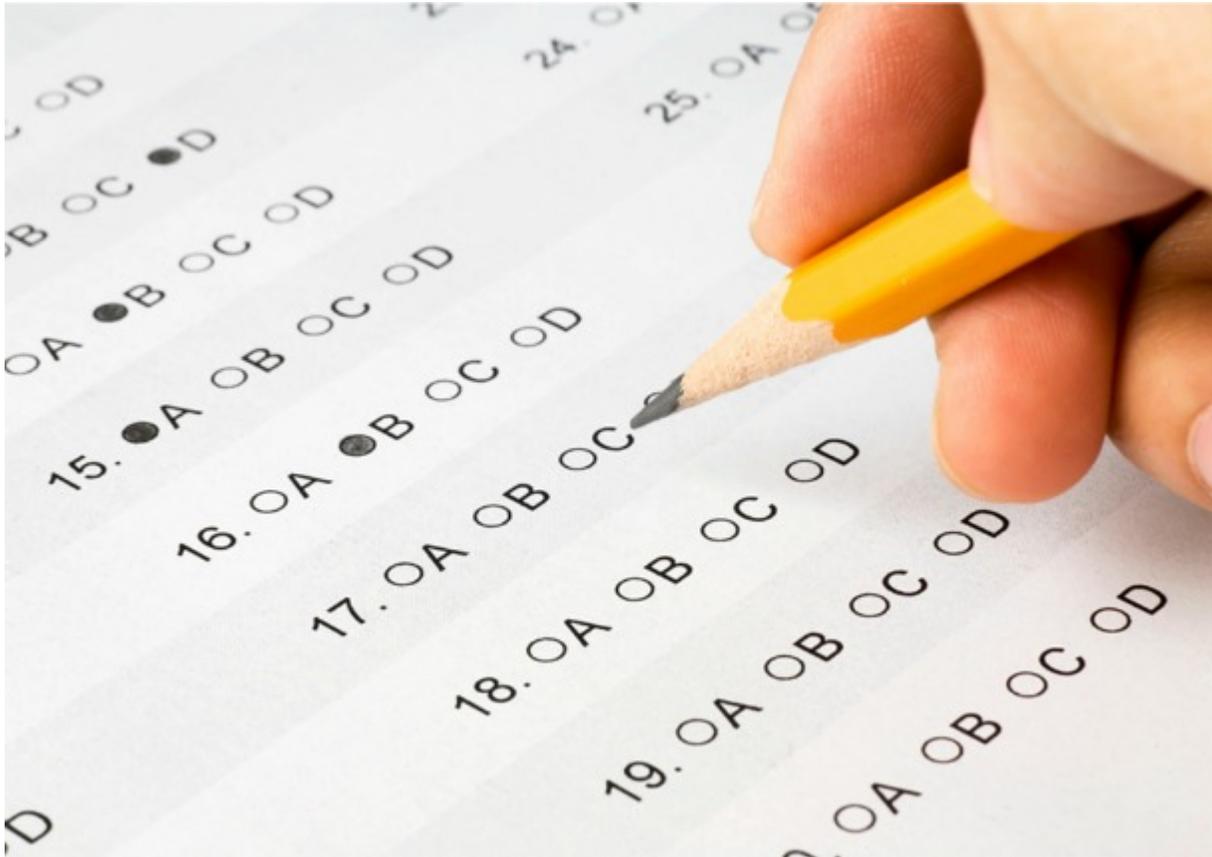


Standardized testing will happen this year; it just won't count for much

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Vermont students will take state standardized tests this spring, but officials will ask the federal government not to penalize schools based on the results or on the number of students who actually participate.

Federal law requires that states administer tests every year in math, English and science, but in March 2020 the U.S. Department of Education allowed states to cancel the tests altogether when the pandemic arrived.

Many in education hoped the federal government would do so again this year. And when the Biden administration announced it would not grant test-canceling waivers, several states requested them anyway. The federal government [turned them down](#).

While the U.S. Department of Education isn't allowing states not to test, it is offering flexibility about when and how the tests are administered, and how the results can be used. Vermont's [waiver request](#), unveiled for public comment Wednesday, focuses on so-called "accountability" provisions.

That means that, while tests will be given this spring in basically the same manner as before, the results won't be used to identify low-performing schools. And schools won't face penalties if fewer than 95% of their students participate, the threshold they are typically required to meet.

“We can't say, ‘Let us not test.’ We have to do that. And so we're saying, ‘OK, got it. We're testing, we hear you, but can we at least lower the stakes this year?’” Deputy Education Secretary Heather Bouchey told members of the House Education Committee on Thursday.

Education officials in Vermont expressed disappointment that the Biden administration would require testing at all. But, given the parameters set out by the federal government, they said they generally agreed with the Vermont Agency of Education's waiver proposal.

“Providing the test but waiving the accountability and the participation rate for this year probably is the best that we're going to get. So I support that approach,” said Jeanne Collins, a Rutland County school superintendent speaking on behalf of the Vermont Superintendents Association.

Standardized testing has long been controversial, but the debate about the assessments has taken on even more urgency this year. Critics, including most unions and [some experts](#), say the tests will be a waste of time and unreliable anyway. But proponents, including the federal government, have countered that states must try to collect this data in an attempt to gauge the pandemic's impact on learning.

“It's really unfortunate that so much time and energy is going to be taken away from real learning activities and direct instruction to administer these tests, and there's a lot of challenges with the technology and just scheduling it,” said Don Tinney, president of the Vermont-National Education Association, the union that represents most teachers in the state.

But, given the Biden administration's mandate, Tinney said Vermont is generally taking a practical approach.

“When the federal government says ‘you have to do this,’ you have to do it,” he said.

Vermont could have asked to delay the tests until the fall. But both Tinney and Collins said that, while the agency had explored that possibility, educators appeared to prefer getting the tests over with sooner rather than in the fall, when schools would have their first shot at normalcy in over a year.

“I don't find that wise. I find that even less palatable than ‘let's do what we have to do this spring and see what we get,’” Collins said.