



March 30, 2021

Incoming Commissioner Heather Mueller
Minnesota Department of Education
1500 Highway 36 West
Roseville, MN 55113

Incoming Commissioner Mueller,

After a year of incredible disruption, Minnesota sits at the precipice of opportunity. Our students' needs have never been more pronounced, and this is particularly true for students of color, English Learners, and students with disabilities. As you know, education inequity for these groups is not new, but the challenges brought on by the pandemic has exacerbated them. This is why we must take this opportunity to finally improve our public education system with innovation and equity in mind as opposed to returning to a status quo that is leaving too many students behind.

We are writing today as a coalition of advocates calling for urgency as you implement the American Rescue Plan (ARP). We envision a Minnesota Department of Education that sets a vision for what's possible, holds districts accountable to an equitable rollout of new and improved programming, and incorporates a race equity lens as they seek to ensure that all Minnesota students succeed in our education system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe MDE can and should set a new bar for education equity in Minnesota schools, using federal funds not only to accelerate learning, but to address pre-existing needs and barriers. We urge MDE to develop a visionary plan for spending state funds, and to provide strong leadership and guidance to districts so that they make the most of this opportunity. To this end, we offer five key recommendations:

1. **Ensure support for students who have been historically underserved.** While funds will be distributed through the Title 1 formula, this does not guarantee that students will be effectively targeted or that programs will be designed through an equity lens. MDE must provide state leadership, guidance, and feedback loops.
 - a. Prioritize programming to meet the unique academic recovery needs of students with special needs, English Learners, students who are homeless or highly mobile, foster youth, and other groups that have faced significant barriers to learning during the pandemic. MDE should use state funds to support programming and provide specific guidance to districts on how to best support these student groups.
 - b. Require intervention for students who meet certain metrics. The scale of ARP investment means that Minnesota has no excuses for leaving students behind. MDE should develop

targets for identifying students that must be offered supplemental programming to meet academic, socio-emotional, and other needs.

- c. Launch COVID Recovery Community Advisory Board: MDE should create a board to oversee progress on key recovery goals through 2024. This group should engage students, families, and community leaders to provide feedback on progress, challenges, and ongoing needs within Minnesota's diverse cultural communities. MDE should encourage similar structures at the district level, with systems in place to gather regular feedback from students and families—focusing on those who have faced the greatest barriers during the pandemic, including students of color, students from low-income families, English Learners, students with disabilities, and others.

2. Partner with districts to launch aggressive plans to address learning loss. ARP represents a rare opportunity for districts to implement significant short-to-medium-term programming to help students recover from two school years of interrupted learning. MDE should set a vision for ensuring that all students meet key metrics: kindergarten readiness, 3rd grade literacy, 8th grade math proficiency, and college and career readiness. The following strategies can help support this vision:

- a. Support identification and adoption of research-backed strategies to accelerate learning. MDE should develop a menu of vetted, research-backed options for districts to choose from as they roll out ARP-funded learning loss programming, such as summer programming and high-dosage tutoring. MDE should encourage districts to partner with programs that have a track record of success, elevating service contracts with providers who can support quick program expansion as a best practice. MDE should also share learning from the Regional Centers of Excellence in coordinated, intentional ways, and help districts navigate barriers to innovative options like extended day and extended year programming.
- b. Encourage districts to go beyond the required 20% allocation for learning loss. This federal floor helps ensure that a portion of ARP funds are used to address critical student needs. While districts should have the flexibility to use additional funds for other COVID-related expenses, they should be encouraged to spend as much as possible on supplemental student supports. Districts should be discouraged from using ARP funds in ways that create long-term, unsustainable obligations.
- c. Develop statewide programming to supplement district reach and capacity over the next three years. Unlike the first two stimulus packages, ARP requires the state to spend part of the state-level set aside on addressing learning loss, after-school programs, and summer enrichment programs. These funds should be invested in ways that address gaps, supplement local programs, and provide incentives for innovation and collaboration across district boundaries and within the community. And, as mentioned above, these funds should be thoughtfully targeted to support students who have been historically underserved in Minnesota schools.

3. Launch an effort to track progress toward COVID recovery that includes clear metrics and community feedback loops. Over the past year, young Minnesotans have made incredible sacrifices to ensure the health and safety of their families and our communities. We know that communities of color and Indigenous communities have been disparately impacted across many measures. We need a clear roadmap laying out where we are today, and a path forward that ensures these communities are not left further behind.

- a. Conduct a statewide cradle-to-career COVID-recovery needs assessment and set tangible progress milestones. To ensure an effective, equitable COVID recovery, it's essential that state leaders start by clearly identifying the areas of greatest need. Where do we have gaps in access to high-quality preschool? Where are English Learners not receiving the supports needed to make expected progress? Where are we seeing growth in MCA scores, and

where are students falling furthest behind? MDE should partner with other state agencies to answer these types of questions and set tangible benchmarks for recovery, with regular report-outs to the COVID Recovery Community Advisory Board recommended above.

