

2021 SPECIAL SESSION I

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SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 308

Directing the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission to study the impact of COVID-19 on Virginia's public schools, students, and school employees. Report.

Agreed to by the Senate, January 27, 2021

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, February 24, 2021

WHEREAS, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be one of the most disruptive forces ever exerted on Virginia's public schools. State guidance has given local school divisions wide latitude in deciding to what extent school programs should be delivered virtually, as opposed to in person, under revised protocols to protect health and safety; and

WHEREAS, strong and inclusive public education systems are essential to the short-term and long-term recovery of society, and there is an opportunity to leapfrog toward powered-up schools; and

WHEREAS, public education systems in the United States were not built to deal with extended shutdowns like those imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers, administrators, and parents have worked hard to keep learning alive, but these efforts are not likely to provide the quality of education that is delivered in the classroom; and

WHEREAS, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the many inadequacies and inequities in public education systems, such as lack of access to the broadband and computers needed for online education, lack of supportive environments needed to focus on learning, and the misalignment between resources and needs; and

WHEREAS, the extended period of restrictions on face-to-face instruction in the Commonwealth has exacerbated previously existing differences in student learning experiences, levels of support, and access to resources. NWEA, a nonprofit organization that develops and offers student assessments, estimates that students could return to school in the fall, either in person or virtually, (i) with roughly 70 percent of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year and (ii) with less than 50 percent of the learning gains in mathematics relative to a typical school year and, at some grade levels, nearly a full year behind in mathematics relative to what educators would observe in normal conditions; and

WHEREAS, researchers predict that the top one-third of students will make gains in reading during the extended period of restrictions on face-to-face instruction, possibly because they are likely to continue reading with their families while such restrictions are in place, thus widening the achievement gap; and

WHEREAS, one national survey shows that one-third of teacher respondents report that the pandemic has made them more likely to exit the profession or opt for early retirement, results that are concerning. Of such subset of teacher respondents, 45 percent are over the age of 50, 44 percent have over 20 years of experience as educators, and 42 percent live in the American South; and

WHEREAS, government funding for public education often fluctuates in response to external shocks, as governments prioritize other investments. The slowdown of economic growth associated with the spread of COVID-19 may affect the availability of public funding for education, as tax revenues decline and emergency funds are funneled into supporting increased health care expenditures for those in poverty; and

WHEREAS, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many students have opted for home school and private school alternatives during the 2020-2021 school year, a trend that has had an adverse impact on the calculation of the number of students in average daily membership for the purpose of public education funding; and

WHEREAS, as public educators have an unwavering commitment to ensuring that Virginia's public education system is one that provides equitable educational opportunities to all students and to meeting the needs of all Virginia learners, especially those disproportionately impacted by restrictions on face-to-face instruction or learning loss; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission be directed to study the impact of COVID-19 on Virginia's public schools, students, and school employees.

In conducting its study, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission shall:

1. Examine and determine reasons for barriers to student success in virtual and hybrid models as well as the overall impact of COVID-19 face-to-face learning restrictions on previously existing student achievement gaps, student achievement, and student well-being, including any disproportionate impact on at-risk populations;

2. Determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on staffing levels, including the impact of teacher and school employee retirements and resignations on delivery of instruction and the ability of

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local school boards to fully staff their needs, employment levels, and local budgets;

3. Determine the short-term and projected long-term changes in student enrollment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of such changes on funding levels;

4. Determine the impact of implementing COVID-19 health and safety measures in public schools;

5. Evaluate public schools' level of emergency preparedness to face another pandemic or statewide crisis and make recommendations to help guide planning for such events; and

6. Examine programs that can address learning loss and identify barriers to implementing those programs, including resource gaps.

Technical assistance shall be provided to the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission by the Department of Education and each local school board. All agencies of the Commonwealth shall provide assistance to the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission for this study, upon request.

The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission shall complete its meetings by November 30, 2022, and the chairman shall submit to the Division of Legislative Automated Systems an executive summary of its findings and recommendations no later than the first day of the 2023 Regular Session of the General Assembly. The executive summary shall state whether the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission intends to submit to the General Assembly and the Governor a report of its findings and recommendations for publication as a House or Senate document. The executive summary and report shall be submitted as provided in the procedures of the Division of Legislative Automated Systems for the processing of legislative documents and reports and shall be posted on the General Assembly's website.