



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

January 25, 2024

The Honorable Susana Córdova
Commissioner of Education
Colorado Department of Education
201 East Colfax Ave.
Denver, CO 80203

Dear Commissioner Córdova:

The U.S. Department of Education (Department) received your written plan for a reasonable level of tolerance when calculating whether the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) has met State maintenance of equity requirements in fiscal year (FY) 2023 under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP Act). This written plan applies only to a subset of Colorado's local educational agencies (LEAs).

The ARP Act State maintenance of equity requirements help ensure that State funding supports LEAs with high concentrations of poverty and the students who have been subject to longstanding opportunity gaps in our education system and experienced the greatest impact from the COVID-19 pandemic. These requirements are vital for ensuring that States maintain funding to address the impact of the pandemic on students' education, and for protecting students in high-need and highest-poverty LEAs from disproportionate cuts if reductions in State effort do occur.

The Department determined that it is consistent with the State maintenance of equity requirements to allow a State educational agency (SEA) to calculate whether it has maintained funding equity with respect to its very small high-need and highest-poverty LEAs within a reasonable "tolerance level." The Department's determination is based on the possibility of significant volatility in the calculated per-pupil funding amounts for very small LEAs caused by small changes in student enrollment, which may be unrelated to whether an SEA has achieved the intent of the requirements. (See *Frequently Asked Questions, American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Program, Maintenance of Equity Requirements*, July 26, 2022, Question 21(a).)

According to materials provided by CDE, LEAs in Colorado are funded through a mix of State and local funding depending on the composition of the local tax base. When an LEA shifts from being entirely locally funded to receiving both State and local funds, the district incurs the impact of a budget balancing Budget Stabilization Factor (BSF). Small rural LEAs are particularly impacted by the BSF, which can reduce overall per-pupil revenue given local tax base fluctuations tied to natural resource extraction. CDE considers LEAs with enrollments of 250 or fewer students to be "small rural LEAs." CDE asserts that calculated annual per-pupil funding amounts for small rural LEAs are significantly affected by small changes in student enrollment, which makes these data an unreliable indicator of whether the SEA has achieved the intent of maintaining equity in funding across LEAs.

For its 52 small rural LEAs, CDE proposes to implement a tolerance of up to a five percent reduction in per-pupil funding from year to year. This tolerance would impact two LEAs identified by the State as meeting the definition of high-need or highest-poverty that served 0.03 percent of Colorado's students in FY 2023.

After reviewing CDE's tolerance proposal and accompanying data, the unique circumstances in the State, and our further State-specific analysis, we have determined that this approach includes a reasonable level of tolerance when calculating whether Colorado has maintained equity for small rural LEAs in FY 2023 and is consistent with CDE's FY 2022 tolerance request.

We appreciate your diligence in developing this proposal. If you have any questions, please contact your program officer at: Colorado.OESE@ed.gov.

Sincerely,

Laura Jimenez

Laura Jimenez
Director, Office of State and Grantee Relations