



February 3, 2021

Commissioner Mary Cathryn Ricker
Minnesota Department of Education
1500 Highway 36 West
Roseville, MN 55113

Commissioner Ricker,

We are reaching out as a coalition of advocacy and community-based organizations that have been closely tracking the impact of COVID-19 on students—particularly those traditionally underserved, who we know have been hit hard by the incredible disruption of the past year. We are eager to see Minnesota put the latest infusion of federal stimulus funds to the best use possible. To this end, we are writing today with a series of recommendations to ensure Minnesota students' needs are equitably addressed as your team implements the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The new federal stimulus package will send \$588 million to Minnesota for K-12 education needs. States have significant flexibility in using these funds, and it is critical that Minnesota use them for targeted, equitable, research-backed strategies. MDE has two critical roles: providing guidance to local decision makers, and effectively spending the 10% state set-aside (approximately \$58.8 million).

We hope MDE will make equity its top consideration as you move forward with both of these roles. While CRRSAA prioritizes our most vulnerable populations by sending the majority of funds through the Title I formula, this does not guarantee equitable or impactful local spending. These funds should be used to provide supplemental, recovery-oriented programming. MDE can take several steps to ensure federal funds support students with the greatest needs, and that they drive meaningful recovery for students:

1. Prioritize Students Most Impacted by COVID-19: All students have felt the impact of COVID-19, but the data shows that students with disabilities, English Learners, homeless students, students in foster care, students of color, American Indian students, and students on tribal land have faced some of the most significant challenges during distance learning. It is critical that MDE issue guidance to schools on how they can identify and prioritize students with the greatest need for intensive programming, including priority for in-person services, summer programming, and high-dosage tutoring. This guidance should:

- Provide clear guidelines for serving students with special needs, including making them a top priority for in-person learning and advancing innovative options to ensure full delivery of services outlined in each student's IEP;
- Outline strategies to ensure quality, accessible resources for English Learners, including access to multilingual staff to bridge the gap between school and family;
- Provide a menu of program options that districts can choose from to accelerate learning and address disparities exacerbated by the pandemic, along with guidance on criteria (including diagnostics) to identify students for participation. MDE should also consider a floor for which students **MUST** receive some type of supplemental intervention; and,
- Ensure that districts build plans based on feedback from students that represent the constituencies most impacted by COVID-19.

2. Support Districts in Measuring and Addressing Learning Loss: Regardless of where a student goes to school, they have experienced some learning disruption in the past year. MDE must play a role in guaranteeing that students in all corners of the state have access to robust supports tailored to their needs. We hope that MDE will provide clear recommendations to districts on diagnosing and addressing learning needs, helping remove state level barriers, and even using state funds to ensure access to effective tools and interventions. This includes:

- Ensuring high-quality diagnostics: In the coming year, two types of assessment will be critical: first, statewide MCAs to measure progress toward recovery and direct resources to where they are needed most. Second, districts will need high-quality diagnostic assessments to tailor interventions and supports at the individual student level. We recommend the following steps to support effective diagnostic assessments:
 - Clear guidance on when and how to use diagnostics, and how to use federal funds to support this;
 - Supplemental resources and supports for districts, school leaders, and educators on how to use diagnostic data to plan and inform instruction;
 - Guidance on how to use results to prioritize services and interventions;
 - Investment of state-level funds to vet, purchase, and provide K-12 schools access to effective testing options.
- Creation of individualized recovery plans: More than ever, districts must be intentional about meeting each student where they are and providing individualized approaches to recovering and accelerating learning, while also addressing social-emotional needs. Districts should also ensure parents have a clear sense of how their students are faring, supports available to them, and progress toward proficiency and/or graduation. We recommend that MDE provide resources, including guidance, templates, and communications tools, to support districts in developing individual reports with benchmarks based on diagnostic assessment outcomes.
- Identifying and removing barriers to extended 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 for this year, the summer, the 2021-22 school year, or beyond, including:
 - identifying district needs and barriers to implementation;
 - providing guidance on barriers that may prevent students from engaging in these opportunities;
 - using state funding allocations to incentivize innovative and/or intensive programming; and,
 - communicating with legislators about flexibilities needed to extend learning.

3. Invest in Early Literacy Programs: As you know, literacy is an essential academic foundation, with a strong link between high school graduation and third grade reading proficiency. MDE should focus on ensuring that K-3 students have the support they need to develop this foundation despite significant disruption during a critical window. For example:

- [Massachusetts allocated \\$10 million](#) for early literacy programs that provide additional support to K-3 students. The programs are meant to address learning loss and accelerate the reading skills of students from historically underserved communities.
- [Oklahoma requires districts](#) to commit to using at least one-third of their dollars for a menu of items that includes literacy training for educators, among other critical items.

