MSBA and COSSBA Federal Advocacy Update

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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.

The FY 2024 appropriations process is finally resolved, almost six months into the fiscal year. President Biden signed the $1.2 trillion package which includes the Labor, Health and Human Services and Education (LHHS) bill. The bill will fund the federal government until the end of the fiscal year which is September 30, 2024. Meanwhile, the FY 2025 process is already underway. Given it is an election year, Congress will likely not complete the FY 2025 spending bill until after the November election.

A summary of the LHHS portion of the bill, prepared by Democratic staff for the House Appropriations Committee, says, “The bill provides a total of $79.1 billion in discretionary appropriations for the Department of Education (ED). After adjusting for Community Project Funding, the total amount is a decrease of $201 million (0.3 percent) compared to fiscal year 2023.” The bill invests $18.4 billion in the program that helps the country’s poorest schools, which is a $20 million increase compared to FY 2023 levels. Modest increases would go to special education investments, as well.

The Title II grants that support teacher professional development will see an investment of $2.2 billion. The bill supports ongoing investments in programs that address student social, emotional, and cognitive needs. The Department’s Education, Innovation and Research program will invest $87 million in grants for STEM and computer science, and $87 million in grants for social and emotional learning in FY 2024.

A chart detailing the FY 2024 appropriations for ED is available here. For more details, you can read the full COSSBA Weekly Education Report dated March 25, 2024. The U.S. House and Senate are now in recess until the week of April 8, 2024.
Top Three Federal Education Updates

1. Applications are Open for the 2024 Renew America’s Schools Prize

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has announced the opening of applications for the 2024 Renew America’s Schools Prize. This program is funded using money from the bipartisan Infrastructure Law, a total of $180 million dollars for energy related improvements like new HVAC systems, electric vehicles, and renewable energy technologies. The goals of the energy upgrades are to improve indoor air quality and foster healthier learning environments in K-12 schools. The DOE also noted that the end result of investments in energy is reducing overall energy use which is the second-highest operational expense for American schools.

According to the DOE, the prize will be awarded to school districts that “demonstrate the need for both energy improvements and financing, with a focus on schools that serve disadvantaged communities, including those with a high percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and/or districts which qualify as rural.” To read the full press release from the DOE, visit this link.

DOE is now accepting applications for the 2024 Renew America’s Schools Prize. Submissions are due by 4 p.m. (Central time) Thursday, June 13. To access the 2024 Renew America’s Schools Prize, visit https://www.herox.com/renewschoolsprize. To view the tools and resources that will support your application, visit https://www.energy.gov/scep/renew-americas-schools.

2. The National Advisory Council on Unpaid School Meal Debt Act

Last week, Minnesota Representative Ilhan Omar introduced the National Advisory Council on Unpaid School Meal Debt Act. This bill will create a commission to address unpaid school meal debt in child nutrition programs by formulating policy recommendations to address school meal debt and ensuring the sustainability of these programs.

The council would be composed of 14 members, including state food service directors, experts, parents, and cafeteria employees, appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture. This bill was incorporated into the Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act, the nutrition reauthorization bill that successfully passed through the House Committee on Education and Labor in 2023.

Unpaid school meal debt is on the rise nationwide. With the passage of HF5, the Universal Meals Program in the 2023 legislative session, Minnesota is one of eight states that currently provides school meals at no cost.

Other states that provide free school meals include Michigan, Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Vermont, California, and Maine.

For more details you can read the full text of H.R. 7639.
3. Federal Grant Money is available to Increase the Number of English Learner (EL) Teachers

According to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), approximately 8.9 percent of Minnesota students are identified as English learners (EL). This equates to over 77,000 students in our state who receive English language instruction at school. In the 2023 Minnesota legislative session, $86.9 million was approved for English learner aid and cross-subsidy reduction over the next biennium. This will nearly double the per-pupil funding formula and creates a new component of EL revenue for future years. There is also federal funding for EL through Title III, a component of the Elementary and Secondary Act that can support professional development for staff working with English learners. In the 2022-2023 school year, $10.8 million Title III dollars flowed to Minnesota.

While a majority of English learners are in the seven-county metro area, the population is growing slightly more quickly outside of the metro area, especially in communities such as Austin, Worthington, Rochester, and St. Cloud. This growing number of English language learners requires a growing number of licensed EL Teachers. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) has announced a competitive grant program through the National Professional Development Program to provide funding to support professional development activities intended to improve instruction for English learners and assist education personnel in meeting high professional standards.

According to ED, $8.4 million will be available to fund pre-service training programs for teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and aspiring educators, including high school students, who want to become fully certified as bilingual or multilingual educators. Possible applications include Grow Your Own programming for existing district staff as well as funding for concurrent enrollment and Career and Technical Education (CTE) options for our high school students with a desire to become EL teachers.

The deadline for notice to intent to apply for this federal grant money is April 11, 2024, and the final deadline is May 13, 2024. For more details and the application notice, visit this link.

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.