



August 25, 2020

This letter represents a joint effort by the school system superintendents comprising the Northwest RESA to formally request comprehensive assessment and accountability reform in our state's models. It is our understanding that North Carolina is one of five states in the country who have been granted an opportunity to reform testing/assessment. We are excited about this opportunity and hopeful that it will be met with new ideas that reform our testing/assessment practice into one that is truly reflective of student achievement with timely and meaningful results for teachers, administrators and parents. We also are aware that the State Board of Education has a workgroup examining the accountability model for possible change recommendations to be sent to the General Assembly. With this work we also hope that positive changes will be made that better reflect the quality of our schools.

We would like to share with you some of the concerns that we have and some suggestions to consider when taking on this enormous but valuable task.

From the superintendents' perspective, there is little discussion needed to justify the need for comprehensive testing reform in our state. The current model has been in place for some time and does not provide the data needed in our schools. We believe there are many facets of the testing program that need to be examined and improved.

First, the current testing model requires that tests be administered at the end of the academic year with student performance on a single day, in a specific subject area, being the record of achievement for the entire year. This produces a great deal of anxiety for all who are involved: the student, the teacher, and sometimes even the parent/guardian. Concerns about test anxiety and its influence on test results should be considered. In addition, a single point of data at a single point in time should not be the determinant of a student's achievement for the year. Not to mention, this single test result weighs heavily in the permanent indicator of success for the student, teacher, and school.

Another issue with test administration at the end of the school year is that the data collected is of no use to the current teacher. Isn't guiding instruction one of the basic tenets of an assessment model? When test data is collected at the end of the year, there is no opportunity for the teacher to adjust instruction to meet student needs because the school year is over, or nearly over, when the data is received. We believe that the assessment model in our state should consist of data points collected at various points throughout the school year. This would allow instruction to be adjusted and remediation and acceleration to be implemented in an

immediate manner on an individual student basis based on those results. Additionally, if this is done, a pacing guide from DPI would be very helpful for teachers.

Second, we are concerned that the current test question format fails to allow a student to adequately demonstrate mastery of content. While there is a place for multiple choice responses, a student should have the opportunity to offer more elaborative responses to show their mastery. Furthermore, students should be able to demonstrate their understanding with opportunities to apply their knowledge. We encourage teachers to understand the learning styles of our students, yet we assess in a single manner. Test items should include authentic tasks that require the application of knowledge to solve problems and complete tasks. We know that these types of tests are more difficult and more expensive to develop and to score, but the data they yield is much more useful.

Another concern is the length of the tests. A single test given in a single test administration must be lengthy to get a reasonable representation of the tasks taught throughout the school year. We propose a testing model that utilizes shorter assessments throughout the school year providing multiple data points and eliminating the need for a cumulative single measure at the end of the year. The approach of multiple assessments could include shorter tests as well as other innovative forms of assessment such as those described above. When used together, this would better reflect what a student has learned and would provide the opportunity to intervene as needs are identified.

Some other thoughts about testing have been shared that we would like to pass along, these include:

- The online features, or lack of, are also a concern. Students are limited in the current testing platform because they cannot annotate text or make notes in margins. They are able to highlight text, but that is not enough.
- Create useful data and reports that can be used by teachers to guide their instructional planning and design.
- Eliminate other tests that are being used in favor of shorter tests throughout the school year. This would also save a great deal of money for systems that purchase other assessments for this purpose.
- Move away from the lock-down, secure testing atmosphere and make the days of testing more like a “normal” school day.

We believe that a student is more than a test score. A student’s recorded achievement for a school year should represent what the student has learned and should reflect a myriad of “assessments” throughout the school year that provide a detailed and accurate picture of every student. These assessments should include various types of test items and tap into the various learning styles of students.

As we discuss the testing model, we cannot ignore the accountability model that is built upon the testing model. The State Board of Education has a workgroup addressing the accountability model. We would like to provide feedback for the State Board of Education's consideration on this topic as well.

As a method of presenting a "quality" indicator of a school to the public, the current accountability model of assigning letter grades to schools does not always accurately reflect the quality of schools. Those of us who are in schools every day realize that there are many qualitative indicators that could be used to better capture and reflect the level of quality in a school. We suggest that if test score data is used, growth be weighted more heavily than it currently is, at least the same weight as proficiency. We also believe there should be more indicators included in the accountability "formula". The derived metric should reflect the skills of all students and should be meaningful and reflective of what the school has offered throughout the student's academic career. Another area of the model that is in critical need of review is the heavy influence that poverty plays in the results. This effect should be mitigated and controlled for in the model. The current school letter grade results are often proxy indicators of school system poverty.

We are hopeful that this opportunity for genuine reform will not be wasted. We should seize this privilege we have been given with genuine reform occurring in our state. Simply tweaking what we have is not enough; our students and all other stakeholders deserve better. We encourage you to help our state benefit from this opportunity to reform and improve our testing and accountability processes.

Respectfully,



Don Phipps, Superintendent
Caldwell County Schools