

Executive summary

The state and federal government have provided local educational agencies (LEAs) in California with historic sums of funding to help address the most critical challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. This money continues to be essential for school districts and county offices of education (COEs) to address health and safety issues, mental health concerns, social and emotional well-being, educational technology, and infrastructure improvements. Although spending reports for federal relief aid have provided some information about how much money LEAs have spent and—very broadly—in what categories, they do not tell the whole story of school leaders' experiences with this funding at the local level.

To help shed light on these experiences, the California School Boards Association (CSBA) conducted research using focus groups and a wide-ranging survey of superintendents and LEAs' fiscal staff. This research focused on LEAs' priorities, challenges, and recommendations for state and federal COVID relief funding. The 239 survey respondents represent LEAs that serve over 1.3 million of California's K-12 students and a wide geographic range of elementary, high school, and unified districts as well as county offices of education.

The findings from this survey highlight the extraordinary efforts of LEAs to address the wide range of priorities they continue to face in dealing with the impacts of the pandemic. Survey respondents spoke to the essential nature of the funding for first facilitating distance learning and later for reopening schools to in-person instruction. At the same time, the funding came with challenges that have implications for future emergency aid packages. These challenges included staffing shortages, staff burnout, supply chain slowdowns, and the complicated nature of combining multiple funding sources with different requirements. This report considers those challenges and offers recommendations on funding to help mitigate the effects of future crises and improve future emergency aid packages.

This report is the second part of a CSBA series on COVID relief funding in California. Part one, *Unprecedented Times, Unprecedented Responses*, focused on how relief aid has been spent thus far.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



1) Emergency relief funding was essential to allow school districts to continue operating and meet student and staff needs.

Survey participants continually noted how essential emergency aid was in addressing the needs of students and staff. The challenges brought on by the pandemic were unique and constantly changing. Throughout the past few years, that has meant that students' needs have also continually changed. The historic influx of emergency aid enabled school leaders to quickly address those needs to the best of their ability while keeping schools safe for in-person instruction.

2) In the face of a historical educational crisis, school leaders focused on using relief funding to address students' academic and social-emotional recovery.

Learning recovery and social and emotional supports were key concerns for respondents in our survey. School leaders discussed a wide range of expanded learning support programs that were enacted using relief aid, including before- and/or after-school programs, summer learning, expanded instructional days and years, content interventionists, academic support staff, and other services. The learning recovery efforts highlighted by respondents cross multiple expenditure reporting categories, indicating that the complete picture of investments in these programs is much more nuanced than state and federal reporting captures.

3) Mental health services and supports were a central theme for respondents throughout all sections of the report.

Top of mind for most survey respondents was the trauma experienced by students, their families, and school staff. District leaders realized that learning recovery is unlikely to

succeed if students' and staff's social and emotional well-being is not prioritized. Schools used emergency aid to hire mental health professionals and created programs to help address trauma. Survey respondents also reported intense burnout among staff, many of whom were asked to take on additional responsibilities due to staffing shortages while dealing with their own mental health needs. Mental health services were among the programs that school leaders most feared they would have to cut when funding ends.

4) School leaders faced significant challenges in spending and planning to spend emergency relief funding, and these challenges could be mitigated in future emergency aid programs.

Many of the challenges survey respondents faced related to using emergency aid came from external sources and the way the funding was structured. External factors that impacted spending included staffing shortages, supply chain disruptions, and the burnout of staff who had already been stretched thin. Factors related to the structure of emergency funding included sustainability of programs, and the demands of navigating multiple new categorical reporting requirements.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The full effects of the pandemic on students and LEAs will persist long after the deadlines to spend state and federal emergency aid. There will be future crises that will require emergency aid for schools, and this report's findings can help the state and federal government improve relief funding policies moving forward.

Five key recommendations:

- 1 **Ongoing funding**, in the form of increased base aid, will be necessary to continue to support the needs of students and staff. Funding deadlines and declining statewide enrollment may create a fiscal cliff leading to deep local district cuts. Increased base aid can also help LEAs address pressing and systemic issues so that they do not become as severe during the next crisis.
- 2 **Flexibility for school leaders to make spending decisions** to address local needs is crucial when considering emergency funding. Emergency funding policy should give school leaders wide latitude to make quick, on-the-ground decisions.
- 3 **Future emergency aid should consider the administrative impact of reporting requirements on districts in California**, with attention to the compounding effect of managing separate categorical and one-time funds. In times of crisis, administrators may have less bandwidth to focus on learning new, additional spending and reporting requirements, especially in California's hundreds of small districts. Strategies to reduce the reporting burdens include the consolidation of programs to reduce the number of required reports and using existing reporting structures to address questions of accountability.
- 4 **Policymakers should consider the cumulative impact** on LEAs when they consider requirements for submitting spending plans and strive to reduce redundancy across programs and funding streams.
- 5 **School leaders and governance teams should clearly and consistently communicate** with their district communities on the programs and services they are implementing with COVID funding and future emergency aid. This communication will help increase communities' understanding of the one-time nature of the funding and foster trust. Furthermore, this approach is consistent with California's approach to local control and accountability.