

GUEST COLUMN

When federal funding shortcomings hit home

By **MATT GILLARD**
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To say that our reality has changed since the coronavirus outbreak began would be a drastic understatement from advocates who work to close equity gaps and ensure positive outcomes for all our children, youth and families. A more pressing fact has been the lack of sufficient action from Congress and the White House to meet the needs of this moment, as we plan to return to school. With the past school year disrupted, learning opportunity gaps that many students experience in their lives are more pronounced than ever, due to differences in household stress, resources and skills.

Now with resurging positive cases, including in hotspots here in Michigan, states continue a great balancing act – working to re-open schools, ensure safety and the well-being of residents, and support students as they catch up and move ahead. But here's the kicker: Michigan cannot afford to do this alone; it's not possible. Additional federal funding is the only option



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in protecting our state's economy, and the futures of our children, youth and families.

Analysts project that Michigan's state revenues will have fallen by \$2.2 billion in the current fiscal year, which ends in September, and will leave another \$2 billion budget hole for next year. At the same time, core

issues affecting the health, safety and well-being of Michigan's children, youth and families, and therefore our state's medical, economic and educational recovery from this crisis, have not subsided but grown more severe.

When a failure of leadership at the top trickles down and hits home, it affects us locally and the feeling of federal neglect hits our communities.

In the 15 school districts served by the Berrien Regional Education Service Agency (RESA), there are gargantuan budget

worries ahead with estimated cuts to state aid of \$600-\$700 per student depending on the district's cash reserves. The shortfall is so vast that eliminating all the categoricals in a school district's budget would still not be able to touch that, for example. Cuts to big-ticket items – staff levels and transportation – seem likely yet contradictorily improbable when more teachers not less will be needed as class sizes are forced to shrink per social distancing rules, and buses aren't able to transport as many students at a time. All this plus new costs to accommodate distance learning, CDC-required PPEs and cleaning services cannot be covered without additional federal funding.

During these critical times, students without as many learning resources at home are falling behind, raising concerns over equity gaps among our most vulnerable students. These concerns necessitate the need for more funding for school- and community-based afterschool programs that offer students the vital academic and enrichment boost they need. Community-based youth development programs have been

staying in touch with their kids and families, also offering critical social emotional support and outreach services, but their capacity to serve is limited. At the Boys & Girls Clubs (BGC) of Benton Harbor, staffers have been calling kids and communicating on virtual platforms, finding rising mental health problems with an increase in suicide concerns, depression and homelessness.

Sadly, just as the BGC program would swing into high gear in the summer as kids are home full-time, COVID has wreaked havoc on the donations that largely make up its \$2.5-million annual budget, said CEO Brian Saxton. In a typical year, they serve 4,000 kids in three sites during the summer and five in the school year. The added stress of COVID-related expenses has created a new cost model that ramps up expenses while scaling back service. He described it this way: "We will need 120 percent of staff to serve 25 percent of kids, doing 50 percent of programs, in 100 percent of our buildings."

The question is – where will the money come from?

Over the past few months the

outcry from both sides of the aisle for federal support has been present, but the voices of those who are truly affected have not been amplified. We should not engage in any scenario that leaves vulnerable populations even more vulnerable in the guise of budget cuts, and we will not entertain the conversation of what is more important – education, health or safety. We're demanding sufficient federal action to meet the needs of our state now.

How we treat children, youth and families in our state who faced challenges before the pandemic and are facing even tougher challenges right now will be the ultimate factor in whether or not our state truly recovers from this crisis. The costs of neglecting them will hurt our state long after the next few financial quarters.

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