

United States House Committee on Oversight and Accountability
Health Care and Financial Services Subcommittee

“America’s Report Card: Oversight of K-12 Public Education”

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WRITTEN TESTIMONY

DENISE FORTE

PRESIDENT & CEO OF THE EDUCATION TRUST

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

Thank you to Chairwoman McClain, Ranking Member Porter, and members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Denise Forte, and I am the President and CEO of The Education Trust, a national nonprofit research and advocacy organization committed to advancing policies and practices to dismantle the racial and economic barriers embedded in the American education system. I was also a congressional staff member for 20 years, most recently as the Staff Director for the Committee on Education and the Workforce for Congressman Bobby Scott. I am also fortunate to be the mother of two sons who attend public schools here in Washington, D.C. Today, I am pleased to share with you EdTrust's assessment of how students have fared as a result of the pandemic and recommendations on how we can address the multi-generational inequities that existed long before COVID-19. Evidence-based solutions that support students, parents, the school environment, and are responsive to community needs have shown strong results and are needed now more than ever to address the gaping holes the pandemic exacerbated.

Policymakers nationwide, at every level of government, should be in agreement that we must provide the highest quality education for all children to reach their highest academic potential and overcome the devastating impact of [unfinished learning](#) (also known as "learning loss") created by the pandemic. Over much of the past four years, states and school districts have been utilizing much needed funding that Congress provided to address the immediate needs of students, educators, and staff, while also prioritizing the changes needed to address the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 school closures on Black, Latino, and Native students; students from low-income backgrounds; English learners; students with disabilities; and students experiencing homelessness. For example, Black, Latino, and Native students had [less access](#) to devices and home internet service during the transition to, and throughout, remote learning. Additionally, students of color [more frequently](#) were being taught by teachers with less support and expertise in adapting teaching practices to virtual learning, vetting and deploying online learning tools, and identifying and meeting students' varying needs. They also more frequently had parents who were "essential workers" and/or those with nontraditional work hours that [did not allow for](#) telework or time to assist with schoolwork and had [more](#) socio-emotional stressors than their White counterparts. This has contributed to disproportionate amounts of students of color experiencing [unfinished learning](#).

The final piece of relief funding was allocated by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which provided powerful, and potentially transformative investments in our educational system. These funds helped make the return to in-person learning possible, particularly in low-income communities and communities of color, and provided resources to address unfinished instruction through effective, evidence-based practices and respond to the social, emotional, and academic needs of students now and into the future. However, as the end of that funding approaches this year, we must acknowledge that the pandemic's impact on student learning and well-being will last beyond the duration of the ARPA funds. We and other stakeholders have been encouraging states and school districts to plan for this potential funding cliff and build infrastructure to support interventions to address unfinished learning in the years to come. Right now, state and district administrators are making decisions to potentially close

schools, lay off teachers, and cut programs that we know work due to oncoming financial challenges. These decisions are also constrained by decades-old funding formulas that have allowed funding inequities to persist and worsen over time. Those also need to be reformed and restructured in light of the challenges we face.

EdTrust has joined with advocates from the civil rights, disability rights, business, educator, and parent communities to center their voices in the recovery effort and to highlight the promising actions some states and districts have taken. We continue to support state and local leaders who are taking action on behalf of students and ask members of Congress to assist them in their work.

Targeted Intensive Tutoring and Expanded Learning Time

EdTrust's [research](#) indicates there are two strategies that are most effective to accelerate learning: [targeted, intensive tutoring](#) and [expanded learning time](#). These solutions are agreed upon by [experts](#) across the political spectrum. We also know that [strong, positive relationships](#) with teachers and school staff can dramatically enhance students' motivation, academic engagement, and social skills. Additionally, expanded learning time can also mean programs in the summer and after school. States and districts have increasingly partnered with community-based organizations to ensure all students, especially those underserved, have access to high-quality opportunities to learn and grow after school and over the summer.

Many [states](#) have already begun investing in these tools, which have helped narrow some of the opportunity gaps students are facing. For example, Tennessee's [TN ALL Corps](#) program requires students to be placed in small groups of no more than three students for each adult, for 30-45 minutes a day, a few times a week. Districts have also received needs assessment and planning support so they can maximize tutoring opportunities for underserved groups of students. Every district was required to complete a needs assessment to determine which students were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and focus relief accordingly.

In October, [Virginia](#) launched All In VA, which included a statewide high-dosage tutoring program, as a part of a \$418 million academic recovery package. The state is directing 70% of those funds toward tutoring and directs districts to offer tutoring to students in grades 3-8 who have failed or are in danger of failing the state's annual assessment. [Some](#) of the All in VA funding will also be used for other important interventions, such as addressing chronic absenteeism and strengthening early literacy.

Alternatively, [Massachusetts](#) has developed an "Acceleration Roadmap." The Roadmap provides an equitable framework for addressing unfinished learning and provides guidance on acceleration academies, summer school matching grants, summer acceleration, and college summer step-up programs. Massachusetts has been implementing these programs in ways that affirm students' race, identity, home language, and unique abilities. [Massachusetts](#) also funded Math Acceleration Academies, which provide small group tutoring sessions to students in 75 school districts during school-break periods.

Structural Supports for Students and Educators

There are other complementary policies that states can put into place to help students and teachers continue this work, including: 1) high-quality statewide summative assessments to evaluate the impact

of where resources were allocated and determine what's working and what needs to be changed; 2) high-quality professional learning opportunities for educators on [learning acceleration](#), [culturally affirming pedagogy](#), and [technology-enabled instruction](#) to ensure students have the opportunity to reach high standards; 3) strategies for leveraging school-based teacher leadership, [distributed leadership](#), and innovative staffing models to support to tutors and teachers; 4) investing in high-quality, culturally responsive instructional materials; and 5) investing in the [modernization and expansion](#) of statewide longitudinal data systems that connect data from early childhood education to K-12 to workforce.

