May 1, 2023

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20202

RE: Docket ID ED–2023–OESE–0043. Request for Information Regarding the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education.

Dear Secretary Cardona:

The purpose of this letter is to respond to the U.S. Department of Education's request for information.

The Aurora Institute would like to commend you and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) for your leadership and commitment to advancing high quality, equitable education for every child, and dedicating attention to improving our education systems by encouraging states to pursue innovative assessments. We are encouraged that the Department has requested information on how to improve the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) to increase participation by states.

The Aurora Institute believes we need to change our nation's education system—starting with removing barriers in federal education policy and investing in building capacity for assessments for learning.

Our education systems need more space for innovating assessments—piloting assessment systems that drive continuous improvement for all students, especially students furthest from opportunity. We can do this by building systems of assessments that are more timely, responsive, and accessible to educators, parents, and students, producing information that allows educators, schools, and systems to adapt and change course over time. Part of this change includes supporting and aligning to student-centered, personalized, and competency-based education. Competency-based assessments capture authentic evidence of students' knowledge and skills, requiring them to demonstrate progress or mastery before advancing to the next level.

We must recognize that tweaking the existing system that over-emphasizes ranking and sorting students is a frame that needs to be re-examined and questioned for root cause analysis of inequity. Instead, we must create incentives for advancing student-centered learning and competency-based education systems that are focused on building mastery of academic knowledge and skills.

Instead of tweaking the existing system where major opportunity gaps exist, we need to reorient school systems to focus on identifying where students are, and meeting their needs to bring all students the resources they need to achieve at high levels. In turn, we can align instruction, curriculum, and assessments toward a system that centers human flourishing as its purpose. We must move beyond a standardized one-size-fits-all system to promote personalized learning to achieve meaningful outcomes, advance world-class learning experiences, and expand opportunities.

Below, we have responded to the RFI questions with Aurora's recommendations to ensure IADA better meets the intent of fostering innovation:

1. *The Department is interested in whether there are additional considerations or approaches to comparability, whether through changes to current IADA regulations or additional guidance (for elaborating on the "other method" in section 200.105(b)(4)(i)(E)), for the innovative assessment.*

    a. *Are there other methodologies that could be used as models to provide comparable results to current statewide assessments without compromising the innovative nature of the new assessments?*

The current over-prioritization of comparability and ranking (ranking students, ranking schools, cut scores) that drive federal assessment frames in the United States is counterproductive. The current accountability models are entrenched in the factory model approach to education and are time-based, rather than learning-based. They are more interested in assessing students on a single path based on age and grade, or year-over-year cohort growth rather than a more comprehensive picture of student success and evaluating where individual students are proficient and growing over time on mastery-based progressions. As a result, the current accountability and assessment frame prioritizes comparability of students and schools over cumulative validity of the evidence of outcomes. These tests rely on an overly narrow view of what students know and are able to do, prioritizing test item sameness over a comprehensive and multi-faceted framework of balanced assessments, evidence, and student outcomes that matter for well-rounded students. By prioritizing comparability and replicability, the systems are held accountable for are not meaningful to students, families, or communities.

Yes, standardized assessments with cut scores where every student takes the identical test on the same day produce a simplistic data model that is easy to implement. Unfortunately, using those test scores to rank and label students and schools can distort the purpose of assessment and lead to unintended consequences such as over-emphasis on testing and test prep at the expense of teaching and learning.

Instead, assessments should be more focused on how to improve teaching and learning for students based on research/evidence of development, as well as enable personalized learning experiences for students, all towards the goal of deeper learning for applying knowledge and building durable skills. This will mean identifying various forms of assessment beyond standardized tests that are meaningful to learners and educators—performance assessments, projects, and more—that collect authentic evidence of learning and provide timely information to students, educators, and families. While the resulting system will likely be less comparable across systems, it will be more valid and meaningful to students, families, and educators. By trading off comparability for validity, systems will be able to focus on accountability for building capacity and continuous improvement, rather than punitive measures.

    b. *Are there ways that a State could plan for an orderly transition from using the achievement standards for the current statewide assessments to achievement standards for the innovative assessment as it scales to statewide use?*

Designing effective, future-focused assessment systems will require making space to pilot and innovate new approaches that are rooted in more meaningful and modern definitions of student success. This starts with education leaders at the state, regional, and local levels engaging communities in developing Profiles of a Graduate for a more complete vision of what a student should know and be able to do upon graduation. These profiles provide a holistic picture of the knowledge, skills, competencies, and abilities beyond traditional academic outcomes that students need before graduating.

Following, schools and systems can develop performance frameworks that encompass the most important aspects of success—this could include a frame using multiple measures, balanced scorecard and outcomes results, as well as balanced systems of assessments drawing on the following information: test results, performance assessments, evidence of student work, and/or capstones that demonstrate mastery of learning.

