March 1, 2021

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399

The Honorable Wilton Simpson
President
409 The Capitol
404 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

The Honorable Chris Sprowls
Speaker
Florida House of Representatives
420 The Capitol
402 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

The Honorable Richard Corcoran
Education Commissioner
Office of the Commissioner
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

RE: Urge State of Florida to Distribute K-12 Federal Emergency Aid to Public Schools and Students in Advance of American Rescue Plan

Dear Governor DeSantis, President Simpson, Commissioner Corcoran and Speaker Sprowls:

We urge you to expedite delivery of federal emergency aid that was approved by Congress in December 2020 to local school districts to benefit public schools and students. We have worked in Congress to provide much-needed emergency aid to our local communities and schools through Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES I) Act and Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CARES II). We have listened to our parents, teachers, non-instructional personnel, school board members and our school districts. All agree that students and public schools are in dire need of additional resources to operate safely, address student academic achievement, and keep teachers and other essential personnel on the job.

The CARES I Act, approved by Congress last March, provided over $770 million to Florida and school districts for K-12 education. CARES II subsequently provided $3.1 billion at the end of December 2020. It is critical that these emergency funds be disbursed right away to ensure continuity of student learning, and avoid layoffs and other detrimental consequences. Time is of the essence as school districts are trying to determine plans for graduation ceremonies, summer school, rapid COVID-19 testing, social workers to help bring children back to school, and other critical issues.
The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the delays in receiving federal emergency aid have created budget pressures on all Florida school districts. Florida schools are facing extensive unexpected costs as a direct result of the public health crisis. Across the state of Florida, school districts are contemplating how to address learning losses, and some are considering drastic cuts that would prove harmful to our students and state in the long run. Withholding federal emergency aid likely will increase the negative impact on our school districts, eventually costing taxpayers more money or leading to additional budget harm.

Importantly, Congress intended these emergency funds to be available to support employment of existing staff so that public school districts across Florida can keep teachers and other personnel on the job until we return to normal and all students return to the classroom. CARES I and CARES II funds may be used to pay employees and contractors during the disruptions caused by COVID-19. Under section 18003(d)(12) of the CARES I and section 313(d)(15) of CARES II, funds can be used for activities that are necessary to maintain the operation of and continuity of services, including continuing to employ existing staff, consistent with the organization’s policies and procedures for paying compensation from all funding sources, Federal and non-Federal. Also, section 18006 of the CARES I and section 315 of CARES II requires that local and state educational agencies, institutions of higher education or other entities receiving Education Stabilization Funds “shall, to the greatest extent practicable, continue to pay its employees and contractors during the periods of any disruption or closures repledged to coronavirus.”

To hasten the delivery of emergency aid to local school districts, Congress explicitly required the U.S. Department of Education to disburse these dollars within 30 days of the
enactment of CARES II. We have been advised that the Department of Education made the ESSER II funds available to Florida on January 6, 2021. The Congressional intent and the needs of our students underscore that CARES II is to directly and immediately meet the needs of our students and families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan last week that will provide significant additional emergency aid for students and schools. The American Rescue Plan also will provide robust new funding under the Child Care and Development Block Grant and Head Start that will help school districts realize their plans for expanded pre-K and early pre-K. Our communities across Florida should plan now for how they will use these vital early learning funds that are critical to ensure children from birth to age five are ready for school and success in K-12, college, career and life.

Federal emergency aid is intended to support our students and educators immediately without unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles. Therefore, we urge you to expedite the transfer of federal emergency education funds to our local school districts, put the needs of our families and students first, and work with us on the next round of emergency aid.

Sincerely,

Kathy Castor
Member of Congress

Lois Frankel
Member of Congress

Frederica S. Wilson
Member of Congress

Val Butler Demings
Member of Congress

Al Lawson, Jr.
Member of Congress

Darren Soto
Member of Congress

Stephanie Murphy
Member of Congress

Ted Deutch
Member of Congress

Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress

Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Member of Congress

Charlie Crist
Member of Congress