- b. Ensure effective use of assessment data, including baseline diagnostics, individual student growth measures, and comparable statewide metrics to identify student needs and monitor progress between now and 2024. In the coming year, actionable assessment data will be critical. First, statewide MCAs should be used to measure progress toward recovery using data that is comparable across districts and demographic groups to help identify successes and direct resources where they are needed most. MDE should work to expedite delivery of MCA results to families and educators, and provide support to help both groups understand how to interpret and act on the results. Second, districts will need high-quality diagnostic assessments to tailor interventions and supports at the individual student level. MDE should create guidance on when and how to use diagnostics, recommend how to use results to prioritize services and inform interventions, and invest state-level funds to ensure access to vetted testing options. Finally, MDE should ensure that these and other measures already in use by districts (NWEA, FAST, etc.) are used to effectively track student growth and provide targeted interventions based on student need.
- c. Launch statewide 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 socio-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 helping families make sense of student needs and opportunities for support, acceleration, and enrichment.
- d. Support transparency and accountability in local spending. MDE should create a district planning and reporting template that breaks down how local ESSER funds will be spent, how these investments will drive outcomes, and how districts will measure progress. This should be made easily available to families and community members. MDE should ask districts to share their plans for addressing learning loss, explain how they will ensure access to supports for historically underserved students, and identify how funds will support student mental health and other supplemental services, while also enumerating one-time expenses and identifying, if funds are being used for general staff and operations expenses, how this will be sustained after ARP.

4. Leverage ARP to support smart one-time investments to improve Minnesota’s education infrastructure. Just as ARP presents districts with an opportunity to launch aggressive academic programming, it also presents the state with a unique opportunity to address long-standing needs that often go unaddressed because of prohibitive costs. With \$132 million in largely flexible statewide spending, this is a moment Minnesota can’t afford to miss. We urge MDE to invest in the following:

- a. Improve state data systems. Minnesota is behind other states in our ability to gather, analyze, and report on metrics that are essential to smart data-driven program management, and in ways that are accessible to families. Now is the time to change this and make an investment that will pay dividends for a generation.
 - i. *Update the School Report Card*. Parents have been asking for an improved, user-friendly report card for years, and it has consistently been pushed to the back burner. The current version is cumbersome, confusing, and hard to navigate. To make school outcomes more transparent and accessible for parents, Minnesota must bring this report card into the 21st century, investing in much-needed updates so that families can quickly get information on the things that matter most to them, like academics, school

- climate, and more. Minnesota can look to other states, including those that are using multi-measure school performance frameworks to build a common understanding of quality and identify clear areas of opportunity that should be addressed to close gaps.
- ii. *Strengthen longitudinal data systems to provide meaningful information on barriers and opportunities from cradle to career.* MDE should use ARP funds to strengthen internal and inter-agency strategies for gathering, reporting, analyzing, and building action plans around data that starts with pre-K access and kindergarten readiness, and goes on to measure opportunities, gaps, and needs through to college and career. First, MDE should conduct an audit of internal data collection and reporting systems and make changes to streamline and align them, with a focus on enabling the state to identify and shore up weak links that are driving inequities. MDE should ensure straightforward systems to aggregate, analyze, and report K-12 education data that is already gathered locally, doing state level analysis with the data and providing schools and districts with the support to do the same locally. MDE should also reinvest in SLEDS, partnering with the Office of Higher Education, the Department of Employment and Economic Development, other key agencies, and a committee of community stakeholders to take the tool to the next level. The system offers basic insights into cross-agency data, but there is room to grow, with states like California modeling major investment in actionable cradle-to-career data systems.
 - iii. *Expedite Ed-Fi project.* The All Kids Count Act has been law in Minnesota for years, but outdated data systems have prevented the state from fully implementing it. Minnesota should leverage ARP to get this across the finish line and provide the more nuanced data we need to support our state's diverse cultural communities.
- b. Invest in training. There are many ways we can take advantage of ARP to upskill our teacher workforce—an investment with lasting dividends. MDE should invest in specific types of training that can help educators better serve students, such as:
- i. *Innovative pathways to the classroom.* Minnesota is home to a growing number of innovative teacher preparation programs, including several with a track record for preparing, supporting, and retaining teachers that are more racially diverse than traditional teacher preparation programs. ARP funds can support expansion of these programs, including Grow Your Own, Teach Minnesota, and other targeted alternative programs with a track record for increasing teacher diversity and addressing teacher shortages. MDE should make a 3-year investment in these programs to help move the needle on the state's teacher diversity goals.
 - ii. *Literacy training.* Despite a large body of research supporting science-based methods of early reading instruction, many educators report they did not learn these skills in teacher preparation. ARP gives Minnesota the opportunity to address this critical need, advancing understanding of the science of reading and ensuring standards-aligned curriculum and instruction through professional development. MDE should build on the \$1M investment in Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training currently being proposed at the legislature to make this available statewide.
 - iii. *Restorative practices.* Students will need intensive social emotional support as they recover from the pandemic. It will be more important than ever for teachers to have the skills to support them in constructive ways. MDE should invest in restorative practice grants for districts over the next three years to pollinate expertise across the state.
 - iv. *Data literacy.* Many teachers report that they haven't received training on how to use annual tests to improve their teaching and help their students. MDE should develop and roll out professional development to ensure that teachers are empowered with the tools to understand and act on key metrics to inform their instruction and better support students during the COVID recovery process.

