School Planning in the Wake of COVID Funding

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According to Michael Griffith of the Learning Policy Institute, school districts receive approximately 8%of educational funding from the federal government. The remaining 92% is divided almost equally between the state and local governments (Learning Policy Institute, 2020). In the wake of the business closures, loss of income, and reduced collected sales taxes that local and state governments are receiving, school systems can expect to see a reduction in funding for school divisions.

Griffith states that although the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic (CARES) Act relieved some of the school districts' pressure to continue to fund programs during closures it was not nearly enough. The CARES Act only provided the "equivalent" of $286.00 per student, significantly less than the 8% districts typically receive. In the article, Griffith states that he found between 10 and 20 percent deficits in school budgets across the United States in his research. Coupled with the growing need for school districts and states' services during the pandemic and possibly further down the line, schools will have to do more with less. The CARES Act funding will not negate the shortage of state revenue used for education.

The author of the article created a tool in which he can combine the two CARES Act funding sources, the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund and the Governor's Emergency Relief (GEER) Fund, with known data to determine the effect it would have on education spending. He used Georgia as an example and discovered that the state would have a 20% reduction in educational funding. Using the tool, Virginia would only receive approximately $1300.00 less per student.

States can also use ESSER funding for higher education and must allocate some funding for private schools, which would reduce the public PK-12 money even more. Griffith points out that there are other rules and regulations attached to the CARES Act that determines how the funds can or must be spent. He also advocates for additional federal assistance to support school districts' current needs in the wake of state losses in income. Griffith also points out that vulnerable student groups may take the brunt of the loss more than other groups with reduced funding. He provides one silver lining in that districts may have greater flexibility without the rules associated with federal funds.

Richmond Public Schools (RPS) felt the financial impact of school closures in March of 2020 when they had to provide virtual education to their over 25,000 students. RPS was not technologically prepared for all students to learn online as they had not rolled out a 1:1 plan. Sixth-grade students had been receiving Chromebooks for the previous three years, and the high schools had just received enough Chromebooks for SOL testing the year before (2018-2019). They received funding via the CARES Act to purchase Chromebooks for every student over the past nine months. This funding is not a sustainable source of funding to replace and update technology. With the predicted reduction in educational funding coming from the state, RPS needs a long-term plan.

The state funding reduction stems from the state and city's measures to curb the coronavirus's spread among citizens. In November of 2020, Governor Northam issued new measures to contain the Coronavirus spread (Commonwealth of Virginia, 2020). The measures impacted numerous businesses hindered by reducing the number of people allowed to publicly and privately gather to 25 and prohibited alcohol sales after 10:00 PM. Restaurants are feeling the strain of these limitations, and many have had to close their doors. With the restrictions, individuals do not spend as much money in local businesses as they opt for online purchases from larger companies, and local businesses are losing money. As a result, businesses are paying less into the state, and consumers pay less in sales taxes.

So, the question is, how does RPS plan to operate with the loss of state and local funding? How can they use the CARES Act funding received? Recently, Jason Kamras, superintendent of RPS, presented his proposed budget to the school board that included a 54 million dollar federal grant and explained how the district plans to stretch the funds over the next two years. The first CARES Act funds covered additional expenses associated with the school closures in March, so those funds are encumbered or spent. In the School Board presentation, he stated that he "anticipate[s] about $4 million in additional state revenue and about $5 million in additional city revenue." (Richmond Public School, 2021)

He also stated that the district had been awarded "about $55 million from the latest round of one-time COVID-19 federal stimulus funds." (Richmond Public School, 2021) The plan is to divide the funds into thirds to be used this year and the next two academic years for COVID-related expenses, such as critical air quality in the schools and other district buildings, and support for Social-Emotional Learning and academics. The district will use the local and state money for recurring expenses, such as raises, step-increases, a supplement to health costs, and payments to regional schools as mandated for specific state programs. That is assuming the local and state coffers will have the 9 million dollars to give to RPS.

In the board meeting, Mr. Kamras stated that there was a plan in place to obtain state grants to support the move to the Extended Calendar presented during the meeting as well. The plan includes $8 million for the new calendar's related expenses for the 2021-2022 school year (FY22) and $6 million for the following year (FY23). (Richmond Public School, 2021) The proposal calls for the remaining funds divided into the following areas:

- upgrades and repairs to buildings,
- hiring additional maintenance personnel,
- academic purchases that include five new hires,
- supports for the English Language Learner (ELL) population, and
- a summer 2021 program to support PK, K, and ELL students.

While these are all worthwhile and well-intended to bolster our district and address some of our most essential needs, we have to ask, what happens when the money is gone? How do we continue to fund the extended calendar program, the updating and repair of over 25,000 Chromebooks and hotspots, the teachers' technology, and all of the salaries associated with the new positions? When the funding runs out, and districts cannot find additional money via grants, state and local funds, or new federal funds, the program dies, and people lose jobs. Ina district the size of RPS, many people shift to new positions when new grants or other funding arises, such as the current wave of ELL funding. School districts gamble on finding the funds necessary to support their changes by demonstrating the benefit to the community, the school board, and the state via decreases in dropout rates and chronic absenteeism and the increase in student scores.

According to ESS, there are six tools to manage a district budget properly, and number one has to do with the data listed above. (*6 Strategies for Effective Financial Management in K-12 Schools*, n.d.) Number two is to create a short-term plan, which is necessary when using one-time or limited use funds, such as the Virginia Year-Round School grants. Number three deals with administrative costs. Each time a new department or initiative is added, the district usually adds a new administrative position. When a district is top-heavy, the budget gets small very quickly. RPS needs to be careful that it doesn't create that scenario using the CARES Act to fund positions that can not be maintained long term.

Number four deals with assets. Again, districts need to be careful with purchasing things with a short shelf life, such as outdated technology that needs replacing within three years and the funds are no longer available. Number five discusses obtaining support by being transparent. Finally, number six cautions the administrator not to outsource what can be accomplished in-house. Outsourcing can raise costs for a school district dramatically. Using qualified staff already present can reduce the drain on those one-time funds and not leave the district, staff, and students high and dry when the funds run out, and those resources disappear.

I used RPS as an example of the pitfall of thinking too big with those projected revenues from the local and state government and the one-time funds received from the CARES Act. When the money doesn't come through, trust is lost between the community and the district. Lost faith is tough to restore, and many schools may be heading for the same scenario when the funds run out or are shorter than the district administrators anticipated.

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