chiefs said that, given all the ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic, and how much face-to-face instruction has been lost, standardized testing should not be a priority right now.

“We are not opposed to accountability ... in normal times, but these are anything but normal. Rather, like our colleagues across the nation, we are working diligently to get a larger portion of students back into schools for in-person instruction, working to address the social and emotional, and academic, needs of our students which includes plans to address lost opportunities, getting staff and community members vaccinated, and serving as a lifeline for so many members of our communities,” the letter states. “Let us focus on those priorities rather than on the logistics of testing kids.”

Federal law requires states to provide accountability standards, which in Illinois includes designating each school as exemplary, commendable, targeted or comprehensive, to help families and communities understand a school’s performance, and those ratings are included in the [Illinois Report Card](#) provided by the Illinois State Board of Education. Federally mandated testing is a part of how that’s determined.

In advocating for testing waivers, Illinois Superintendent of Education Carmen Ayala has noted more than 1 million schoolchildren in Illinois were still in remote learning full-time.

“We believe that bringing students back in-person only to immediately begin state testing will have a detrimental effect on the goals of supporting their social-emotional wellbeing, mental health, and reconnection with the school community,” Ayala wrote in a letter to federal authorities.

ISBE spokeswoman Jackie Matthews said Wednesday the state board is working with the U.S. Education Department to provide maximum flexibility to Illinois districts.

If waivers had been granted, this year would have marked the second in a row that Illinois students missed taking the Illinois Assessment of Readiness. Typically administered each spring to the state’s public school students in third through eighth grade, the IAR assesses the state’s common-core learning standards for English, language arts and math.

At the high school level, the SAT that’s usually administered to all juniors was also waived last spring but was provided in the fall to the same group of students — this year’s high school seniors — who needed to take it to fulfill the state’s graduation requirement, Matthews said.



Alexis Duran, a fifth grader, goes over a writing assignment at O'Neal Elementary School in Elgin. Only about half of Elgin School District U-46 students have returned for in-person classes so far this year. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

The federal government’s policy on assessments has also faced criticism from teachers unions.

“Standardized tests have never been valid or reliable measures of what students know and are able to do, and they are especially unreliable now,” National Education Association President Becky Pringle said in a Feb. 22 statement, adding she hopes “every state will submit a request to

suspend high stakes school rankings and potentially harmful sanctions against already struggling schools.”

Standardized tests given “during the global health crisis should not determine a student’s future, evaluate educators, or punish schools; nor should they come at the expense of precious learning time that students could be spending with their educators,” she said.

Former President Donald Trump’s secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, was widely lambasted by teachers unions last fall for her stance that federally mandated state assessments should be held in 2021.

But Bob Schaeffer, public education director at FairTest, an organization critical of standardized testing, said it shouldn’t be surprising that the Biden education team is also in support of assessments “because inside the Beltway, there has long been bipartisan consensus on test-driven educational reform.”

Though Schaeffer suspects schools will receive “significant flexibility” in how tests are given, he still questions their merit.

“You can’t really draw a valid sample, because they were canceled last year, so this is really an exercise in collecting data for data’s sake,” Schaeffer said.

Other experts also warn that testing already vulnerable students during the pandemic is unlikely to yield meaningful results.

“Given the collective trauma that we, as a society, have gone through, now is not the time to use standardized testing as any measure of achievement,” said Lisa M. Downey, director of undergraduate educator preparation and an associate professor at National Louis University. “Because these tests can be very stressful for students and teachers, we need to be able to assure them that there aren’t any repercussions for lower-than-recommended scores this year.”

Still, Downey said test scores can help educators understand what learning loss may have occurred and detect specific gaps in knowledge to “help guide instruction in the coming year.”

Sanders, of District U-46, said his school system has “plenty of local data that we can look at” to make such determinations. He’s hopeful that, at minimum, this spring’s testing can be delayed until next fall.

“Next fall would be a little more reasonable, because by then, we should be poised and ready for more kids in the classroom,” he said. “But now is not the time.”

---Daily Herald--- 03/09/2021

How suburban educators are responding to state's call for culturally inclusive instruction

By: Madhu Krishnamurthy



Huntley High School Principal Marcus Belin, center, is part of a state task force helping review and improve Black history curriculum statewide. *Paul Valade | Staff Photographer, 2020*



Huntley High School Principal Marcus Belin says Black history should be taught in the context of current social realities. *Rick West | Staff Photographer, 2020*



Teresa Lance



Adrian Harries



Martin DaCosta

As a result of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement last year after the death of George Floyd, the state of Illinois is working with school districts in the suburbs and across the state to change the way Black history is taught in classrooms.