States also recognized the importance of developing, retaining, and supporting a strong workforce during the pandemic. One example is [Missouri, which has developed a Grow Your Own and Teacher Retention Grant](#) that provides \$50 million via grants to 85% of school districts statewide. The grants support teacher preparation, establish or expand Grow Your Own programs, and enable retention strategies to address teacher shortages. So far, the program has met with early success: 23% of local education agencies (LEAs) are already seeing teachers remain in hard-to-staff content areas, including in many rural LEAs. Additionally, 45% of teacher preparation programs participating saw increased interest in teacher positions, including a 36% enrollment increase in programs since 2018.

In addition, [North Carolina](#) used federal relief funds to launch the AP Accelerator program, which provides training and support to assistant principals (APs) to help them transition into principal roles, a challenge for APs nationally and, in particular, APs of color and APs in high-needs schools. The first cohort comprised of nearly half of leaders of color, of whom 21 of the 25 participants were promoted from AP to principal within one year. The state also used ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funding to support their Instructional Leadership Academy, which provides a two-year professional development fellowship for district and school leaders in high-need schools, and funding to Turnaround Coaches to assist teachers and principals in schools identified for Comprehensive Support and Involvement (CSI) and Targeted Support and Involvement (TSI).

States and districts have also been working to proactively re-engage students who became disconnected from school during the pandemic. For example, [Colorado](#) launched an initiative to recruit, train, and place AmeriCorps members in school districts to reach out to students who have not been engaged in school. This also consists of a strong family engagement strategy; building [trust, transparency, and capacity](#) between schools and families is key to accelerating and sustaining student learning.

Accelerating learning is also easier when all students are learning in an environment where they feel they belong, where they have their [identity affirmed](#), where they are engaged and have agency in their learning, and where they receive the social, emotional, mental, and physical supports they need to learn, develop, and thrive. State and district leaders should protect — and, where possible, expand — funding for whole-child supports, including funding for school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and other mental health providers, especially in high-need districts and schools, and seek to recruit educators and staff who reflect the communities they serve and the public institutions they maintain. Given the challenges students have faced since the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent mental health concerns regarding students, these supports are imperative now more than ever. States have been able to use ESSER funds to address these concerns; for example, [Louisiana](#) invested in providing access to mental health screeners in schools and trauma support services for students who qualify. It is

important to acknowledge that we cannot fall into the trap of funding academic recovery or socio-emotional supports; the latter is independently valuable, but also facilitates and strengthens the former.

Combatting the Fiscal Cliff

States and school districts should also be looking beyond this year to lay the foundation for longer lasting structural changes to address the inequities that existed before, and were exacerbated by, COVID-19. The average district has relied on ESSER funding to support roughly [8% of its budget](#) in recent years. Furthermore, the loss of these funds will be hardest on Title I school districts because they received more federal dollars on average; and without additional state investment, district budgets could be [slashed](#) by an [average of \\$1,200 per student](#). A state like Arkansas, where 84% [of all ESSER funds](#) have been exhausted, [11% of their education revenue](#) was supplied by ESSER funds, and the [growth rate of incoming revenue](#) slowed by 6% (the third highest of any state from FY23 to FY24), will be particularly challenged to avoid destructive cuts. States like South Carolina and Oklahoma are in similar situations.

Unfortunately, budget-cutting often means staff reductions. While not all states track how districts use ESSER funds, data from those that do suggests that about [half of ESSER is paying for labor expenses](#). This is reflective of the reality that all effective interventions require skilled, supportive, and caring adults. Research indicates that teachers are the biggest in-school factor for student success. Simply put, when the ESSER money runs dry and the fiscal cliff hits, many districts will be left with little choice but to seek staff reductions to the detriment of students and their communities.

To mitigate these harmful cuts, state education leaders and state legislatures should be leveraging existing and creating sustainable funding streams beyond 2024 to support successful programs created with federal pandemic funds, and ensuring that [any remaining dollars are put toward](#) evidence-based approaches to academic recovery such as high-dosage tutoring programs, student support services, after-school and summer school programs, and strengthening and diversifying their educator workforce. We also urge Congress to continue to support states and districts with their ongoing school improvement activities by increasing funding for Title I-A, Title II, and for evidence-based school improvement activities that ensure that schools serving the highest number of students from low-income backgrounds have the resources they need to sustain the comprehensive, multi-year interventions undertaken on behalf of students.

While some states may receive liquidation extensions for ESSER funding, the Department of Education has asked them to detail how the extensions, if granted, would support students' academic recovery and mental health, and we support that decision. We also support states granting additional flexibility to carry state and local funds beyond the federal deadline, allowing for strategic spend-downs in upcoming years.

While the impact of the fiscal cliff will vary from district to district, we know that every school and student will likely be affected. It would be a huge step backward for states and districts that have been effective at assisting vulnerable student populations. Losing momentum now should not be an option. The risks are too high for students in this country, and there is still unfinished learning that we can resolve. Working with the support of communities and families, state and district leaders can take steps

to ensure that all students — especially those who need the most support — can obtain an education that equips them to excel.

Conclusion

In closing, we must recognize that in order to combat the disparities in educational access and achievement that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, especially for underserved students, we need to continue to support the remedies that are most effective: [targeted, intensive tutoring](#), [expanded learning time](#), investing in building stronger school environments, and building and supporting a strong and diverse educator workforce. There is an opportunity for state and district leaders to continue to use federal resources in equitable ways to address the needs of underserved students, and devise strategies to combat the upcoming ESSER cliff. We at EdTrust look forward to assisting and supporting federal, state, and district leaders in this work.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I look forward to taking your questions.