



# Beyond the Bubble

## Americans Want Change on High Stakes Assessments

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## Introduction:

Over the past month alone, more than 118,000 students, parents, families, civil rights groups, activists and other educators across the nation joined the National Education Association (NEA) in demanding that the U.S. Department of Education think beyond the bubble and stop high-stakes testing for this school year.

Though all of these signatories are discouraged by the overwhelmingly negative responses on waiver requests for the 2020-2021 school year, we are hopeful that raising the voices of concern from Americans in every state and territory around the world will help the Department of Education see how our Nation's testing regime and the power it holds is hurting our students and their learning.

We need to create an understanding of learning beyond the bubble sheets and standardized tests. The Department of Education should partner with educators to develop authentic assessments that reflect true learning and skills — including creativity, leadership, critical thinking, and collaboration. Performance tasks and skills-based assessments are already used in some districts across the country, and should be studied and replicated with support from the Department of Education.

We are ready to partner with Secretary Cardona in building back a better way to assess learning in the future.

## The Open Letter

*American students are still navigating the most difficult year of learning in modern history. Between losing loved ones to COVID-19, being forced out of classrooms, adapting to distance learning, and missing out on a year of regular social interactions—they have had their worlds turned upside down.*

*The last thing they need is to take a stressful, ineffective standardized test.*

*We, the undersigned, are educators, parents, families, caregivers, students, and community members. We demand all departments of education think beyond the bubble and stop high-stakes testing this year.*

*There will be nothing standard about how testing will be administered this year. Any data collected that forces comparisons between and among schools, districts, educators, and students across*

*states will be invalid and could lead to the gutting of funding and resources for those that need it most.*

*These tests are not capable of collecting the kind of information needed to target supports and resources. We need to rely on the expertise of educators who understand students’ physical, social, mental, and emotional needs at this time—not two-dimensional data from a multiple choice test.*

*We must ensure that our students who have been hardest hit during the pandemic—our Black, brown, rural, indigenous students, as well as those with special needs—receive the support they need. The educators and communities who know them best must have the flexibility to tailor assessments that can determine where students are and help design an educational experience that fully supports their academic, social, and emotional needs.*

*Standardized high-stakes testing should not come at the expense of precious learning time that students could be spending with their educators.*

*We believe in an educational system that focuses on and measures what our students truly need—skills like creativity, leadership, critical thinking, and collaboration.*

*A better future for education is possible, and the first step is to start thinking beyond the bubble and stop high stakes testing this year.*

## Breakdown of Open Letter Signatories

In just a month, NEA’s open letter currently sits at 118,082 signatories from every single State, Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, Guam, the Virgin Islands, as well as from Service Members and their families stationed abroad. Below is a chart that lists out the total signatories for each state and territory. A list of every signature is provided in an addendum attached with this report.

State	Total
Alabama	754
Alaska	306
Arizona	2469
Arkansas	425
California	14120
Colorado	2127
Connecticut	2436
Delaware	577
District Of Columbia	154
Florida	6222
Georgia	1741
Hawaii	591
Idaho	425
Illinois	5778

Indiana	2273
Iowa	862
Kansas	898
Kentucky	1305
Louisiana	769
Maine	741
Maryland	1949
Massachusetts	4412
Michigan	6339
Minnesota	2436
Mississippi	497
Missouri	2161
Montana	266
Nebraska	576
Nevada	811
New Hampshire	570
New Jersey	6559
New Mexico	737
New York	5513
North Carolina	2813
North Dakota	110
Ohio	4818
Oklahoma	812
Oregon	3243
Pennsylvania	8510
Rhode Island	430
South Carolina	819
South Dakota	143
Tennessee	1862
Texas	3841
Utah	734
Vermont	591
Virginia	2947
Washington	5260
West Virginia	353
Wisconsin	2254
Wyoming	121
Armed Forces Europe	38
Armed Forces Pacific	43
Northern Mariana Islands	1

Unknown	192
Guam	7
Puerto Rico	22
Virgin Islands	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>118082</b>

## Voices from the Registry

From an elementary school teacher in the Navajo Nation to a college professor in Philadelphia - as well as every other state and territory in between and around the world - Americans raised their voices to be heard. Below are excerpts from some of the more than 2,400 federal comments submitted to the Department of Education’s federal registry pleading to recognize the crisis that our students and educators have faced together over the past year and waive testing this year.

