

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



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Pam Stewart
Commissioner of Education

March 3, 2014

Dear Teachers:

First, I want to say thank you to all of the teachers and parents who devote so much of their time to helping all children including those with special needs. Teaching is among the noblest of professions and all of you will always have the respect and support of everyone at this department.

You may have read about political efforts to attack assessments by using the tragic situations of children with special needs. I have the deepest sympathy for any family and child who is suffering due to a disability or traumatic event and the utmost respect for the strength required of the family. I wanted to take a few minutes to share my thoughts directly with you on the topic.

We take the confidentiality of each child very seriously at the department and for that reason, we cannot speak about individual students or situations.

We all know that the only way to guarantee success in any endeavor is to set goals and measure our progress. In education, measuring progress is key to successful learning. I firmly believe that every child enrolled in a public school in Florida deserves the opportunity to have access to the best education possible. Our citizens expect that we provide all children an education that supports each child reaching the highest possible goals and experiencing success on the way.

Many of us, and many who have devoted their lives to ensuring equal rights for children with disabilities, can remember the days when a "public education" meant very little to some as children with special needs were ignored and treated as less than equal.

It would be a moral outrage to deny that opportunity to any child based on any reason including special needs. For all students, it is important that we measure progress so that we educate all children regardless of their circumstances.

Message to teachers

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We cannot and should not return to the days where we tacitly ignore children with special needs by failing to ensure they are learning and growing as the result of teachers' excellent work. We have worked very closely with families, teachers and districts to ensure that the alternate assessment for children with special needs appropriately measures their abilities and their progress.

For some additional context: Last year, nearly 1.7 million Florida students took a statewide assessment, and the department has received a total of 30 requests for exemptions from this year's assessments; 16 have been approved under the allowances provided in Florida law.

As a life-long educator and as Commissioner of Education, I will continue to do everything I can to ensure that all students have the best opportunity for the highest quality education in our state.

Thank you for all you do every day to ensure every child in Florida has the best chance to succeed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Pam Stewart". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Pam Stewart