

TESTIMONY

Testimony To: House Committee on Education
Submitted by: Daniel M. French, Ed.D., Secretary of Education
Subject: Education Recovery
Date: March 17, 2022

Background

In emergency management, recovery is the work that is organized to address the impact of the emergency after it is over. In this case, the emergency is the COVID-19 pandemic, and although the pandemic is not over, the risks from COVID-19 continue to decrease so we can safely lift many of the mitigation recommendations for schools and begin the recovery phase. This is an important moment for our education system relative to the pandemic. We have not been able to make a shift to recovery work previously since our education system has had to dedicate some portion of its daily capacity towards implementing public health mitigation measures. Now we can begin to focus all our capacity on meeting the educational needs of our students.

We envisioned education recovery to contain three, broad planning areas: 1) academics, 2) social and emotional needs, and 3) re-engagement. We also envisioned education recovery to be a multi-year effort. Re-engagement was the priority last year since our students had spent a better portion of the 2020-2021 school year in remote or hybrid learning.

Now we expect to focus on the other two planning areas, academics, and social and emotional needs. Our work in these areas is described by our approved ARP ESSER State Plan. This plan outlines how that state will spend state-level funds (SEA funds) and coordinate with local district funds (LEA funds) to address issues related to education recovery. These federal funds are also designed to be used in a multi-year manner, with ARP ESSER funds being available through September 2024.

Coordination of SEA Funding and LEA Funding

The General Assembly appropriated all but approximately \$8.1M of the SEA funds last year. Below is a summary of this activity highlighting the two recovery planning areas of academics and social and emotional needs. Other funds were appropriated for activities such as Community Schools and facilities improvement and are not summarized below.

- General SEA Funding Summary
 - \$43M in SEA ESSER funding and spending plan approved by US ED
 - \$8.1M still needs to be appropriated

- Mandatory appropriations that need to be made - \$2.8M for summer, \$2.8M for afterschool, and \$1.4M for learning loss
 - Discretionary appropriation - Recommending \$1.1M for facility planning grants
- Recovery priorities - 1) academic and 2) social and emotional needs
 - Academic
 - \$2.1M literacy technical support
 - \$4M remote learning
 - New afterschool (\$2.8M) and summer school (\$2.8M) appropriations from above with new focus on academic support
 - Social and Emotional Needs
 - \$3M appropriation - designing program with DMH

LEA funds, 90% of the federal relief funding under ARP ESSER, are controlled by LEAs and are spent in accordance with local spending plans developed with community input. LEAs must post those plans to their websites by the end of March 2022 and share them with the agency. LEA grant applications for these funds are due by November 2022. LEA funding plans also include a mandatory set aside. 20% of LEA funding must be reserved for evidence-based activities related to addressing academics and learning loss.

The state does not direct how LEAs use their funds, but SEA funding activities can help coordinate LEA activities to ensure maximum impact. For example, SEA funds were used to establish the School Facilities Improvement Project, a goal of which was to help districts address immediate facilities needs related to mitigating COVID-19 using their LEA funds. SEA recovery funds for academics and social emotional needs will be leveraged in a similar manner. We are also establishing several planning groups to guide the recovery work and to ensure coordination among state agencies and local school districts.

Recovery Planning

Recovery in education will be a multi-year effort requiring close coordination between state agencies and local school districts. In anticipation of this need for coordination, we are creating two planning entities, one internal to the agency and the other an external group comprised of various stakeholders.

Recovery Leads Team – Internal

In 2018, the agency created an internal planning team for Act 173 called the Act 173 Leads Team. This was necessary due to the broad impact of Act 173 on the education system and the work of the agency. Now that the technical and rulemaking work for Act 173 has largely been concluded, this team will be re-constituted as the Recovery Leads Team.

Act 173 work will become a subproject for this new team, and the policy levers in regulation that were identified for successful implementation of Act 173 (Educational Support Teams, Local Assessment Planning, Coordination of Curriculum, and Needs-Based Professional Development) will be leveraged to address recovery issues for two reasons: 1) they are directly relevant for districts to engage in recovery work, and 2) due to the complexity of this work, there will be a need to promote coherence between recovery and Act 173 implementation. Having these projects situated appropriately at the agency will greatly assist in creating that coherence.

The purpose of the Recovery Leads Team will be to coordinate the recovery work among agency divisions. This group will likely be augmented over time to include members from other state agencies such as the Department of Mental Health.

Education Recovery Steering Committee – External

Throughout the pandemic, we have leveraged a Secretary’s Advisory Council to provide feedback to the Secretary on implementing COVID-19 mitigation measures in our schools. This group will be disbanded in favor of creating an Education Recovery Steering Committee. The purpose of the Committee will be to give input into state-level education recovery activities related to academic needs, social and emotional needs, and to help coordinate state-level activities with district-level activities to maximize alignment and impact.

The group will be comprised of the following members:

- Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA) Designee
- Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA) Designee
- Vermont Principals’ Association (VPA) Designee
- VT-NEA Designee
- School Principals (2)
- Classroom Teachers (2)
- School Counselors (2)
- School Nurses (2)
- AOE Leadership
- Project Manager of the AOE Education Recovery Leads Team

The composition of this group is different than the previous Advisory Council in that it has more school-level staff. This group will begin to meet in April.

A Note on Staffing

The pandemic has had a significant impact on agency operations. Some of that impact is just now being realized and will likely lead to organizational changes in the future.

The House Education Committee has been very concerned about agency capacity even prior to the pandemic. I want to alert you that the agency has now assumed a significant amount of new work because of the pandemic, and I do not believe that workload will diminish after the recovery phase is complete. Additionally, the General Assembly is contemplating major new policy reforms in education that will likely put even further demand on agency capacity going forward.

In this context, you can understand my disappointment in learning the House cut one of the two General Fund position requests the agency made in this year's budget proposal.

I ask this position to be restored so the agency will have the necessary capacity to support the work you have asked us, and will ask us, to administer.

Under resourcing the agency at this critical moment will have a significant negative impact on our ability to support the essential work of education recovery.