- v. *Culturally responsive instruction.* Minnesota students of color need learning environments that are safe and welcoming, and led by teachers with a strong understanding of how to support students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This is particularly important, because even as we work to diversify the state's teacher workforce, the vast majority of Minnesota teachers are white. MDE should invest in professional development—and in the expansion of programming that supports and affirms students of color, including ethnic studies and heritage language programming.

5. Address long-standing barriers to academic success. Student needs coming out of the pandemic may be more pronounced, but many have existed for decades and are long-standing contributors to Minnesota's opportunity gaps. These needs will not be addressed overnight, but ARP can help Minnesota take major steps in the right direction, setting a new bar through short-term grant programs, and planting the seed for models that can be built on through future state investment.

- a. Invest in early literacy programs: Literacy is an essential academic foundation, with a strong link between high school graduation and third grade reading proficiency. Unfortunately, many students are not on track and this has only been exacerbated over the past year. 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. In the appendix, we highlight state investment models to consider. We encourage MDE to support districts in expanding and deepening partnerships to support literacy.
- b. Support targeted and culturally responsive mental health support: In addition to focusing on 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.
- c. Provide support to English Learners and their families. Distance learning has been particularly challenging for EL students, and we encourage MDE to provide targeted supports to districts with high concentrations of EL families, as well as guidance on the types of interventions that can help these students most. We also encourage MDE to provide guidance on how districts can better engage families of EL students, providing not only translated documents, but also bicultural liaisons between families and schools to promote culturally responsive family engagement that leads to higher education achievement outcomes for students.
- d. Ensure intensive supports for students with disabilities. The shift to distance learning was catastrophic for many students receiving special education services, with many receiving minimal supports and facing significant barriers to essential academic and other special education needs. In addition to new IDEA funds available through ARP, states and districts can and should use ESSER funds to ratchet up services to students eligible for special education services, including behavioral and mental health services, technology assistance, additional paraprofessional support, and priority access to extended and supplemental learning opportunities.

Please find additional context and examples in the appendix below. We hope that it can serve as inspiration as MDE takes on the important task of leading the next phase of Minnesota students' pandemic recovery process.

We appreciate your leadership and would like to meet soon to discuss MDE's vision and share our hopes for how this infusion of resources will ensure a robust, equitable, student-centered COVID-recovery.

Sincerely,

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Appendix: Building from Best Practices & Promising Innovations

There is a growing body of evidence around what works to accelerate learning. MDE should implement best practices with state funds and provide technical assistance to states around to develop effective programming.

The Annenberg Institute at Brown University has a [series of research briefs](#) that contain recommendations on how to ensure that students—particularly those traditionally underserved—are getting the proper support for academic acceleration. This includes:

- High-dosage tutoring,
- Student surveys,
- Extended learning days and years,
- Integrated wraparound services,
- Professional development for teachers,
- Teaching grade level content, and more.

In addition, Minnesota should look explore how other states have invested the first two rounds of ESSER and GEER funds to identify promising practices to replicate:

Academic Acceleration

- [Hawaii invested \\$6 million](#) in summer learning and afterschool programming meant to help students who have been negatively impacted by learning loss.
- [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.

Early Literacy

- [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.
- [Tennessee invested \\$100 million](#)—\$60 million which was from COVID-19 federal stimulus—in a “Reading 360” statewide program to support access to tutoring and online support to help students develop literacy, professional development for teachers, and phonic kits and materials for classrooms.

Mental Health

- [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.
- [Tennessee invested \\$1.5 million](#) to develop an online tool that maps community resources available to support mental health and related services for students.
- [Utah used their money](#) to provide additional funding for mental health partners for additional services to students, professional development on trauma responsive practices, tele-mental health services for families, and a digital tool to assess mental health needs.
- [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.