



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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**Public Comment Re: LEAP Task Force Recommendations
Senate Education Committee**

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Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide public comment on the Learning, Equity, and Accelerated Pathways (LEAP) Task Force Recommendations.

I was honored to serve on the LEAP Task Force, which was composed of parents, educators, direct service providers, community organizations, advocates, and policymakers. It was a pleasure to serve with these incredible leaders who are thoughtful and committed partners in advancing education equity in Rhode Island. Our goals were to address ongoing concerns with Rhode Island's learning recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic by assessing the conditions of "learning loss" in the schools and communities across Rhode Island; identifying research-based, high leverage strategies for equitable learning recovery; and identifying priorities and the strategic focus for learning recovery efforts that would align with stimulus funding guidance.

We engaged in critical discussions about the challenges students, parents, and schools faced during the pandemic and the need to utilize this once in a lifetime opportunity to rethink education and dismantle systems that have led to the disparities and inequities in education based on income, race, ethnicity, language status, and disability.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is pleased with the enabling conditions identified in the report that are necessary to meet the urgency of this moment including:

- **Address systemic racial inequities** in Rhode Island's educational system.
- **Center the voices of students and families** in all work across the entire education system.
- Prioritize **cross-sector partnership and intentional collaboration** across Rhode Island to implement collective impact approaches.

These conditions align with the key recommendations in our recent publication [*Youth, Family, and Community-Based Approaches to Equity in Education*](#).

We are also pleased that social-emotional wellness is elevated in the report. Restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and positive disciplinary practices are effective approaches for addressing student trauma and help to increase academic outcomes. **Schools that are unequipped to meet the mental health and emotional needs of**

students during and after the pandemic can perpetuate or introduce new traumas.

School-based mental health professionals have an important role to play in creating and sustaining positive school climates and can improve health outcomes, attendance rates, graduation rates, academic achievement and career preparation, and lower rates of suspension and other disciplinary incidents -- all measure that are critical for a successful and accelerated recovery.

The needs of Multilingual Learners, students with disabilities, and students in the core cities (Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket) must be prioritized for learning recovery efforts, and **all efforts must use an anti-racist, equity-focused lens**. This should include the expansion of dual language programs and more resources to meet the needs of differently-abled students. Additional supports can help to create the identified enabling conditions and to act upon the LEAP Task Force recommendations.

Communication with students, parents, and community members

I was fortunate to participate in a small group discussion with U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona about the federal requirements for states and school districts to seek broad public input to develop plans for the use of *American Rescue Plan ESSER* funds. **Authentic and meaningful engagement of students, parents, and community members requires intentional efforts that promote the sharing of power and decision making.** There is a need for more communication with students, parents, and community members around the amount of money their school district will receive and clear avenues and meaningful opportunities for community input on the school district plan before it is submitted. Providing districts with technical support and examples of best practices for authentic student and parent engagement could help school districts co-plan with the community.

Resources for Out-Of-School Time (OST)

OST programs have provided crucial services to students and families during the COVID-19 pandemic, including assistance with academics, accessing technology, and addressing food insecurity for families. We are pleased that the report encourages the sharing of data between schools and OST providers to allow students to be well-served and have their needs met.

There is a substantial gap between high-quality afterschool and out-of-school time opportunities available to youth from low-income families compared to opportunities for youth from higher-income families. Higher-income families spend almost seven times more on enrichment activities, which contributes to persistent gaps in student outcomes. Federal and city funding of high-quality afterschool and summer programs helps youth from low-income families participate in out-of-school time programs and helps to promote equity.

It is important for schools to engage with and integrate **community-based organizations that reflect the identities of students and provide culturally relevant learning opportunities**. Additional thought and support are needed to ensure OST programs that are led by Leaders of Color and members of historically marginalized communities have access to these opportunities to collaborate with school districts. Often the reimbursement model for services creates financial barriers which inhibit these community providers from partnering with schools. The reliance on providers to have the fiscal capital to expand services and programs before a partnership begins can unintentionally contribute to inequities.

Accountability

The *American Rescue Plan* includes maintenance of equity requirements. The U.S. Department of Education intends to provide additional guidance on these important requirements; however, it is clear funds are intended to support and promote equity. Accountability measures for how funds are spent and how funds were used to address equity is needed.

Now is the time for schools to be bold. We urge education leaders to utilize these once in a lifetime funds to challenge the scarcity of resources model that often infringes on progress and to courageously decide to **address the racial inequities that have plagued our education system**. Thank you for the opportunity to provide public comment.