

October 7, 2021

Richard Corcoran
Commissioner, Florida Department of Education
Turlington Building, Suite 1514
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0400
commissioner@fldoe.org

RE: Equitable state allocations of American Rescue Plan education funds

Dear Commissioner Corcoran:

On behalf of UnidosUS (formerly the National Council of La Raza), I write to urge the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) to submit a state plan for federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds. Additionally, we request that you immediately release millions of dollars in existing pandemic funds held by FLDOE to districts so that they can begin programming those dollars before the school year is out and prevent further disrupted learning for our students.

[UnidosUS](#) is the nation's largest Hispanic¹ civil rights and advocacy organization. The UnidosUS Florida-based [Affiliates](#) include 17 community-based organizations that invest more than \$113 million and employ more than 3,200 staff to provide direct services from housing counseling to workforce development to approximately 130,000 Floridians annually. UnidosUS—headquartered in Washington, DC—has an office in Miami and staff in Orlando. Through partnerships, community investments, and state research and advocacy on housing, health, and education, UnidosUS advances opportunities for the more than six million Latinos who call Florida home, and is present in 27 of Florida's 67 counties.

As you know, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of the wellbeing of Florida's youth and their households, and the state of Florida has both the responsibility and opportunity to keep students and staff in a healthy and safe learning environment and address disrupted learning. The ARP funds are critical for meeting student needs holistically and minimizing the spread of COVID-19 in our schools and communities, while at the same time getting students back on track with their academic careers.

Pediatric cases of COVID-19 in our state have skyrocketed since June 2021. According to the Florida Department of Health's [COVID-19 Weekly Situation Reports](#), at least 121,807 pediatric cases in Florida, under age 19, were identified as COVID-19 positive from August 27 to September 30, 2021. The COVID positivity rate for children ranged from 16.8% to 21.1% at the start of September. While the virus does not have a high death rate among children, there are long-term effects that adversely impact the quality

¹ The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout our materials to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. UnidosUS may also refer to this population as "Latinx" to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

of life of young survivors, including lasting neurological, mental, and physical consequences— such as such as fatigue and memory loss. [Studies](#) on hospitalized children recorded neurological symptoms in some, such as headaches, encephalopathy, dysarthria and/or dysphonia, and hallucinations.

The American Rescue Plan Act was signed into law on March 11, 2021. ARP Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) state plan applications were due on June 7, 2021, and all but one of 52 State educational agencies (SEAs) have submitted them to the U.S. Department of Education. Regrettably, Florida Department of Education is the only SEA that has not submitted a state plan application. Based on the [ARP ESSER Methodology and Allocation Table Revised](#) (June 2021), Florida’s revised state allocation in federal education funds is \$7,043,370,152. The law requires that at least 20% of the funds must be used for “learning loss,” also known as disrupted learning.

These federal dollars may be used for sustainable solutions that have an impact beyond the ongoing pandemic. An equitable response to the pandemic requires targeted support for students disproportionately impacted such as low-income students, English learners (ELs), students with disabilities, and students experiencing homelessness. Below is a list of education priorities that we urge you to address with the federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act:

- **Protect students, educators, and school staff from COVID-19 infections.** Florida has not produced a school COVID-19 report since May 2021. The wellbeing of everyone during this public health crisis, requires transparency, communication, and collaboration. School districts must have contact tracing protocols and updated emergency contacts for each student. Students must be encouraged to quarantine if they are exposed to the virus. Schools need supplies to regularly disinfect surfaces and may need to hire more staff to reduce class sizes.² A percentage of ARP education funds must go to science-backed strategies for stopping the spread of COVID-19.
- **Provide targeted, intensive tutoring for EL students.** For students to get adequate attention, no more than four students should be assigned per each trained tutor. An equitable way to use ARP funds would be to invest in intensive tutoring for EL students targeted to each student’s academic needs. Intensive tutoring is most effective with younger students and when implemented consistently (year-round) with a skill-building curriculum. EL and immigrant students deserve culturally-competent and linguistically diverse tutors who use evidence-based strategies. Funds should be dedicated to train tutors in skill-building curricula and to provide for small tutor-to-student ratios.
- **Provide English learner-specific after school programs and summer learning opportunities.** This will ensure that English learners have a chance to meaningfully engage in additional opportunities to accelerate their learning and enrich their out-of-school time while receiving targeted support. Any summer programs designed to reach ELs should be free of cost and include targeted outreach in students’ home languages.

