



COVID-19/Pandemic Learning Loss Issue Brief

Background

Pandemic Learning Loss

The NC Department of Public Instruction (DPI) compared data based on projected student outcomes prior to the COVID-19 pandemic to actual 2020-2021 school year data to estimate the number of months necessary for learning recovery. DPI found that students in grades 3-8 English Language Arts courses will need an average of 5.3 additional months of learning recovery time, and students in grades 3-8 Math courses will need an average of 11 additional months of learning recovery time.¹

Recognizing the need for remedial instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, the General Assembly appropriated \$70 million for a “summer learning program for students whose learning had been negatively affected by the impacts of COVID-19”.² The General Assembly also allowed school districts to begin the 2020-2021 school year on August 17, a week earlier than the statutory start.³ An earlier start date gave schools additional time for assessments of learning loss from the 2020 spring semester. The General Assembly did not provide this same local school calendar authority for the 2021-2022 school year.

Testing Waivers

The General Assembly agreed to waive the following for the 2019-2020 school year:

1. End-of-grade (EOG) and end-of-course (EOC) tests,
2. K-3 diagnostic and formative reading assessments, and
3. WorkKeys tests for CTE students.⁴

The General Assembly also waived the calculation, issuance, and display of school performance grades and school report card information for the 2020-2021 school year⁵ and the identification of low-performing schools and low-performing LEAs for the 2020-2021 school year, based on 2019-2020 data.⁶

For the 2021-2022 school year, the General Assembly waived the calculation and display of school performance grades and the identification of additional low-performing schools and low-performing LEAs but required the issuance and display of school report card information to meet the minimum requirements under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.⁷

Funding Flexibility

In fiscal year 2020-2021, LEAs had very limited authority to move funds to areas they deemed more critical. Despite this overall lack of funding flexibility, the General Assembly did allow LEAs to use

¹ Recovery Interventions Require Effects Equivalent to Months of Additional School Time, N.C. Department of Public Instruction Office of Learning Recovery & Acceleration

² S.L. 2020-4, Section 3.3(13)

³ S.L. 2020-3, Section 2.11

⁴ S.L. 2020-3, Section 2.3

⁵ S.L. 2020-3, Section 2.4

⁶ S.L. 2020-3, Section 2.5

⁷ S.L. 2021-130

transportation allotment funds for purposes related to the pandemic, such as school nutrition, school-and community-based childcare, sanitizing schools and buses, personal protective equipment (PPE) and remote instruction.⁸ The General Assembly also gave DPI an additional six months to use \$75 million in emergency school nutrition funds and expanded the program to include summer meals.⁹

Average Daily Membership (ADM) Hold Harmless

Additional assistance from the General Assembly came in the form of an ADM hold harmless provision for public school units (PSUs) in both the 2020-2021¹⁰ and 2021-2022¹¹ fiscal years. This means that the State Board of Education did not reduce ADM allocations due to a discrepancy between actual and anticipated ADM.

Appropriations

Both State and federal funds have been used to address the additional demands on schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Federal funds came from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), which became law on March 27, 2020,¹² the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA), which became law on December 27, 2020,¹³ and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which became law on March 11, 2021.¹⁴ According to DPI, the total amount of federal COVID-19 relief funds allocated to the State is \$6.2 billion, as of May 31, 2022. 41.47% of those funds have been expended on things such as student meals, student and staff computers and hotspots, services for student mental health needs, and learning recovery efforts.¹⁵

The 2021-2023 State budget included funds aimed at COVID-19 recovery, like an additional \$9.9 million for a new school psychologist allotment to allow each LEA to hire at least one school psychologist, a school-based virtual care pilot program, broadband expansion, and local school employee bonuses for working during the pandemic.¹⁶

NCSBA Position

LEAs must be granted waivers and additional flexibilities to face the fallout of COVID-19 head-on. Examples include the flexibility to allow LEAs to move resources to cover critical needs and deliver meals to students, as well as a hold harmless on the ADM allotment. Another need for districts is the extension of some waivers for school performance grades and low-performing school identification. NCSBA believes that tests should only be used to inform and guide curriculum and instruction; however, the results should not have negative consequences.

The General Assembly should continue appropriations for internet connectivity, computer devices, and mental health support personnel. NCSBA believes that any State investments in computer equipment and connectivity should be credited toward the \$730 million in school technology funding owed to public schools from a 2008 court judgement.

⁸ S.L. 2020-4, Section 4.13

⁹ S.L. 2020-49, Section 4

¹⁰ S.L. 2020-97, Section 3.1

¹¹ S.L. 2021-180, Section 7.23

¹² Public Law 116-136

¹³ Public Law 116-260

¹⁴ Public Law 117-2

¹⁵ Expenditure and Allotments Data as of May 31, 2022, N.C. Department of Public Instruction

¹⁶ S.L. 2021-180

Extraordinary measures are needed to combat the learning loss that has occurred since March 2020. Our students are in dire need of remedial instruction. Decisions made in the coming months and years will determine whether tens of thousands of students experience long term success or failure. Among the options, school districts should have the ability to extend the current and upcoming school years to help address the educational gaps and provide students with opportunities to get back on track. Consideration should also be given to funding additional supports, e.g., intensive tutoring and targeted summer programs. Otherwise, we are likely to see record numbers of students either being held back, dropping out, or not reaching their full potential. The General Assembly should also assess the annual impact of learning loss to help determine additional needs in future years.