4. Support Targeted and Culturally Responsive Mental Health Support: In addition to measuring and addressing learning loss, MDE should simultaneously invest in supporting students' mental health. MDE should provide clear guidance to districts on prioritizing this at the local level, including best practices in ensuring accessible, student-centered, culturally responsive supports. We highly encourage MDE to identify ways to partner with community-based providers with existing expertise in culturally relevant youth mental health services to make this effort as effective and impactful as possible. MDE can also look to other states for funding models:

- [Florida invested \\$2 million in telehealth for districts.](#) The effort includes mini-grants to all districts to help train counselors, social workers, and school psychologists in how to deploy telehealth and inter-agency partnerships to coordinate with other ongoing efforts.

- [Illinois invested \\$2.5 million in social-emotional support for students](#). Funds were used to create the Student Care Department, developing a student health and safety team that promotes best practices for social-emotional learning.
- [Nevada invested in wraparound services](#). The effort supports organizations with a track record of successfully partnering with schools to provide wraparound services, including mental health and social-emotional development.

5. Launch COVID Recovery Community Advisory Board: To ensure that MDE is spending federal stimulus funds in ways that address equity and student need, MDE should create a board to oversee progress on key recovery goals through September 2023, when federal CRRSAA funds expire. This group should explicitly focus on students and families, providing feedback on progress, challenges, and ongoing needs within Minnesota’s diverse cultural communities and geographic regions. MDE should facilitate this work in partnership with organizations already effectively partnering with families and youth: Minnesota Youth Council, Minnesota Parent Union, Voices for Racial Justice, Isuroon, Coalition of Asian American Leaders, Migizi, African American Leadership Forum, Youthprise, and others. Students are a voice that has too often been left out of the conversation on the impact of COVID-19 on education, and we encourage MDE to do more intentional outreach to community organizations that can help facilitate more intentional engagement.

6. Replicate Promising Practices: State leaders have a key role to play in ensuring we build on lessons learned during the COVID-19 crisis. MDE should work to identify districts with the strongest and most equitable approaches to learning acceleration and COVID recovery, including those who most effectively spent CARES Act funds. MDE should elevate these practices in statewide guidance, trainings, and other forums to pollinate what’s working across the state. MDE should also consider using state-level funds to incentivize and support replication of these practices over the next several years.

7. Impactful Investment of State Set-Aside: We are eager to see MDE use its \$58.8 million allocation of ESSER funds to launch statewide initiatives, address critical gaps, and replicate promising practices. We believe these funds can have the greatest impact if they are invested intentionally, rather than redistributing and diluting them across districts, as happened under CARES. This is a critical moment for statewide innovation and leadership, and we believe MDE should play a strong role in identifying, piloting and incentivizing promising models using these funds. In 2020, other states developed statewide programs that Minnesota can consider replicating. The common thread is that these programs work to target areas of greatest need, while expanding research-based practices for accelerating learning:

- [New Jersey created a \\$2.5 million grant](#) for 16 districts to implement, scale-up, and enhance evidenced-based intervention to accelerate students’ academic progress.
- [Arizona invested \\$20 million in Acceleration Academy Grants](#) dedicated to extra support for high-needs schools. Schools can use grants to fund extra math and reading specialists, paraprofessionals, or other supports for remediation and acceleration.
- [Alabama dedicated \\$26 million](#) to provide additional support to address achievement gaps and another \$9 million for intensive before-and-after school tutoring.

We appreciate your leadership on COVID-19 recovery. We would be eager to meet to discuss these recommendations further, and our rationale based on what we are hearing from students and families.

Sincerely,

Josh Crosson, EdAllies
 Danyika Leonard, Education Evolving
 Paula Cole, Educators for Excellence
 Jennifer Stern, Great MN Schools
 Kori Redepening, Minnesota Alliance with Youth
 Amy Walstien, Minnesota Business Partnership

Lauryn Schothorst, Minnesota Chamber of Commerce
 Rashad Turner & Khulia Pringle, Minnesota Parent Union
 Mikisha Nation, Teach for America
 Tonya Draughn, Uplift MN
 Julia Freeman, Voice for Racial Justice

cc: Governor Tim Walz
 Dr. Heather Mueller, Deputy Commissioner
 Daron Korte, Assistant Commissioner