

PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS' ASSOCIATION OF MARYLAND

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January 6, 2016

Mr. Guffrie M. Smith, Jr.
President
Maryland State Board of Education
200 W. Baltimore Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Dear President Smith:

On behalf of the Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM) representing all 24 local school superintendents, I am writing to you in response to the November 30, 2015 letter you received from MSEA regarding MSDE's Report on Local, State and Federally Mandated Assessments in Maryland. In their letter, MSEA provided a summary of the results of their analysis of MSDE's assessments report. MSEA contends that MSDE's report includes "incomplete quantitative and qualitative data, and in some cases, inaccurate or misleading answers." PSSAM has found that statement and others included in MSEA's letter to be questionable and in some instances completely inaccurate.

PSSAM states that we believe that the MSDE's statewide student assessment survey was a reflective exercise. It provided local superintendents the opportunity to receive additional information about the assessments given and how the data is used in other districts. MSDE worked closely with the 24 LEAs to ensure that the data collected was accurate, complete, and comparable. MSDE's work complied with the expectations outlined in Senate Bill 452. They came back to local superintendents a second time after we had reviewed the data from the other school systems to ensure that all systems reported data that was accurate and complete. PSSAM believes that the MSDE assessment report is much more reliable and therefore more useful to the assessment work group.

The challenge with MSEA's report is that there is no way to ensure consistency or comparability due to the way in which the data was collected. MSEA's analysis was led by Time to Learn committees, composed of teachers in every county. The committees were charged with obtaining input from teachers and support staff at all levels "to validate what was reported and add any assessments that were missing but should have been included."

While we recognize that the intent of the MSEA Time to Learn Committee Survey was to provide teacher input, in some instances, teachers and support staff may have inadvertently provided inaccurate information. For example, teachers may have counted assessments required by their principals as mandated by the county when, in fact, these assessments are optional.

Each local school board must have the flexibility to develop individual assessment policies and practices that reflect the specific and diverse needs of their system. In fact, last year, many districts actually reduced the number of mandated assessments. Some local systems offer additional tests that are "optional assessments." Principals, in conjunction with teachers, have the authority to determine if "optional assessments" would provide them with additional data to help meet the needs of every student in their individual school. An example would be assessments that are used to determine specific instructional interventions for students. In Frederick County, I can personally attest to the fact that there was confusion among our teachers on this specific issue when they reported data.

In addition, local superintendents are questioning teacher responses regarding benchmarks relative to Student Learning Objectives (SLOs). There appears to be some confusion as to whether teachers included benchmarks as mandated when related to their SLOs. To be able to provide accurate information to the survey, teachers must be aware that although SLOs are mandated, any assessments related to them are not.

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There are other examples of inaccurate information that MSEA documented in their letter. In an effort to be more specific, I am including comments from Caroline County regarding some of their concerns. On page 2 in the section titled Testing Time, MSEA's letter states that "in Caroline County, the time is listed as '2 class periods' for a primary level DIBELS test but does not explain how long a class period is in an elementary school."

Caroline County states that this information is incorrect. They assert that the following information was shared with MSDE as noted in italics: "*Caroline County Public Schools (CCPS) administers DIBELS three (3) times per year for approximately five (5) minutes for each student's assessment.*"

Other examples of inaccurate reporting in MSEA's letter are provided by Allegany County. I will share with you two examples. On page 3, paragraph 4, the letter states that "In Allegany County, educators estimate that as many as 20 days of instruction are lost for non-tested subjects..." Allegany County provides the following response: "*The most any student would lose in any given class would be 6 days (3 ELA, 3 Math).*"

Also on page 3, paragraph 2, the letter states that among other issues with technology in Allegany County, there were "frequent problems with the system crashing mid-test and students having to start over from the beginning because their work was lost;" Allegany County provides the following response: "*As for students having to 'start over from the beginning because they lost their work,' this is inaccurate in that the test resumes where you left off and does not start over.*"

For the sake of brevity, this letter provides you with just several examples of incorrect information in MSEA's letter. PSSAM recognizes and values the input of teachers and support staff. However, we believe it is important for the State Board of Education to understand that inaccurate information could have unintentionally been reported to MSEA's Time to Learn committees, resulting in a flawed MSEA report on Maryland assessments. In fact, several superintendents report that their local MSEA leadership had not seen or confirmed the MSEA analysis of data that was detailed in the November 30, 2015 letter to you.

Therefore, we ask that you take our input into consideration as you move forward with any next steps.

Sincerely,



Theresa R. Alban, Ph.D.

President, PSSAM and

Superintendent, Frederick County Public Schools