

News Release

Comptroller's Workgroup on Pandemic Spending Warned About Coming "Funding Cliff" for Schools

*Teachers' groups worry about burnout, lack of input
on how money should be spent to support students
and educators*

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (March 29, 2022) - Comptroller Peter Franchot today hosted the seventh meeting of the [Comptroller's Workgroup on Pandemic Spending](#), hearing from leaders in K-12 education about the heroic efforts of educators to quickly adapt to virtual instruction, the shortcomings that federal and state relief aid failed to address, and the potential fiscal cliff that local school systems' budgets could be facing in the coming years.

"Educators and support staff have been among the unsung heroes of this pandemic," Comptroller Franchot said. "The challenges posed by the pandemic on our schools continue to be evident today, with record-high vacancies in teaching and support staff positions, as well as the significant learning loss that our students have experienced over the past two years."

Local school system leaders painted a mostly positive picture about the quick flow of federal funding that enabled them to make a rapid transition to virtual instruction in the early days of the pandemic that closed school buildings for between several months and more than a year.

[Howard County Public Schools](#) Superintendent Michael Martirano noted that most of the early relief aid was used to buy laptop computers for all 58,000 students so they could access virtual classes. The cost of those purchases — about \$4.2 million — was the equivalent of more than 60 teacher positions.

Federal relief aid enabled Howard County to provide \$1,800 bonuses to 8,400 teachers and support staff this year, which Martirano said was money well spent.

“In order to take care of our children well, we must take care of our staff,” he said. “Our staff serve as trusted adults that students approach with personal challenges. Too many of our students carry unnecessary and unfortunate burdens on their backs, and schools often serve as reprieves from that reality. Not a single dollar of federal, state or local funding was used to purchase care, compassion, love and the other wonderful traits that our staff exhibit every day and that every student requires.”

In Montgomery County, the state's largest school system, the \$425 million in federal and state relief money focused on several key topics: expanding summer school, tutoring and other educational programs to mitigate learning loss, providing professional development opportunities and staffing resources to educators, upgrading technology offerings, establishing a year-round virtual academy, coping with students' social and emotional challenges and logistics for returning to school safely.

"Keeping school buildings open through the surges was huge this year and it was really important for our students and staff to be able to do that," said Jeanie Dawson, chief of finance and operations for [Montgomery County Public Schools](#).

However, she warned about a "funding cliff" that looms large over most local school systems once federal support runs dry even though many of the challenges laid bare by the pandemic remains.

Overall, the federal government has sent more than \$4 billion in relief aid for K-12 education to Maryland, mostly via the American Rescue Plan that passed last year. However, only about 25 percent of those funds have been spent, said Justin Dayhoff, assistant superintendent of financial planning, operations, and strategy for the [Maryland State Department of Education](#).

"We are early in the process still in terms of the overall timeline of expected spending for these programs," he said, noting that American Rescue Plan money will run through Fiscal Year 2025. "When we see all these funds going out, there can easily be a narrative around why aren't school district spending all of this right now. We want districts to spend strategically. We want them to do that work intentionally, thoughtfully. Doing so takes time and the design of these grant programs allows for that."

Dayhoff also addressed delays with sending federal grants to child care facilities that depended on that support to remain open and care for the children of essential workers.

"We know that the federal funds couldn't be released into their hands fast enough," he said. "MSDE acknowledges that the Department could have done a better job of anticipating that supplemental appropriation from the moment the state became

aware of the program in order to build a better, more timely, collaborative process with our partners."

The workgroup also heard from several union representatives about the pandemic's impact on teachers, who faced numerous challenges during the pandemic, including the shift to virtual learning, dealing with students' social and emotional needs, and returning to classrooms without proper protections in place, said Samantha Zwerling, government affairs specialist for the [Maryland State Education Association](#).

Too often, teachers had to accept protocols put in place with either limited or no input, whether it involved sick leave policies, lack of personal protective equipment or the best use of COVID relief funds, she said. As a result, educators felt underappreciated and misinformed at a time when they were working harder than ever, leading to higher-than-usual burnout rates.

"Schools opened to all in person this fall and educators and students were supposed to treat it like normal. It wasn't and it still isn't," Zwerling said. "Educators report to us constantly that these are the toughest years of their careers and many are leaving our schools."

Nathan Ferrell, a Spanish teacher at the Baltimore Leadership School for Young Women who represented the [Baltimore Teachers Union](#) at the meeting, echoed that teachers, as well as parents and students, have not been given the opportunity to weigh in on how relief aid should be spent.

"When you are making those decisions in a vacuum, it is adversely impacting the dynamic needs on the ground at the various worksites of where we are," he said.

During the past 10 months, the Workgroup on Pandemic Spending has heard from numerous state agencies and community organizations about the successes, failures and difficulties of pandemic-related programs. The Workgroup, established by the Comptroller after the General Assembly set aside funds in the FY 2022 budget for a review of pandemic-related spending, is examining how funds have been expended, whether they went to intended recipients and populations most in need; disparities in distribution; and possible predatory fraud and pandemic profiteering.

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