### *Elizabeth Marsh, a Navajo Nation educator in Arizona*

I am writing to you today to ask you to cancel the standardized state tests like Arizona's AZM2. I am a 4th grade teacher at Kayenta Elementary school in Kayenta, Arizona. My students and district were at the center of the Navajo Nation outbreak (Kayenta Unified School District includes Chilchinbeto) From March - June 2020.

The CDC sealed our buildings that spring. Since then, we have been teaching virtually due to the lack of medical resources, running water, multi-generational housing, and general lack of resources in the community. Teachers, families, and staff have stepped up to do whatever they could to make sure students got an education.

For most students, the state test will be their first time in a building where the elementary school principal died of COVID. Their last time seeing her was March 2020 (she moved districts and passed away in a nearby district in January 2021). Anxiety, fear, and grief will be through the roof for these students. High anxiety all-day state tests should be the last thing we should be pushing to "get back to normal."

Every student has lost someone - an extended family member, a close family member, and/or even their principal. We lost a long-serving school board member in December 2020 as well. Some students have even had COVID themselves, or have parents who are still recovering from the effects. State tests should not be the solution to this problem. We know where our students are academically.

We have always known that we were behind and underfunded due to impact aid as we are a school on the Navajo Nation. Arizona has not had a consistent form of education statewide due to a lack of guidance from both the federal and state levels. Some schools have been in person, some have been closed, and some have been open and had to repeatedly close due to cases within the classroom/school. No one method of instruction has been consistent statewide (unless you were online all year). If we want to go back to normal, we need to not waste 5-10 days of testing students (while the other half of students receive only partial instruction) for what we already know.

Putting students into a traumatic experience deliberately for testing with poor data validity is and should be repugnant to educators. We care about children. We want the best for our students. The fact that we will

have to test students instead of help them process their trauma, their grief, their fear is morally injurious to educators.

This school year has been filled with sadness, horror, and shocking events. State tests are not the solution. Please cancel the standardized state tests so that we can help our students.

<https://www.regulations.gov/comment/ED-2021-SCC-0032-0221>

***Carmen Andrews, a 25-year high school teacher and parent of 2 public school students***

Every standardized testing moment and moment of preparation for those standardized tests is a minute less of educational instruction and learning for our students. If you truly pay attention we are talking about hundreds of lost teaching and learning hours every single year - HUNDREDS. Please stop the madness to help us in a teaching situation that very few living people have experienced - one existing in the middle of a pandemic.

Our students need our HELP they don't need more TESTS. Use that time to look at and understand how unproductive and uninformative standardized tests are and acknowledge them for what they are - cash cows for Pearson Education and others who are making their money off of the backs of our state and our nation's children. Students do not learn from testing.

Any teacher worth their salt can tell you how every single student in their classroom is doing without any sort of test coming from the outside from some corporation woefully out of touch with education. Something I learned long ago as a Peace Corps Volunteer still applies today. You can weigh the baby all you want but she's not going to gain weight unless we take the time to feed her. Our students in Nevada desperately need to be fed.

Stop putting up barriers for teachers to do our jobs in a way that benefits our state and our country's children. Please do the right thing by educators and students, and approve testing and accountability waivers for Nevada. Our children deserve it.

***Ashleigh Piccinino, an Aspiring Educator***

I am Ashleigh Piccinino, a practicum student at Missouri State University. I'm also a person with a disability, total blindness with light perception. Over the many years, I've taken many standardized tests, of course through human readers and Braille versions. I don't think these tests really assess what kids know, especially those of us with disabilities. I just believe they're numbers on a spreadsheet, promoting social promotion in schools without the students actually learning and/or otherwise achieving at their best.

I think that portfolio assessments and/or other student-directed assessments would better benefit people, especially those of us with visual impairment/other disabilities. This gives us a chance to show what we really know and how we know it. Although numbers are once again on the grades, quality of work—not quantity of work—is the key here.

