



April 21, 2020

Commissioner Mary Cathryn Ricker
 Minnesota Department of Education
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Commissioner Ricker,

As you know, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on students across Minnesota. With school buildings closed, students have immediate distance learning needs and will need longer-term intervention and support to address learning loss, social-emotional needs, and more. We are writing today with a series of recommendations to ensure Minnesota students' needs are equitably addressed as MDE implements the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

The federal stimulus package will send nearly \$185 million to Minnesota to address K-12 education needs. Federal guidelines provide some parameters for how states may use these funds but leave significant decision-making to state and local leaders. It is critical that Minnesota use these funds to achieve equitable outcomes for students in both the short-and long-term. Many students around the state have unmet immediate needs—like access to the internet and technology, as well as tailored support for special education students, English Learners, and other vulnerable populations. It is imperative that Minnesota begin thinking now about how we will address learning loss in the coming year, and how federal funds can address upcoming needs so all students can thrive once schools re-open.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Minnesota Department of Education has two critical roles in implementing the CARES Act: first, providing guidance to local decision-makers, and second, effectively spending state-level funds. Under the CARES Act, MDE may reserve up to 10% of the stabilization funds (approximately \$14 million) for emergency needs, which may be spent through September 30, 2021. It's critical that MDE balance immediate needs with long-term planning for recovery and rebuilding. When prioritizing how to spend these resources, MDE should consider the following recommendations.

1. **Prioritize Equity:** Each of Minnesota's 327 school districts and 169 charter schools are unique, with their student compositions and financial situations varying widely. While stimulus funds prioritize our most vulnerable populations in how they are distributed—through the Title I formula—this does not guarantee equity in spending. MDE can take several steps to ensure local funds are spent in the most equitable way possible:
 - **Guidance to districts:** It is imperative that MDE issue guidance to schools on how they should use CARES Act funds to advance equity, including how they can best address distance learning, learning loss, and social-emotional learning needs of vulnerable students. This guidance should clearly address:
 - how to best serve students with special needs;
 - how to ensure quality, accessible resources for English Learners and their families, including access to multilingual staff to bridge the gap between school and family during distance learning; and,
 - that schools and districts must have well-developed, actionable plans for addressing xenophobia in schools. During the pandemic, there have been stories of racism and violent acts against Asian Minnesotans, and it is paramount that our education institutions have plans in place to address bigotry, ensure student safety, and educate students about parallel examples in our nation's history.

- Effectively allocating state set-aside: MDE should also prioritize equity in spending the state set-aside. This could include statewide programs that address targeted student needs or targeted supplementing of local investments. For example, the Texas Education Commissioner is creating an [Instructional Continuity Grant](#), which will provide additional funding for district and charter schools with at least one Title I school, with amounts based on the number of Targeted Support and Improvement schools within the district. The purpose of the grant is to help schools minimize learning disruption as a result of closures.
2. **Support Districts in Learning Loss Recovery**: Regardless of where a student goes to school, they will experience some learning disruption this semester which will impact the 2020-21 academic year. MDE will play a critical role in helping K-12 schools address learning loss, including:
 - Proactive planning and guidance on unfinished learning: Starting within the next few weeks, MDE should convene educators who can help to identify the state standards that are mostly likely going to be impacted by COVID-19. Using this information, MDE should create guidance and devote resources to helping K-12 schools address this unfinished learning.
 - Identifying and removing barriers to extended day or year programming: Making up for lost learning will be difficult without the addition of learning hours in some form. MDE should play a leadership role in exploring options for schools and districts, whether over the summer or in the 2020-21 school year, and identifying district needs and barriers to implementation, as well as barriers that may prevent students from engaging in these opportunities.
 - Ensuring high quality diagnostics: Since standards-based testing will not take place this spring, and students will experience varying degrees of learning loss in the coming months, MDE should work to ensure districts have high-quality diagnostic assessments in place for fall 2020 to determine where students are academically and what they need. These assessments should be paired with guidance and support for educators in using the data to plan and inform instruction. MDE should consider using a portion of their funds to examine, purchase, and provide K-12 schools with effective testing options.
 3. **Replicate Promising Practices**: State leaders have a key role to play in ensuring we are building on lessons learned during the COVID-19 crisis. MDE should work to identify districts with the strongest and most equitable approaches to distance learning for different age groups and learning needs, as well as those with the most robust plans for re-engagement when school re-opens. They should use all the tools available to build on success: infusing best practices into statewide guidance for potential future closures, funding for expansion and replication, advancing regulation in areas where there are significant discrepancies across districts, and more.
 4. **Identify and Support Struggling Schools & Districts**: MDE plays a key role, through ESSA and World's Best Workforce, in identifying and supporting schools and districts in need of improvement. The COVID-19 crisis only heightens the importance of this work, to ensure that students are not falling through the cracks in a time of significant change and turmoil. At the same time, systems for identifying these schools have been disrupted by school closures. MDE should work proactively to build an interim plan for identifying and supporting struggling schools to ensure important improvement work carries on, and in particular, that best practices related to distance learning and learning loss are adopted where needed most.
 5. **Launch Stakeholder Survey to Guide Funding Decisions**: To ensure that MDE is spending federal stimulus funds in a way that advances equity and student need, MDE should quickly administer a statewide survey to ask stakeholders—families, students, educators, and communities—about their needs and hopes for this investment. Minnesota can look to Tennessee, which sent a [statewide survey](#) intended to help the state prioritize their investments.
 6. **Ensure Transparent Fiscal Reporting**: MDE should ensure that all districts and charter schools provide transparent information to the public on how federal stimulus funds are spent. This public reporting should show specific program allocations and describe how these investments will meet the needs of low-income students, students of color, American Indian students, students on tribal land, students with special needs, English Learners, students experiencing homelessness, and

students in foster care. MDE should create clear templates and public access guidelines for local reporting, and also aggregate reporting for easy access at the state level.

We believe these recommendations will benefit Minnesota students, families, and educators in the wake of COVID-19, and would love to meet with your team to discuss next steps, at your convenience.

Sincerely,

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