



CSBA statement on school reopening agreement

Over the last 12 months, many school district and county boards of education have demonstrated innovation and resourcefulness under adverse conditions brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. Working under frequently changing health guidance, they have spearheaded the transformation of school districts into food distribution centers, created mobile hotspots for students in their communities and provided child care services to families. This local leadership has uplifted lives and responded to the academic and social-emotional needs of students during a time of crisis.

So, we are pleased that the latest school reopening bill provides some of the essential resources governing board members and superintendents have been requesting to meet the vast array of student needs, particularly for those school districts that have been providing in-person instruction for months. We appreciate the work of Gov. Gavin Newsom, the Legislature and their staffs in attempting to support local educational agencies (LEAs) with this agreement and responding to some of CSBA's policy concerns in the process. As a result, this measure has significantly improved the capability of some schools to reopen and to stay open.

Notably, the bill now allows for the expenditure of funds prior to resuming on-campus instruction so schools can more effectively prepare for the return of students and educator vaccination provisions have been expanded from teachers only to include all school staff working with students with at least 10 percent of the supply being prioritized for education staff. The legislation also indicates that schools that are already open can remain open since the new requirements will not impact schools that have resumed in-person instruction or plan to do so shortly.

Our assessment is tempered, however, when we see that the bulk of the revenue funding for this program is available only because the state defers the June school apportionment into the next fiscal year — the state is essentially steering money to this program instead of paying off a debt owed to LEAs. This legislation also provides no minimum funding level for small school districts that often lack the economies of scale to meet implementation guidelines. In addition, the bill does not address the exposure schools face due to the fact that most insurers are not covering COVID-19 liability and what protection that does exist is generally inadequate. Yet, the proposal does mandate that school districts and county offices of education spend 10 percent of the funds received under the Expanded Learning Opportunities program to hire paraprofessionals. This requirement must be implemented regardless of whether an LEA needs the positions, can find qualified candidates in their area to hire, or view this expenditure as the best way of supporting students. In order to ensure this work proceeds as effectively as possible, we encourage the state to further consider the funding issues we have raised and offer LEAs the flexibility to respond to their particular circumstances instead of offering blanket solutions to problems that have a distinctly local complexion.

Reservations notwithstanding, the agreement between Gov. Newsom and the Legislature addresses several of the concerns CSBA raised on behalf of school districts and county offices of education. It also provides funding needed to support LEAs in their ongoing efforts to resume in-person instruction. As currently drafted, the bill represents a step forward as LEAs strive to reopen their schools while addressing the numerous challenges that require them to put appropriate safety measures in place, gain community support and continue to negotiate the labor agreements needed to resume in-person instruction this spring.

~Vernon M. Billy
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 California School Boards Association (CSBA)

