

MN students will take annual math, reading tests, but state won't use MCA results

Last year's MCAs were canceled because of the pandemic.

Josh Verges - Pioneer Press

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Minnesota schools must administer statewide math and reading tests this spring, but the results likely will not be used to identify struggling schools.

The Minnesota Department of Education on Thursday requested a one-time waiver from accountability and school identification requirements in federal education law.

If approved, the state won't use this year's test results when it identifies the next list of low-performing schools in 2022. And the list of schools getting extra support from the state this year will remain the same next year.

Last year's federally mandated tests were canceled across the country because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Several states this year have asked to cancel their tests but have been denied. So far, only Washington D.C. has been allowed to cancel its tests because so many of its students still are learning from home, and most Colorado and Oregon students will take either the math or reading test, not both.

Even though the tests must go on, the Biden administration is allowing states to all but ignore the results by postponing the identification of low-performing schools.

Minnesota's waiver application says the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) "will yield valuable information" for school districts and the state. But the data, it says, will be so varied that it should not be relied upon to identify schools in need of support.

"By waiving these requirements, we increase the quality of our next identifications for comprehensive, targeted and additional targeted support, leading to a more effective use of resources to advance student academic achievement," the application reads.

School identification in 2022 will be based on MCA results, graduation rates and attendance data from only the 2018-19 and 2021-22 school years, department spokeswoman Ashleigh Norris said.

UNION WANTS TESTS CANCELED

Education Minnesota, the state teachers union, supported the waiver request but argued the tests should have been canceled again this year.

“We do not understand why we are sacrificing valuable instructional time to collect data that is so flawed that it will never be used,” President Denise Specht wrote in a letter to the department.

The union predicted a record number of students will opt out of the tests, which must be taken at school, even by students who have been in distance learning for the past year.

Besides high numbers of students opting out, testing will look a bit different this year. The state is not requiring schools to schedule test make-up days; they are allowing test monitors to supervise more students than usual; and students who are not testing can be in the same room as those who are.

EdAllies, a nonprofit that advocates for historically underserved students, also supported the state’s accountability waiver, but for different reasons.

Executive Director Josh Crosson called the MCAs “an essential tool for understanding whether students are on track,” and said the tests this spring can serve as a baseline for tracking Minnesota’s academic recovery from the pandemic, as well as give parents data on their children’s needs.

EdAllies urged the department to report the test results within 30 days so that teachers and parents can begin to address learning gaps at the end of the school year and during the summer. Norris said the department hasn’t yet established a reporting timeline.

The Department of Education took public comment in February on a previous plan that would have changed the formula for identifying low-performing schools in 2022, giving less weight to tests taken this year and next. But after the Biden administration issued new guidance, that plan never was submitted for federal approval.