



YOUR ACCESS TO THE REGION

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

FEDERAL RESOURCES TO STIMULATE CHANGE: ARE WE READY?

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It is an exciting time for education. There is considerable federal activity with an emphasis on helping underperforming schools and districts and stimulating innovative ideas to improve teaching and learning. Although federal activities change quickly, following is a summary of the key issues, especially those related to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009.



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The Landscape for Federal Funding in 2009

As Charles Dickens wrote in *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." Such is the case for many states and local school districts this year. Just when there is an unprecedented infusion of federal funds to support school and district improvement initiatives, the economy is in its worst decline in decades, thereby reducing state and local revenues. Unfortunately, the reduction of state and local revenues to some extent decreases the potential for gains that may be possible with the increased federal funding for taking on new initiatives. Instead of new opportunities, however, some of the funding is being used to maintain what was already in place.

To complicate matters further, this infusion of ARRA funds gives members of the U.S. Congress the expectation that the stimulus dollars will lead to higher student achievement under the current provisions of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. It is difficult to argue with this belief because Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) also received substantial increases. However, keep in mind that schools get the stimulus funds only one time; there is no assurance that additional money will be available in future federal appropriations. Even though it is difficult to imagine taking money away from Title I and IDEA in the future, states and districts should use caution when planning how to spend the funds to avoid making long-term commitments that depend on them.

Looking Ahead: Will NCLB Be Revised This Year?

The fiscal year 2010 appropriations process is now under way in Congress. It is unlikely that there will be significant increases for education programs above the fiscal year 2009 levels. The Obama administration indicated that it will carefully review all federal programs to determine whether they are meeting their intended objectives. Therefore, there is some likelihood that certain programs could be eliminated—

especially smaller ones and those that show little evidence of positive results based on the benchmarks that the administration is using to make these determinations.

Legislatively, those who thought that the NCLB Act was not going to be reauthorized this year may be surprised to learn that there may be some activity on it after all. For a while, it seemed as though the legislative agenda was full with other initiatives, but U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan mentioned in a recent hearing that reauthorizing NCLB may get started toward the end of 2009. Getting started this year would not be difficult because the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor held hearings and learned about proposed revisions to NCLB last year. In addition, during summer 2008, the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions devoted time to planning for the reauthorization. Changing some of the provisions of NCLB that are known to be serious problems for states and school districts should be a strong incentive for Congress to make reauthorization a high priority, and there is a possibility that the law may be renamed during the reauthorization process. Although it is unlikely that the NCLB Act will be reauthorized in 2009 (because of the daunting process of getting legislation through Congress and then signed by the president), getting the process started will go a long way toward the hope of getting it finalized in 2010.

Assistance for Educators Is Within Reach

Coupled with the unprecedented increase in federal funding for education through the ARRA funds and the possibility of beginning the reauthorization of NCLB this year, educators need to begin thinking about how to comply with daunting accountability challenges in an era of compliance and innovation. There is simply too much momentum to turn back the accountability clock for education now, so it is time to sort through the complex process of how best to ensure that all students are meeting learning goals and that they have qualified and effective teachers. Designing and developing longitudinal data systems is one area of recommended use for stimulus funding, and working with the Great Lakes West Comprehensive Center takes on critical importance. Leveraging valuable dollars and knowledge about 21st century education through these collaborative efforts are part of an agenda that is critical to future success for states and their federally funded centers.

The diligent work of Great Lakes West with the state education agencies (SEAs) during the past four years has been a valuable support in SEA improvement initiatives and in providing research-based information to ensure a better chance of success in complying with federal laws. This year, with the substantial federal funding increases and the possibility of NCLB being reauthorized, states and districts have an unprecedented opportunity to forge ahead with these current efforts so that all students succeed in notable ways within two years. There are expectations that innovation will be a big part of school improvement and will lead to improved results. There has never been a better opportunity to seriously undertake this mission of leveraging federal resources and encouraging collaboration among federally funded programs with SEAs—all with sufficient funding behind it. Are we ready for this challenge?

References

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