Learning experiences could emphasize on opportunities for learning such as career explorations, access to experiences like paid internships, support services for mental health and social emotional learning, and a balance of inputs and outcomes measured through surveys of school climate and belonging. These new locally-derived performance frameworks could provide the basis for exploring community goals and rethinking an accountability system for reciprocity and moving beyond single snapshot test scores and towards a more meaningful capture of student learning and well-rounded youth.

Importantly, local communities should inform what those profiles, frameworks, and quality assurance systems prioritize. While many countries have been approaching quality assurance using performance frameworks informed by community and stakeholder engagement in accountability for years, it is an entirely new frame in the United States. As a result, we must open up avenues for piloting and testing innovative assessment and accountability approaches and allow communities to innovate and build capacity in real-time.

The key to making this shift is "reciprocal accountability." Reciprocal accountability is the practice of mutual responsibility within a system. It is based on the idea that everyone involved in a given relationship must take responsibility for their roles and actions. This means that all parties must be accountable to each other for outcomes and goals, as well as their individual actions. The goal is to create an environment with transparent information where each party works together to achieve success.

> c. *We note that ESEA section 1204(e)(2)(A)(iv) states that the IADA "generate results that are valid and reliable, and comparable, for all students and for each subgroup of students described in section 1111(b)(2)(B)(xi), as compared to the results for such students on the State assessments under section 1111(b)(2);" and ESEA section 1204(e)(2)(A)(x) states that the IADA "generate an annual, summative achievement determination, based on the aligned State academic achievement standards under section 1111(b)(1) and based on annual data, for each individual student." Within these statutory requirements, are there other issues with respect to comparability that the Department should clarify, either in regulation or guidance to help states meet this requirement? Please be specific in: (a) describing the issue; (b) identifying the proposed change to address the issue; and (c) identifying how the change will lead to a State being more likely to apply for IADA.*

In order to move toward a more innovative and balanced system, we need to think differently about how aspects of technical quality are prioritized and weighed to be more aligned with broader purposes of assessment systems and the overarching purpose of education. We welcome the opportunity to discuss them with the Department at your discretion. We believe that we need to rethink the concept of comparability of learning goals and outcome to ensure IADA better meets the intent of fostering innovation. We suggest that evaluating innovative assessment pilots using the existing frame is also problematic. Using comparability to the traditional state assessment limits innovation. The innovative assessment should be required to set forth a plan and timeline, document that it is comparable in terms of the student outcomes, focus on validity, and use new metrics as the evidentiary basis for results interpretation and use. Anchoring comparability to the existing test may limit the depth of thinking encouraged on the innovative assessment, because many state assessments do not measure deeper learning. Current IADA states face technical challenges to meet comparability requirements as they are now defined. Allowing a different, but very appropriate target (i.e., outcomes) will remove this hurdle, so states do not have to restrict their innovative designs to align to traditional assessment systems. This approach to comparability (by criteria and outcomes in achieving criteria) still allows state leaders to use the data in meaningful and appropriate ways. This more effectively supports innovation.

> 2. *Current IADA regulations do not specify a timeline by which a State approved under IADA must administer an operational IADA assessment in some schools or LEAs.*
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>   > a. *Would a State be more likely to submit an IADA application if the Department explicitly provided one or two planning years, after the granting of IADA authority, before the State first administers an operational IADA assessment in some schools or LEAs?*
>   > b. *Noting that the State would need to have enough detail about its plan for the Department to grant IADA approval or pre-approval, please describe the benefit to the State that would be provided*

with one or two years of planning time as well as suggestions for the types of activities the State would undertake during the planning time?

The Aurora Institute, since December 2015, has purported that states need planning time and more time to build capacity to advance innovative assessment pilots within and across a state – time to plan, pilot, and begin implementation. More research is needed along with a learning agenda on what it takes to innovate assessments and how approaches to building capacity take time and resources. States need both planning time and to lift the five-year limit to scale statewide. The current timeline for planning, implementation, and scaling is not realistic.

We strongly encourage the Department to provide states the ability to propose a timeline to allow for planning years and shift the current regulatory timeline construct accordingly. Innovation takes time and is rarely linear. By allowing states to build in explicit time to plan, the Department acknowledges that reality and better supports states to ultimately be successful. During that time, the state would signal to stakeholders the path it is on but would then have time for authentic stakeholder engagement, ensuring the state's approach is co-created not dictated due to time constraints. The state could then refine their assessment design based on stakeholder feedback prior to administration. Another critical part of the planning time will be the interaction between the state and the Department. While the state will have a strong plan from the start, providing planning time will allow the state and Department to work together to address any potential challenges or concerns before the state must start administering the assessment, allowing for a more effective partnership and ultimately a more successful outcome.

