PACE

COMMENTARY

Utilizing COVID-19 Recovery Funds to Serve English Learners in California



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This commentary provides California's K–12 education leaders 10 recommendations for utilizing COVID-19 recovery funds to serve English learner students. It is important for leaders to act boldly and innovatively to begin to reimagine K–12 education, in particular for English learners (ELs), whose learning has been yet more negatively affected by the pandemic than that of their English-speaking peers.

INTRODUCTION

I write this commentary on COVID-19 funding for English learners (ELs) as a former EL student, a former bilingual teacher, and a current national EL policy expert. The commentary responds to the question: How should California leaders utilize COVID-19 funds to best serve the state's EL students?

ELs have been more deeply and negatively affected by COVID-19 than their English-speaking peers in at least four main ways:

1. ELs are participating in remote and in-person learning at disproportionately lower rates.
2. ELs are experiencing more significant academic learning lag, including language lag.
3. ELs are contending with disproportionate health and wellness concerns.
4. EL parents feel more disconnected from their child's school.

Governor Newsom stated that California's K–12 schools should reopen safely in fall 2021 for full-time, five-days-per-week in-person instruction. This will coincide with the influx of funding from the American Rescue Plan American Rescue Plan law passed in March 2021 that will provide $15.3 billion to assist K–12 schools in California with reopening safely and addressing student needs. Every school district must develop a plan by June 1, 2021 that details how they will use these one-time funds, 20 percent of which must be directed to redressing learning loss. It is thus up to local education leaders to decide how to use these funds to serve the state's more than 6 million K–12 students, including California's 1.1 million English learner students, who constitute 19.2 percent of all students.

ENGLISH LEARNER COVID-19 FUNDING RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on my English learner and finance expertise as well as on other research, below are ten evidence-based recommendations that education leaders should consider implementing to utilize COVID-19 funds to better serve California's EL students.

1. Use COVID-19 funds comprehensively instead of in separate siloes in order to maximize and leverage other resources (i.e., Title III) to reimagine the services provided to ELs without supplanting funds.

2. Build upon the cultural and linguistic assets of ELs to enrich their education instead of focusing on ELs' deficiencies.

3. Understand and address the unique needs of the EL population at each school site (e.g., in terms of percentage of ELs, languages spoken, type of EL) to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.

4. Focus on high-quality and effective programs and services that address both language (e.g., dual language programs) and culture (e.g., ethnic studies).

5. Provide multilingual and culturally competent health and wellness support services to students and families.

6. Develop authentic and meaningful relationships with all parents and guardians, especially families of ELs.

7. Provide high-quality and effective professional development for educators, especially English as a second language and bilingual teachers.

8. Implement effective strategies for recruitment and retainment of high-quality educators, especially English as a second language and bilingual teachers.

9. Establish strategies for reduced class size, especially at schools with a high proportion of ELs.

10. Design infrastructure for a high-quality hybrid English as a second language / bilingual model for families that decide not to return to in-person instruction.

These investments build from other resources (e.g. Restorative Restart: The Path Towards Reimagining and Rebuilding Schools) that are focused on making schools safe and that guide school investments in transitioning back to in-person instruction.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 funds provide California's K–12 system a unique opportunity to reimagine education for all students—including English learners, who have unique needs. It is vital that we do not repeat mistakes made with earlier large influxes of K–12 funding. In the 1960s, federal funding was provided to combat poverty (Title I) and to address language issues (Title VII, now Title III). At that time, the funds were framed as a way to compensate for the deficiencies of students living in poverty and of what were then terms Limited English Proficient (LEP) students instead of as a way to advance a high-quality education In 2009, Obama stimulus funds were used too cautiously by school districts, which chose not to direct funds in innovative ways to reimagine education. Education leaders must learn from these mistakes; think boldly yet with nuance; provide, progressively and innovatively, a high-quality and equitable education to all students, including the diverse ELs in California public schools.

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