



April 15, 2021

Dear Governor Evers, Speaker Vos, Majority Leader LeMahieu, and State Superintendent Stanford Taylor,

At last Thursday's Joint Education Committee hearing on how to spend the American Rescue Plan's billions of dollars in supplemental funding for K-12 education, a common, bipartisan theme emerged: policymakers in Wisconsin must find ways to help students who have fallen behind, failed courses, and gone missing. In response, **our organizations are calling on lawmakers, to the greatest extent possible, to utilize the American Rescue Plan's \$1.5 billion in new K-12 funding to support course access for struggling students.** This could:

1. Allow parents to choose the courses that best fit the needs of their children at the school they currently attend.
2. Fund after school, summer school, and other courses that meet each child's individual needs and help them get caught up and ready to excel.
3. Ensure accountability by allowing only course providers—including other traditional public, private, or public charter schools, dual enrollment courses through universities or technical colleges, or other private providers such as tutors—to receive full payment only if the student successfully completes the course.

**Wisconsin K-12 At a Crossroads:** Before the pandemic, our reading scores were below the national average. Wisconsin's racial achievement gaps consistently rank near the largest in the nation. The K-12 system simply prevented too many students from realizing the American Dream.

Our organizations are deeply concerned that COVID-19 has exacerbated the achievement gap while simultaneously lowering outcomes across the board, even for many students who once earned solid A's. More troubling, Wisconsin public school enrollment has dropped by 25,000 in a single year. While some of those students simply fled schools that were closed in favor of private options that were teaching in person, many others are simply missing. For those who are logging into virtual learning, failure rates are skyrocketing. A Milwaukee Journal Sentinel survey of 60 school districts in Wisconsin concluded that 90% of the districts had higher failure rates than the year prior. Around one in three students at Milwaukee Public Schools, according to the district, failed the fall semester. At Wausau Public Schools, around one in four middle school and high school students failed a course (a quadruple increase from the prior year).

**American Rescue Plan:** The recently enacted law will direct over \$1.5 billion to Wisconsin for K-12 education. It's an extraordinary amount of money. According to testimony from ExcelinEd, it is the equivalent of \$1,850 per student and almost 20% of DPI's entire budget request.



Spending these extra funds on brick-and-mortar buildings will create the wrong incentives and do little to rescue the students who are lost and left behind.

**How to Spend ARP on Education Recovery:** If Wisconsin is to accept the K-12 education funding from the American Rescue Plan, then the money should be directed to parents and families to the greatest extent possible. The money could be overseen by schools but directed toward the resources that parents value most. They have been their child’s long-term substitute teacher throughout the pandemic and know best how to choose the courses needed to catch-up. The money could be utilized for summer school, after-school tutoring, or during the next school year.

Here is one idea of how funding for course access could work within the parameters of American Rescue Plan ([more information can be found here](#)):

1. Funds would be directed to schools based on 2020-21 enrollment numbers and could be used for any supplementary education services chosen by parents. Students would not need to switch to a different school to take advantage of these offerings. Funds would be “performance-based,” meaning the provider of each course would not receive full payment until the student successfully completes the course.
2. School districts could be required to match certain funding levels, depending on federal limits. They could set appropriate limits on how much funding each student may receive; however, they could provide more and give priority to students who have been “missing” or failing in the last year.
3. Any existing school (public, choice, or charter) or college and university in the state could provide Education Recovery services to other schools as long as they are offering in-person instruction to their own students. DPI would maintain a list on its website of these and additional course offerings. Third-party providers could apply as well. All providers would have to demonstrate that they meet federal requirements for “evidence-based” practices and must receive an approval or denial by DPI within 30 days of application to ensure that these programs can begin as soon as possible.
4. Schools would be responsible for ensuring funds are allocated to summer, after-school, and other programs in accordance with federal requirements and will receive the majority of state administration funds for this purpose. Programs that relate to improving reading outcomes could focus on strengthening students’ early literacy foundational skills and/or providing interventions to address gaps in reading proficiency using science-based



interventions. A small amount could remain with DPI or an entity it designates to review and approve course providers.

This is just one approach. We urge you to consider taking whatever action possible to ensure that the funds are spent on parents and families. Our plan would achieve that goal and give students another opportunity to avoid being lost.

Thank you for your attention to this critical public policy issue.

Institute for Reforming Government

Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce

Wisconsin Federation for Children

School Choice Wisconsin Action

ExcelinEd in Action

Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty

The John K. MacIver Institute for Public Policy

Badger Institute

FreedomWorks

Building Education for Students Together

CC:

Members on Joint Finance Committee, Senate Education Committee, and Assembly Education Committee