



Dr. Lesli Myers-Small  
Superintendent of Schools  
Rochester City School District  
131 West Broad St., 2nd floor  
Rochester, NY 14614

June 11, 2021

Dear Dr. Lesli Myers-Small,

On behalf of the Healthi Kids Initiative of Common Ground Health, I am writing to share our coalition's recommendations for the American Rescue Plan funding.

Healthi Kids is a grassroots community coalition that advocates for whole child health in the Greater Rochester and Finger Lakes Region. Together, our 65 members advance policies, systems, and environmental changes that nurture the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of children from birth to age 8. Our staff and coalition members work closely with Rochester City School District families, staff, and teachers to support a healthy learning environment. We work directly in fifteen elementary schools and are proud to partner with district staff to support children and families.

Over the last year, we have faced several crises due to COVID-19, and the ongoing and systemic acts of police brutality on Black and Brown residents in our community. The current reality for families in our community has changed dramatically from loss of jobs and homes, to losing any semblance of predictability and stability.

As we continue to all navigate the ever-changing dynamics of the pandemic, the Healthi Kids coalition is writing to share our recommendations for American Rescue Plan Dollars:

**1. Adequate materials and equipment to meet health and safety standards**

The evidence is clear. When schools follow health and safety standards set by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, New York State Department of Health and the Monroe County Health Department, it works. COVID rates can and will continue to remain low so long as school districts continue to follow proper health and safety standards including: social distancing, masking and regular handwashing.

*Funding from the stimulus dollars should be used to purchase supplies to sanitize and clean each Rochester City School District building, and towards repairing and improving school facilities to reduce the risk of virus transmission in the future.*

**2. Opportunities for healthy culturally relevant relationship building through social emotional learning experiences**

The current pandemic is compounding existing trauma in our children and impacting their overall brain development. We can support healing of these neuropathways, continue to build resiliency of

our children by providing the necessary supports to their family and by fostering healthy relationships between kids, their peers and staff.

Schools also provide a necessary space for children to play and build important social emotional skills. Research from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child shares the best way adults can mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 on children, is by building healthy relationships between their peers, and adults in their life.<sup>i</sup> When we prioritize building healthy relationships through play, play based learning, recess, and social emotional learning, we are mitigating the trauma and impact the last year has had on our children. Our children all deserve that opportunity.

*Continued investment in social emotional learning opportunities; social emotional resources; professional development related to social emotional learning; and investment in professional development related to culturally responsive and relevant instructional practices for educators across the district.*

### **3. Supporting enrichment activities and out of school time programming to students**

One key way we can support healthy relationship building for our students is through enrichment activities and out of school time programming. Twenty percent of American Rescue Plan funding must be used to address learning loss through after school or summer programming and experiential learning experiences. High quality programs are a valuable tool to support the growth, development, and health of a child. National studies demonstrate participation in this type of programming contributes to overall student success including: improved academics, positive health outcomes, strong social emotional skills, and a reduction in negative behaviors.

Studies also demonstrate that with sustained participation in extended learning time, after school and summer programming, children continue to gain a host of benefits beyond improved academic performance including: improved academic attendance, study habits, on-time grade promotion, educational attainment, motivation, and reduced rates of high school dropout.<sup>ii</sup>

*Additional investment should be provided to supporting and expanding after school and summer programming to RCSD students; and towards providing students with experiential learning opportunities outside of the classroom.*

### **4. Development and implementation of a culturally responsive-sustaining education environment for all kids**

We echo and support the recommendations of families across the school district who continue to advocate for culturally responsive-sustaining education environments for their children. Culturally responsive-sustaining education is grounded in a view of learning that allows for multiple expressions of diversity (Race, social class, gender, language, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, ability).

Despite some progress made in this space to support curriculum design, professional development for teachers, and programmatic efforts, much needs to be done to move forward anti-racist teaching practices and curriculum in the school district. Our students deserve a learning environment that is inclusive and supportive of their identities.

*Additional investment should be made to prioritize to advance the New York State Department of Education Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework including, but not limited to: ongoing professional development and learning support for all staff particularly in the areas of: equity, anti-bias, multicultural and culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogies; establishing different pathways for educational success and life readiness; and expanding recruitment and retention of diverse staff that reflect the student population.*

## **5. The implementation of play-based learning opportunities outlined in the Next Generation Standards in K-3 classrooms**

Play is fundamental to kid's whole child health and well-being. Play is a kid's preferred way of learning, and research demonstrates that play can enhance academic performance. In September 2017, the Board of Regents adopted the Next Generation Learning Standards for students. Within those standards is a recognition of the importance of play-based learning and curriculum for students in K-3 settings. Despite all the benefits of play, and the new guidance New York State Department of Education not all children in the Rochester City School District have equitable access to the benefits of play in their education experience.

Despite bright spots throughout the district, and a wealth of community organizations committed to the power of play, there is no coordination of these efforts, or mechanisms to support the transition of knowledge and resources between buildings. Families and students across the district have raised alarm bells on this issue for almost a decade and are looking for equitable opportunities to maximize the potential of play in their children's learning experiences.

*Investment should be made to support playful learning opportunities for all students. This includes: continued professional development of staff and community partners who support RCSD students; resources for K-3 classrooms to implement play-based learning experiences; and resources for building administrators and staff to ensure the adequate implementation of recess policies highlighted in the district's local wellness policy.*

## **6. Appropriate mental health and trauma supports for students in school buildings and/or through telehealth opportunities;**

At the end of the day, the pandemic has compounded toxic stress for children in the Rochester City School District. As you well know, consistent toxic stress in childhood caused by poverty<sup>iii</sup>, adverse childhood experiences (ACES)<sup>iv</sup>, and racism<sup>v</sup> significantly alters overall brain structure and function in children and negatively impacts their overall health and wellbeing in the future. Our coalition members and family advocates have expressed their concerns to staff over the last several months about the impact COVID-19 will have on their children's mental health and wellbeing, and their overall ability to rebound from yet another trauma without adequate support.

