

Reimagining a New Way Forward: Teacher Input on the Use of COVID Stimulus Funding

The Problem

To counteract the impact of the COVID pandemic on school systems and communities, the federal government passed a series of Covid relief and stimulus bills in March 2020, December 2020, and March 2021. Together, these bills will provide Illinois with over \$7.8 billion to invest in education, of which 90% goes directly to districts.ⁱ As we consider how this money should be spent, we must remember that each district, and even each individual school, has differing needs. Therefore, the voices of the stakeholders closest to the students —teachers and parents—will be invaluable as we aim to ensure the fair, purposeful, and bold funding decisions are necessary. The latest relief package underscores this by requiring districts and states to consult these stakeholders as they develop their plans for the remaining dollars. The federal guidance notes, “As students and teachers continue to return to full-time in-person education, they will have important insights into how schools should approach prevention and mitigation of COVID-19, and into what may be needed to support student success.”ⁱⁱ As current teachers and Teach Plus Policy Fellows, we are aiming to support the most impacted communities and their students through elevating teacher voices and their professional recommendations on how to best spend the stimulus dollars to benefit students.

*“Listen to the educators who are in the classroom. Our students cannot learn if they are not mentally well. We need to service the whole child, not just their test scores.”
A Chicago Charter Elementary School Teacher*

Methodology

With the passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP), education in Illinois stood to change greatly due to a record-setting influx of funding. With this in mind, we sought to:

1. Identify what teachers believe are the greatest needs for post-COVID education.
2. Put forth teacher-informed recommendations for how COVID stimulus funding should be utilized.

To gauge this, we held focus groups in January and February of 2021 with 137 Illinois teachers from a variety of districts throughout the state. Focus groups discussed what teachers believed would be the best ways to use COVID Stimulus Funding. While the groups were held before the passage of the American Rescue Plan, we believe the findings can be generalized to encompass all COVID Stimulus Funding.

In our focus groups:

- 55 percent of respondents work as teachers in public schools; 25 percent work as teachers in public charter schools; 12 percent as paraprofessionals or other staff roles at their school.
- 40 percent of respondents teach in Chicago; 48 percent work in the Chicago suburbs; 7 percent work in urban schools outside the Chicago area; 5 percent work in rural schools.
- There were 28 different Illinois public school districts represented in this study; there was one Chicago Public Schools-affiliated Charter Network represented.

The Solution

Below are **student-centric** recommendations from teachers on how the state and districts should invest education dollars in the coming years:

- 1. Students Need Access to Mental Health Supports.** Students' will not be able to learn or function in a school environment without access to quality mental health support. To provide students with this support, they need the following:
 - **More counseling and social work staff.** Many schools are underfunded and understaffed when it comes to counseling and social work support. As one suburban Chicago teacher explained, *"the amount and level of severity of the trauma this time period has caused for students cannot be understated. Our students need the support of more professionals in schools to help them through this."* Due to the immense trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to consider bringing in more counselors to address the **immediate need** for support. Acknowledging that such funding is time-limited, these added school counselors and social workers should both provide immediate support for students in need, and train school staff in trauma-informed social and emotional strategies. Teachers then would become equipped to help students reinforce positive behaviors and decision-making skills that are beneficial now and in the future.
 - **Access to trauma-informed and culturally responsive professional development.** Students need teachers who understand their previous experiences. For teachers to support students in this way, they need access to quality professional development about culturally responsive and trauma informed teaching. As one suburban Chicago teacher said, *"Staff need training and support on trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices, especially during a time of collective trauma, [and] support in mental wellness will be vital while students heal."*
 - **Increased supervised unstructured student-directed time.** Students need time to have **fun at school** through things like brain breaks, additional recess, and quiet time. Playground equipment offers students a physical outlet if needed. Wellness rooms with bean bags, soft music, and healthy snacks offer a soothing environment where students have space to be calm and at one with their thoughts. One of the things students have lost during the pandemic is the opportunity to play and interact with other students. As a suburban teacher said, *"I think that adding opportunities for students outside of the classroom will enrich their [learning] experience."*

*"Because mental health is first and foremost. It is the foundation."
A Chicago Elementary School Teacher*
- 2. Students Need Access to Academic Supports.** Students have a variety of **academic needs** that not only call for support in their individual situation, but also in how instruction is delivered through teaching models and flexible schedules as well as academic opportunities.
 - **Flexibility to meet students where they are.** Students need **flexibility** in their schooling that allows them to learn on an **individualized plan**, creates opportunity for working students in a **flexible schedule**, and gives opportunities for **project-based learning**. A rural secondary teacher in Southern Illinois stated, *"Additional help in a one-on-one basis allows for differential learning and flexibility needed for learners who are struggling to meet the demands of home, school, and work."*

