

# ADVENTIST SCHOOLS, COVID-19, AND THE BIG GOVERNMENT BAILOUT:

## *Is the Funding in Jeopardy?*

BY ALVA JAMES-JOHNSON, JOEL GUERRA, AND PAOLA MORA ZEPEDA

For two years, schools in the Chesapeake Conference of Seventh-day Adventists received scholarship funds from the state of Maryland for low-income students. The funding, administered through the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) voucher program, helped disadvantaged families afford a private school education.

However, in 2019, the state launched an investigation into the written policies of private schools that received the allocations, eventually concluding that Adventist schools in the Chesapeake Conference were in violation of state guidelines prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Based on that investigation, the state of Maryland not only rescinded scholarships that had already been granted for the 2019–2020 school year, it also demanded that the conference refund money allocated for scholarships the previous two years, according to Janesta Walker, superintendent of schools for the Chesapeake Conference.

With that painful scenario in mind, the Chesapeake Conference recommended that schools

under its auspices not accept federal funds made available through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the biggest government bailout in US history, which includes millions of dollars set aside for private schools. *Spectrum* found only one Chesapeake school—Highland View Academy—listed in a US Treasury database that identifies organizations that received amounts of \$150,000 or more.

“We’re concerned about the religious liberty implications of accepting those funds,” said Walker, in a recent interview.

We, here in Maryland, have had a very difficult and complicated situation in the last couple of years with the state and government funding that we have received for scholarships in the past.



Janesta Walker

The government actually came back and withdrew funding that we had been granted and went back two years and clawed back funds that had already been

## Gay SDA Teacher in Florida Threatens Lawsuit Over Termination

BY TAYLOR DEAN

Steven Arauz was allegedly fired on June 23 from his job at Forest Lake Education Center (FLEC), a Seventh-day Adventist K–8 school located in Longwood, Florida. Arauz said the Florida Conference informed him of his termination after he had been featured in an article, published by an online magazine, called “Gays with Kids,” highlighting his life as a single foster and adoptive parent.

On Oct. 21, the *Orlando Sentinel* reported about the controversial firing in an article, which was picked up by *Newsweek* and other media outlets. In an October 27 interview with *Spectrum*, Arauz said his termination is unfair because FLEC and the Florida Conference have received government aid in the form of scholarships, as well as CARES Act stimulus relief funds. Arauz said he is considering legal action against what he believes is a violation of government guidelines.

“Any organization that is wanting to receive government funding, or even state tax funding, should be held to some strict guidelines when it comes to discrimination laws, whether that is not just sexual orientation, but also race, girl or boy, or age,” he said. “I understand that in our country we have religious freedom, and I’m absolutely all for religious freedom. . . . But none of us gets to choose if we’re born a boy or a girl. None of us gets to choose black or white. None of us gets to choose gay or straight. Those are things that we have no choice over.”

Frank Runnels, vice president for education and superintendent of schools for Florida Conference, responded to questions submitted by *Spectrum* regarding the controversy, disputing Arauz’s accusations.

“Mr. Arauz’s contract had expired and was not renewed,” he wrote in an email. “Each year, we carefully consider our staffing needs for the upcoming school year. Contributions and other sources of school funding are unrelated to such annual evaluations.”

spent. And so, of course, that weighed heavily on our minds as we were thinking about accepting [CARES Act] government funding. We also know that the assurances that [we often] sign to accept the funding sometimes get into the area of religious liberty and could have an impact on how we operate our schools, and we do not want to be put in a position to where we are forced to compromise our faith values for the sake of money.

The Chesapeake Conference is not alone. As the United States government doled out trillions of dollars to shore up an economy brutally battered by the novel coronavirus pandemic, many K–12 Adventist schools in the North American Division grappled with whether or not to accept government funds.

Some, like school administrators in the Chesapeake

Conference, opted to heed counsel provided by the North American Division, which recommended that church entities abstain from pursuing the money. At the same time, schools in other conferences applied for, received, and accepted the funds in an effort to withstand the challenges of COVID-19, according to those interviewed for this article.

Much of the national spotlight has centered on the \$659 billion Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), which issued millions of government dollars to religious organizations for employee protection. General Conference and North American Division entities, along with dozens of schools, conferences, and independent ministries, received millions of federal dollars from that pot of money, despite the NAD’s recommendation to abstain based on religious liberty concerns.

However, the CARES ACT also includes specific funding for K–12 schools through a \$13.5 billion Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) pro-

*Spectrum* was able to confirm that at least eighteen Adventist K–12 schools received loan allocations ranging from \$150,000 to \$1 million through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP).

