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Questions & pitfalls: Emergency public school funding

By Colin McNickle

Billions of dollars in coronavirus pandemic relief money will have flowed into Pennsylvania public schools' coffers when it's all said and done with. But a scholar at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy says plenty of questions remain and pitfalls loom large for taxpayers going forward.

“(I)t is easy to see that schools might be delaying a lot of hard decisions and cost-cutting measures for the next several years” because of the inflow of federal dollars, says Eric Montarti, research director at the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 20, No. 23*).

School districts received two rounds of funding from the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (known as ESSER I and ESSER II). The latter round expands spending uses and the time frame in which to expend the money.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education says the state received \$2.2 billion in ESSER II money. Its 500 school districts will receive a total of \$1.9 billion and the 167 charter schools \$341.6 million, distributed under an existing federal formula.

But could this money, one-time infusions (at least for now), turn into a boomerang that comes back to haunt taxpayers? Questions abound.

“The state Department of Education notes that both ESSER I and ESSER II are ‘one-time, non-recurring emergency aid,’” Montarti notes. “But what if the federal government passes new stimulus packages?”

“It is worth thinking about what happens to electronic devices, supplies, additional staff and reduced class sizes once the federal money is expended,” the think tank scholar reminds.

“With many districts and charters returning to in-person instruction in the fall, what happens to the materials purchased with remote or hybrid learning in mind?”

“Or to staff devoted to social distancing or technology modifications?

“Or are schools thinking of keeping hybrid, distance-learning options intact and part of the educational model?” Montarti asks.

And a potential kicker in the wallet of John and Jane Q. Taxpayer in all this? The specter of school tax increases.

“If the items funded by ESSER dollars are maintained, it might fall to property taxes levied by school districts to provide the revenue,” Montarti says.

In the 2020-21 school year, 17 of Allegheny County’s 43 districts increased property taxes, including three that increased taxes greater than their Act 1 index cap (requiring state approval).

Additionally, given the strict reporting requirements that come with the emergency relief money, how will the money spent on “learning loss” ever be quantified?

But perhaps the most critical question is this:

“Will all the extra federal money be enough to repair the educational deficits created by the pandemic?” Montarti asks. “If not, what will it take and how long?”

And, just as important, will the massive expenditure of more and more taxpayer dollars have the perverse effect (as seen so often in the public educratic system) of leading to *worse* academic outcomes?

Colin McNickle is communications and marketing director at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy (cmcnickle@alleghenyinstitute.org).

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Allegheny Institute for Public Policy
305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234
Phone (412) 440-0079
E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org
Website: www.alleghenyinstitute.org
Twitter: [AlleghenyInsti1](https://twitter.com/AlleghenyInsti1)