

Dept. of Public Instruction: State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly sends letter in response to the Joint Finance Committee co-chairs

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State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly sent the attached letter today the Joint Finance Committee co-chairs.

December 9, 2021

Joint Finance Committee Co-Chairs Howard Marklein and Mark Born:

I am in receipt of your disappointing, disingenuous, and nakedly political letter. Despite numerous warnings about how the intent of parts of your motion was in direct conflict with the language of the American Rescue Plan Act – including from the United States Department of Education – you forced DPI and our schools into a game of high-stakes chicken. And you lost.

The law stated that we needed a plan to meet the needs of the students who lost the most learning during COVID. Anyone paying attention to the needs of the education sector will tell you that the kids who do not have access to the best teachers, the best facilities, the best technology, mental health supports, the enrichment programs, and the after-school programs are the ones that lost the most. Your plan did not address this.

Your constant use of the word reward is troubling to me as a parent, an educator, and a taxpayer. COVID did not come about for you to hand out political favors. Federal dollars, which are not yours to decide on how to use, are also not yours to

reward those who meet your favor.

Furthermore, you are sitting on nearly two billion dollars of unspent state dollars that could be targeted at supporting districts who were able to safely provide in-person instruction. As a firm believer in the power of in-person instruction, and a former school district leader who navigated this issue, I support your policy goals. But that does not allow you to neglect your duties to follow the law.

Despite all of this, my staff has been working with staff in your offices over the past weeks to keep you apprised of the situation and to find a middle ground that serves our learners and schools. I found it shocking and disheartening that there was no mention of that in your letter.

Let's set the record straight. I am committed to working with you to get the remaining dollars into the hands of our schools so they can support our learners. We have to work within the parameters of the federal law. I believe there is plenty of room for compromise, but the political nonsense needs to stop. We have ideas, it's just a matter of if you are willing to work with us, and if you are willing to follow the law.

Thanks for your consideration,

Dr. Jill K. Underly