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gram established as part of the Education Stabilization Fund. Those dollars, funneled through the fifty states, are allocated to individual schools via local school districts, which are required to provide “equitable services” to private schools based on the proportional share of students, according to guidelines established by the US Department of Education. Additional money is available through Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funding, distributed by governors at their discretion.

The ESSER funds have been embroiled in controversy in recent months due to public backlash over private schools receiving the money. Critics have argued that a rule implemented by US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos would divert millions of dollars from public schools serving low-income children. The policy required public school districts to funnel more coronavirus stimulus dollars to private schools using a calculation based on total student enrollments, rather than the number of low-income students, a formula historically used for such allocations.

- On August 21, a Seattle federal judge issued a temporary injunction blocking the funds to private schools in response to a lawsuit filed by the state of Washington.
- On August 26, a federal California judge temporarily halted the funding in response to a lawsuit filed by a coalition of states, including California and Michigan, and school districts such as those in New York and Chicago.
- On September 4, a federal judge in Washington, DC, blocked the funding in response to a lawsuit filed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), school districts and public-school advocates.

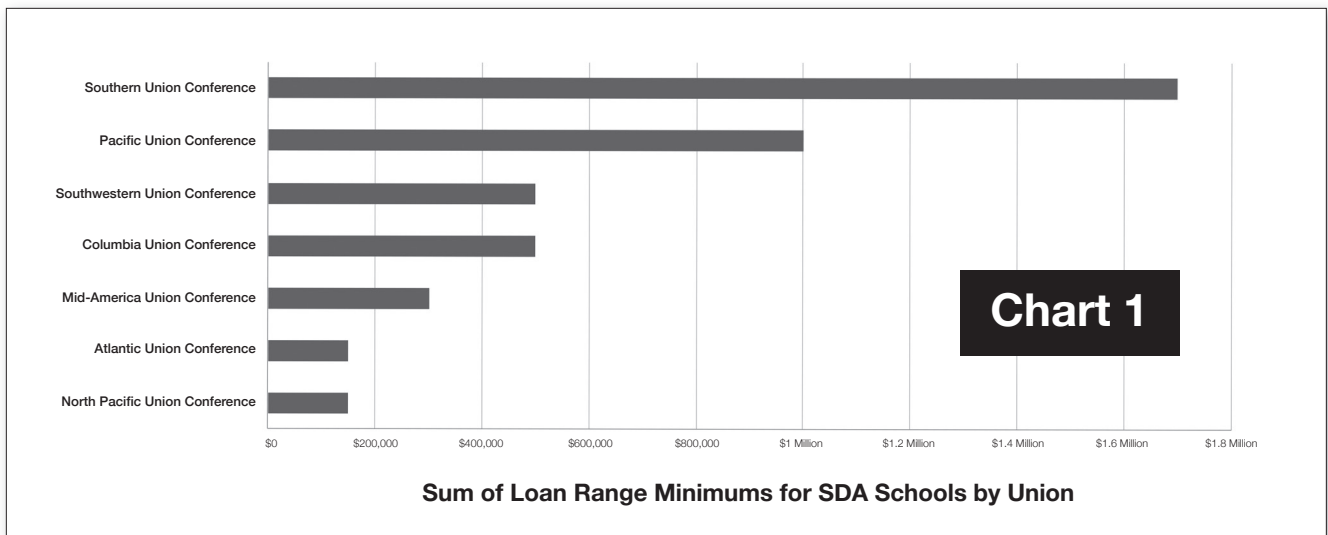
*Spectrum* conducted a four-month investigation to track money flowing to Adventist K–12 schools via the CARES Act. Reporters tried contacting Adventist administrators from each of the fifty conferences located in the United States, as well as many union officials. Of that number, only twenty-one responded and nineteen agreed to be interviewed.

However, through analyses of data released by the US Treasury Department—matching Adventist K–12 entities and government data using school names, addresses and the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code that the federal government uses to classify educational nonprofits—*Spectrum* was able to confirm that at least eighteen Adventist K-12 schools received loan allocations ranging from anywhere from \$150,000 to \$1 million through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). A data scientist from DataKind, a volunteer organization that provides pro bono services to journalists and other clients, assisted with the project.

The money tracked thus far does not include PPP loans amounting to less than \$150,000 that Adventist schools may have received from the CARES Act, or dollars that conferences may have applied for separately. A *Spectrum* database of fifty-five Adventist organizations that received PPP allocations lists twenty conferences in the United States.

The US Treasury database categorizes the dollars received according to a range of funding, not specific amounts, with tiers of \$150,000 to \$350,000, \$350,000 to \$1 million, \$1 million to \$2 million, \$2 million to \$5 million, and \$5 million to \$10 million. Entities receiving less than \$150,000 were not identified by the SBA due to privacy concerns, according to US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin. Five news organizations, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, are suing the SBA for access to government records regarding who received funding and the exact amounts.

