MSBA and COSSBA Federal Advocacy Update

February 15, 2024
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The MSBA and COSSBA Federal Advocacy Update is your timely news about current public education issues affecting Minnesota schools.

MSBA became a charter member of the Consortium of State School Boards Associations (COSSBA) in 2021. COSSBA is a nonpartisan, national alliance dedicated to sharing resources to support, promote and strengthen state school boards associations as they serve their local school districts and board members. COSSBA works to advance federal congressional priorities on behalf of 25 state school board association members.

Congressional action is needed to fund the federal government for fiscal year 2024. Twelve appropriation bills must be passed to avoid a government shutdown in March. A third continuing resolution (CR) was approved on January 19 that extended appropriations in a laddered approach, dividing the 12 required appropriations bills into two groups. The first set will expire on March 1. The second group, which includes federal education funding, is set to expire a week later on Friday, March 8.

According to COSSBA’s government relations team (BOSE Public Affairs Group), while work on spending bills has not made the news, negotiations continue behind the scenes to set funding levels for the 12 FY2024 spending packages. Federal education advocates continue to urge Congress to resolve the spending bills before the two March deadlines, but the COSSBA Weekly Education Report states that “this task is looking increasingly daunting, and there is unlikely to be much more news on progress until the week of February 26.”

To read the full COSSBA Weekly Education Report dated February 12, visit this link.
Top Three Education Updates

1. New Improvements to FAFSA Process

The revamped Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application continues to make postsecondary planning a challenge for Minnesota high school students. According to the National College Attainment Network, fewer than half the number of students (56% fewer) have completed the FAFSA compared to this time last year.

The Department of Education (ED) planned for colleges to receive completed FAFSA forms in January, but this process is now delayed until March. This may result in a significant holdup in colleges’ ability to send out financial aid packages, putting students in a position to rush critical decisions about their future. This week, both Minnesota senators signed a letter requesting further clarification and local supports for students who completed the FAFSA.

On Tuesday, February 13, U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona announced new steps to address the challenges with implementation of the new FAFSA application. College requirements are reduced, and more flexibility is provided to speed up the process. In addition, federal personnel are now available to support under-resourced schools and funding is provided to provide technical assistance. Visit this link for more details on this increased FAFSA support.

2. Federal Guidance given for Technology Use in Special Education

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – the 1975 federal law – has long required that Individual Education Plans (IEP) be created for students who qualify for special education. But for the first time, the Department of Education (ED) has guidance on how assistive technology relates to IDEA.

According to ED, assistive technology is any device or item used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a student with a disability. Examples include an augmentative communication device, a wheelchair modification to add a computer holder, audio books for a student who cannot read, or word processors for a student with a writing disability.

As all students have become more dependent on technology for learning, this guidance is critical. The guidance provides clarity on how school districts can be certain they are providing assistive technology, in compliance with IDEA, to promote successful outcomes for students receiving special education.
3. The ACCESS to Careers Act

The Bipartisan Assisting Community Colleges in Educating Skilled Students to Careers Act (ACCESS to Careers ACT) was introduced in the U.S. Senate this week. The bill creates a grant program that provides funding to states and community colleges to address the demands of current workforce needs. If passed, grants of up to $10 million will be available to states to develop partnerships and grow Career and Technical Education (CTE) programming.

The grant money could be used for a range of career training, apprenticeships, and on-the-job learning experiences. As noted in the recent Education Week article on the topic, “It’s the latest sign of a growing bipartisan commitment to the value of career training and a recognition that the academically oriented, college preparation track isn’t right for all high schoolers.” A quarter of the grant funds can also be used for student support services including transportation or mental health services that enhance students’ ability to access CTE programming.

The ACCESS to Careers Act aligns with the 2024 MSBA priority to transform and innovate our high schools by providing personalized pathways for all high school students.

Watch this update for future advocacy opportunities! If you’re unsure who represents you in Washington, D.C., visit this link. For more information on the Minnesota delegation in Washington, see this directory for Minnesota Members of Congress.