



COLORADO

Department of Education

Commissioner's Office
201 East Colfax Avenue, Room 500
Denver, CO 80203-1799

A+ Colorado
African Leadership Group
Colorado Latino Leadership, Advocacy, & Research Organization (CLLARO)
Colorado Succeeds
Democrats for Education Reform
Education Reform Now Colorado
Independence Institute
Ready Colorado
Stand for Children Colorado
Transform Education Now

July 20, 2020

Dear Colorado Education Organizations:

Thank you for your thoughtful feedback regarding diagnostic assessment in the 2020-21 school year. While Colorado schools did an amazing job of answering the call to find innovative approaches for educating students during extraordinary circumstances last spring, there is no question that the coming school year will present unique challenges that will require thoughtful strategies to support the safety, well-being and academic success of Colorado students.

First, it is important to note that using assessment information to engage students and build upon their knowledge and skills, not solely to identify deficits, is good assessment practice in any circumstance and is particularly important now. In addition, while many Colorado educators already thoughtfully approach measuring student readiness at the beginning of each school year, taking steps to identify unfinished student learning will be particularly important this fall in order to facilitate high impact instruction. We are in total agreement that in order for educators, parents and students to know where students are academically and to understand what the plan is to meet their students' needs, high quality assessment tools, incorporating both formal tests and robust classroom assessment practices, must be used.

We have determined through conversations with district leadership that Colorado districts and schools use multiple commercially available assessments, such as iReady, MAP, Performance Series, and aimsweb, every year. While some other states use these types of assessments state-wide, decisions regarding which of these to incorporate into Colorado district and school assessment systems are mostly determined locally, *taking alignment to local curricula* into consideration. That is why we have determined the best course of action is to assist school districts as needed with improving their own assessment systems, and not to spend ESSER resources on a statewide standardized diagnostic assessment. We have expanded upon our rationale below.

Over the last few months, my team has engaged in conversations with members from your organizations, district leaders, the State Board of Education, and additional education representatives to consider the utility of a statewide diagnostic tool, and to better understand the diagnostic, formative



and interim assessment tools that schools and districts across Colorado are already implementing. We wanted to understand this bigger picture as we considered the use of federal funds for the purpose of purchasing a statewide diagnostic assessment solution as proposed in your letter.

Through these conversations, we have found that “diagnostic assessments” are used in a variety of ways by various stakeholders. According to our [Colorado Comprehensive Standards-Based Assessment Framework](#), the purposes of diagnostic assessments are to screen students for special program placement or intervention, and to identify underlying causes of breakdown in learning. Diagnostic assessment data support actions such as targeted interventions for at-risk and gifted students, and program placement and support for English language learners.

A less conventional characterization of diagnostic assessment is that of a more uniform type of “proficiency-based” assessment that could be provided to all students at the beginning of the school year. Accordingly, a footnote from your letter called for an off-the-shelf, commercially available formalized assessment for all Colorado students. Based on conversations with educators, assessment professionals, state board and other education stakeholders, I have determined that establishing a statewide assessment of this type at this point-in-time would distract districts from focusing on critical fall re-opening priorities, result in unnecessary duplication and not necessarily be aligned to local curricula. Additionally, use of large-scale diagnostic assessments to determine all students’ current knowledge and skills falls outside of the validated purposes and uses of those assessments. A primary consequence of such use could be the over-identification of special education or intervention services which may not be necessary and could further exacerbate inequities.

We do whole heartedly support the intention in your letter -- ensuring we understand where students need more support academically -- and feel that there are a number of things CDE and districts can and are doing to support this goal. As always, districts have the authority to adjust their local assessment systems and may choose to change which of the assessments they use. We have been discussing with many districts all the options at their disposal to meet this important goal. This year, districts and schools may also direct their ESSER funds toward purchasing additional assessments if they are deemed reasonable, necessary, and allocable for the purpose of measuring learning loss due to COVID-related school closures. Also, as part of CDE’s [Assessment Literacy Program](#), several tools and resources are available to assist with determining whether an assessment has the capacity to meet the needs of students and educators:

- [Colorado Comprehensive Standards-Based Assessment Framework](#): The framework is designed to provide information regarding a variety of assessment types to include the primary user of the assessment, its purpose, frequency and relationship to instruction, strategies for obtaining evidence of learning, types of evidence gathered, and how the results should be used to inform specific actions and decisions.