² *UnidosUS Guiding Questions and Critical Action Items for School Reopenings.* (Washington, DC: UnidosUS, 2020) https://www.unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/unidosus_GuidingQuestionsandCAI_forSchools_072620.pdf (accessed September 9, 2021).

- **Close the digital divide.** More than 20% of households in Florida lack high-speed internet. Black and Hispanic households are disproportionately impacted, with 31% and 26%, respectively, unable to access high-speed internet.³ Federal investments can be used for sustainable, long-term digital equity. Targeted and increased investment in online learning supports for ELs—including devices, connectivity, and digital programs specific to their needs—is essential for preventing ELs from being shut out of the learning process. Additional assistance such as technical support and digital literacy will make it possible for more students to connect to their academic platforms and complete homework.
- **Invest in the professional development of dual language, English learner, and general education teachers.** Dual language programs exist in less than one-third of Florida school districts. ARP funds may be used to certify and recruit more English learner and dual language teachers to expand these programs. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Exceptional Student Education (ESE) certifications rank among [the top five in critical teacher shortage for the 2020–2021 school year](#). For all teachers, professional development should focus on culturally-competent communication with students and their caregivers and social-emotional training.
- **Provide school-based mental health resources for ELs and low-income students.** Any intervention to address disrupted learning works best when coupled with wrap-around supports for student wellbeing. Our nation is now more than 18 months into a pandemic which has affected every aspect of students’ lives. Students may be struggling with the loss of household income, grieving over loved ones who have not survived, and the lack of social connection with peers. Funding to hire more school counselors, psychologists and social workers exist within the ARP ESSER allocations. Students need trauma-informed and/or healing-centered resources to cope with mental health issues stemming from the pandemic.

After a very challenging year, Florida is in a position to receive federal funds that could create long-lasting improvements to Florida’s education system. The state-level prohibition of science-based public health measure in schools not only infringes on the governing rights of school districts, but endangers the lives of students, school staff, and their communities. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona expressed the [eagerness to collaborate with your department](#) to protect Floridians in the education system, despite the missed deadline to apply. We urge your office to submit Florida’s application for ARPA PK-12 education funds and prioritize disproportionately impacted students.

The undersigned urge you to act swiftly and submit the state plan for the ARP ESSER funds, and to release existing pandemic relief funds to districts so that they have what they need to help our students get back on track. Lastly, we request a meeting with you and UnidosUS Affiliate leaders throughout Florida to further discuss, in detail, our recommendations on equitable allocations of ARP education funds. Please contact UnidosUS Florida State Director Jared Nordlund at jnordlund@unidosus.org for further information.

³ *Students of Color Caught in the Homework Gap* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, National Urban League, National Indian Education Association, UnidosUS, 2020), Appendix A, https://futureready.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/08/HomeworkGap_FINAL8.06.2020.pdf (accessed September 13, 2021).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jared Nordlund". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "N".

Jared Nordlund
Florida State Director, UnidosUS

Raisa Sequeira
Florida Policy Analyst, UnidosUS

Sylvia A. Alvarez
Executive Director, Housing & Education Alliance (HEA)

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Executive Director, Latino Leadership

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Executive Director, Centro Campesino

Josephine Mercado, JD
Founder and CEO, Hispanic Health Initiatives, Inc.

Maria Pinzon,
Executive Director, Hispanic Services Council

cc: State Senate Minority Leader Lauren Book
State House Minority Leader Bobby B. DuBose

Senate Education Chair Joe Gruters

Senate Education Vice Chair Shevrin "Shev" Jones

House Education & Employment Chair Chris Latvala

House Education & Employment Democratic Ranking Member Patricia Williams

House Early Learning & Elementary Education Chair Vance Aloupis

House Early Learning & Elementary Education Democratic Ranking Member Tracie Davis