



Federal Relief Funds: Schools Left Waiting as Texas Stalls

COVID relief legislation approved by the U.S. Congress in December 2020 and March 2021 authorized a total of \$17.9 billion for public schools in Texas to spend over the next three years to help students overcome “learning loss” caused by disruptions to instruction.

Some 40 states have started distributing dollars to their schools, but Texas has not. In fact, Governor Greg Abbott wrote the U.S. Secretary of Education on February 22 and asked that Texas be waived from the federal requirements for the distribution of those dollars because he could not certify that Texas would meet “maintenance of effort” regarding state funding for education.

When discussing these federal dollars, these points are worth keeping in mind:

- Meeting the “maintenance of effort” requirements would cost Texas about a \$1.2 billion increase in spending on higher education, according to legislative budget-writers. This is a modest sum compared to the \$18 billion now left on the table.
- Rather than proactively working to see how Texas could meet the federal requirements to draw down the \$17.9 billion, the state’s only official response has been to seek permission not to distribute the dollars to schools. Legislative leaders claim they want to make sure they can work with the “strings attached,” but they have shown little real effort to resolve whatever issues they have with those strings.
- More than 40 states have found ways to comply with the federal requirements to at least distribute some of the dollars from the two federal bills. The Governor’s letter does not explain how Texas is so unique that it could not also comply.
- There is reason to worry Texas will eventually use the federal dollars to supplant state spending in other areas of the budget – in other words, take the dollars, save money for the state by replacing state dollars with federal dollars, and do nothing for students. Texas did this with the original federal COVID legislation approved in March 2020.
- Legislation has been proposed to create a new committee that would decide how to spend the federal dollars after the Legislature adjourns. This would further stall the decision at a time when schools need these resources to catch students up quickly. It would also usurp the authority of almost every member of the Texas House and Senate by delivering control over the dollars to such a small group.

The bottom line is that Texas has it backwards: Rather than trying to determine how to distribute dollars to the schools that need them, Texas is trying its best to withhold them. It is the students who have missed so much instruction and teachers who have overcome so many obstacles who are suffering from the state’s inaction.