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 boards association members.

Last week the House Appropriations Committee made progress on passing the 12 appropriation bills. They approved interim subcommittee allocations in compliance with the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 including a $9 billion increase to defense while non-defense programs will be cut effectively by 6%. These cuts are not evenly distributed. The Labor-Health and Human Services and Education committee’s allocation will receive a significant cut of 10% to 11%. These numbers are concerning to public education stakeholders. To review the complete allocations, visit the House Appropriations Committee website.

Both the U.S. House and U.S. Senate are in recess this week, but the schedule will be busy throughout June and July as spending bills arrive on the House floor. The Labor-Health and Human Services and Education appropriations bill is expected to be heard in the House in the last week of July.

According to COSSBA’s government affairs firm, Bose Public Affairs Group, it would not be surprising to see this ambitious approval schedule altered or even derailed. Based on past votes, moderate Republicans could take issue with House proposals that significantly cut domestic programs. Additionally, appropriators in the Senate will have different ideas about how much money should be spent on education and other domestic priorities.

For more details, you can read the full COSSBA Weekly Education Report dated May 28, 2024.
Top Three Federal Education Updates

1. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s summer food programs are now called SUN Programs
According to the USDA, “SUN” is short for summer nutrition and will include three new initiatives to provide a permanent summer electronic benefits transfer (EBT) program. First, SUN Meals are free meals at eligible neighborhood locations available to all kids 18 and under, no application required. Second, SUN Meals-to-Go will provide some rural communities with free meals that can be picked up or delivered. Last, SUN Bucks is a new grocery benefit that can provide up to $120 per child during the summer months for students who qualify.

Congress initially funded these free summer meal programs through the Consolidated Appropriations Act in December of 2022. To learn more about the new SUN programs, visit the USDA’s website. School districts can use the SUN promotional toolkit found at this link.

2. E-Rate Funding can be used for School Bus Wi-Fi Upgrades
In 2023, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) added school bus Wi-Fi to the list of services eligible for E-Rate funding. Federal E-Rate funding provides reimbursement to public schools for eligible telecommunication-related purchases. Adding internet access to school buses is an effective strategy in closing the homework gap (the gap that exists between students and families that have access to digital devices and quality internet and those who don’t). An internet connection on school buses could fill a need for students with school-issued devices but a lack of reliable Wi-Fi access at home. This can be especially helpful for students who live in rural areas and have long bus rides.

School districts need to plan ahead for the complex process of filing for federal E-Rate reimbursement. The first step is to begin completion of the Form 470 which can be submitted starting July 1, 2024. More details on E-Rate applications can be found at this link.

3. Minnesota Senator Tina Smith Pushes for More Funding for Early Childhood Education and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Improved School Climate
Senator Smith and 39 of her colleagues in the U.S. Senate submitted a letter to the leadership of the Senate Appropriations Committee requesting the “highest feasible funding for the Childcare and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Head Start, Early Head Start, Preschool Development Grants, and early intervention services available through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C (Grants for Infants and Families) and Part B Section 619”. Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar also signed the letter.

Specifically, the letter asked for an additional $434.8 million for early intervention services provided under IDEA Part C (for a total of $974.8 million) and $263 million for preschool special education services under Part B, Section 619 (for a total of $683 million). The senators explained that funding is “essential to ensure that young children with disabilities are ready to learn when they enter school”. They also cited research done at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis which provides evidence that the return on investment is $16 for every $1 spent on high quality early education. A full copy of the letter can be read at this link.
Senator Tina Smith also reintroduced bipartisan legislation to improve school climate. The Trauma-Informed Schools Act was first introduced in 2022 because of the U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy’s concerns about the increased needs around youth mental health. The bill provides for the use of evidence-based practices that build positive culture in public elementary and secondary schools. It allows states to use federal funds to train teachers and other staff to improve school climate and increase student connections in the school community. According to Senator Smith’s office, the bill will help teachers and school staff address the mental health needs of all students, especially young people struggling with adversity, and ensure they are supported so they can build resilience for future success.

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.