



## COVID-19/Pandemic Learning Loss Issue Brief

### **Background**

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught school administrators to be flexible and adaptable as circumstances change from week to week. Unfortunately, the laws governing school operations are rigid and require legislative action to provide what our schools need during this crisis.

### **Pandemic Learning Loss**

Education experts believe that the transition from in-person instruction to remote instruction has produced significant learning loss in North Carolina's children. Stanford University estimated the NC learning loss for the 2019-2020 school year as 57 days in reading and 194 days in math.<sup>1</sup> Using data from the Curriculum Associates i-Ready Assessment of 25 states, McKinsey and Company found that "the cumulative learning loss could be substantial, especially in mathematics - with students on average likely to lose five to nine months of learning by the end of this school year. Students of color could be six to 12 months behind. While all students are suffering, those who came into the pandemic with the fewest academic opportunities are on track to exit with the greatest learning loss."<sup>2</sup>

Barriers to learning include inadequate or no internet access, lack of computers, no support from working parents, no quiet place to study, etc. In April 2020, Jeff Suval, Director of NC's Broadband Infrastructure Office, said there were 197,139 households where students cannot do their required online assignments from home.<sup>3</sup> He also reported that while 94.8% of NC households have access to the internet, only 59.4% of households have internet due primarily to the cost of the service. Dr. David Stegall, Department of Public Instruction (DPI) Deputy Superintendent of Innovation, reported that only 81% of students regularly attend remote instruction.<sup>4</sup>

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".<sup>5</sup> The General Assembly also allowed school districts to begin the 2020-2021 school year on August 17, a week earlier than the statutory start.<sup>6</sup> An earlier start date gave schools additional time for assessments of learning loss from the 2020 spring semester.

### **Funding Flexibility**

In fiscal year 2020-2021 LEAs have very limited authority to move funds to areas they deem more critical. Even if there is a fund balance, the General Assembly has prohibited school districts from

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates of Learning Loss in the 2019-2020 School Year, The Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University, October 2020

<sup>2</sup> "COVID-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help", December 8, 2020, McKinsey & Company

<sup>3</sup> Presentation to the House Select Committee on COVID-19 Economic Support Working Group, April 21, 2020, Jeff Suval, Director of the North Carolina Department of Information Technology Broadband Infrastructure Office

<sup>4</sup> Presentation on Remote Teaching and Learning to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee, December 1, 2020, Dr. David Stegall, Deputy Superintendent of Innovation, NC Department of Public Instruction

<sup>5</sup> S.L. 2020-4, Section 3.3(13)

<sup>6</sup> S.L. 2020-3, Section 2.11

transferring funds out of these allotments: Teacher Assistants, Academically and Intellectually Gifted, Children with Disabilities, Driver's Education, and Limited English Proficiencies.

To help school districts cope with the COVID-19 crisis in the 2020-2021 school year, the General Assembly allowed LEAs to use 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.<sup>7</sup> The General Assembly gave DPI an additional six months to use \$75 million in emergency school nutrition funds and expanded the program to include summer meals.<sup>8</sup>

### **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.<sup>9</sup>

The General Assembly also waived the calculation, issuance, and display of school performance grades and school report card information for the 2020-2021 school year<sup>10</sup> and the identification of low-performing schools or low-performing LEAs for the 2020-2021 school year, based on 2019-2020 data.<sup>11</sup> A further legislative action was a waiver of the CPR graduation requirement for students in grade 12 for the 2019-2020 school year.<sup>12</sup>

### **Appropriations**

Both State and federal funds have been used to address the additional demands on schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, Governor Cooper directed \$50 million in unused funds to be used in schools with COVID-19 related expenses.<sup>13</sup> These State funds were soon followed by the passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) by Congress on March 27, 2020.<sup>14</sup>

As of January 15, 2021, \$702.1 million in federal funds has been allocated to LEAs and \$38.3 million to charter schools.<sup>15</sup> These funds have been used for such things as PPE, student meals, student and staff computers and hotspots, and services for student mental health needs.

Congress approved additional federal funds with the passage of the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act 2021 on December 27, 2020. NC is expected to receive \$1.6 billion from this Act, with 90% going to schools (\$1.44 billion) and 10% reserved for use at the State level (\$160.3 million). The General Assembly will need to appropriate the funds during the 2021

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<sup>7</sup> S.L. 2020-4, Section 4.13

<sup>8</sup> S.L. 2020-49, Section 4

<sup>9</sup> S.L. 2020-3, Section 2.3

<sup>10</sup> S.L. 2020-3, Section 2.4

<sup>11</sup> S.L. 2020-3, Section 2.5

<sup>12</sup> S.L. 2020-3, Section 2.9

<sup>13</sup> "Governor Cooper directs funding to schools to teach and feed students during COVID-19", Press release on March 24, 2020; the unused funds were from the current and previous school years as well as the State Emergency Response and Disaster Relief Fund.

<sup>14</sup> Public Law 116-136, 134 Stat. 281

<sup>15</sup> Allocation of COVID Funds, Division of School Business, N.C. Department of Public Instruction

legislative session. The new federal bill also extended the deadline for spending most of the original CARES Act funds from December 2020 to December 2021.

### **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. Another need for districts is the extension of some testing waivers and the suspension of their associated statutes. 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, mental health support personnel, and PPE. 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.

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.