

New Jersey will seek standardized testing waiver, make grants available for learning loss Print



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New Jersey will seek a waiver from the federal government to cancel statewide standardized testing due to the ongoing pandemic, Gov. Phil Murphy announced Friday.

Though his administration will be requesting the waiver, the governor cautioned that “we have not yet received any indication from the Biden administration as to whether a waiver of assessment will be accepted, and we also recognize the importance of statewide assessments to gauge our students’ learning.”

Murphy also announced during his regular briefing in Trenton that the state Department of Education will be releasing its so-called Road Forward plan to address learning gaps and the increase in mental health issues that have festered among students and staff due to the pandemic.

“We think this is the most comprehensive plan being put forth by any American state,” Murphy said.

Acting Education Commissioner Angelica Allen-McMillan said during the briefing that although the state is applying for the testing waiver, “we must continue to use a data-driven approach to inform student growth and achievement.” As such, she said, the state will be collecting “local interim assessment data” from every district that applies for new learning loss grants.

In addition, the state Department of Education will provide two assessments in 2021— the Start Strong Assessment that was offered last fall and a kindergarten readiness assessment the department will pilot.

Allen-McMillan said the DOE will also release a “clearinghouse of successful practices” to help guide districts making programming decisions this spring and summer.

Background: Pressure has been building on Murphy to request standardized testing waivers. Some education advocates told POLITICO they thought the administration may have been waiting for the federal government to signal its position on testing before moving forward with the request.

The Biden administration has remained quiet on the issue of testing, but the chairs of two state Assembly education committees planned to introduce legislation that would [require the state Department of Education to request a waiver](#).

In the Senate, however, Education Chair Teresa Ruiz (D-Essex) had been the strongest voice in state government supporting the need for some form of testing to assess students’ learning loss and educational attainment.

“While I do not support a request for a waiver from the federal government to suspend statewide assessments, I am encouraged by the different pathways that Acting Commissioner Angelica Allen-McMillan is exploring for the collection of data,” Ruiz said in a statement. “Our conversations this week have been robust and centered on the critical need to tackle learning loss now and in the future.”

Representatives from the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association and the New Jersey Education Association praised Murphy's announcement in a joint statement on Friday.

"In a year filled with challenges and disruptions, the last thing our students need is to lose a single minute of instructional time to take a test that would not yield valid and reliable data or support their learning," the advocates stated. "We look forward to working with the NJDOE to gather the relevant, reliable data needed to help us target our efforts efficiently and effectively."

Learning loss: The centerpiece of the state's new learning loss plan is \$1.2 billion in federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds from the most recent coronavirus relief package, a little over \$1 billion of which will be distributed directly to districts, Murphy said.

The state also plans to make available \$75 million in grants to traditional school districts, charter schools, renaissance school projects and county vocational school districts to "help curb learning loss and accelerate learning."

The funds, Murphy said, may be used for one-on-one tutoring or broadening summer learning programs, providing educators with new professional-development opportunities and parents with new tools to help promote their kids' learning.

Education advocacy groups, business associations, parents and teachers have been [urging Murphy to adopt programs](#) like the ones announced Friday.

Murphy also announced Friday that schools will be able to apply for \$30 million in federal grant funding to strengthen mental health support for students and school staff.

Nonpublics: Murphy said his office will also be submitting an application to the federal government for the Emergency Assistance for Non-Public Schools federal program, which will allow the DOE to provide Covid-19 grant assistance to private schools. More information on that grant program will be forthcoming, Murphy said.

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