Most of the Adventist schools on the list are located



in the southern and western states. Four are in the Florida Conference, four in the Southern California Conference, two in the Kentucky-Tennessee Conference, and two in the Texas Conference. The Greater New York, Chesapeake, Iowa-Missouri, Oregon, Ohio, and Dakota conferences each had one school on the list.

The minimum amount the schools would have received, based on the ranges reported by the government, is a total of \$4.3 million, with schools in the Southern Union receiving the most with a total of at least \$1.7 million. (See Chart 1). The Adventist schools in the database reported a total of 440 jobs to the government, with those in the Southern California Conference reporting the most, with a total of 135. Schools in the Florida Conference, which received the most money, reported zero jobs, according to the government database. (See Chart 2).

Tracking ESSER funds allocated to Adventist schools is more complicated because of how the funds are distributed. *Spectrum* submitted public-records requests to education officials in all fifty states to track the funding, but only a few released the information. So far, the magazine has been able to confirm through government records that at least sixteen Adventist schools in Georgia received the ESSER funding, amounting to a total of at least \$269,449, and six Adventist schools in New Jersey received allocations amounting to a total of at least \$42,070.

Stephen Bralley, director of Secondary Education and Accreditation



Stephen Bralley

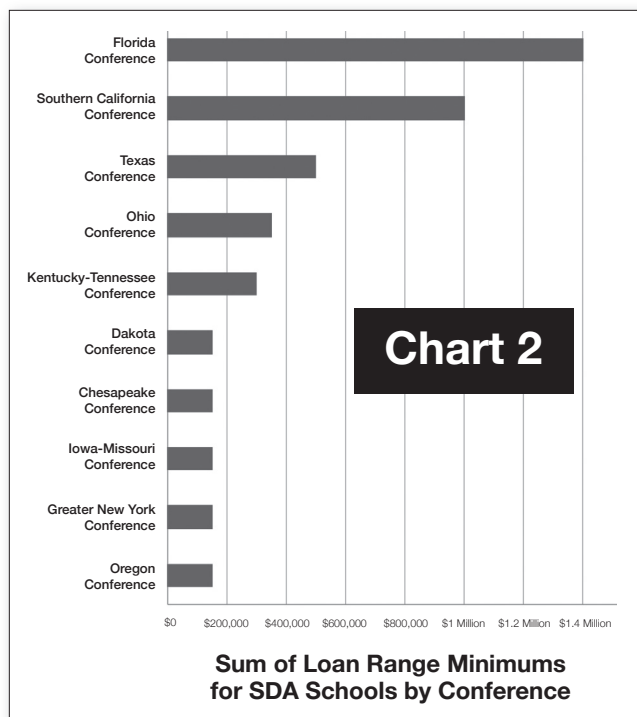
for the North American Division, sits on the Council for American Private Education (CAPE) and other councils that have been lobbying the government on behalf of private schools. He said many Adventist schools applied for and received CARES Act funding in the spring because of financial stresses caused by the pandemic.

Before April, word started kind of filtering out that the funds were being developed, and we started getting a lot of questions from the field—some excitement—because [the schools] were in financial pain. And so, the NAD began to look and evaluate what we knew at the time, and that generated the written response that the NAD sent out on April 8.

In that missive, the NAD stated:

Many church leaders and members have concerns regarding both restrictions and conditions surrounding the acceptance of this government aid. In addition, there have been questions regarding how receiving this money fits into the Seventh-day Adventist Church's longstanding and historic commitment to the separation of church and state.

“It is the North American Division administration's recommendation to abstain from participation in both of these federal financial assistance programs,” the statement



continued, referring to federal funds available through both the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES) and the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA). “While the risk associated with this money is uncertain, NAD leadership’s primary concern is remaining faithful to the counsel we’ve been given regarding church-state relations.”

Though many Adventist schools ignored the NAD’s recommendation and pursued the funding, much of it may now be in jeopardy because of public outrage, the recent court rulings, and developing restrictions, Bralley explained.

What the bill was described as pre-April and April has not been static. It has evolved and, in some cases, changed in its delivery all the way up until now. Originally, there was a lot of affirming talk from the US government that there would be no strings attached. And then by mid-April/(early) May the Treasury Department started releasing language and information that was very clear there were going to be strings attached, specifically when it had to do with non-discriminatory practices, employment practices, Title VI and IX, and age discrimination.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects individuals from discrimination based on race, color, or national origin when trying to access benefits or financial assistance under any program funded by the federal government. Title IX protects people from discrimination based on sex when participating in educational programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance.

