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Maryland's share of federal education funding should focus on historically excluded schools

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Opinion by **Donna Christy** - December 10, 2021



Photo by Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post

Capitol Heights Elementary School teacher Natasha Rubin teaches virtually to a class of talented and gifted fourth-graders before her homeroom class arrived for their in person learning last fall.

Maryland's schools are more than just places for learning. They reflect our community's values, strengths and failures, and provide a litmus test on the future success of our state.

The coronavirus's impact on students has been complicated and paradoxical. On the one hand, all students, parents and schools faced profound challenges during the pandemic, regardless of Zip code. On the other, the disparities in students' experiences based on Zip code were dramatic. Unless we take action, students who had few opportunities at the beginning of the pandemic face a future scarce in promise.

This is a critical moment in time to tackle thorny educational disparities that were exacerbated by the health crisis. We can do this by providing additional resources to historically excluded communities and expanding services that take the whole child into account to fully support the social, emotional and mental health development of our kids.

That's why, as the leader of an educators' union whose members teach and support more than 136,500 of Maryland's students, I'm urging our state legislators, school board representatives and parents to accelerate the once-in-a-lifetime chance to use billions in new federal relief funds to give every student in Maryland and in Prince George's County the opportunity to thrive by expanding equity in our schools.

The American Rescue Plan Act provides $1.9 trillion in federal stimulus funding to help state and local governments address the impact of the coronavirus, with $3.7 billion earmarked for Maryland. It provides more than $170 billion to education, making it the federal government's largest-ever single investment in the nation's public schools.

Earlier this year, Maryland's elected leaders agreed to allocate $600 million for the safe reopening of our schools. With this infusion, districts can address short-term needs caused by the pandemic and begin to remedy the entrenched structural inequities the pandemic revealed. They can do this by investing in programs and supports that will equip our educators with the tools to make our schools more healthy, safe and equitable and significantly move the needle on important metrics such as absenteeism and graduation rates.

The pandemic disrupted education for all students but hit students living in poverty and suffering food insecurity, students with disabilities, English language learners, homeless students, students in foster care and students of color hardest. We must use the federal rescue dollars to address the impact resulting from the disruption to learning since the beginning of the pandemic and to adequately resource the mental health and social-emotional learning needs of the students and educators with the greatest need. We recommend using federal recovery money to provide our students with curriculums and supports that speak to their lived experiences, celebrate our diversity and foster a sense of belonging for all students and their families. We know this will begin to move school communities from survival toward thriving.

Prince George's County Public Schools is among the nation's 20 largest school districts and the second-largest school system in Maryland. Our platform this year as we prioritize important changes in our school system is "From Pandemic to Promise: Re-imagining Our Schools," because we believe we have a unique opportunity to make historic changes for the better, such as this one. By advancing equity-centered investment in Prince George's County, we have an opportunity to build a model of success that can be replicated and help all Maryland students.

These goals will help us reach the General Assembly's stated goal of creating world-class schools outlined in the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. The Blueprint is an ambitious long-term education funding and policy plan with the explicit goal of creating world-class schools over the next decade. The unprecedented investment in education from the American Rescue Plan and the Blueprint for Maryland's Future provide our state with a unique opportunity that must not be squandered. The American Rescue Plan provides thousands of dollars of additional support per student. We can provide the resources, services and staffing necessary to ensure equitable opportunity for each and every student. Through the application of this funding, we must center equity, compassion and justice in our schools.

The Education Department has already begun distributing these resources. But it's up to us at the local level to devise a plan for putting those funds to good use. It's up to us to execute our plan with the sense of urgency our students deserve. We must make sure these funds are used appropriately and invested in our most in-need schools to ensure a just economic recovery for all.

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