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Statement Regarding Spring 2019 ILEARN Scores

Superintendent Dr. Steve Thalheimer

With yet another change in state assessments, schools in Indiana have witnessed a drop in proficiency passing rates statewide. As it stands, this would impact school accountability letter grades as well. While no one is satisfied when students are not truly able to demonstrate what they know and can do, it is important to note that it is difficult to build capacity to teach skills and content and have students perform well when the state assessment format keeps changing. It is because of this that Elkhart Community Schools supports efforts by Governor Holcomb and State Superintendent of Instruction Jennifer McCormick to not have these lower scores affect Indiana educator and school accountability.

The ISTEP+ Assessment underwent a change between the spring 2014 test and the spring 2015 administration, resulting in schools needing to adjust instruction and prepare for a more rigorous test. State passing rates fell with the revised assessment in 2015 and accountability was held harmless. Less than five years later, the state abandoned the ISTEP+ test due to public outcry over testing times and limited information about student learning. The ILEARN test became the replacement test this past spring with a claim of even more rigor, but with fewer time constraints and the inclusion of technology enhanced items that gauge students 21st century skills.

While the goals of having students engage with richer texts and problem solving through writing is admirable, two issues were clearly evident with this test.

1. The ILEARN test came to be as much about navigating long scrolling screens of text and separate tabs for the various tasks as it was about reading, writing, and math skills. This proved particularly challenging for younger students or students who do not have access to technology outside of school.
2. The multi-step tasks on the test which needed to be completed within a single test session required levels of stamina and flexibility many students were not prepared for. Classroom teachers may ask students to read and annotate multiple texts and then write about them, but this is usually done over several days. Additionally, information about the test itself and how to prepare for it was still trickling to schools last October within the same school year the test went into effect.

As we always do, educators will try to learn from these assessment results and adjust yet again. We will continue to align what we teach to the core standards indicated by the ILEARN guidance documents provided by the state. Elkhart Schools will be doing this within a new reading program for grades K-6 and a new math program for middle grades this year. We will also be analyzing secondary language arts and elementary math curriculum this year as part of our adoption cycle for next year. We will look to teams who did come near to or surpass the state average for effective instructional practices to share with colleagues. Additionally, we will increase practice with technology to increase students' ability to navigate the testing platform. However, none of this will make up for the fact that

standardized tests like ILEARN simply do not provide students the best opportunity to show us what they know.

A final aspect of building our capacity for these tests that has to be noted is the difficulty school districts have in maintaining a trained teaching force who understands how to instruct their students in math and language arts. With many teachers leaving the profession or going through the revolving doors at various districts in order to increase their compensation, many Indiana schools find it difficult to build the staff with collective knowledge to increase achievement for their own students. With the target of the test moving yet again and the professionals in our classrooms changing, is it any wonder that the test scores keep falling? This is another consequence of inadequate school funding not accounted for in the test scores.

