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Why we can't afford to let students skip another year of testing

OPINION

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Less than one year ago, Americans were clamoring for more data and reporting during the first COVID-19 surge. Now we are drowning in data. The impact of COVID is broken down by region, by race, by age and our understanding of the disease has grown rapidly.

Given the significant improvements we have seen, it seems unfathomable that now, some want to avoid collecting data on one of the pandemic's most profound impacts: education.

The students of today are the workforce of tomorrow. The business community and parents alike need data to understand which students, schools, and districts need the most help to overcome the learning disruptions wrought by COVID-19 – even if the data are not perfect.

For this reason, we were heartened by the U.S. Department of Education's announcement that it would not allow states to cancel academic assessments again this year and would instead offer logical and necessary flexibilities for testing responsive to the ongoing pandemic.

Waiving the requirement to administer the MSTEP, the assessment students take to gauge how well they are mastering state education standards, in 2020 was appropriate, but we cannot afford to miss another year of data. Michigan's students, families, educators, and policymakers need as much information as possible to guide recovery efforts.

Research firm McKinsey and Co. reported last December that nationwide, students are on average three months behind in their education. Students of color are up to five months behind, while white students were only one to three months behind.

Without Michigan-specific data, attainable only by MSTEP assessment results, we will not be able to compare across all districts and schools in the state to give parents a clear picture of whether their child is on track, what degree of learning remediation is needed, and where resources are most needed to be directed.

Unfortunately, State Superintendent Michael Rice and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer do not agree that MSTEP data is essential. Last fall, Rice asked the US Department of Education to cancel tests again this year, and Whitmer called giving the assessment "cruel."

We believe the opposite: the pandemic has been the cruelest to our most vulnerable and underserved students and families, and we need transparent data about their educational needs to target state and federal funds that can improve their chances of educational recovery.

Parents agree with the importance of administering the MSTEP assessment. New findings from a representative survey conducted by the National PTA and Learning Heroes found that 52 percent of parents favor administering statewide assessments, compared to just 24 percent opposed. The percent in favor rose to 60 percent after being presented with options for lowering the stakes this year.

In the days after the U.S. Department of Education's announcement, Superintendent Rice said in a statement that he would keep pushing to waive his responsibility for administering the MSTEP, citing that over half of Michigan's students have received "inconsistent" instruction.

We call on Superintendent Rice to instead take advantage of the opportunity to collect these critical data points while lowering the stakes through providing flexibility in the test's administration. He should follow the lead of states like Pennsylvania, which have acknowledged the challenges as well as the importance of testing and offered pragmatic solutions such as administering the assessment later in the year.

We cannot now rewind the clock to a time when we were desperate for data that did not exist. Instead, let us work together to make sure Michigan has as much information as possible to guide critical decisions and investments as we look toward accelerating learning and helping our students recover from the pandemic.

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Inline Play

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