

Growing anger against Biden administration's mandate for standardized tests during pandemic

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Last month, President Biden's Acting Assistant Education Secretary Ian Rosenblum sent a letter to state education administrators instructing them that standardized tests had to be administered to students in some form this spring, summer or fall.

Rosenblum—whose previous job was executive director of the Education Trust-New York, a pro-standardized testing and pro-business organization—said states could delay the tests but they could not be canceled like last spring and they have to be conducted as soon as possible. The spring testing window for state tests, including the PSAT and SAT, typically given to high school juniors and seniors preparing for college, has already started in the United States.

The states of Michigan, California, Illinois, Georgia, New Jersey and New York requested testing waivers for the 2020-2021 school year in December and January. Others, such as Texas, Tennessee, Florida and Indiana, are testing students regardless of the Biden administration's decision.

Rosenblum, who currently heads the Education Department's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, claimed the tests were needed to “address the educational inequities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, including by using student learning data to enable states, school districts, and schools to target resources and supports to the students with the greatest needs.”

This is nothing but a political cover. Testing is being tied to school reopenings, with the push for standardized testing coinciding with the Biden administration's plans to open up all K-8 schools by the end of April.

“President Biden's first priority is to safely re-open schools and get students back in classrooms, learning face-to-face from teachers with their fellow students,” Rosenblum wrote. “To be successful once schools have re-opened, we need to understand the impact COVID-19 has had on learning and identify what resources and supports students need.”

He added, “We must also specifically be prepared to address the educational inequities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, including by using student learning data to enable states, school districts, and schools to target resources and supports to the students with the greatest needs.”

Standardized tests have been among the greatest stressors to the nation's children, teachers and families since they were aggressively scaled up under the Bush administration's No Child

Left Behind (NCLB). These tests have been used to systematically defund public schools for the past two decades, and mandating them during a pandemic should be deemed cruel and unusual punishment.

At a December 2019 Public Education Forum in Pittsburgh, Biden promised that he would end the federal mandate on standardized testing. Instead, his Education Secretary Miguel Cardona is a fierce advocate of standardized testing and school reopening who provoked widespread anger among teachers when he served as Connecticut's commissioner of education.

During his confirmation hearing, Cardona reiterated his insistence on standardized testing, stating, “If we don't assess where our students are and their level of performance, it's going to be difficult for us to provide some targeted support and a resource allocation in the manner that can best support the closing of the gaps.”

In an effort to posture as teachers' allies and cultivate illusions that Cardona and Biden can be pushed to the left, the heads of the national teachers unions and various Democrats have publicly opposed the Biden administration's mandate on standardized testing. National Education Association (NEA) President Becky Pringle stated her opposition shortly after Rosenblum's memo was circulated.

Last week, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten—who has played the central role in facilitating Biden's homicidal campaign to reopen schools—co-authored an article for NBC News with New York representative Jamaal Bowman, in which they only oppose standardized testing this spring. While stating that they “understand why [standardized tests] exist,” their only objection is that “standardized testing this year will not reliably gauge student performance or identify areas in need of growth.”

Bowman, who is a member of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), also recently co-wrote a letter to Cardona opposing testing with five Democratic members of Congress, including Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, Sen. Ed Markey of Massachusetts, Rep. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Rep. Thomas Suozzi of New York and Rep. Mark Takano of California. Omar and Bowman are part of the DSA's congressional “squad” and promote identity politics to confuse workers and keep them tied to the Democratic Party.

Their letter endorses the reckless campaign to reopen schools, writing, “we must dedicate all of our efforts to a return to safe, in person learning, and we cannot divert our time and expenses to ‘teaching to,’ implementing and administering federally mandated testing.”

The manner in which this year’s tests take place is being left to the states, with each one determining testing dates and whether they will be done virtually or in-person. Cardona claims that students should not be asked to go into buildings in areas where cases are high to take tests, which begs the question why any students are going into buildings at present, as COVID-19 continues to run rampant throughout the country. According to Burbio’s K-12 School Opening Tracker, only 53.7 percent of schools are open at some capacity, with many of those only in a hybrid form.

According to a Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) study, 25 percent of students were missing for fall assessments. More broadly, there has been a loss of an estimated 3 million children from public school rolls during the pandemic. Students are missing due to loss of family members, caregivers’ loss of jobs, unstable housing, and the inability of parents to get childcare assistance for those forced to work.

Among educators, parents and students, there is widespread opposition to the continuation of standardized testing during the pandemic. A Michigan teacher commented to the *World Socialist Web Site*, “In mid-October, my students, now 9th graders, were given the PSAT, after over two months of virtual learning, and three months of summer where no learning took place. These scores could potentially be used for my evaluation. Students should not have been given this test. The country is in the middle of a pandemic and these students have over five months not receiving normal instruction or had accessibility issues with technology.”

A kindergarten teacher from Utah spoke about the standardized test for identifying letters and sounds, known as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). She said, “Here’s the thing about DIBELS: it doesn’t really give us that much information we don’t know or can’t get other ways, especially the Beginning of Year test. It takes money from the district to hire the testers and have them travel around the various schools.

“The kids take their masks off for the DIBELS testing and the testers just wear face shields. Same thing for ELL testing. It’s about 5 minutes per kid but the testers are in the same poorly ventilated room for hours at a time. And they travel between different schools. We also have standardized benchmark tests in Math and Reading given to us by the district.

“We are hanging on by the skin of our teeth. I am so burnt out. Every Friday I feel like I’m going to fall apart and every Monday I wake up dreading going to school. And I LOVE teaching!! This is just exhausting and it’s so hard to teach kindergartners and kindergarten content with the masks and attempts at distancing and extra stress all the teachers and kids are under. It’s just a lot.”

The entrenchment of standardized testing under Bush, which was escalated under Obama, followed decades of bipartisan budget cutting and the systematic destruction of working class living

standards. Predictably poor results on tests were exploited to persecute teachers and close “failing schools,” which were either left to rot or converted into privately-run charter schools. Teacher evaluations and pay were also aligned with test results, further undermining a wide-ranging curriculum and converting it into mind-numbing “teaching to the test,” largely tailored to the needs of big business.

Throughout this process, there has been a continual funneling of public resources to for-profit charter schools and other school privatization schemes, which will only deepen under Biden. Significantly, at the last minute, Democratic Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer (NY) inserted \$2.75 billion in funding for private schools into the COVID-19 stimulus package passed last week. This reactionary and unprecedented move was endorsed by Weingarten.

The pandemic has been exploited to accelerate the attack on teachers and public education, with massive budget cuts implemented in states across the US and masses of educators leaving the profession early in response to the demand that they return to deadly classrooms for in-person learning.

Among educators, parents and students, there is enormous opposition to testing and the reckless reopening of schools. This must be combined with a political struggle against the further starvation of public education and for a radical redistribution of wealth to greatly improve the quality of public education. Until the population is inoculated and the pandemic contained, all learning must remain fully remote.

Only after a massive infusion of funds to vastly improve education should tests, designed and overseen by educators themselves, be conducted to see where improvements and more resources should be allocated.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee is leading the fight to put human needs and lives above profit, and to organize educators to carry out the necessary political struggle against both parties of austerity, inequality and war and the fight for the universal right to high quality public education. We urge all those who wish to take up this fight to sign up today to get involved !



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