

Press Clippings 04-17-21 to 04-19-21

---Press Clippings---04/19/2021
There are no U-46 related news stories.

---The Courier-News ---04/18/2021

Parents, unions call for school boycott

Community frustrated by plans for in-person standardized tests this spring

By Karen Ann Cullotta



Fifth grader Evelyn Duran works on a writing assignment during literacy block at **O'Neal Elementary School in Elgin in March. District U-46** is among the nearly 700 school districts across Illinois that requested, but didn't get, a waiver from federally mandated state assessments. Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune



Susan Raphael pictured with her children Jacob, 13, from left, and twins Jeanette and Lily, 10, outside their Oak Park home — is among parents who intend to keep their children out of school during mandated assessments this spring. Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune

When Percy Julian Middle School in Oak Park began welcoming students back earlier this year on a limited basis, Susan Raphael was excited her 13-year-old son would finally resume in-person instruction and be able to gather with classmates after nearly a year of remote learning.

But Raphael's joy was soon replaced by frustration, after Oak Park School District 97 announced that — despite the prolonged COVID-19 disruptions — students would be required to spend four days this month taking federally mandated standardized tests on subjects like reading, math and language arts.

“My first reaction was, this is so silly. ... They are taking away a week of student learning when they're already losing instructional time like crazy,” said Raphael, a mother of three who has

decided she will not send her son to school for the standardized testing and is unlikely to have her twin daughters take the tests later this spring.

“It seems like the system is broken, especially for students at big urban school districts like Oak Park and Chicago. It doesn’t provide any benefits for my child, especially with the risks,” Raphael added.

“ ... It’s a waste of our time.”

District 97 officials acknowledged they too would rather not have to administer the tests.

“Given the unprecedented nature of this school year and ongoing concerns related to the pandemic, we were hoping to receive a waiver from testing,” said a district statement, which added that the assessments “will provide a data point, but it is our practice to take a holistic approach and consider multiple sources to tell the achievement stories of our students.”

Long the bane of educators and parents alike, the annual, federally mandated student assessments — which for students in third through eighth grades is known as the Illinois Assessment of Readiness, or IAR — were waived in 2020 after the coronavirus abruptly shut down schools.

While the Illinois State Board of Education and more than 700 Illinois superintendents asked the U.S. Department of Education for another testing waiver for 2021, their requests were flatly denied. President Joe Biden’s Department of Education said no waivers would be granted, insisting the data is critical to understanding the magnitude of what some anticipate will be a staggering loss of student learning during the pandemic.

Some parent groups and teachers’ unions are also lambasting the test mandate, with a recent post on the Illinois Families for Public Schools’ website declaring, “Every Child Can Refuse State Testing!” The group, along with the Chicago Teachers Union and the Illinois Federation of Teachers, is hosting an information session Monday on “how and why” to boycott the test.

“Especially this year, using time and money to administer state tests isn’t what our children and our schools need... Many families have chosen to remain with remote learning, meaning that they are being asked to go into school just to take the tests,” the parent group’s statement said.

“This is not what we should be doing as a school system in a pandemic,” CTU’s Testing Committee said.

Still, this time around federal officials have granted Illinois districts “accommodations” to the usual testing protocol, including waivers for “accountability,” meaning that schools will not be given “ratings,” such as “exemplary,” “commendable” and “targeted.”

School districts will also not be required to test 95% of students, and instead, are being asked to offer in-person testing opportunities aimed at attracting the maximum number of students possible.

Despite an option to postpone the tests until fall — even though fewer than a quarter of Illinois’ roughly 2 million public school students have returned to in-person classes full time — districts across the state are administering the IAR tests this spring. They must be taken in person, even to the nearly 100,000 students statewide who have not returned to school since the arrival of the pandemic in March 2020.

At Elgin-based School District U-46, which enrolls more than 37,000 students, Superintendent Tony Sanders said that after holding out hope that that his students could opt out of the test, he decided that spring was “the lesser of two evils.”

“Our challenge is that many of our families have students who are still doing all remote learning, and they’re not going to send their kids into the school building just to take a test,” said Sanders, who led the contingent of Illinois school district superintendents who sought assessments waivers from Biden’s new education secretary, Miguel Cardona.

Like many Illinois school districts, U-46 also administers MAP testing, which Sanders said provides timely feedback to educators, unlike the IAR, which often has a lengthy delay before data is released to school districts.

The requirement to deliver student assessments during the pandemic is also troubling to some experts, who question how the data can be considered valid and useful when it is highly likely that a significant sector of students will not participate.

“Would we deploy a vaccine based on only 50% of the data from the trials? And would you take that vaccine?” said Megan Bang, vice president of the Spencer Foundation and professor of learning sciences at Northwestern University’s School of Education and Social Policy.

Bang also suggests that, during the pandemic, demanding that teachers “engage in kill and drill” classroom instruction based on testing, rather than allowing them to nurture a love of learning in their students, could lead to “an exodus of teachers on a scale we cannot fathom.”

The state is paying Pearson — the multinational publishing and education company that provides the IAR test — around \$55 million for three years of assessments. That includes \$18.6 million for 2020, when only about a quarter of students took the exams before they were halted because of the pandemic, according to ISBE spokeswoman Jackie Matthews.

“By the time we received the federal waiver and could officially communicate to schools that spring 2020 assessments would not occur, testing and scoring had already started or been entirely completed for a quarter of our students who take the IAR,” Matthews said.

The contract also has the state paying Pearson an amount not to exceed \$15.6 million to administer the assessments in 2021, and an estimated \$21 million in 2022, Matthews said.

Illinois Superintendent of Education Carmen Ayala said last week that while she is disappointed that Illinois schools were not granted waivers to opt out of the IAR this year, she was encouraged by the federal approval of an array of requested accommodations.

“We are trying to provide flexibility to the maximum extent, including the choice of giving the tests in the spring or the fall, but more than 90% of our school districts want to give the assessments now,” Ayala said.

While a waiver was recently granted for the usual required 95% participation rate, Ayala said with so many Illinois students still learning remotely, it is tough to predict how many will actually take the assessments, which are still required to be conducted in person.

Nevertheless, Ayala said even some data will be useful in helping guide decisions about how to spend the roughly \$7.8 billion in federal COVID-19 relief funding earmarked for Illinois schools.

“A school may only be able to assess 70% or 50% of students in third grade, but with that data they can still see trends that emerge, and provide additional support for students in particular areas,” Ayala said.

“We want to be very intentional in addressing not only the academic, but the social emotional health of our students, and the impact of trauma,” she said. “And these assessments will help give us one piece of that puzzle.”

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