

CONCORD MONITOR

Our Turn: Confusion, unfunded costs as state's schools prepare to reopen

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For the Monitor

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Recently, the House and Senate Education committees asked 24 education leaders, school board members, employee representatives, special educators, school nurses, and athletic association and transportation representatives about school reopening guidance.

Nearly all presentations coalesced around two points. They said the guidance to date – under the banner of flexibility – leads to inconsistencies among districts and confusion for everyone and they said reopening of schools has unanticipated funding needs that when unmet will lead to greater inequities among districts.

Most symbolic of inconsistent guidance is the governor's Executive Order 48 issued at the end of May, requiring schools to design compensatory education plans in the first 30 days of the school year. Then, in early July, the governor announced, "We're not going to tell schools what to do in their third-grade classrooms."

But Executive Order 48 mandates just that. The next week, the Department of Education's school reopening guidance document was issued saying, "the first week of school should focus on stabilizing students by spending time building relationships, modeling expectations, and implementing support systems." So now we're down to three weeks.

Additionally, the Department of Education referenced guidance from the Academy of Pediatrics that states, "schools can expect a backlog in (student) evaluations; therefore, plan to prioritize those evaluations for new referrals as opposed to re-evaluations (of students with individualized education plans.)"

In a district in Cheshire County, there are over 200 students with existing IEPs. Each IEP requires a parent meeting with the teacher, special educator, and often other school counselors. Assessments, setting up support services and parent conferences require time out of the classroom, which is made more difficult by the parameters of teaching in a pandemic.

School leaders and special educators want more flexibility on the 30-day deadline, but until last week have not had a forum to request this. Schools want flexibility to set their own timeline for completing student evaluations for compensatory education services, and during their presentations, educators asked for modifications to the governor's executive order.

Nearly all of the 24 presenters expressed concerns about unfunded costs of reopening schools during the pandemic: new furnishing/desks for social distancing, testing air quality and circulation in buildings, personal protective equipment for school nurses, substitute teachers for when regular teachers need to quarantine or for more student tutoring services, hallway signage, student drop-off lanes, additional transportation routes because of distancing on school buses, daily sanitizing and disinfectant supplies, more custodial staff for cleaning during school hours, more space in nurse offices and waiting areas for students showing symptoms, and remote learning technology.

Education Commissioner Frank Edelblut was asked if there's money in the state's CARES Act allocation pipeline for schools. The commissioner half-heartedly quipped that the Legislature hadn't appropriated additional funds but the truth is Gov. Sununu cut the Legislature out of that constitutional duty when he decided to be the sole arbiter of how the \$1.25 billion in federal funds should be spent.

Of that pot of money, Sununu has provided zero in additional funds for local school districts to date. We urge the governor to consider the needs of school districts, students, and local property-tax payers as schools reopen when he makes decisions about the limited CARES Act funds that remain unallocated.

Outside of the flexible \$1.25 billion in CARES Act funds, New Hampshire also received \$33 million from the U.S. Department of Education. That funding represents \$213 per pupil, or 1% of total school expenses. Schools had to request their share of funds from the N.H. Department of Education. There's been no transparency for what they requested, but one can assume in April it was to recover costs associated with the transition to remote learning and sanitizing classrooms for that academic year. Testimony indicated they didn't request funds for reopening in the fall.

If holding back additional funds to support reopening schools is a strategy for leveraging additional federal funding, then the governor should make his advocacy public. Right now, it appears to be downshifting reopening costs onto school districts.

During our joint meeting, we heard from a representative of school transportation companies his concern regarding the vague guidance for drivers, students boarding buses, and distancing and age groupings on buses. He also expressed concern for having enough drivers to cover additional routes because drivers were in short supply before the pandemic.

And now with curtailed access to DMV livescans, job applicants screening for fingerprints is limited for FBI criminal history background checks. And if that's the case, then schools confront the same screening problems for substitute teachers, custodians and food service staff, and volunteers.

And finally, masking guidance came up in nearing all presentations. The lack of transparent, clear guidance from the state leaves the decision to 177 school districts and 234 towns to all act independently and then for residents to feel confused by what applies where. Imagine traveling to an athletic competition in a neighboring town. According to the National Governors Association, 30 states have adopted mask guidelines. Mask Up NH applies to ages 15 years and over. What science informed this program? CDC guidance is for anyone over age 2 to wear a mask in public.

Legislators have been completely left out of the executive branch's discussions of school reopening guidance. However, in one morning we demonstrated the value of the legislative process, bringing expert testimony from diverse voices together. You can view the testimony at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rX1i28EoRdw> Surveys of 50,000 Granite Staters may be useful, however, in two months there still is no summary of what was gathered and the DOE has yet to share the answers to the survey's open-ended questions, which could provide critical context to the multiple choice questions.

We need a partnership between the executive branch and legislators to ensure that the public and educator voices contribute to guidance on opening New Hampshire schools this fall.

As chairs of the House and Senate Education committees, we will continue to push for that because we know when our government fails to work together, students, families, teachers, and support staff are at risk.

(Jay Kahn of Keene is chairman of the N.H. Senate Education and Workforce Development Committee. Mel Myler of Contoocook is chairman of the N.H. House Education Committee.)