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March 10, 2015

To: Senator Paul Farrow, Chair Senate Committee on Education Reform and Government Operations
Representative Thiesfeldt, Chair Assembly Committee on Education
Members, Senate Committee on Education Reform and Government Operations
Members, Assembly Committee on Education

From: Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

Re: SB 67/AB 78 - Pupil assessments, evaluation of educator effectiveness, and school accountability reports

No position: For Information Only

Thank you to Members of the Senate Committee on Education for continuing to thoughtfully address next steps in Wisconsin's school accountability system.

Survival Coalition is a statewide coalition of more than 30 disability groups - several of which directly support students with disabilities and their families to advocate for quality special education supports. Parents of children with disabilities depend upon accurate information provided through a robust assessment process as a piece of the puzzle showing how their school is doing to support their child and all students with disabilities.

New Assessment

For students with disabilities, the roll out of the current Smarter Balanced Assessment has reportedly been less than ideal. We have concerns about the inability of the test to fully implement computer adaptive testing that can show a more accurate picture of the knowledge of a student with a disability. Because students with disabilities often have scattered skills (i.e. strengths in one area- such as comprehension, but simultaneously lower skills in another area) a test that does not allow for leveling does not show the true picture of a student's learning capacity and gaps. While the Smarter Balanced test was intended to roll out with leveling features intact, allowing students to move up and down throughout the assessment as their knowledge allowed, the current version of the test does not have this capacity and will not be functional this year.

In January the National Federation for the Blind (NFB) and other disability advocates wrote to the Smarter Balanced Governor Board about their continued concerns about accessibility and appropriate accommodations for students so close to the exam's roll out. NFB indicated their prediction that the test, in its current form, could deny the right of students with disabilities to participate equally in the assessments. There are 21 states that were slated to use the Smarter Balanced common core assessment tests in K-12 starting this spring. Given the accommodation and accessibility concerns, it is good that this particular assessment is put on pause in Wisconsin.

Pause on Report Card

Our organizations are generally not supportive of deferring accountability for schools or for principals or teachers for any amount of time. The achievement gap for students with disabilities is too wide and the stakes are too high. However, given that other accountability proposals on the table have not yet incorporated adequate accountability for students with disabilities, we hope that our concerns can still be addressed and that a high quality accountability system will soon be put into place. We are assured that federal law still requires DPI to administer a state test, that assessment data will be publicly available through WISEdash, and that Educator Effectiveness will continue as required under the federal ESEA waiver.

We support the idea of restarting the report card next year with one fully functioning and high quality assessment for all students, across all schools receiving public funding.

Principles for Accountability

As we shared in testimony related to SB 1 and have acknowledged in our analysis of the Governor's current budget proposal in AB 21, we are concerned that other school accountability provisions may move forward without taking into account basic principles of quality that are essential to parents of children with disabilities. We reiterate our principles for a solid, comprehensive accountability system that adequately addresses the needs of students with disabilities below:

- An accountability system that is built upon an “apples to apples” comparison of children with disabilities. Students should be taking the same assessments, with the same accommodations availability to allow parents to adequately compare scores across different types of schools.
- Students with disabilities should be identified with a common definition across all schools.
- Robust multiple measures of accountability must include growth, gap closure and achievement disaggregated specifically to identify the performance of the subgroup of students with disabilities.
- The system should incorporate all schools that receive public funds.
- The system must include and specifically reference all students, including those with significant cognitive disabilities taking the alternate reading and mathematics examinations administered under s. 118.30.
- Accountability measures should address measures of college and workforce readiness and information related to high school graduates entering the workforce.
- Accountability measures should include information on the number of pupils who are suspended or expelled.
- Transparent reporting of school performance should include a required posting on a school's website to allow parents easy access to information on the performance of students with disabilities.

Thank you in advance for addressing the concerns outlined in this testimony. Our Coalition members are ready to provide support and feedback as you continue this process.

This document prepared by the Survival Coalition Education Issue Team.

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