Schools provide a space for students and families to receive needed supports including: school based mental health supports; special education; intervention services; health care access; emergency needs; and crisis intervention.

Additional investment should be to provide additional supports to students in school buildings and through telehealth opportunities.

*These investments could include but should not be limited to: additional staffing of social workers, mental health counsellors, crisis intervention specialists; additional resources for existing staff; and professional development opportunities for staff to provide culturally relevant, responsive and trauma informed care to students and their families.*

**7. Providing funding to adequately support restorative practices to improve school climate**

We echo and support the recommendations of the Children’s Agenda and families across the school district to continue to invest in restorative practices.

*These recommendations include: advancing help zones and alternatives to suspensions in every building; hiring additional restorative coaches; providing professional development to all staff on restorative practices; and providing stipends for building staff who coordinate restorative work in their buildings.*

**8. Providing all students with healthy, nutritious and culturally relevant food throughout the school day**

Since 2008, Healthi Kids has been advocating alongside parents and students for better school meals in the Rochester City School District. School meals are important – kids cannot learn or grow appropriately without proper nutrition. When so many of our children rely solely on meals provided at school, it’s essential that we are ensuring that our kids, just like others in our surrounding suburban districts, have access to high quality, healthy meals and beverages that they enjoy and want to eat. As we all know, the pandemic has exacerbated issues of food security across our community, and now the food provided during school hours is more important than ever before.

To advance healthier, nutritious and culturally relevant meals in the Rochester City School District our coalition recommends the following investments:

*Investments to improve school meal quality for all school buildings such as: establishing culturally relevant menus for students; creating salad bars at each school building; retrofitting water fountains in cafeterias to become “hydration station” water bottle fillers; creating school gardens; and implementing low-sodium flavor stations in each school.*

*Investments that could transform the model of food service to our students: this includes the exploration of investment in farm to school; the expansion of scratch cooking; and piloting a three meals a day program and expanding the backpack program to improve nutrition security for students.*

**9. Direct significant funding to assist students with disabilities in recovering from disrupted learning and delayed or missed services due to the pandemic.**

RCSD must be prepared to meet the needs of its students with disabilities who have a legal right to receive supports and services, but have not been getting them to the fullest extent throughout the pandemic.

Lack of comprehensive services for all students who qualify for an IEP or 504 plan is a crisis that existed before the pandemic began in spring 2020, but has been exacerbated in the past year. Students are returning to school after more trauma, loss, and instructional time, and the effects will be compounded for students with disabilities. RCSD must not allow these students to be left behind in its recovery, and should use this funding opportunity to put the necessary staffing, training, and family and student supports in place to ensure ALL kids within the District can thrive and reach their fullest potentials.

*We echo recommendations from our partners at The Children's Agenda and ROC the Future for RCSD to make the following investments in special education: fully fund the recommendations of the Special Education Advisory Council; align the continuum of special education services across buildings for fewer student transitions, more program availability, and adherence to least restrictive environments; provide consistent mandatory professional development for all staff on student IEPs and 504 plans and the Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS).*

*Additional investments to support RCSD students with disabilities include: hire additional qualified staff (such as educators, paraeducators, school psychologists) to provide comprehensive support and services to students with disabilities; provide safe and reliable transportation services so students with disabilities can safely access in-person instruction; provide programs to assist students with disabilities with remote education technologies and modalities.*

We look forward to working with you, your staff, and our local partners to ensure all of our students in the Rochester City School District continue to have access to safe, supportive, and healthy learning environments. Should you have any questions or thoughts on our comments, please feel free to reach out to me directly at [jenn.beideman@commongroundhealth.org](mailto:jenn.beideman@commongroundhealth.org) or at 585-224-3126.

Sincerely,



Jenn Beideman, Advocacy Manager  
Healthi Kids Initiative at Common Ground Health  
1150 University Ave. Bldg. 5  
Rochester, New York 14607

CC: Van Henri White, Board President  
Cynthia Elliott, Board Vice President  
Ricardo Adams, Commissioner  
William Clark, Commissioner  
Beatriz LeBron, Commissioner  
Amy Maloy, Commissioner  
Willa Powell, Commissioner

---

<sup>i</sup> Harvard Center on the Developing Child (2020). Stress, resilience, and the role of science: Responding to the coronavirus pandemic. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/stress-resilience-and-the-role-of-science-responding-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

<sup>ii</sup> Redd, Z. et al (2012). Expanding time for learning both inside and outside the classroom: a review of the evidence base. Child Trends, and the Wallace Foundation. August 2012. <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Expanding-Time%20for-Learning-Both-Inside-and-Outside-the-Classroom.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Blair C, Raver CC. Poverty, stress, and brain development: New directions for prevention and intervention. *Acad Pediatr.* 2016;16(3):S30-S36.

<sup>iv</sup> Oh, D et al (2018). Systematic review of pediatric health outcomes associated with adverse childhood experiences. *Pediatrics*, January 2018 Vol 141, Issue 1.

<sup>v</sup> Priest N, Paradies Y, Trenerry B, Truong M, Karlsen S, Kelly Y. A systematic review of studies examining the relationship between reported racism and health and wellbeing for children and young people. *Social Science & Medicine.* 2013;95:115-127.