It's part of a broader state effort to make curriculum more culturally inclusive to reflect diverse student populations, including changing the way Black, Latino and Asian history and literature is taught.

Meanwhile, the state has adopted new [Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards](#) to prepare future educators to teach diverse students.

The new standards, which take effect in 2025, aim to foster classroom and school environments in which all students feel a sense of belonging.

But they have sparked controversy among Republican legislators, who argue the rules would require licensed teachers and administrators to adhere to a particular political ideology. They view it as an attempt to push liberal politics in the classroom.

"It takes teachers and it puts them in a position to become advocates for a particular political agenda," said Republican rules committee member Rep. Steve Reick of Woodstock last month. "There is a lot of resistance to turning teachers into advocates for particular political viewpoints."

ISBE officials counter that the rule aims to make teachers more mindful of how their own biases and perceptions affect their teaching. And, regardless of the politics over the rule, many local districts note that the diversity of their teaching ranks is not keeping up with increasing diversity among their student bodies.

More than 52% of Illinois students identify as students of color, and English Learners are the fastest growing student population. Yet, the state's teacher workforce is more than 82% white.

Social realities

"I never encountered a Black man as a teacher," said Marcus Belin, principal of Huntley High School who is Black and is part of the Illinois State Board of Education's Black History Curriculum Task Force.

Belin said he became an educator so he could be a role model for Black boys and girls, and he is focused on changing school culture so minority students feel more welcome.

Huntley High's student population is 74% white, 12% Hispanic, nearly 7% Asian and 2% Black. Leaders at Huntley are working on a plan to recognize students' cultural diversity year-round, having monthly events celebrating them and highlighting literary works by minority authors. They also are considering creating affinity groups supporting different cultures, such as Black and gay student alliances, to give students a voice.

Belin said Black history should be taught in the context of current social realities.

"In schools now, we are still talking about slavery. That was 200 years ago," Belin said. "That's not changing kids' perceptions about ... social justice. Let's talk about protests. It needs to be more contemporary. Kids go to school and wonder 'Why am I learning this?'"

Some districts are looking to students for input on improving school climate.

Elgin Area School District U-46 will roll out an equity survey Monday to assess students' sense of belonging, cultural awareness, and diversity and inclusion efforts.

The district is developing a Latinx studies elective course that will be available to high school seniors in Spanish as part of the dual language program this fall and a high school African American studies elective course for the 2022-23 school year.

Nearly 400 students weighed in on what they would like to see included in African American studies. The district also has brought in an educational consultant to help write the curriculum, said Teresa Lance, assistant superintendent for equity and innovation at U-46.

Lance said the district has begun training teachers -- nearly 71% white, 25% Hispanic and roughly 2% Black and Asian -- on culturally responsive teaching practices. U-46's student population is 55% Hispanic, nearly 26% white, 8% Asian and 6% Black.

"The first thing is being aware of the biases that we hold," she said. "And when those biases actually start showing up in terms of stereotypes or inhibiting us from addressing the cultural needs of our students. That's when it becomes problematic."

Helping teachers overcome their apprehensions about teaching culturally sensitive material is part of the issue, said Adrian Harries, director of diversity, equity, and inclusion for Algonquin-based Community Unit District 300.

Nearly 90% of the district's teachers are white, while the student body is 46% white, 39% Hispanic, 6% Asian and 5% Black.

This fall, the district is rolling out two new courses (with five more coming the following school year) in English language arts and social studies aimed at promoting understanding of Black and Latinx cultures. It is working to diversify materials for middle and high schools and expects to train teachers over the summer.

"Oftentimes, teachers don't want to dive into a text that's culturally relevant but might have some topics they're just not familiar in covering," Harries said. "It's hard to know how to educate somebody around something that you haven't experienced and you don't have firsthand knowledge of."

Minority recruitment

Increasing teacher diversity through minority recruitment is one way to address inequities, said Martin DaCosta, principal of Winston Campus Jr. High School in Palatine.

The school's students are 68% Hispanic, nearly 19% white, nearly 6% Asian and 4% Black. Across Palatine Township Elementary District 15, 88% of teachers are white, nearly 9% are Hispanic, and nearly 3% are Asian.

DaCosta's school has a more diverse teaching corps than the district as a whole.

"We reach out to alumni, kids that have recently graduated from college who went through our schools, grew up in our neighborhoods, had a connection to the community," DaCosta said. "One of the things that we believe in is that representation matters."

DaCosta said teachers have been incorporating curriculum materials in different languages and offering varying perspectives. Students also have input in book selections that validate and affirm their identities.

"We are also intentional about highlighting people in STEM, politics and history who come from underrepresented minorities ... so that every kid regardless of background is able to see themselves in the curriculum," DaCosta said.