



Florida School Finance Officers Association, Inc.

Dedicated to maintaining quality business management practices and securing uniform financial accounting and reporting to promote public interest in Florida public education.

October 22, 2020
Richard Corcoran
Commissioner of Education
Turlington Building, Suite 1514
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

Commissioner Corcoran,

As a follow-up to our September 14, 2020 letter to you regarding fiscal and COVID-19 issues, we wanted to provide you and your team a few items to consider for your Florida School Districts and Charter Schools. The Florida Finance Council, including members of the Florida Department of Education staff, have been meeting weekly since March 25, 2020, our goal has been and continues to be offering help and guidance to school districts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you for your continued willingness to consider our input on K-12 Public Education topics.

The Executive Order (No. 2020-EO-06) issued July 6, 2020 had many elements regarding the 2020-2021 school year. Critical among them were those granted under section III – Reporting Flexibility and Financial Continuity, including the guarantee of “Full Florida Education Finance Program funding from state revenue based on General Appropriations Act (GAA) full-time equivalent (FTE) student membership forecast for 2020 fall semester.” As we approach the end of the first grading period, the mix of instructional models across the state provides an example of what can be accomplished when we work together.

The continued first goal and priority for us remains the same...returning our students to a safe environment in a bricks and mortar classroom. To continue this as our priority we need your guarantee of financial continuity through December 31, 2020, which we understand the current Emergency Order affords school districts. Fortunately, student enrollment trends appear to have been growing steadily over the last four weeks in some districts. However, many school districts are continuing to report an overall decline in enrollment levels, including charter school enrollment as part of the district totals. School District personnel are aggressively trying to locate these students to ensure they will receive instruction but we do not know when or if they will return. It has also become apparent that many parents of students in early grades will be using this as a “redshirt” year, and we hope to welcome their children again next year.

The economic safeguards contained in the Emergency Order expire at the end of the calendar year. The ultimate impacts of the Third and Fourth Calculations and statutory adjustments, if applied, could be devastating to districts who continue to experience significant enrollment loss. Moreover, the remote option remains a viable choice for parents whose students are succeeding and need to remain home for health reasons.

Until the time we have all our students back into the classrooms, we need to ensure K-12 Public Schools can utilize both a traditional direct instruction model via the brick and mortar schools and direct instruction through a virtual setting.

As you consider a way forward after the expiration of the current Emergency Order, we recommend that you keep these thoughts in mind as you consider a new or modified Emergency Order.

- As you have so often stated, students learn best by being in the classroom. We could not agree more, and our districts are diligently putting into place measures that move students back to the classroom. However, funding for the remote/innovative model continues to be critical. Parents continue to choose this option as the one that best fits the needs of their students, especially if there are underlying health conditions of either the student or family.
- It is critical that the forecasted FTE for FY 2020-2021 remain as our funded FTE in the FEFP through all 2020-2021 calculations, in lieu of the traditional FTE actual counts for Survey 2 and Survey 3, through June 30, 2021, including all FEFP funding.
- However, we understand that funding at the forecasted FTE may not be obtainable and we want to preserve the integrity of the FEFP. Therefore, the following suggestions are made for consideration:
 - Recognize that while some districts may indicate that student projections have been met or even increased, the underlying data must be reviewed. For example, many districts have seen a significant shift of “bricks and mortar” students to district and/or the Florida Virtual School. The resulting funding reductions of this shift with virtual funding being less than full funding could have a significant impact on personnel and programs for the second half of the fiscal year.
 - Additionally, the “growth” could be due to a greater than anticipated number of students whose families would have sent them to private schools now joining the public school numbers through Family Empowerment Scholarships.

- We recognize that growth in districts and the virtual schools must be addressed. However, any adjustment that is made must not detrimentally impact those districts that have lost significant FTE. We anticipate that most of these students will return to brick and mortar and we must have the personnel and programs in place to accommodate them.
- The significant overall decline in enrollment across the state provides your office some latitude in remedying this situation. Rather than facing a prorated holdback as we did in recent years when actual enrollment surpassed projection, FDOE will enjoy a budget surplus within the appropriation approved for K-12 education by the Legislature and Governor. We suggest these funds remain within the FY 2020-2021 FEFP and be reallocated to school districts in a manner that helps mitigate the impact of declining enrollment.
- Alternatively, since it becomes more apparent every day that students in grades PK-2 will not be returning to the school house in large numbers this year, as parents make the choice to keep their students at home for a full year and potentially retain the child in the same grade the following year, an option that could allow districts to keep these staff employed and avoid having staffing issues next Fall is to retain the hold harmless for those grades only.
- Understanding the fluid nature of student enrollment trends this year, potential remedies should contemplate a potential ongoing return of students. Students continue to enroll after the October FTE survey week and we expect this trend to continue into the New Year as more families return to brick and mortar instruction.
- Finally, bus ridership is down, but bus routes continue and, in many districts, have increased. The funding for transportation must be preserved.

Please consider these suggestions as you look at amending or issuing another Emergency Order for the remainder of the fiscal year. We look forward to working with you in partnership as we continue to face the challenges of providing exemplary instruction in all settings to our students during the pandemic.

We would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this proposal in more detail. Please contact me at (813) 272-4383 or by email at Gretchen.Saunders@hcps.net if you or your team have any questions or require additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gretchen Saunders". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name and last name clearly distinguishable.

Gretchen Saunders
Chair, Florida Finance Council

cc:

J. Alex Kelly, Chief of Staff
Eric Hall, Senior Chancellor
Jacob Oliva, Chancellor, Division of Public Schools
Suzanne Pridgeon, Deputy Commissioner
Mark Eggers, Assistant Deputy Commissioner
Finance Council Members
Joy Frank, FADSS