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## FISCAL UPDATE Article

Fiscal Services Division

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### NCSL COVID-19 WEBINAR — EDUCATION, CHILD CARE, AND NUTRITION

**Webinar.** The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) has been holding a series of [webinars](#) related to the COVID-19 outbreak. The information contained in this article is from the webinar on April 3, 2020, which included responses, concerns, and long-term effects in the areas of education, child care, and nutrition.

**Child Care.** The webinar began by highlighting different challenges for each stakeholder group before and during the COVID-19 outbreak. For providers, challenges before COVID-19 included low wages, limited access to benefits, and heavy reliance on parent fees. During the outbreak, challenges have included mandates to close or stay open, risk of permanent closure, and access to essential supplies. For families, challenges before COVID-19 included shortage in supply and quality of care, high costs, and limited access to financial assistance. During COVID-19, the struggle to pay for care persists, as do problems related to access to care for workers with essential jobs.

Among the other assistance provisions, the federal [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act](#) included \$3.500 billion in Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funds. Of this amount, the Center for Law and Social Policy estimates that Iowa will receive \$30.6 million. Funds can be used for payments to child care providers to pay wages, serve workers with essential jobs regardless of income limitations, and purchase essential supplies.

States have taken different levels of action in response to the outbreak. One state (Rhode Island) has closed all child care programs, over 12 states have closed programs with an exception for serving workers with essential jobs, and the remaining states have allowed child care programs to remain open. Other policy actions being taken, some utilizing the flexibility in CCDBG funds, include:

- Expanding or extending eligibility for child care assistance programs.
- Connecting workers with essential jobs to child care providers.
- Lowering copayments.
- Enrolling new providers, and making other changes to child care regulations and licensing.
- Providing financial assistance through continuing payments despite closure or attendance level changes, and providing grants or short-term assistance or bonuses.
- Amending priority populations for order of services on wait lists.
- Including child care providers as essential workers.
- Providing guidance on best practices for health and safety.
- Facilitating access to essential supplies.

**K-12 Education Responses and Concerns.** At least 124,000 public schools in 48 states and U.S. territories have been mandated to be closed. Neither Iowa nor Nebraska have mandated closures, but both have governor recommendations to do so. Most states have waived attendance requirements and assessments. Many states are encouraging distance learning or online learning platforms and establishing virtual classroom environments. School meals are still being distributed at the discretion of individual school districts.

Maintaining communication with parents and students is a concern, especially in rural areas and with English language learner students. The challenges of implementing online learning include proper training for teachers, student access to technology, and maintaining equitable learning opportunities for

special education and English language learner students. Additional concerns include issuing necessary graduating credit for students and the delay of college entrance testing such as the ACT.

Long-term concerns because of the impact of K-12 school closures include the loss of academic time, effects on academic achievement gaps, and the lapse in accountability measures for college readiness due to the waiver of assessments. The loss of state and local revenue streams including sales and property taxes will most likely impact school budgets.

**Higher Education Responses and Concerns.** More than 1,100 colleges and universities have closed campuses, and most are transitioning to online-only coursework. Students have been impacted by abrupt dormitory and dining hall closures and the loss of work-study on-campus jobs. Recruitment and admissions processes have also been interrupted because of closed campuses.

Responding to the housing and transportation needs of students because of campus closures has been a concern. Higher education institutions were better equipped than K-12 schools to transition to all online learning, but challenges still exist for full implementation and ensuring equitable access to technology. Because of the closure of K-12 schools, preservice teacher graduating candidates are unable to meet typical student teaching requirements, and this may impact graduation and licensure for those students. Some institutions are delaying admission decisions until June 1, 2020, and that is affecting decision making for potential incoming students.

Long-term concerns exist for higher education, including lost academic time and the effects on academic achievement gaps. Job assistance services for graduating students are being impacted because of campus closures and the changing employment market. The loss of state revenues will most likely impact higher education funding.

**State Legislative Responses.** COVID-19-related education bills have been passed in 31 states, and more are expected. The NCSL Education COVID-19 Bill Tracking Database is available [here](#).

**K-12 Federal Policy Responses.** The CARES Act includes the establishment of a K-12 Education Stabilization Fund. Included in the Fund is \$13.500 billion, with 90.0% to be distributed to local education agencies (LEAs) as formula grants. The funding is not to be a revenue replacement but can be used for planning for distance and online learning, purchasing technology, and expenses related to responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. An additional \$3.000 billion in funding is to be used at the discretion of state governors to be distributed as needed for K-12 schools, higher education, or early childhood education. Both of these funding streams are tied to a maintenance of effort (MOE) requirement that states must maintain education funding for FY 2020 and FY 2021 that is equal to the average of FY 2017 through FY 2019. There is a clause for a potential waiver of this MOE requirement for states that have experienced a precipitous decline in financial resources. Additional guidance will be issued.

Additional CARES Act provisions affecting K-12 schools include waivers for state assessment and accountability provisions and the provision of funding flexibilities for LEAs. The Act does not waive Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirements, but it does require United States Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos to make recommendations on IDEA flexibilities for Congress to consider. Meeting the needs of special education students covered under IDEA is of concern when implementing distance or online learning.

**Higher Education Federal Policy Responses.** The CARES Act includes the establishment of a Higher Education Stabilization Fund. Included in the Fund is \$14.250 billion in grants to higher education institutions, with at least 50.0% required to be used for emergency aid to students. Included in the Act are waivers for penalties to students for ending education mid-semester and permission for federal work-study funds to be paid out. Also included are provisions for federal student loan payments to be deferred and for student loan interest to be waived through September 30, 2020. Any collection actions and wage garnishments on defaulted student loans must be halted.

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**Nutrition Program Changes and Funding.** The webinar concluded with highlighting some food assistance program history, policy changes, and funding updates. Highlights included:

- For school-based food distribution programs, schools are having to be creative in distributing meals. There are some nationwide waivers on policies in place, but schools must submit requests for other waivers.
- There is a Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) option available as part of the free and reduced-price lunch program. States can submit a plan to allow students eligible for free and reduced lunch to receive the equivalent amount on an EBT card.
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) flexibilities were covered. These included waivers for work requirements, extending eligibility certification time periods, and increasing benefits per household.

**Additional Webinars and Information.** The next NCSL webinars will be on critical energy infrastructure. More information on this is available from the LSA upon request and from the following webpages:

- Iowa COVID-19 Website: [coronavirus.iowa.gov](https://coronavirus.iowa.gov)
- Iowa Department of Public Health: [idph.iowa.gov/Emerging-Health-Issues/Novel-Coronavirus](https://idph.iowa.gov/Emerging-Health-Issues/Novel-Coronavirus)
- NCSL COVID-19 Resources for States: [www.ncsl.org/research/health/ncsl-coronavirus-covid-19-resources.aspx](https://www.ncsl.org/research/health/ncsl-coronavirus-covid-19-resources.aspx)
- National Governors Association (NGA) COVID-19 Page: [www.nga.org/coronavirus](https://www.nga.org/coronavirus)

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