The need for flexibility between and within districts can be illustrated in an analysis of teacher responses around career education. Teachers from a mid-sized district in central IL, in a separate set of focus groups, not included in statewide numbers listed above to avoid overweighting that one district, teachers mentioned the need for students to receive **high school credit for jobs** held outside of the school more than teachers from other areas. These teachers were able to **recognize a specific need from their community** as they watched their students try to support their families during this time. While not all students may not need this flexibility, we heard similar calls from other districts. Additionally, as districts begin to develop their own plans, Teach Plus Illinois would be happy to share the protocol and train teacher leaders to hold these focus groups in their own districts, providing critical, timely information to district leaders.

- **Improved Remote and Hybrid Learning Modalities.** As schools move to varied models of learning, encompassing both online and blended learning, **remote and hybrid learning teaching models** are seen as **important** in strengthening the academic opportunities of students. A suburban high school teacher said: *“During remote and hybrid learning many of these students have actually thrived because of the flexibility school offered them.”*

“Distance learning will be around forever, but it won't be used as heavily as it has been during this pandemic. I think changing the way a classroom looks to fit more the modern era is important”
A Suburban Elementary Teacher

3. **Students need a supportive environment.** Along with providing direct support for mental health and academic needs, schools must also address the many other factors that contribute to student success. In this way, schools must think holistically and operate as one cohesive unit. For this to happen, teachers emphasized that **schools must be a supportive environment for both students and staff.** While a supportive environment can take many forms, our focus groups highlighted three key recommendations:
 - **Safe school buildings.** First and foremost, families must feel safe sending their children to school. Teachers are asking for an investment in the infrastructure of school buildings, including ventilation systems, to protect the health of students and staff. As one teacher in the western suburbs stated, *“After finding out Covid-19 was airborne, my colleagues and I really looked into our buildings' ventilation systems and found [that] they definitely needed upgrading. If we want students in the building during a pandemic, it MUST be the best it can be.”*
 - **Smaller class sizes.** Districts should prioritize class sizes when making staffing decisions in order to meet the diverse needs of students, especially given the additional demands brought on by the pandemic. A teacher from a rural school in southern Illinois stated, *“Class size MATTERS...too many students and not enough teachers make it nearly impossible to make a personal connection with the at-risk students who need it the most.”*
 - **Autonomy in schools and districts.** Many teachers are excited by the opportunity to pave a new way forward after the pandemic. Teachers see endless possibilities and insist that we do not simply “go back to normal,” but take what we have learned during the pandemic to improve education and create a “new normal.” As one

teacher from central Illinois stated, *"This is a great opportunity for grassroots educational innovation."* **Teachers are asking for the necessary flexibility to innovate.** Innovation could mean creating more choices in areas such as scheduling, instructional format, and credit options to name a few. These decisions should be made collaboratively between schools and families.

"More and more students are helping families with household expenses ... This will give those students [the opportunity to] explore the workforce while getting credit and assisting their families"
A Southern Illinois Rural Teacher

Additionally, teachers pointed out one key area where the state can act to support students at this time: **Evidence-Based Funding.** Many teachers had varying needs of support at this time ranging from HVAC needs to access to devices to professional development requests. As one suburban Chicago teacher pointed out, *"Schools that are struggling the most should have the greatest proportion of the resources in order to provide for the needs of their students, families, and staff. Bringing these schools closer to other better funded schools is only fair. The students in those schools deserve every advantage we can provide for them."* To maintain equitable funding, we must maintain Evidence-Based Funding to ensure that high need communities are still being properly supported and can further initiate the recommendations provided.

Conclusion

If Illinois is to rebound from the devastating effects of the pandemic, it will require a lasting commitment to strategic investments in education. If we invest in the teacher-informed and equity-driven priorities listed above, we have a chance to come back from the pandemic stronger and more equitable than before.

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ⁱ National Conference of State Legislatures, "Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund Tracker." Accessed 4/29/2021 at <https://www.ncsl.org/ncsl-in-dc/standing-committees/education/cares-act-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund-tracker.aspx>

ⁱⁱ Federal Register, 34 CFR Chapter II. American Rescue Plan Act Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund Interim final requirements, page 22. Accessed 4/29/2021 at <https://public-inspection.federalregister.gov/2021-08359.pdf>