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Texas legislators must allow federal money to flow to schools

By Justin Henry and Tammy Richards, March 31, 2021

Washington wants to send billions of dollars to Texas schools to help students overcome the many obstacles they have faced over the last year; however, state officials are sitting on the funds and costing schools and students valuable time and resources in the process.

Three times in the past year, the U.S. Congress has passed, and now two presidents have signed, COVID-19 relief legislation to help the country face the health and economic consequences of the pandemic. Each of those bills has included money specifically to help Texas students — \$19 billion in total.

When the first round of federal relief offered to provide extra assistance to Texas students, state officials swapped or “supplanted” those dollars for state resources they would have otherwise spent on public education. This act saved money in the state treasury, but it did not provide the extra resources for Texas schools that federal lawmakers intended.

Since then, Congress has approved two larger COVID packages, in December and March, with a combined \$17 billion for Texas schools. These relief dollars are intended to provide extra services to mitigate learning loss that students have experienced this year. This money was not intended to take the place of tax dollars that the State of Texas has already allocated so that the state can use the \$17 billion from the federal government for non-educational expenditures. School districts have no idea when they will know what, if any, financial support they might receive from the federal relief, which significantly hampers the ability to plan for student acceleration and learning this summer and for the fall.

Most states have taken steps to begin the process of distributing those dollars to public schools. Texas, however, has made no such effort, even as the time left in the current school year continues to dwindle.

When the pandemic hit last year, school buildings quickly closed and principals and teachers had to suddenly shift away from the in-person learning they had always provided and create systems and processes for online learning. They did a remarkable job of reinventing public education overnight. Still, schools and students experienced the inevitable bumps in the road when students were suddenly not in the same room as their teachers. And while schools have developed or adopted better online platforms since then, there have still been widespread interruptions in learning.

This is why the federal relief dollars matter. If schools cannot proactively provide more resources and interventions to help students accelerate their learning, the damage to students’ long-term academic success could be significant. Catching up those who have experienced learning loss is a moral obligation and also an economic issue as we strive to build a stronger Texas workforce.

School districts have numerous initiatives and innovations to help these students, including bringing in more teachers to reduce class sizes, providing extra instruction during the summer, and

using more instructional aides. This variety of approaches underscores the need for local control; local communities know best how to put resources to use to address their specific priorities. Local districts, not Austin, must be able to determine their own students' needs.

Some Texas leaders may philosophically disagree with the amount of money Congress has spent on COVID relief. But the duly elected Congress has authority over how to spend federal dollars and has chosen to use those dollars for this purpose. If Texas continues to sit on this essential education funding, Texans are not going to start getting dividends on the taxes they've already paid to Uncle Sam. Our federal dollars will just go elsewhere.

In 2019, Texas stepped up with landmark legislation to provide the resources and funding necessary to support school children across the state. Let's not lose momentum by withholding available federal funding that would accelerate learning and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our children. It's time for Texas legislators to stop stalling and provide federal relief to local school districts.

Our districts need these resources now in order to plan, our teachers need these resources now in order to teach, and our students need these resources now in order to succeed. Don't let Austin spend federal dollars that local school districts have the expertise to deploy. We need Texas to release those funds now so we can put them to work for kids.

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