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Texas Schools Need Federal Relief Funds Now!

Students pay the price as Texas leaders sit on federal funds

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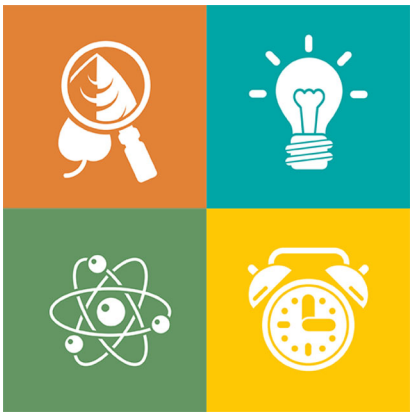
To address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government allocated billions of dollars for K-12 schools and colleges. It designated some funds for distribution by state governors and some for colleges and universities. But the bulk of federal emergency education funds are intended for K-12 schools via the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER).



Unfortunately, Texas leaders are choosing not to accept those funds, leaving schools without critical relief monies. Commissioner Morath reported recently that half of Texas' students are likely to perform below grade level by the end of this school year (Morath, 2021). And Texas schools lost contact with 600,000 students since the pandemic began (TEA, 2020). Three out of four older students report struggling with mental wellness issues (Ramón, 2021).

Each of the three COVID-19 emergency laws added relief money to the ESSER fund, but the largest infusion by far was in March 2021 through the American Rescue Plan (ARP). This infusion included $122 billion for elementary and secondary schools across the country.

As with the other federal relief packages, ARP requires that at least 90% of ESSER funds be distributed to school districts to address critical needs such as lost instruction time, safe reopening, the digital divide, and growing mental health concerns.

Texas Leaders Are Leaving Money on the Table

Texas is one of only a handful of states that has not taken steps to distribute these much-needed federal funds to school districts. Instead, Texas used the first round of relief funds (ESSER I from the CARES Act, $1.3 billion) to replace, or supplant, state funding for schools, leaving many districts without additional monies to cover new COVID-19 costs.

Federal relief funds for education:

- **Round 1, March 2020:** $1.3 billion available for Texas – The state used the funds to fill its own budget gaps
- **Round 2, December 2020:** $5.5 billion available for Texas – The state has not distributed the funds to schools
- **Round 3, March 2021:** $12.4 billion available for Texas – The state has not distributed the funds to schools

Texas has still not allocated its Round 2 relief funds, nor its Round 3 funds even though most of the funds are available now. Other states are moving forward to distribute funds to their schools. For example, Arkansas schools already have direct allotments with some schools receiving up to $40 million, Georgia has claimed and begun allocating ESSER II funds, and Louisiana has

issued guidance to its schools on the use of all three rounds of ESSER funding.

If schools don't receive the promised relief funds…

- Many students **won't receive mental health supports;**
- Many students will continue to **struggle with lost instruction time** with no options for tutoring, after school programs, summer programs, and extended time programming;
- Many students **won't have access to technology supports** and devices; and
- Many **schools won't be able to upgrade facilities** and sanitation services.

Why is Texas Holding Up Relief Funds for Education?

State lawmakers say before they can claim the funds, they need answers from the federal government to questions about how the money can be used. But, at the time of writing, Texas leaders have not made all those questions or federal waiver requests public.

It is clear Texas schools are not receiving their fair share of critical relief funds. This compromises their ability to implement programs that would support teachers and students.

What Texas Should Do

Texas must stop waiting to access funds and should not use federal monies to supplant state funding for public schools. Instead, our leaders should do the following.

Immediately access the federal funds to which the state is entitled, including $5.5 billion in ESSER II funds and the more than $12 billion in ARP ESSER funds.

Immediately begin distributing relief funds to school districts so they can plan and use the money to address the needs of students, families and teachers. Most school district leaders are in an excellent position to work with their communities to determine the best use of funds. These

allocation decisions should not be left solely to the Texas Legislature or a small group of lawmakers.

Work with teachers, families, students and other advocates to **develop a robust state plan**, focused on equitable use and distribution of funds.

Provide guidance to school districts on how to spend funds equitably, ensuring the bulk of funds go to the students and communities most impacted by long-standing educational inequities and COVID-19, including students of color, those from families with limited incomes, emergent bilingual (English learner) students, and students with disabilities.

Provide technical support and guidance to school districts through the regional service centers to create district-level student and family engagement plans that ensure all members of school communities are part of fund allocation and use decisions.

Use a portion of the ESSER discretionary funds (10% of the fund) to **provide accounting and transparent support** to school districts, especially smaller ones without adequate personnel for a detailed tracking of funds.

Schools urgently need federal relief funds to make their budgets work. Teachers should get the support they need to meet new and changing expectations. And students must be able to access the resources they need to thrive.

IDRA calls on Texas to act now and send the relief funds where they belong!

Morath, M. (March 18, 2021). **Testimony of Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath.** Texas Senate Education Committee.

Ramón, A. (March 2021). **Student Researchers Collect Insights from Peers about the Pandemic's Effects on Schooling.** IDRA Newsletter.

TEA. (August 13, 2020). **SY 2020-2021 COVID-19 Crisis Code Reporting Guidance.** Texas Education Agency.

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