

*Forward in Excellence*

Dr. Raymond H. Blanch  
Superintendent



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March 22, 2021

Dear Senator Gillibrand, Senator Schumer, and Congressman Maloney,

We write to you as the governing body of the Somers Central School District in Northern Westchester, New York to urge that Congress enact legislation to waive all unfunded state mandates under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for the 2020-2021 school year.

Somers Central School District is proud of our distinction as one of the few districts countywide which opened in September 2020 and remained open to support our 3,000 students in grades K-12 during this wholly remarkable school year.

But these efforts were at a significant psychological and financial cost to our district. In total we've spent nearly \$2M ensuring as safe a reopening as possible for all 3,000 students. This cost included the hiring of instructional and custodial staff to educate our learners and keep students safely distanced in regularly cleaned and safe spaces.

Learning too has been entirely different for students and their teachers this year. The very real social and emotional burden the pandemic has placed on our community and nation cannot be stated loudly enough. When our faculty and staff returned to classrooms last fall it was not without very palpable and well-reasoned fears. Nevertheless, they returned each day in support of our learners.

To administer standardized assessments that will steal hours of valuable instructional time from our learners in grades 3-8, which are children as young as 9 years old, and especially as mandates tied to accountability have been lifted, breaches our fiduciary responsibility to the community we represent. In a year when student learning has been interrupted by quarantines and garbled by face masks, administering these assessments fails to consider the needs of our students, the very reason schools exist.

In education there is a saying that "you can't Bloom before you Maslow". This refers to the requirement to meet the needs of a human-centered taxonomy (Maslow) of physiological and psychological wellbeing prior to meeting needs of a cognitive taxonomy (Bloom) including the recollection of facts and figures. If we've learned nothing else from the pandemic it is that the physiological and psychological wellbeing of our students will not be met by administering standardized assessments but rather by focusing on our students needs through more instructional time and re-building essential social connections.

The administration of the federally mandated tests under ESSA undermines best practices in instruction and violates our fiduciary responsibility to the community we serve. We cannot in good conscience use taxpayer dollars to administer standardized assessments during a year where our students need more time with their teachers and peers for instruction and positive socialization. We ask Congress to act now and enact legislation that waives all unfunded state mandates under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for the 2020-2021 school year.

Sincerely,

*Dr. Lindsay Portnoy  
Heidi Cambareri  
Dr. Ifay Chang  
Michael D'Anna  
Joseph Marra  
MaryRose Joseph  
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District Administration

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