

EDUCATION

Standardized tests raise questions in time of pandemic

By Alex Rose

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UPPER DARBY » Upper Darby School District Superintendent Dr. Dan McGarry is questioning a push for standardized testing this year even as the state is recommending that schools go to virtual learning in areas seeing a surge of coronavirus infections.

“Is it really smart to put an emphasis on state testing during a pandemic?” he said. “That’s where it’s a head scratcher for me, and I would hope that the state and federal government would come together and say, ‘Look, let’s champion our schools, try to get them to open, support them trying to get open, but let’s not make the focus on state testing.’”

McGarry said schools are getting a mixed message as the state government attempts to quell a rising surge of COVID-19 cases by placing restrictions on things like public gatherings while still requiring thousands of students to come to schools for in-person testing.

“While the window has been extended a little bit for this school year, and of course we obviously appreciate that, we’re still in a pandemic,” he said. “So if you can imagine in Upper Darby High School, when we’re having to test over 1,000 students in the high school alone at a time, the longer we push off the win-



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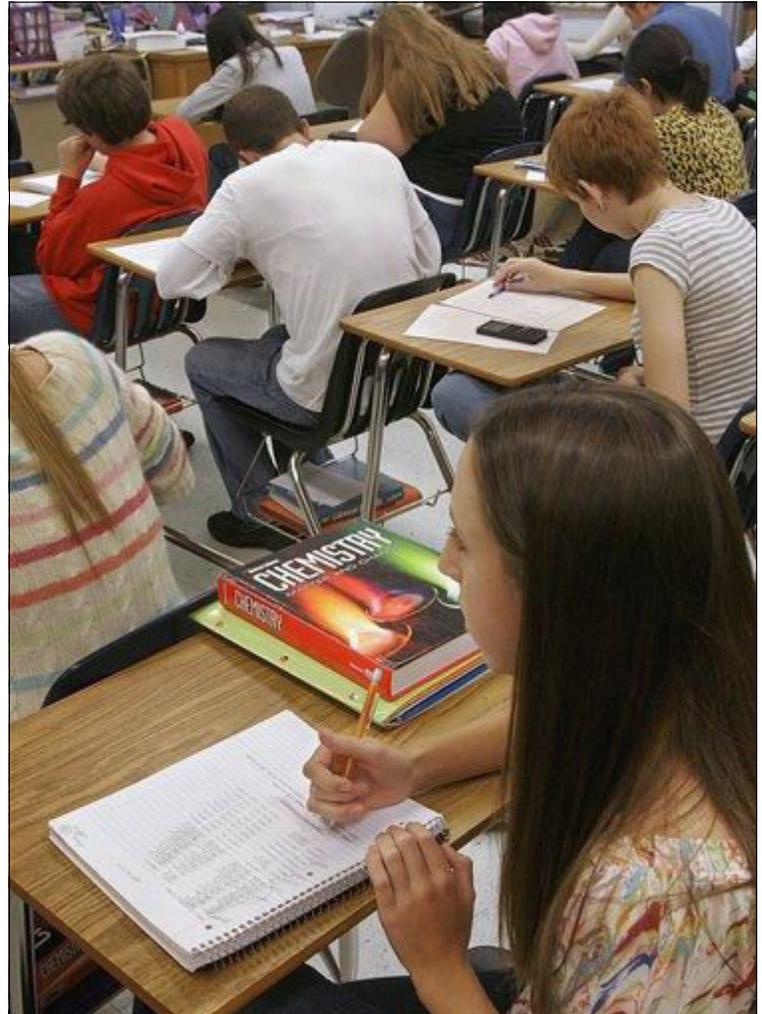
As it stands now, the Pennsylvania Department of Education is requiring that schools continue to administer tests mandated at the federal level – including the Keystone Exams that are tied to graduation.

Meanwhile, an order issued by Secretary of Health Dr. Rachel Levine last week requires administrators of districts residing in areas of the state where the virus is at “substantial” levels – a rate of 100 in 100,000 for seven consecutive days – to attest that they are taking various steps to ensure student safety. Districts that do not comply with the attestation will have to transition

fully to remote learning for at least two weeks and suspend all extracurricular activities.

McGarry said that signals that the state understands the need to keep kids separated in a bid to reduce transmission rates, but is nonetheless still requiring in-person testing. That appears to be due to a lack of flexibility from the U.S. Department of Education.

U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos wrote in a letter issued in early September that federal waivers granted for 2019-20 testing in the spring are not likely to come again for the 2020-21 school year. DeVos stated that assessment testing is critical in determining how students are doing in school



MEDIA NEWS GROUP FILE PHOTO

Tenth-grade students take a chemistry test while in class at Springfield High School in Springfield, Ill., in 2007. An Associated Press analysis of new state data found an average 28 percent gap statewide between the percentage of elementary pupils meeting or exceeding standards on tests and high school students doing the same.

and that removing that tool would lead to an erosion of transparency and accountability while damaging the educational outcomes of the nation’s most vulnerable students.

