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14TH DISTRICT, FLORIDA

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February 22, 2021

Governor Ron DeSantis
State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399


RE: Urge immediate disbursement of K-12 federal emergency aid to Hillsborough County Schools and local school districts

Dear Governor DeSantis:

I urge you to speed the federal emergency aid that was approved by Congress in December to local school districts right away. From the start of the coronavirus pandemic, I have worked in Congress to provide much-needed emergency aid to our local communities and schools. I have listened to Hillsborough County parents, teachers, non-instructional personnel, school board members and our school district. All agree that students and public schools are in dire need of additional resources to operate safely and to keep teachers and other essential personnel on the job. Plus, the House of Representatives is poised to pass the American Rescue Plan this week, and Florida is estimated to receive an additional \$7.4 billion with \$526.9 million going to Hillsborough Schools - so more help is on the way.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES I) Act, approved by Congress last March, provided over \$770 million to Florida and school districts for K-12 education. Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) received \$54 million in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds (ESSER I) in September 2020. A second round of aid to Florida school districts was approved by Congress in December - \$3.1 billion - under the bipartisan Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CARES II). HCPS is estimated to receive \$222 million of these funds. It is critical that these emergency funds be dispersed right away to ensure continuity of student learning, avoid layoffs and other detrimental consequences.

COVID-19 RELIEF FOR K-12 SCHOOLS

	CARES ACT <i>March 2020</i>	COVID RELIEF PACKAGE <i>December 2020</i>	<i>American Rescue Plan</i> <i>Likely enactment in early March</i>
NATIONWIDE TOTAL	\$13.2 billion	\$54 billion	\$130 billion
FLORIDA	\$770 million	\$ 3.1 billion	\$7.4 billion
HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	\$54.7 million	\$222 million	\$526.9 million

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the delays in receiving federal emergency aid have created budget pressures on HCPS and other school districts. They are responsible for extensive unbudgeted requirements for health and safety of students, teachers and other personnel. Hillsborough is considering a number of drastic cuts that would prove harmful to our students and community in the long run. Withholding federal emergency aid likely will increase the negative impact to the HCPS bond rating, eventually costing taxpayers more money or leading to additional budget harm.

Importantly, the law states that ESSER II funds are to be awarded only to “local education agencies (LEAs),” which in Hillsborough would mean traditional public schools, as there are no charter schools that are their own LEA. Congress also clearly intended these emergency funds to be available to support employment of existing staff and so that districts like HCPS can keep teachers and other personnel on the job until we return to normal and all students return to the classroom.

ESSER I *and* ESSER II funds may be used to pay LEA employees and contractors during the disruptions caused by COVID-19. Under section 18003(d)(12) of the CARES I and section 313(d)(15) of CARES II, an LEA may use ESSER funds for activities that are necessary to maintain the operation of and continuity of services, including continuing to employ existing staff of the LEA, consistent with the organization’s policies and procedures for paying compensation from all funding sources, Federal and non-Federal. In addition, section 18006 of the CARES I and section 315 of CARES II requires that LEAs, SEAs, IHEs or other entities receiving Education Stabilization Funds “shall, to the greatest extent practicable, continue to pay its employees and contractors during the periods of any disruption or closures replated to coronavirus.”

To hasten the delivery of emergency aid to local school districts, Congress explicitly required the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) to disburse these dollars within 30 days of the enactment of CARES II. I have been advised that USDOE made the ESSER II funds available to Florida on January 6, 2021. The Congressional intent and the needs of our students underscore that ESSER II is to directly and immediately meet the needs of our students and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Time is of the essence. I urge you to disperse the federal emergency aid immediately. In fact, some states such as [Pennsylvania](#), [Nebraska](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Oregon](#) and [North Dakota](#) already have issued guidance or opened applications for local education agencies to secure ESSER II funding to meet the safety, academic and mental health needs of their students. Florida's children deserve no less.

Furthermore, Congress is likely to pass the American Rescue Plan in the next couple of weeks that will provide significant *additional* emergency aid for students and schools. The American Rescue Plan also will provide robust new funding under the Child Care and Development Block Grant and Head Start that will help HCPS and other school districts realize their plans for expanded pre-K and early pre-K. Communities across Florida should plan now for how they will use these vital early learning funds that are critical to ensure children from birth to age five are ready for school and success in K-12, college, career, and life.

CARES II/ESSER II is intended to support our students and educators immediately. Therefore, I urge you to expedite the transfer of federal emergency education funds to HCPS and our local school districts, put the needs of our families and students first, and work with us on the next round of emergency aid. If you have any questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact me or my Legislative Assistant, Joicelyne Jackson, at 202-225-3376.

Sincerely,



Kathy Castor
U.S. Representative
Florida – District 14

Cc: Richard Corcoran, Commissioner, Florida Department of Education
Addison Davis, Superintendent, Hillsborough County Public Schools
School Board Members, Hillsborough County Public Schools
Hillsborough Legislative Delegation
Hillsborough PTSA
Hillsborough CTA
Hillsborough Early Learning Coalition
Hillsborough Education Foundation