

Testimony of Darryl Thames  
Chairman, Manchester Board of Education  
Re: State Education Funding

Hello. I am Darryl Thames, chairman of the Manchester Board of Education and, I will add, the proud grandparent of two children in the Manchester Public Schools system.

I want to share my concerns about the impact of the proposed suspension of Education Cost Sharing grant increases to Alliance districts like ours that have the awesome and challenging responsibility of educating an especially diverse population of students, more than 60 percent of whom are children from communities that have long been marginalized.

State funding to Manchester stands to decrease by more than \$5 million from what we were anticipating over the next two years if the reductions stand and this would have significant consequences at a time when our students and families are reeling from the disruptions caused by the Coronavirus pandemic.

While we are certainly grateful for funding through the CARES Act for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, nearly 80 percent of federal ESSER 2 aid would be needed to offset the decrease in anticipated funds as a result of the delay in honoring the bipartisan funding formula from 2017.

I'd like to share what some of the ramifications of this reduction would mean.

Our 2021-22 school budget was built with the expectation that the anticipated Alliance allocation would support the salaries and benefits of Assistant Principals, STEAM teachers, library/media specialists and others whose roles all are critical to operating our schools. Funds also were to be used to support our ever-growing technology needs. Before the pandemic we had a device for every student in grades 5-12 but our instruction now depends on one-to-one from grades PK - 12. Needless to say, costs are also rising proportionately as our replacement cycle now covers more devices and we also have allocated more devices to staff who deliver instruction and services remotely.

Also impacted would be funding to support the programming necessary to address learning loss. Specific examples for use of this funding includes:

- **Summer Programming**

There will be needs in the areas of academics, social emotional support, and health and wellness as we restart school full time. We will begin to address those needs with a robust summer program that is open to all MHS students from grades K - 12. This primary goal of this program is to get students excited about learning. The program will of course include time for targeted academic support for students who are struggling but all students will also have access to STEAM programs, recreational / wellness opportunities, and social / emotional support. This is the first step to reacclimating students to schools.

- **Before and After School Programming**

Combined with summer programming, expanded before and after school programming will include flexible intervention times that work within the schedules of our parents and families. This approach will be modeled after our summer programming from 2020 where we paired reading consultants with families for evening and weekend intervention which worked for some parents schedules. Providing flexible times allows parents to truly partner with us to support learners.

- **Chronic Absence**

A new approach is needed to address chronic absence. While we will continue to encourage students to attend school in person, we believe a much more flexible approach is necessary. That approach will include expanded opportunities for remote learning along with individual and small group in-person tutoring. In addition to those academic supports, we are proposing an expansion of our family resource center staff to better and more frequently support our families. This idea comes from the case manager model that we have successfully implemented at Manchester Adult Education. Basically, if you can't get to school, we are going to bring school to you.

- **High School Redesign**

We are looking to continue to shift away from a traditional high school schedule to better support student learning, growth, and development. We are exploring new schedules that allow students to pursue a wider variety of learning opportunities and access support for learning during the school day. Support would include a math lab, writing center, college and career application station , FAFSA / scholarships assistance, social emotional support groups, substance prevention, and directed study sessions supported by behavior techs, on track coordinators, and other staff. Our plan is to target instructional minutes by prioritizing content and skills as we have this year so that students are consistently involved in high level, meaningful work while building in places for students to get help with skills, time management, and work completion.

- **Leadership Coaching**

The pandemic is giving us an opportunity to make changes we have talked about for years. Education has, for too long, been focused on short-term fixes, looking for the right test, the right incentives, the right accountability system for teachers. We must reconsider all aspects of the operation - when and how we get students to and from school; ways we recruit, hire, and train teachers; the school calendar (including composition of school year and school day); and what it means to be present in school. While it is clear that students benefit immensely from being in school, it is how that looks that we must rethink. We must prioritize health and wellness of students and staff, continue to focus the curriculum to promote deep and enduring understanding and cultural responsiveness, rethink how we measure and define success, and ensure that all members of the school community understand, appreciate, and can communicate their story and the stories of those around them. This level of change requires support for leaders at all levels of the organization to ensure consistent messaging and coherence across the system.

We have worked hard at addressing the persistent achievement gap that has long plagued schools throughout our state and nation. Equity is central to all that we do in Manchester, and in fact our mission statement promises “safe, inclusive schools where excellence is the goal and equity is the norm.” By preserving the phase-in approach we can deliver on this promise.

As for the increased federal funding, while it is crucial and we are grateful, in fact it is specifically designed to position us to provide academic support, to address learning loss, to strengthen family connections, to promote social and emotional learning, and to enhance technology/infrastructure systems -- but these priorities will not receive the attention they deserve if the resources are redirected or diluted.

Finally, the proposed pause would be extremely problematic entering the 2023-24 school year when the federal stimulus funds would end leaving a massive funding cliff. The funding increase that was to be phased in over 21-22, 22-23 as well as the increase anticipated for 23-24 would need to be supported by the state budget all at once or force significant local tax increases in Alliance communities.

In closing, I want to say that I appreciate the difficulty of the decisions regarding funding for our schools given all of the competing interests and especially considering the devastating consequences of the pandemic and the incalculable toll it has taken. Of all the damage, though, I fear the greatest has been to our students. They need more help than ever as we help them repair the gaps in their learning and the scars they bear socially, emotionally and otherwise.

In closing, I ask that you reconsider the proposed reduction. There is no denying that the past 12 months have hurt many people in many ways, but no group more so than our students, especially those who could least afford the disruption to their education and to their lives. Please take that into consideration as you make decisions that will have ramifications for years and even decades to come.

Respectfully ...