



## Focus on Students Not Standardized Testing

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As a researcher who studies educational inequities in New Jersey, the k-12 school closures across the country shine a bright spotlight on the educational inequality issues my work explores. When students eventually return to classrooms, they will be returning from completely different experiences. Resource and opportunity gaps have always influenced educational experiences and test scores, and are all too often overlooked by policymakers, parents, and others who judge schools and teachers based on ratings and rankings. However, after this pandemic the so-called “achievement gap” will be more like an “achievement canyon.” In order to address the widening gap and inevitable social-emotional needs, teachers must be allowed to prioritize the wellbeing of students above the need for standardized tests.

As schools announced shut downs, middle-class and affluent parents kicked into high gear, shifting to home schooling and hiring virtual tutors. This is not the reality for all families. Many families, like those highlighted in my research, do not have workplace flexibility, private childcare, or funds for extra enrichment. Instead these families may be forced to lean on older siblings to cover childcare needs, sharing technology, completing schoolwork on cell phones, and attempting to concentrate in crowded homes or with housing instability. They would likely be hesitant to tell administrators they are foregoing requisite online learning because threats like truant officers, DCF intervention, and grade repetition loom large.

To mitigate the substantial gaps in the pandemic’s effects on families with greater or fewer resources and to allow teachers and administrators to focus on their student needs when they return to what will likely be schools and classrooms that look and feel quite different, we must decide now to push the federal government not to require standardized testing in 2020-2021. The US Department of Education and the states must eliminate the focus on standardized tests and make sure teachers and schools don’t have to work tirelessly to test prep the students next year, and can instead worry about individual student needs. School administrators should work to provide the kinds of creative opportunities advantaged families sought out at the first opportunity for all families, instead of narrowing the curriculum in order to “test prep”. The US Department of Education and state governments must allow school administrators to be creative in how they approach the needs of students, trusting educators — just as we had to trust them to completely recreate their models during the pandemic — rather than undermining their autonomy with outside demands.