



THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION  
WASHINGTON, DC 20202

November 24, 2020

Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Madam Speaker:

There is nothing that matters more to me than improving student achievement and closing the opportunity gaps between the haves and have-nots in education. Seminal to that work is having assessments that reveal the quality of education being provided to our nation's students. The Nation's Report Card is a critical tool in the effort, and one I have striven to emphasize and improve since taking office.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) has been working diligently for months to be ready in January 2021 to administer tests to fourth and eighth graders in mathematics and English as part of the mandated National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). That testing regime is based on voluntary participation by a large random sample of more than 5,000 schools across the country. Unfortunately, nearly all the sampled schools are, at this point, either prohibited from participating in the testing by local officials or have indicated they cannot or would not participate in this January's assessment. This situation is, unfortunately, unlikely to change in the next few weeks.

We are facing the reality that, even though Congress has provided billions of dollars in Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act resources and the Administration has directed significant amounts of test kits and personal protective equipment to our schools, too few schools will be providing in-school instruction or welcoming outside test administrators this winter to ensure a sufficiently large sample of NAEP participants needed to produce usable national or state data on what students know and can do in reading and mathematics for 2021. Consequently, I have asked NCES to postpone any further expenditures on the 2021 NAEP preparations.

At the same time, I recognize that removing the mandate to test in 2021 is, and should be, a decision for Congress. I am requesting that Congress act as soon as possible—preferably as part of final FY 2021 appropriations action scheduled to be enacted in mid-December—to lift the mandate for 2021 NAEP administration and postpone the administration of NAEP tests until the assessment will be able to produce useful results, likely in 2022. The Director of the Institute for

Education Sciences (IES), the Commissioner of NCES, and the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) have all been consulted on this request, and they all agree with it.

The 2021 NAEP tests would have shed light on the significant learning loss following the school closures last spring and the widespread failure to reopen schools this fall. While the data would have been helpful, the much more valuable and actionable measures of learning loss will be the annual assessments required of states by the Every Student Succeeds Act. I strongly believe that states should implement their own assessments on schedule in spring 2021, given that they do not face the same constraints as NAEP and have ample time to plan for successful test administration tailored to their unique circumstances. This is an issue of bipartisan consensus, and one I hope continues to rise above politics.

I also encourage Congress to take advantage of this unfortunate hiatus in NAEP administration to review the long-term NAEP structure and strategy in light of changing assessment technologies that promise to improve the quality of NAEP assessments. It is time for Congress to rethink the entire NAEP program and improve its efficiency, efficacy, and budget. Since 2002, after the No Child Left Behind Act mandated state-level NAEP tests, the program has become increasingly complicated, difficult to administer, and costly. In FY 2002, NAEP's budget was \$42 million, and \$23 million was spent on the mandated fourth and eighth grade tests. By FY 2019, NAEP's budget was \$151 million (a more than 250% increase), and the budget for mandated tests was \$88 million (a nearly 300% increase). On a per student tested basis, the cost of the core NAEP test has skyrocketed from \$67 to \$293.

Despite the growing costs and complexity, the country still benefits from reliable, periodic national measures of academic progress, but perhaps not at the current pace. It seems clear that the costs of conducting the core NAEP tests every two years far outweigh the benefits of marginally enhancing well-established achievement trend lines. This is why our FY 2021 budget request proposed exploring the option of administering reading and math assessments on a staggered, four-year schedule. Reading could be paired with writing in a given "literacy" testing year. Two years later, math and science tests could be administered in a "STEM" testing year. This cycle would repeat, providing thematically focused results every two years and covering all subjects in four years. This would save as much as \$20 million per administration—money that could be redeployed for the needed modernization of NAEP or used to expand other important tests, including civics.

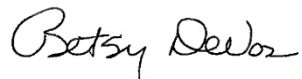
Other changes that I encourage Congress to explore in concert with IES, NAGB, and the assessment community include moving test administration to the cloud—to eliminate the logistical complexity and cost of sending thousands of test administrators to thousands of schools—and restructuring NAEP assessments on a foundation of technology-enabled adaptive testing, where students' right and wrong answers drive which questions the student receives, producing more accurate results and, in particular, generating far more accurate information

about the lowest performing students who are the primary focus of federal education programs and policies.

To begin evaluating these potential efficiencies, IES has contracted with the National Academies to study NAEP's technologies and suggest a more cost-effective design. That study is just a down payment on what should be a more systematic review and redesign of NAEP's processes, and I encourage you to consider its recommendations when they are available in late 2021.

Like you, I look forward to when enough students are physically in schools to allow the administration of NAEP, as well as the remediation of massive learning loss. For students' sake, that day must come soon. In the meantime, I hope you will seize the opportunity to reform and improve NAEP so it can continue to serve as the gold standard and further demonstrate the need to improve the quality of education provided in this great nation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Betsy DeVos". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Betsy DeVos