- [Colorado Assessment Review Tool](#): The purpose of this tool is to help educators evaluate assessments in order to make determinations regarding their quality and efficacy relative to alignment to standards, scoring strategies, the degree to which the assessment is fair and unbiased, and the opportunity for students to learn as a result of the assessment. This review can aid education leaders in making determinations regarding assessment administration, use of results, and purchase decisions.
- [Classroom Assessment Analysis](#): This user-friendly tool allows teachers to quickly and thoroughly determine the extent to which their classroom assessments are: (1) aligned to learning goals and success criteria; (2) reflective of the appropriate rigor; (3) precise and free from errors and extraneous information; (4) free from unintended bias; and, (5) inclusive of a well-designed scoring strategy.

Although the introduction of a new state assessment does not make sense for Colorado at this time, we recognize the importance of assessment activities that must occur at the beginning of the school year. As Colorado schools and districts plan for and begin a school year under very challenging and potentially ambiguous circumstances, assessment-related practices must be consistent with the district's academic goals as well as the district's student and teacher social-emotional and well-being priorities. Schools and districts are in the best position to leverage their local assessment practices and assessments to guide the critical decisions that they will need to make regarding instruction, resource allocation and individual student supports. In addition to the considerable changes in educational environments and school-day structures experienced by students last spring, the varying degrees of impact on local curricula, which may have differed significantly by student age and content area as well as by educational system resources, family resources, and educator capacity must be considered.

Students and teachers will benefit most from assessments that are closely aligned with district curricula and take into consideration, (1) non-negotiable content; that is, content that is essential for students to know in order to have the requisite knowledge and skills to participate in future learning; and (2) content that was not taught and, therefore, students have not had the opportunity to learn. District review of curricula from the last and upcoming year will be critical to informing these important determinations. Therefore, in addition to the prioritization of identifying individual student learning loss and holes, we are encouraging districts to consider engaging in an evaluation of the health of their curricula and scope-and-sequences.

Given the focus on student-centered, instructionally embedded assessment and the adjustments to curricula, education leaders need to thoughtfully consider the timing, interpretation and use of results obtained from large-scale interim assessments so that students are not unintentionally held back from engaging in grade-level content or unnecessarily targeted for remediation because of inaccurate "special needs" perceptions. Acknowledgement of the holes that will likely exist for many students as a result of





opportunity to learn issues created by COVID-19 will be a critical component of ensuring that all students are engaging in grade-level content in school year 2020-21.

We recognize that sharing assessment and instructional considerations for the beginning of the 2020-21 school year with Colorado school districts is critically important. In addition to evaluating current assessment systems and avoiding particular assessment practices at the beginning of the year, we are encouraging districts to determine which assessment-related conversations to have with staff before school resumes for students and to engage in professional development that addresses the assessment practices already in use by the district. Along with our [2020-21 School Year Toolkit](#), below are a few new national resources that districts may find useful as they engage in preparation for the return to school, whether their return approach includes an in-person, remote or hybrid model:

- [RESTART & RECOVERY: Considerations for Teaching & Learning Overview](#)
 - Appendix G: Assessment Detailed Overview: How prepared and how well is each student learning this content?
- [Restart & Recovery: Assessment Considerations for Fall 2020](#)
- [Learning as We Go: Principles for Effective Assessment](#)

Lastly, our Standards and Instructional Support team are anticipating the release of additional materials next week that provide content area-specific information about ways to identify unfinished learning, what to do about unfinished learning, and a Colorado Academic Standards-based approach to high impact instruction in the time of COVID-19. This information will also be provided at the CASE conference at the end of the month.

I want to thank you again for your thoughtful input regarding learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the potential utility of diagnostic assessment in Colorado's 2020-21 school year. We took your suggestions seriously and spent a lot of time considering them. The coming year presents many challenges and I am grateful that so many intelligent, committed individuals are thinking creatively about how we can reach our common goal of providing the best education possible for Colorado students. I truly appreciate and value the healthy dialog generated by your proposal as well as the partnership that we have developed over the last several years as we work alongside schools and districts to improve outcomes for our students. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions.

Respectfully,

Katy Anthes, Ph.D.
Commissioner