Let's cancel these tests ... not just for the Pandemic year/s but forever as I don't think they do any good ... at all. Students need to know that they've done a good job, and the teachers need to know what the students do/have mastered. That's not possible with a standardized test.

<https://www.regulations.gov/comment/ED-2021-SCC-0032-1299>

***David B. Moore, a School Social Worker***

I am a school social worker at Zeeland East High School in Zeeland, MI. I am licensed by our State as a Master's Level Social Worker with a clinical specialty as is the requirement in our State.

This last year has been very difficult for our students having to live with much uncertainty on a daily basis due to the many impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Adolescents, as is true with children of all developmental levels, thrive in environments of routine and the security that predictability provides for them. The COVID-19 pandemic and some of the responses to it at the macro, meso, and micro levels has created anything but healthy predictable routines for our students. They have been back and forth between in-person and remote/distance learning as a student body, and back and forth between in-person and remote/distance learning due to individual COVID-19 exposure and the resulting self-quarantine (for quite a few this means multiple quarantines).

This has created a level of stress that is very evident among our student population and becomes acute with those who have previous trauma experiences (COVID and pre-COVID). When you consider the stress to students' routines when adding in standardized testing (i.e., time practicing for the test, time away from active participation in familiar classroom learning, proctored at times by unfamiliar staff, and the stress of just taking a test), this just becomes one more stressor in a jumble of many that doesn't allow our students to regulate their emotions effectively.

This is not the time to pile on more unpredictability and removal from secure routines for our students. This testing will be skewed by students too anxious to think clearly and recall specific facts that are most likely left jumbled in the fog of a year that has left many of us as adults over-stressed and working hard to cope; and that is with much more life experience and cognitive processing ability to cope/adapt than what our young adults have had time to acquire. <https://www.regulations.gov/comment/ED-2021-SCC-0032-0605>

***Karen Beck Pooley, a School board member and parent***

I am writing about the current federal mandate requiring state assessment tests this year. As a school board member (for Bethlehem Area School District) and parent of two public school students,

I truly cannot believe we'd think to set aside two to three weeks of what's been a profoundly limited school year to put students, who are already grappling with a mental health crisis and the stresses of an upended year, through tests that are not particularly helpful in telling us what students are learning and how well (or poorly) they're growing academically.

This push for standardized testing seems to think districts aren't measuring student performance and success any other way, which couldn't be further from the truth. In Bethlehem, we're monitoring attendance and engagement, we're reviewing end-of-quarter and end-of-course grades, we're continually evaluating literacy and math skills in our elementary school students – and making all of these results available to the public through board meetings and district outreach.

(We're far from alone using these kinds of assessments, and researchers are already aggregating results from literacy assessments conducted across the country: <https://www.k12dive.com/news/mid-year-data-shows-reading-gaps-widening-especially-for-k-1-students-of-c/595667/>.)

These assessments we're already doing are giving us a clear picture of all of the catch-up work we'll need to do and supports we'll need to provide students as we come out of the pandemic. They're also telling us that the very last thing we need is anything standing in the way of in-school instruction, which the PSSAs would. <https://www.regulations.gov/comment/ED-2021-SCC-0032-0340>

***Christine Schwerin, an elementary school principal***

As a first-year principal at Linwood Elementary School in the Pinconning Area Schools District, I am writing to express my concerns regarding the need for a waiver for the Michigan Spring 2021 testing. As a new principal, I was taught academics should be a priority. But how could I even begin to think about academics when we had to deal with Covid-19.

At the start of this school year, we had to prepare the building, staff, teachers, families, and students for all the safety procedures required just to step inside the building? From rearranging our classrooms to allow for social distancing, to shutting down our cafeteria and preparing new lunch procedures, to dividing the playground and making sure PPE and safety protocols were being followed just to keep the students in class-every day seemed to bring a new challenge.

We had to deal with preparing to teach remotely just in case we had to close for a covid outbreak or quarantine (it happened!), making sure our students who live in rural areas had proper access to wi-fi to connect to daily lessons (they didn't always), as well as keeping track of illnesses, doctor notes and health department updates (there were a lot!)

