



May 26, 2021

Governor Tim Walz  
130 State Capitol  
75 Rev Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
St. Paul, MN 55155

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

Governor Walz and Commissioner Mueller,

Minnesota is at a pivotal moment, with major decisions to make as we set the stage for COVID recovery. As a coalition of advocacy and community-based organizations that have been closely tracking the impact of COVID-19 on students—particularly students of color, Indigenous students, students with disabilities, and other historically underserved students—we are calling on you to capitalize on this moment. The American Rescue Plan gives us the vehicle: an opportunity to invest in student needs that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and just as importantly, to make investments that improve our public education system, addressing long-standing barriers and putting racial equity at the center rather than returning to a status quo.

But first, we need the vision. These investments must be intentional, targeted, and informed by community needs. We are calling on the Governor's office and the Minnesota Department of Education to carefully vet proposed spending choices, ensuring they are aligned to a strategic vision with clear markers of success, and clear feedback loops with community stakeholders.

To that end, we urge you to consider the following proposals as you build a plan to allocate the \$132 million in statewide funds available to MDE:

1. **Set a Clear Vision.** Effectively spending ARP funds is more than a budgeting exercise. In fact, treating it as such is likely to squander a significant opportunity by spreading meaningful but limited short-term funds across too many priorities—and as a result, moving the needle on none. We are calling for a clear, leadership-level vision for how Minnesota will use this investment to support student recovery and build a more equitable, accountable underlying K-12 system. For example, in a letter we sent in late March, we recommended stronger state data systems and investments in training for the teacher workforce as two types of one-time investments that would pay lasting dividends across the state.

MDE's vision should be tied to clear metrics that can be used to measure progress. Before asking stakeholders to weigh in on specific funding streams, we encourage a community conversation about the needs MDE plans to prioritize and the benchmarks for success.

2. **Propose a Longer Planning Timeline.** On June 7, MDE must submit to the U.S. Department of Education either an ARP ESSER plan, or an alternate proposed timeline along with an explanation of requirements driving the request. We believe strongly that MDE needs more time to conduct meaningful stakeholder engagement.

- There has been limited dialogue with education stakeholders about priorities and recommendations. After submitting a detailed set of recommendations to MDE in March, our coalition never secured a time to meet and understand concerns, identify shared priorities, and explain in further detail before a narrowed list of priorities was released for public comment last week.
  - There is insufficient time for meaningful community feedback. While we know MDE has made efforts to coordinate to solicit community input, the timeline and process are unrealistic, with too few avenues for meaningful engagement with communities of color. Less than two weeks, at the end of the school year, nearing Memorial Day, and coinciding with community memorials in honor of George Floyd makes this already tight window almost impossible. Moreover, the public comment process needs improvement. Not only is the May 20-June 1 window a challenge; the survey design is also a barrier—for example, including just one question and using inaccessible terminology, such as “multi-tiered teaching frameworks” and “full-service community schools” to name a few.
3. **Establish COVID Recovery Community Advisory Board.** To provide a structure for goal setting, decision making, oversight of progress metrics, and recommendations for modifications over time, we urge the Governor and MDE to create a COVID Recovery Community Advisory Board. This group should be established now and continue for three years, overseeing 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.

We believe these process improvements are critical. While we are eager to further discuss our specific investment recommendations, we believe that a process that overlooks these critical elements will fall flat, leading to limited buy-in, lack of clarity, and limited accountability—which is problematic first and foremost because it will reduce opportunities to pivot, reinvest, and continually improve to serve students who have been underserved for too long already.

Over the past year, we have weighed in to provide feedback on the needs we are seeing in the community, and on strategies we believe can help move the needle as Minnesota spends federal recovery funds. For additional detail on our previous recommendations, we direct you to our March 30 letter. The recommendations were informed by a broad coalition of groups and organizations that work with families and students. In addition to highlighting the critical data and training investments noted above, we believe our recommendations around access to targeted tutoring, early literacy programs, and culturally responsive mental health support could be effective strategies that are not currently reflected. We strongly encourage MDE to focus on one-time state-level investments, and on COVID-specific interventions, avoiding less targeted, longer-term program infusions that may be unsustainable without ARP funds.

We are eager to meet to discuss these recommendations further, and our rationale based on what we are hearing from students and families.

Sincerely,  
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