3. *Please describe any other barriers in the Department's regulations that might preclude a State from applying for IADA. Please be specific in: (a) identifying the regulatory provision; (b) describing the issue; (c) identifying the proposed change to address the issue; and (d) identifying how the change will lead to a State being more likely to apply for IADA.*

Additional barriers that may preclude states from applying for IADA are outlined in the chart below, which we've laid out as general recommendations to encourage more space for innovative assessments.

Innovative Assessment and Demonstration Authority, Assessment and Accountability Improvement Chart

Innovative Assessment and Demonstration Authority (IADA)			
Topic	**The Problem**	**Proposed Change**	**The Solution**
Planning Period	There is no planning time embedded into the program. States are expected to immediately begin the pilot once the application is approved.	States should be required to propose the amount of planning time needed for their proposed pilot; with allowances that this can be extended on a case-by-case basis.	This could be addressed statutorily or could likely be implemented by U.S. Department of Education (ED) through regulation.
Requirement to Scale Statewide	The statute requires a pilot to be scaled Statewide within five years.	There should be a requirement for States to prepare a plan and timeline to ED, without a specific statutory deadline. This will ensure that there is enough time to build capacity and begin a sustainable plan for scaling in depth. The state plan can contain time-bound targets in a	This would need to be addressed statutorily.

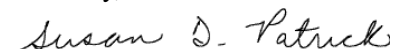| Topic	The Problem	Proposed Change	The Solution
		timeline that are reasonable and appropriate for the state's size and approach. The systems of assessments in the pilot should emphasize policies to be high technical quality and meet the specific needs of the State. This timeline could be developed in the planning period as mentioned above.	
Seven State Cap	There is currently a seven State cap on the number of participants in the IADA pilot program. *Note: The cap has not yet been reached and the elimination of such a cap is dependent on ED's evaluation of the pilot (which should be publicly released in the coming months).*	ED should remove the cap to allow a greater number of States to participate in the program to maximize opportunities for innovation.	The Administration is allowed to remove the cap after the third year of the program pending the evaluation of the pilot. This removal of the cap can be accomplished through executive action.
Lack of Funding	There is no funding attached to IADA. Instead, participating State Education Agencies use the funds received under the Competitive Grants for State Assessments (CGSA) or other resources.	Increase funding for CGSA to give States more flexibility to innovate under IADA.	CGSA increases should be included in an appropriations bill.
Educator Capacity and Literacy Training	Building educator capacity and improving assessment literacy are critical to ensuring that the needs of students are met, and the results of the assessments are used for improved instruction.	Support and provide resources to States to include how they will plan, build capacity to implement the assessment system and increase assessment literacy for all stakeholders.	This could be supported by ED through grant programs and regulations for the pilot authority.
Multiple Demonstration Authorities Per State	Consider supporting how States can plan multiple pilots for innovative assessments.	Allow a State to run multiple pilots to create a learning agenda across the State and then the State can incorporate the best practices.	This could be made clear through a statutory and regulatory changes.

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<tr><td colspan="4" align="center">ACCOUNTABILITY</td></tr>
<tr><td align="center">Topic</td><td align="center">The Problem</td><td align="center">Proposed Change</td><td align="center">The Solution</td></tr>
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| Accountability | Assessments and accountability are linked but right now there is not authority similar to IADA for States to be able to pilot accountability approaches that differ than what is required under section 1111 of ESEA.

It can be restrictive for States to innovate their assessments if they are not able to innovate their accountability systems. | The title of IADA in ESSA is the "Innovative Accountability and Assessment Demonstration Authority." There is a need to create a corresponding accountability pilot that allows states to pilot new accountability systems that would focus on different approaches, especially reciprocal accountability. | Pilots need to be established to focus on innovative reciprocal accountability and new performance frameworks. |
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Ultimately, states applying for IADA pilots and grants should be empowered to explore systems change—moving towards true innovation, and away from the current assessment and accountability frame. States should set goals of producing a working theory of action describing the "problem" the state is trying to solve with the IADA, and why the IADA will help the state address that issue through an R&D/learning agenda.

It is critically important for our country to reimagine education and focus on investing in our future, not our past. The current K-12 education system has not produced equitable outcomes for all students. We must change policies and invest in innovation to transform our education systems. Student-centered policies are needed for true systems change and innovations for equity. We must challenge frames and investments that perpetuate tinkering with the existing system, rather than reimagining it. The time is ripe to redesign education to align with future needs and purposes to achieve human flourishing. We appreciate the Department's interest in advancing more equitable and innovative assessment systems through IADA and stand ready to serve as a partner to you in this process.

Sincerely,

Susan D. Patrick
President & CEO
Aurora Institute