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Secretary Betsy DeVos
Office of the Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos,

First, I want to thank you for all the work you have done in the first few months of your leadership of the United States Department of Education. I know you share my concern over the rising level of federal control of public education.

That is why I am writing you today. I am a member of the Alabama State Board of Education, and while I believe this letter captures the concerns of my Board, I am writing you in my individual capacity and as a mother of three children in Alabama public schools.

Earlier this month, Alabama Superintendent of Education Michael Sentance requested flexibility from using ACT Aspire testing while we develop an Alabama test that is right for us.

Over the last several years we have worked hard to implement rigorous standards that will best prepare our children and youths for living and working in the 21st century. We have shaped these standards with Alabama's values in mind while keeping our eyes on what today's students will need to thrive in the decades to come.

Unfortunately the ACT Aspire test has not met all expectations of the State Board. To be fair, the test suite did pass muster in some respects. For instance, the test has relatively short "seat time" and is more affordable than some.

However, questions about alignment have been raised by your Department.

My fellow State Board members and I have addressed concerns about Aspire including:

1. The test has few prep tools or exemplars, and those available must be purchased. Most of our systems cannot afford to buy the tools.
2. We have had trouble getting results back early enough to be helpful to teachers and parents.
3. The data we do receive does not seem to be in a form that educators can easily disaggregate, so instruction in many cases is not effectively informed by the test.

At this point our best option is to receive a waiver for next year's standardized test. This would allow us time to develop a test that aligns to our Alabama standards, is rigorous, and properly informs instruction. Alternately, we could use existing formative assessments to determine student achievement growth.

If your Department does not grant the waiver there is a strong likelihood we will administer three different summative tests in three years, Aspire this past year, a different test next year, and yet another test the year after next. Obviously this is very undesirable for our students, parents and teachers.

The Alabama State Department of Education's contract with Aspire ends within the next few months. I expect my Board would not be agreeable to re-entering a contract with Aspire, and, in fact, Aspire may not be agreeable to entering into a contract with Alabama.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed in December 2015 in a rare show of bipartisanship. ESSA replaced its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and modified provisions relating to the periodic standardized tests given to students.

ESSA allows some testing flexibility, but the regulations of the United States Department of Education seem to be the problem. ESSA's flexible approach to testing ought to be a strong consideration. I also invite you to review the Center On Education Policy (CEP) recent Summary of Three Reports "What Do Teachers and District Leaders Think about State Standards and Assessments." CEP makes a number of policy recommendations including, "State leaders could consider changing their assessments to be a series of interim tests that can be aggregated to a single summative score, as allowed under ESSA Title I, part A, section 1111(b)."

Standardized testing is extraordinarily difficult. Getting it right has implications for Alabama for decades to come. We need time to do that.

President Trump and you have spoken eloquently about decentralizing education and giving authority, accountability, and responsibility back to the states, parents, and local educators. Please consider those promises with this request.

Sincerely,



MARY SCOTT HUNTER
President Pro Tem, Alabama State Board of Education

Cc:
Alabama Federal Senate and House Delegations
Alabama State Board of Education
Alabama State Superintendent of Education
**Delivered via email attachment*