

June 1, 2015

Board Statement Regarding Policy 5060 –Student Participation in Assessment Programs

We have heard from many parents regarding the role that standardized assessments play in their children’s education. We understand the concern that standardized testing takes time away from normal classroom instruction. We also appreciate the frustration and dissatisfaction specifically regarding the M-Step assessment, which is new this year. The Board shares many of these concerns. In particular, we feel that the numerous shifts from one assessment tool to another have disrupted one of the main benefits offered by these assessments – the ability to track changes in student proficiency over time.

However, both Michigan and federal law are clear that student assessments are required, and that failure to assess students can result in significant sanctions against districts, including loss of funding. Both state and federal law are also clear that ALL students must be assessed. There is no provision for opting out.

Failure to take the state and federal-mandated assessment has direct and immediate impact on the school where the child attends. A pattern of 'opting out' could have detrimental impacts on our application-based programs -- how performance is reported, their Focus school status, the funding with which they are supported, and hence the viability of these highly-valued programs in AAPS.

The Board believes that standardized assessments can be a valuable tool for improving outcomes for students, and in particular, for students who belong to sub-groups which have historically not fared well in our public schools. We are committed to closing the so-called “achievement gap” between Caucasian and African-American students, as well as similar gaps involving low-income students, students with special needs, English-language learners, and other minorities.

Numerous studies have shown that using data-driven decisions is a highly effective strategy for improving academic outcomes. In order to make these data-driven decisions, data must be collected regularly, consistently and universally. Without data, we are simply shooting in the dark.

It is for all these reasons that our policy requiring universal participation in student assessment is being brought forward. We do not believe that requiring participation in state-mandated student assessments is an unreasonable or discriminatory requirement for participating in our district's application-based schools. Because these schools offer programs and unique educational experiences that are not found in our traditional schools, we believe that this opportunity should be accompanied by additional responsibilities. One of these responsibilities is to do nothing that might harm the educational experiences of other students, both those who attend application-based schools, and those who attend our traditional schools.

We agree that implementation of the M-Step test across the State did not go smoothly, and that this has resulted in a backlash against this particular assessment. Our experience in Ann Arbor was, on the whole, much smoother than in many districts, largely because we already had in place a technological infrastructure to support on-line testing. We anticipate that many of the glitches encountered during M-Step's first year will be ironed out, and that the assessment will go much more smoothly next year. For better or worse, M-Step will be around for at least three more years.

We have communicated, and will continue to communicate concerns regarding standardized testing in general and the M-Step in particular to the Department of Education. We have formed an Assessment Advisory Committee to help clarify and communicate our concerns.

But however strongly we may feel about these issues, failure to test is a practice that will, under the state accountability system, cause immediate harm to our application-based schools school and to the district as a whole. These harms have traditionally impacted ratings, focus school status, and funding. Due to this, we feel it is appropriate to protect the programs, schools, and district by ensuring that we have full participation at every school. Meanwhile, we can continue the excellent work in the district and in our community to press for higher quality assessments and for appropriate adjustments to our accountability system in the future.



Andy Thomas, Secretary
On Behalf of the Trustees of the AAPS Board Education