

Written Testimony of Will Holleman
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Before the Senate Committee on Finance
The Honorable Joan Huffman, Chair
July 11, 2022

Interim Charge 1: Examine local use of federal funding, including funding provided to school districts through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund.

KEY POINTS

- School districts have benefited from the flexibility of ESSER fund expenditures.
 - State funding for accelerated instruction is necessary for continued academic growth.
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Chairwoman Joan Huffman and Members of the Committee:

We would like to thank the members of the Senate Committee on Finance for highlighting the ongoing efforts of teachers, school administrators, and, ultimately parents and students, in restoring academic growth after the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Please allow us to highlight two specific areas related to your request for information in this interim hearing: school district use of federal funds and the impact of accelerated instruction.

Flexibility in Expenditure Discretion

Local discretion with federal funds allowed school districts to more appropriately meet the learning needs of their students. Each district had needs that differed from region to region in our diverse state. In prioritizing flexible spending requirements, legislators created the space for school districts to offer various services and programs without concern or confusion, which aided the rapid instructional recovery.

As a result, school districts and charters used funds to extend the school day and provide additional instructional time for students, offer more wrap-around services to help students cope with trauma, and update technology and building needs to limit the spread of COVID-19. The recovery in STAAR scores was a Texas team effort – from the funding provided by our Congressional delegation, to the local discretion permitted by the Legislature, to the extraordinary effort made by teachers, parents, and students in the schools.

Continued Investment in Accelerated Instruction

Another statewide policy decision that yielded academic progress following the COVID-19 learning loss can be found in the focus on accelerated instruction, and the increased dedicated support from teachers, principals, and administrators to meet those state requirements. House Bill 4545 created new requirements for accelerated instruction ranging from required additional instructional time to small student/teacher ratios for supplemental instruction and tutoring. Raise Your Hand Texas would caution against continuing some of the more burdensome administrative requirements under the program and ask that you consider relieving some of these requirements as we exit the pandemic. In particular, inflexible time requirements for additional instruction and staff-to-student ratios should be left to the discretion of the communities that know their students' needs best.

As the committee is aware, school districts are using a substantial portion of federal funds to pay for requirements from House Bill 4545. Over time, as federal funds run out, the requirements established under HB 4545 will remain, and will ultimately become an unfunded state mandate. If these requirements are to remain, additional state-supported funding for accelerated instruction will be needed. Providing both state resources and reducing administrative burdens to implement accelerated instruction post-pandemic will help school districts continue to focus on individual student academic needs and support teachers.

Conclusion

Raise Your Hand Texas continues to support state and federal funding with as few requirements as possible to achieve the policy goals intended. Districts know their individual communities best and need the continued financial flexibility to help fuel post-pandemic academic progress. Lastly, as Raise Your Hand Texas continues to speak with teachers across the state, the increased measures for accelerated instruction remain one of the top reasons cited when considering leaving the classroom. If requirements for accelerated instruction remain as mandated under state law, additional state funding will be necessary to continue the academic progress we are now seeing.

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