

States suspending standardized tests as schools close

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In this Wednesday, March 11, 2020, file photo, custodial staffer Hortensia Salinas uses an Electrostatic Clorox Sprayer to spray disinfectant in a classroom at Brownsville Early College High School in Brownsville, Texas. Closing schools to combat the spread of the coronavirus is having a sweeping impact on an annual rite of spring: the standardized tests that are dreaded by millions of students and teachers alike. (Denise Cathey/The Brownsville Herald via AP, File)

Closing schools to combat the spread of the coronavirus is having a sweeping impact on an annual rite of spring: the standardized tests that are dreaded by millions of students and teachers alike.

Several [states](#) have canceled standardized testing for this [academic year](#) as they face [school](#) closures that could last weeks or months. The tests were scheduled to begin in early April in many states.

While that's easing the burden on students and teachers, it's also creating problems. The federal government requires states to perform annual standardized assessments under the Every Student Succeeds Act. And education groups warn that moving classes online won't deliver equitable learning across states, [school districts](#) and even within classrooms.

Several states have asked U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos to waive those requirements. The department has said states can apply for a waiver on a case-by-case basis, but no blanket waiver has been announced.

In a recent advisory to schools, the department said it generally doesn't grant broad waivers from the assessments that provide valuable information for parents, teachers and schools. But it said it would consider a targeted waiver for schools badly hit by the current "extraordinary circumstances."

"It's time for Betsy DeVos to do the right thing on behalf of our students and waive statewide assessments," Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said Tuesday. "When our kids get back to school, our number one priority must be ensuring they have the resources they need to get back on track."

The department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on Monday canceled the annual State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness tests for about 3.5 million students. More than half of the state's 1,200 school districts, including the largest in Dallas and Houston and Austin, are facing prolonged school closures.

That was a relief for Lisa Ivy, a 16-year science teacher in Round Rock, Texas, whose fifth-grade daughter had been facing a STAAR test to determine if she would advance to [middle school](#).

"I watch the anxiety created by these tests, as a teacher and a mom," Ivy said. Her daughter knew what was at stake and was getting nervous that school closures would disrupt the final weeks of learning and review before the critical exam.

"Watching her get scared about it was crazy," Ivy said. "I feel like schools didn't want to cancel because we had STAAR test."

In Washington state, where schools are closed statewide until at least April 24, Gov. Jay Inslee canceled standardized testing. In Ohio, where schools are scheduled to be closed for several weeks, Gov. Mike DeWine said: "If we can't have testing this year, we will not have testing this year. The world will not come to an end."

The Texas test is a high-stakes assessment that starts in third grade and can stop poor-performing students from advancing to the next grade level or even graduating high school. Test scores are also used to evaluate teachers.

While Abbott's office said some districts may still want evaluations this year to collect learning data, the Texas State Teachers Association heralded the decision to say they're not required.

"With this health crisis, educators, students, parents and their families

need to be dedicated to keeping their families safe. That's stressful enough without having to worry about a standardized test to advance or graduate," TSTA spokesman Clay Robison said.

For most people, the virus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially [older adults](#) and people with preexisting health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia.

The vast majority of people recover from the virus. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild cases recover in about two weeks, while others could take three to six weeks to get well.

School districts are grappling with developing online learning for students. Education groups say that creates a problem for standardized testing as students may not have equal access to learning and lessons outside the classroom.

"It's inherently inequitable," said Noelle Ellerson Ng, associate executive director for advocacy and governance for the American Association of School Administrators.

"No school district can guarantee students have access to online learning," Ellerson Ng said. "Some live in homes where mom and dad can work from home and have the ability to get them through it. Others have parents who will have to go to work and make that the priority. It's a burden parents shouldn't have to feel or schools should be held accountable for."

Maggie Brown, a 12-year-old sixth-grader in Austin, Texas, said she wasn't worried about passing the STAAR this year but that she and her group of friends were glad it was canceled. She remembers the stress it put on students trying to advance out of elementary school.

"I got about 40 texts from my friends in the first hour after it was canceled. My phone was blowing up," Brown said. "I'm glad we didn't have to go from online learning to taking the STAAR. The class environment is important to getting ready for the test."

Mississippi, Georgia and Texas are among more than a dozen states that use standardized [test](#) result in rating systems that grade schools and districts on an A-F scale.

In Mississippi, where schools Superintendent Carey Wright has called for eliminating standardized testing this year, that could mean teachers in high-performing schools won't be eligible for bonuses of up to \$2,000. It also could influence which school districts are eligible for state takeovers and where charter schools are allowed to open.

That's similar to Georgia, where testing accounts not only for 20% of a [student's](#) grade in eight high school courses. It also factors into how the state selects low-performing schools for special academic aid.

Georgia Superintendent Richard Woods has said only that he's suspending testing, but his staff says [school closures](#) mean testing is unrealistic when the school year ends in May.

Matt Jones, Woods' chief of staff, said calling off tests during the coronavirus outbreak shows there's more to school than high achievement on tests.

"I think it proves that testing is not the sole focus," Jones said. "We want to make sure these decisions are student-centered."

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