



# BACK ON TRACK SCHOLARSHIPS

*In Support of SB 1230*

*October 5, 2020*

Honorable Members of the Senate Education Committee -

Thank you for your consideration of Senate Bill 1230 - the Back on Track scholarship proposal designed to meet the varied and unique learning needs of Pennsylvania's students as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. My name is Ashley DeMauro Mullins, and on behalf of ExcelinEd in Action, I write in support of providing a lifeline to families so students can get back on track with their education and overcome continued learning disruptions.

Amid the continued uncertainty of the pandemic, schools across the state have made different decisions about how to best serve students. In too many cases, these decisions have resulted in uneven and inequitable learning experiences for students, with parents being left to do the work of schools, despite career and childcare challenges. I applaud the work of our state's educators as they work to serve all students in the midst of this unprecedented challenge. We can better support educators and parents by providing extra financial support to enhance our students' learning experiences.

A summer 2020 [Mckinsey & Company](#) analysis modeled three epidemiological scenarios to estimate the impacts of learning loss that began in the spring of 2020 and could continue through the spring of 2021. In the Fall of 2020, most students across the country are living in something akin to Mckinsey's second scenario, which predicts "school closures and part-time schedules continu[ing] intermittently through the 2020-21 school year," and no consistent in-school instruction until January 2021. Under this scenario, average learning loss for all students will amount to about seven months. For Black, Hispanic and low-income students the picture is especially bleak: McKinsey predicts that these groups will lose up to 10, 8, and more than 12 months, respectively. If this happens, existing learning gaps could increase by 15-20%, and high school dropout rates could increase across all demographics.

Families with means have purchased tutoring services and formed "pandemic pods" where, with other families, they pay a teacher directly. They have also enrolled in online courses and purchased hardware and software to ensure their children can continue learning. Families without the means to access such things have languished, waiting for their schools to make decisions that will inform whether their children learn and, in some cases, whether parents can go back to work.

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***Back on Track scholarships could alleviate some of the financial burden associated with meeting the unique educational needs of each child during this time.***

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Families with students who qualify for the free and reduced lunch (FRL) program would be eligible for \$1,000 grants through the program. For a family of three, a qualifying household income would be below \$40,182. Nearly 600,000 children in Pennsylvania could be eligible for a Back on Track scholarship. With the proposed \$500 million cap from CARES Act funds, we could provide a lifeline to 500,000 students across the Commonwealth.

Through a Back on Track account, parents can utilize funding deposited into an account to pay for computer technology, online courses, tutoring, special education services, curriculum, tuition and other state-authorized uses. By providing access to a range of educational options, these accounts will empower families with the ability to create a customized education plan that maximizes a child's natural learning abilities.



## NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Pennsylvania would not be alone in expending federal CARES Act dollars to help parents meet their children's needs during this difficult time. Several states have chosen to support existing school choice programs, bolstering existing tax credit scholarship by allocating federal dollars to scholarship granting organizations to increase the number of scholarships available.

**Oklahoma** - Governor Stitt committed \$10 million for Stay in School Funds, which is a supplemental scholarship fund for 1,500 low-income families already in a private school to maintain support for tuition costs and ensure economically hard-hit families can keep their children in school.

**Florida** - Governor Ron DeSantis is investing \$15 million in a stabilization fund to provide grants directly to private schools that serve scholarship students and are at risk of closure due to declining enrollment.

**New Hampshire** - Governor Chris Sununu announced a \$1.5 million investment of GEER funding toward 800 new scholarships for low-income students to seek an educational experience that works for them.

Others are more aligned with the approach here in Pennsylvania, acknowledging that parents are burdened with new expenses as they seek supplemental educational resources. These states are using CARES funds to create micro-grants or accounts jointly managed by the state and qualifying parents to cover educational expenses.

**Oklahoma** - The Digital Wallet program will provide \$1,500 directly to 5,000 Oklahoma families at or below the federal poverty line to purchase curriculum content, tutoring services, technology and internet connectivity.

**Idaho** - Governor Brad Little announced a significant investment of \$50 million in CARES Act funding directly to parents through his Strong Families, Strong Students initiative. The program will allow Idaho families to better customize their child's education and meet the challenges of remote learning by providing up to \$1,500 per child (\$3,500 maximum per family) toward purchasing educational materials, devices and services.

At this very moment, hundreds of families are still waiting for a clear picture of what school will look like further into the Fall and into the Spring of 2021. Without assistance, low-and middle-income parents will not have the ability to stem pandemic-related learning losses by accessing the resources that could be covered through Back on Track. Unchecked, learning loss will affect more than individual students and families; it will have negative social and economic consequences for decades to come. States have the power to ameliorate or even stop learning loss, and the time to act is now.

I urge our Commonwealth to respond to this crisis by thinking innovatively and putting the needs of students first. Thank you for considering legislation that will provide a lifeline to parents and help them acquire resources critical to their child's learning.

*ExcelinEd in Action, the c4 sister organization of the Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcelinEd), believes quality education is the foundation for a strong, growing, innovative economy and for restoring opportunity for all Americans. We also believe that student-centered education policy is the best way to re-ignite economic mobility and equip every student with the opportunity to achieve excellence, prosperity and a better quality of life. ExcelinEd in Action advances education reform legislation in states and engages public support for bold reform policies that expand choice and raise student achievement.*