Governor Phil Murphy

Governor Murphy, Acting Commissioner Allen-McMillan Announce "The Road Forward" Initiative to Mitigate Challenges to Students, Educators, and School Districts Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic

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New grant programs will make $1.2 billion available for districts to address student educational and mental health needs

Murphy Administration will also request a statewide assessment waiver from the federal government

TRENTON - Governor Phil Murphy and New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) Acting Commissioner Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan today announced "The Road Forward," a series of coordinated policy initiatives that dramatically expand the Administration's efforts to identify and address the academic and mental health impacts of COVID-19 on New Jersey students and educators.

As part of this coordinated initiative, $1.2 billion in federal COVID-19 relief funds will be made available to districts, including grants dedicated specifically to research-based instructional and mental health interventions. Additionally, the Governor and Acting Commissioner announced that the Administration is seeking public comment and will submit a request to the U.S. Department of Education (USED) to waive federal requirements to administer statewide assessments this spring.

"We know our students and educators have had a difficult year," **said Governor Murphy.** "Providing our school communities with increased flexibility and support is essential to move our education system forward. The additional federal funds will allow districts to best meet the individual needs of their students during this challenging time."

"Educators and students have endured a great deal over the past eleven months," **Acting Commissioner Allen-McMillan said.** "These additional federal funds will support targeted initiatives to enhance academic enrichment and mental health interventions for all students and educators."

"With students being removed from the traditional classroom for nearly a year, the trajectory for student academic achievement has certainly been stifled," **said Assemblywoman Pamela Lampitt, Chair of the Assembly Education Committee.** "We've yet to fully grasp the level of learning loss and disruption to our children's social and personal growth, but it is critical that we get out in front of this issue as quickly as possible. We must address the inevitable academic disparities caused by this public health crisis and to do this it will require an investment in learning enrichment programs and increased student mental health support."

"We are very pleased that Governor Murphy and Acting Commissioner Allen-McMillan are taking a stand for New Jersey's students and applying for a waiver from federally-mandated standardized testing this spring," **said Marie Blistan, President of the New Jersey Education Association.** "A waiver will prevent another disruption that pulls our students away from real learning and will ensure we have more time to focus on meeting their critical immediate needs. We also applaud Gov. Murphy's commitment to helping New Jersey's students overcome the social, emotional and academic effects of this pandemic. Investing federal funds to directly support our students' learning and mental health needs will help them emerge stronger and better prepared deal with the challenges and seize the opportunities that lie ahead."

"New Jersey is almost done closing its digital divide, and with the Learning Acceleration Grant, now our state can work toward closing its learning gap," **said Donna M. Chiera, President of the American Federation of Teachers New Jersey**. "The pandemic has certainly exacerbated emotional disorders, so the Mental Health Grant will go a long way in supporting our students and educators in need. And given that the pandemic has kept New Jersey students from a formal test setting for many months, we fully support requesting a federal waiver to waive statewide assessments. To have a full state assessment program at this time would create even more stress for students and educators, along with financial and logistical burdens for districts to implement the testing. We are hoping that the Biden administration understands and recognizes this and allows New Jersey to waive the assessment."

"There is an urgent need to address learning gaps for NJ students that have emerged or been exacerbated by the pandemic," **said Patricia Morgan, Executive Director of JerseyCAN.** "The grants announced today will begin to address this need by supporting longstanding solutions including tutoring, after school programs, summer programs, and mental health supports for students and staff. These initiatives coupled with robust diagnostic assessments and data analysis are critical steps in a statewide education recovery that includes every student in New Jersey."

Making Federal Funding Available to Districts

On March 15, the DOE will release applications for $1.2 billion in federal ESSER II funds (Federal Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund). The funds will be distributed as follows:

- As required by legislation, a minimum of 90 percent of New Jersey's ESSER II funds will be allocated to local education agencies (LEAs) in the same proportion as those funds received under Part A of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended, in school year 2020-2021.
- Two grant opportunities will provide a total of $105 million to support districts in providing additional academic and mental health supports.
    - $75 million Learning Acceleration Grant: 75 percent of a district's allocation will be used to support research-based academic enrichment activities, such as one-on-one intensive tutoring and summer learning academies, and 25 percent will be used for strategies to support the broader learning ecosystem.

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    - $30 million Mental Health Grant: Funds will be used to assist districts in implementing school-based mental health supports for all students and educators. These grants will assist school districts in building a tiered, sustainable intervention model of comprehensive mental health supports and services.
- The DOE will use ESSER II State set-aside funds to provide assistance to non-Title I LEAs, County Special Services School Districts, Education Services Commissions, Jointure Commissions, Division of Children and Families, Department of Corrections, Juvenile Justice Commission, and the Juvenile Detention Centers.

For additional information, including district allocations, please see the DOE's February 19, 2021 broadcast memo (https://www.nj.gov/education/broadcasts/2021/feb/ESSERFund.pdf).

To assist districts in leveraging these federal funds effectively, the DOE has posted to its website a clearinghouse (https://www.nj.gov/education/leapct/#/home) of successful practices that New Jersey school districts have identified as notable achievements in mitigating the challenges posed by COVID-19. These district-reported successes are categorized by county, district size, and topic area to facilitate meaningful collaboration and learning opportunities between similarly-situated districts.

Requesting a Statewide Assessment Waiver

The Administration recognizes that amid the severe disruptions caused by COVID-19, statewide assessments will detract from schools' efforts to focus on students' social-emotional health, wellness, and individualized academic and behavioral supports. Therefore, the DOE is making available for public comment a request to the USED to waive federal requirements to administer statewide assessments this spring, including the New Jersey Student Learning Assessment, ACCESS for ELLs, and the Dynamic Learning Maps alternate assessment for students with the most significant intellectual disabilities. The waiver request also addresses federal requirements regarding the use of statewide assessments in federal accountability systems. If USED approves this waiver request, the spring 2021 administration of the statewide assessments will be canceled.

For additional information on this waiver request, please see the DOE's February 19, 2021 broadcast memo (https://www.nj.gov/education/broadcasts/2021/feb/WaiverRequest.pdf).

Evaluating and Ensuring Student Readiness

To fill data gaps caused by interrupted statewide assessment administration and to ensure that students are making meaningful growth toward grade-level standards, the DOE will collect data from locally administered assessments that provide a snapshot of student learning during this school year. The DOE will provide additional guidance regarding this data collection later this month.

In Fall 2021, the DOE will provide all districts with the formative assessment known as Start Strong (https://www.nj.gov/education/broadcasts/2020/sep/25/Start%20Strong%20Assessments%20Now%20Available%20for%20Fall%202020.pdf). Using the lessons learned from the initial administration this past fall, the upcoming and improved Start Strong assessments will better enable districts to collect timely, actionable, standards-based student performance data at the beginning of the school year.

The DOE will also pilot the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) this fall. The KRA is designed to be administered to incoming kindergarteners, measuring school readiness in the domains of social foundations, language and literacy, mathematics, and physical well-being. Administration of the KRA will provide participating districts with data depicting how prepared their students are for kindergarten. The tool will give educators and families the information needed to adjust, improve, and target teaching and related resources to the needs of their students.

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