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OP-ED: A light at the end of the tunnel By Rich Askey

Finally, we can see light at the end of the dark tunnel that we've been walking through for the past year.

With COVID-19 vaccinations expanding, educators, parents, and students can look forward to a return to normalcy in our schools, where students will be able to come back to their classrooms in person.

As we do, our schools will have historic federal resources to do so safely and to support students as they recover academically and emotionally from the challenges of learning during a worldwide health crisis.

Over the next couple of years, K-12 schools in Pennsylvania will have nearly \$7 billion in federal resources – nearly \$5 billion was included in the American Rescue Plan package passed in March - to spend on key educational programs, services, and supports. They will also have a tremendous amount of flexibility to decide how to use these funds.

At least \$1 billion from the American Rescue Plan is specifically targeted to intensify support and instruction for students who have experienced learning loss. Public schools could decide to invest more than this minimum to address learning loss.

The remaining money can go toward supports for students and improving the safety and infrastructure of school buildings and facilities. Public schools have a lengthy list of allowable uses for the federal dollars.

So, what comes next?

We need to help schools make the best possible choices about how to spend these federal dollars.

As education experts who teach and serve students every day, PSEA members believe that every one of these dollars should be used to confront the challenges that students will face as we move past this pandemic.

It's no secret that student learning has been set back by this pandemic. The good news is that thanks to the American Rescue Plan we have the resources to accelerate learning and help close learning gaps, address mental health concerns, and get students back on a pathway to achievement. This should include investing in summer learning and after-school programs as well as upgrading educational technology.

Throughout this process, administrators should talk with their teachers, specialists, and support staff to brainstorm innovative ways that their schools can help students catch up on any lost instruction.

To address student wellness, districts should look at hiring more school nurses, counselors, and other professionals who can help students work through the trauma and mental health consequences of this pandemic. Bolstering students' mental and emotional well-being is good for students, in and of itself, but it will also pay dividends for students' academic achievement in the long run.

There are also ample resources to invest in school infrastructure, including modifying classroom spaces for social distancing, modernizing HVAC systems, upgrading outdated buildings with poor ventilation, and eliminating asbestos and mold from school facilities.

To sum up, every dollar that flows to school through the American Rescue Plan should be targeted to help students and solve specific problems in our schools that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Schools don't need to spend the money all at once. Rather, they may apply to the Pennsylvania Department of Education for funds to support specific programs as they are ready, as long as the uses are authorized under the American Rescue Plan. Districts have until September 2024 to allocate the funding.

To be sure, \$7 billion is an unprecedented federal investment in public education. And for good reason, as our schools confront the unprecedented educational challenges of this pandemic.

Across Pennsylvania, educators and support professionals stand ready to work with their school leaders to design programs and projects that will make the very best use of this funding. Together, we can seize this moment and use these funds to do what's best for our students.

What comes next? Our students do, now and always.

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