While the Pennsylvania Department of Education indicated in its own letter to educators last month that it disagrees with that stance, its hands are tied

with regard to testing under the law unless a waiver or some other mechanism scrapping assessments is forthcoming.

“Unless there is relief granted by the federal government, my understanding is that we will be administering the test,” said Lee Ann Wentzel, superintendent of the Ridley School District. “With all that’s go-

ing on, that’s certainly going to create some challenges. We won’t be able to compare apples to apples because we didn’t do state assessments last year, so it’s going to be an interesting challenge and I think we have to take the directive that we’re given in terms of the mandate.”

Bill Kaplan, the parent

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Tests

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of a junior and 8th-grader in Upper Darby, said some leeway needs to be given on state and federal tests this year.

"I'm a big proponent of tests that help with figuring out where my kids and all the other students are academically," he said. "I'm not against the keystones, I'm just against how much investment and time needs to be put into this during the pandemic. That's what I'm really concerned about. I just think it's not necessary at this point."

The PDE letter did indicate that the window for testing could be expanded to the end of March, providing districts at least some relief in attempting to administer the testing to smaller cohorts at one time. McGarry said that was cold comfort, however, as his district does block scheduling and many of these tests - particularly the Keystone exams - are tied to courses the students might have completed months earlier.

"So I'm going to have in the neighborhood of 1,000 students that will be required to take a test sometime before the end of March in a pandemic, months removed from the last time they took that course," said McGarry. "Add to that that I also have to test in the district 1,200 English learners, over 300 of whom are high school kids. So now I also have to find a way to fit in the access test for English learner students in the same window for federal requirements."

"The addition of state assessments on top of all the challenges the pandemic is presenting to our kids, we're trying to weigh the benefits of that," said Rose Tree Media School District Superintendent Dr. Eleanor DiMarino-Linnen. "We understand the importance of accountability, but the implementation of the state assessment, because of the length of testing and the



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timeline for testing, that really presents a challenge for all districts."

DiMarino-Linnen said about 12 percent of families in her district have elected to remain fully virtual. For some, she said that might be because they have a vulnerable family member living at home.

DiMarino-Linnen added that she is proud of the work her educators have done this year under extraordinary circumstances and worries that pivoting from strong engagement to testing could ultimately be detrimental to students.

"Our faculty have done an incredible job of rising to the challenge of developing this new model of instructional delivery, of now not only teaching virtually, but teaching virtually as well as to the children in front of them," said DiDarino-Linnen. "They've spent an enormous amount of time and energy to have that done well and that's really where we want them to focus. We want their focus on taking the standards as the goals of instruction and making sure we're delivering that in a robust way."

McGarry noted most dis-



Upper Darby Superintendent Dr. Dan McGarry

tricts right now are still virtual and students are having a hard time learning the material to begin with. Then there is the logistics of training hundreds of teachers and actually administering the tests in a socially distanced environment, which he said would further detract from instructional time.

"It's difficult enough managing what we're managing, to think about bringing kids in for a state test - and in Upper Darby we're talking about thousands of kids at a clip with 6 feet of social distancing," he said. "And these are nine full days at the high school or 12 three-and-a-half hour sessions. And then I have to do that at both middle schools and then for all my elementary schools. From a staffing implication, during a pandemic, making that the priority when we're just trying to get kids back into school and navigate that, I just think all the adults have to get into a room and really talk about this."

Wentzel said that even under normal conditions, administering tests can have an impact on engagement. Though she said her district expects to be able to meet the challenge of administer-

ing the test using staggered cohorts of students, Wentzel said the amount of effort kids put in and the accompanying level of success will be curious during a pandemic.

"The test itself I get," said Kaplan. "They're trying to make sure everyone has the baseline knowledge to graduate. But it's multiple days with scores of teachers just for this exam and the amount of investment when our teachers are really overtaxed right now, they're just overwhelmed, and if we were going to ask them to do something, I would hope it would be something more critical. I just don't understand what's so critical about this exam."

Kaplan added that it is difficult to explain to his children the need for these exams while at the same time saying they cannot participate in other activities. And if the state can get by this year without the keystones or other standardized tests, he said, maybe it's time to reconsider their value overall.

"I just don't agree with why that's so important and is it worth the risk," he said. "It's a huge drain and then what's the benefit of it?"

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We have other ways to determine whether our children are able to graduate with the kind of knowledge they need. If they're saying it's for benchmarks, there's other ways to get that data. I just don't see the significance of it outweighing the harm."