The assessments are not going to provide me with any data that I am not already aware of. Are my students behind? Yes. Are there significant gaps between my affluent and economically disadvantaged or special needs students? Absolutely. Will taking multiple days away from classroom instruction to administer state assessments help with this situation? Probably not.

<https://www.regulations.gov/comment/ED-2021-SCC-0032-0594>

***Professor Thomas Scott, and Adjunct Professor of Education, former high school social studies teacher, pre-service evaluator for Soc. Studies teaching candidates***

My name is Dr. Thomas Scott and I am a former Secondary Social Studies teacher from Rosemount, Minnesota. I am currently a Professor of Education at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus. In addition to my role as an Adjunct Professor, I also observe and evaluate pre-service Social Studies teaching candidates.

I have witnessed young teachers and veteran teachers alike rise to heroic levels to provide support and instruction for students in a distance format due to the threat of contacting the coronavirus. I can truthfully report that the workload of these teachers has increased three-fold during the pandemic. Yet, they have remained true to their students, providing them with support, guidance, and sympathy in helping students learn under such arduous conditions.

To hold students accountable to taking standardized tests under such circumstances is detestable. The United States Department of Education has an ethical responsibility to provide a healthy learning experience for public school students in the United States. Forcing students to take a standardized test under such a difficult learning environment borders on educational malpractice.

**The scores on the exams will likely be invalid due to covid-19 related circumstances and schools will eventually be held accountable for low test scores. Critics of public education will deepen their attacks on public schools as a result.** I implore the Department of Education provide a mechanism of flexibility for school districts to suspend the exams for this school year. Thank you for your time and consideration of my request.” [Regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov)



### ***Na'Zariel Williams, a Student***

As a senior in high school, this waiver will release all my stress and anxiety about graduating and making my grandparents happy. During COVID, my grandparents decided to keep me home because I lost my uncle and a great friend to me due to COVID and I'm still grieving on both, at first I didn't think it was this serious. I am scared to leave the house or even enter the schools. My grandparents get a phone call every week about a new COVID case at my school, it's no way in separating students during this because some students don't care, I have a future and goals I want to accomplish so I need to stay healthy and at home.

**This school year, we have worked hard remotely and in person for our first time adapting to new environments, please us (senior's) and (early graduates) need this. Hopefully the department of education cares about us students and our mental health, students are passing away because of depression and anxiety because of COVID. Please think about us. Thank you.**

<https://www.regulations.gov/comment/ED-2021-SCC-0032-0286>

## Conclusion

We hope that the more than 118,000 signatures and deeply personal stories from students, parents, administrators, and educators motivate the Department of Education to work with the National Education Association and educators around the country to build a better future for assessing student achievement. A future where students are graded on their knowledge and skills, not their ability to afford a tutor or persevere through hours of sitting still and filling out bubble tests.

In response to this overwhelming demand, the NEA is standing up an internal task force that will bring together educators and experts from across the United States to examine the implications of federal policy on assessments, analyze the effects of high stakes assessments on students and schools, study alternatives to high stakes standardized tests such as performance and skills based assessments, and create a framework for designing the future of assessments that puts equity first and students at the center. We are looking forward to collaborating on this work, and will share our findings and recommendations with the Department of Education for actionable consideration.

To facilitate this critical dialogue and gain insight into innovative and constructive approaches to building authentic assessment systems, we call upon the Secretary of Education to use his authority to create a Commission on Better Assessments. Managed under the auspices of the Department of Education, the Commission would bring together educators, researchers, students, families, and community representatives to identify best practices in developing, implementing, and evaluating assessments. The results of the Commission's work would be shared in a written report outlining recommendations on how the federal government can incentivize and support authentic assessment systems created in partnership with educators that activate the knowledge of students and generate meaningful data that can help improve school quality and ensure student opportunity.

The American people have spoken. Across the country, education stakeholders from students to principals to parents are joining us in calling upon the Department of Education to commit to rethinking our assessment policies, shift away from our national over-reliance on standardized tests, and embrace more authentic, well-rounded assessment systems created by and with educators. We stand ready to partner with the Secretary and the Department of Education. The time to think beyond the bubble is now—let's get to work.