

EDITORIAL | OUR VIEW

Editorial: Need to catch up urgent for students

Today

We're in the midst of an educational disaster, precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The damage: extreme loss of learning and the trauma of enforced isolation forced on Hawaii's students by our shuttered schools and a hasty transition to remote learning, as COVID-safety precautions were enforced.

The remedy: intensive, tailored instruction, counseling and care for each student in need.

The problem: Not enough has been done to address this great need, while for students, time is of the essence.

To help with pandemic-related needs, \$639.5 million in federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds has been allotted to Hawaii's public schools.

The largest share of this money, a third and final ESSER III allotment of \$412.4 million, should be expected to flow to students for remedial education and counseling.

However, as Star-Advertiser writer Esme Infante reported on Tuesday, only "a sliver" of the ESSER III funding has been doled out.

To underscore the urgency, ESSER funding comes with use-it-or-lose-it deadlines. What Hawaii schools have not spent of the \$412.5 million in ESSER III allocation runs out in September 2024.

Educators are well aware of the learning losses facing a majority of the islands' 171,000 public school students. This year, 52.9% of elementary students and 61.3% of middle school students tested one grade or more below their grade level in English. In math, 60.5% of elementary students and 62.3% of middle school students tested one grade or more below their grade level.

The testing took place in the first half of this academic year, making it clear that students have not recovered from the damage done by COVID, and academic services to date have not repaired the problems.

Distribution of federal ESSER III funding was authorized in August. In the meantime, a COVID-19 delta variant surge and the start of the omicron variant wave coincided with the second quarter of the 2021-2022 school year, from Oct. 18 to Dec. 17, causing teacher absences and disruption.

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Nonetheless, it's disturbing to hear from Lisa Morrison, an arts and communications teacher at Maui High School and public school parent, that "we have not seen at the school level any difference (academically) since the ESSER funds were approved for schools to use," as she testified on April 21 before the state Board of Education.

At her Maui school, Morrison said, "in terms of academics, there's been no change. We're not getting any tutoring services. We're not getting any extra support."

That is unacceptable. Hawaii's struggling students need extra help, now.

While it's understandable that Hawaii's schools have not spent all of the ESSER III pandemic-funding allotment — and shouldn't, since it is available until Sept. 30, 2024 — there should be some substantial progress by now, as well as a transparent plan in place to remedy this crisis. It should clearly articulate how the students most harmed by the COVID shutdown will be served.

The Department of Education’s reaction and strides should fit the urgency of the problem, in seeking to repair the damage as quickly as possible.

Cheri Nakamura, director of the nonprofit advocacy group HE’E Coalition, said that in comparison to other cities, Hawaii’s implementation has been slow and needs more transparency. Interim schools Superintendent Keith Hayashi needs to heed this, in order to direct a course correction and better communication.

“We would like to see the money get down to the schools as soon as possible,” Nakamura said. “We would like to have clarity on what the monies are being spent on ... and be able to have confidence that it’s making an impact, especially for our high-needs students.”

Let’s move on this. An emphasis on in-classroom support is required, and time wasted will cause irreparable damage.



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