Dear Secretary Cardona,

Recently, the National Center for Education Statistics released information that shows just how damaging the COVID-19 pandemic has been on the academic achievement of our nation’s kids. NCES reported that the average scores for 9-year-old students in mathematics and reading declined seven and five points, respectively. NCES also reported that these declines in scores were worse among students who were already struggling before the pandemic. Given these record-breaking declines in student learning, we are concerned that your department is moving too slowly in its responsibility to provide the public and policymakers insight into how hundreds of billions of federal dollars provided through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund are being used to address this learning loss.

This spring you implemented a data collection tool for state educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) to report how they are spending ESSER dollars on a variety of factors. For example, LEAs can indicate the amount they are spending on various academic enrichment activities like tutoring or after-school programs. We understand that you completed this data collection on July 1 and that it will take time to process and aggregate the data. However, your department has not even provided an estimate of when this information will be made available. A timely release of this data is important so parents and other education stakeholders can ensure that officials are addressing local needs especially since much of this money has not yet been spent. We appreciate that you recognize the role stakeholders should play in the development of SEAs’ and LEAs’ ESSER plans but how can you expect them to provide meaningful consultation for 2023 and 2024 when they have minimal insight into expenditures and outcomes for 2021 and 2022?

Access to this data is especially key for the enormous amount of ESSER funds provided through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). We have already seen use of these funds for projects unrelated to the pandemic or academic achievement. Other reporting has highlighted the

challenges districts face in screening out ineffective tutoring services.\(^4\) We expressed concerns before ARPA became law that this amount of spending was unnecessary, so now it is time for Congress to have the information it needs to ensure that taxpayer dollars are not subject to frivolous projects or abuse.

We appreciate the work private organizations are making to track some of this data, but the data are insufficient and incomplete.\(^5\) Although the negative impacts of school closures have been clear for more than a year, the abysmal math and reading scores we saw last week show that parents, stakeholders, and Congress must have insight into how schools are using federal dollars to help America’s students catch up. So, we ask that you provide us with an estimated date for when you expect the Department of Education to release the data collected through the ESSER Fund Recipient Data Collection Form.\(^6\)

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Mike Gallagher
Member of Congress

Virginia Foxx
Member of Congress
Ranking Member, Committee on Education and Labor

Elise M. Stefanik
Member of Congress

Dan Crenshaw
Member of Congress


Guy Reschenthaler
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Cliff Bentz
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