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February 22, 2021

Our Wonderful Utah Educators,

It is astounding that we are approaching the one-year mark since the COVID-19 pandemic ushered our schools into “soft closures.” I do not believe any of us knew in those early moments that the way we were reimagining education for our children during the pandemic would carry-on for this long. I want to thank you for the way you have adjusted and adapted to each and every challenge as it has come your way. I also appreciate the concerted efforts extended by so many education stakeholders to support our children’s physical, emotional, and academic well-being.

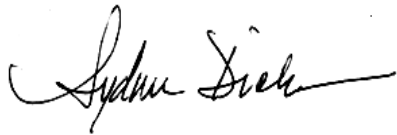
In addition to your extraordinary efforts, it has been remarkable how quickly and decisively our policy makers responded to the challenges of our day by adjusting or waiving requirements and repurposing funding as possible. For example, the Utah State Board of Education [waived 13 rules](#) in 2020-2021 to provide increased flexibility for educators and schools. In addition to these waivers, the Board is seeking relief from using the 2020-2021 state assessments for [federal](#) and [state](#) school accountability requirements.

Some have asked, “why aren’t we also seeking a waiver on the administration of state assessments?” Some even may worry about the time and logistics required to administer the RISE and Utah Aspire Plus tests to our students and question if continuing forward is in the best interest of our students and schools. These concerns have been discussed and thoughtfully considered by many, including the Board and its assessment and accountability advisory councils, which include assessment directors, superintendents, teacher and parent organizations and technical experts. Ultimately, given the broader purpose of state assessments (beyond accountability), which includes providing parents, educators, administrators, and policymakers with an additional tool to plan and target necessary resources, I am supportive of the decision to continue with the administration of our state assessments to the greatest extent feasible.

Perhaps there has never been a greater need for data to understand more fully, not just the impacts of the pandemic induced disruptions, but to identify and promote some of the foremost innovations that will emerge through the burden of necessity that each of you have carried on behalf of your students. We are taking steps to ensure all 2021 data are protected from misuse and appropriately interpreted. One of these steps includes providing the opportunity for students to report information on their experiences this year to contextualize and interpret the assessments.

By collecting this valuable data, we will be able to work collaboratively to resource and support your efforts as we move into future academic years. Again, I appreciate you and all you do to ensure the academic and emotional well-being for our Utah students. You are always my heroes, especially this year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sydnee Dickson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Sydnee Dickson, Ed.D.
State Superintendent of Public Instruction
Utah State Board of Education