“Some of [the guidelines are] totally understandable,” Bralley said,

But when it comes to hiring practices, there’s still some gray area on what that’s going to mean in the future. So, all of these funds, they were given without the expectation of you having to pay them back unless you fail to follow the terms and recommendations. And those terms and recommendations have kind of been shifting and developing. You kind of feel like you’re on a little bit of shifting sand in some cases.

Bralley said DeVos and the US Treasury Department tried to ensure that private schools would be able to continue hiring according to their religious beliefs, but he is not confident that will happen. Federal education officials recently informed CAPE and other private school lobbying organizations that their input would be considered, he said, but he believes CARES Act private school funding is on a slippery slope.

What we were leery about when the NAD released the statement on April 8 was that there was a whole lot of this administration sort of shooting from the hip and figuring it out later. . . . We do know that it’s not as it was originally described. And we don’t know what it will ultimately mean for the schools that accepted funds.

The word we’re getting back is that support, mainly from conservative politicians, is starting to wane. And so they’re really starting to pull back. The fear now is if they continue to push and lobby for equal access to the CARES Act funds, it could end up hurting broader support for private schools when it comes to [accessing

funds for] Title II, III and IV. And so that's kind of where we are right now.

Title II provides federal funding for professional training for teachers. Title III is designed to help ensure that English learners attain English language proficiency and meet state academic standards. Title IV refers to federal financial-aid funds at colleges and universities.

Bralley said one example of strings attached to the money is the US Education Department's recent announcement that private schools' use of the ESSER funding would be determined by Title I specifications, which would require the schools to prove that they were using the funding for low-income and/or special-needs students.

There's a lot of angst in the local public-school districts and counties. The political narrative is that rich, private schools are taking funds from poor public schools. Now, the reality is that in most of our private school systems, our student population looks exactly like the economic distribution in the public systems and counties. But that narrative is not the one that has won out, and that's why political support on Capitol Hill has kind of waned. The narrative is you're just fighting for the well-off in requesting any more funds.

The NAD has been trying to track the numbers of schools that received stimulus dollars, Bralley said, but it has not always been easy.

For that information we rely on our union directors, and our union directors rely on our superintendents, and our superintendents rely on our principals, and sometimes those communication lines work very well, and sometimes—due to various reasons—that communication takes more time. But our teachers and administrators have done an amazing job dealing with this crisis. And, in some cases, overnight, they shifted the pedagogy of how they're delivering education, and they just rolled on right into it. And I think that's part of why our enrollment is stable. They made the

shift quicker and better than many of our public and sister schools.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, a denomination based on an eschatology steeped in the inevitability of government infringement on religious rights, boasts the largest Protestant school system in the world and the second-largest private school system next to the Catholic Church. In the North American Division, that amounts to 941 schools, which include, early childhood centers all the way to colleges and universities. The combined enrollment for the 2019–2020 school year, the most recent year for which numbers are available, was 77,315, according to Bralley. Overall, enrollment has been increasing over the past five years, he said, but schools in some parts of the division have been faring better than others. Small schools, with one to two teachers, have been struggling more than midsize to large ones. And, in some cases, administrators have had to reduce staff or combine educational programs.

Before COVID, we did have schools and, in some cases academies, that were already kind of on the edge. And just like families, with very little savings in the bank, if you're already on the edge and something like COVID comes along, you go from living on the edge to crisis quickly. And so, that's kind of the picture we're seeing.

I know right now enrollment numbers appear to be stable. And in some cases, we're seeing increased enrollment. . . . But if you're sitting in the Southern Union in Georgia Cumberland-Conference in a small school and your enrollment is going down, that's what you see. [We] could stand there and say, "Well, the school in California has tripled in enrollment." But it really doesn't help, and so that's the reality.

While many of the schools receive government vouchers, Title I dollars, financial aid, grants, and other funding through various government programs, the debate over the potential hazards of government funding has challenged the denomination practically from its existence.

Alan Reinach is director of the Church State Council, a religious liberty ministry of the Pacific Union Confer-

ence that has strongly opposed school voucher programs. Though expressing empathy and understanding for Adventist schools that struggled financially because of COVID-19, he reiterated his strong belief in the separation of church and state.

“I have long urged that in the Adventist church, we don’t have a financial problem, we have a spiritual problem. The reason why we can’t provide affordable education to every child who wants it is because we have a spiritual problem,” he said in a June interview with *Spectrum*.



Alan Reinach

I don’t know the figures, but I’m told that a relatively modest proportion of members pay a faithful tithe. So if we had far more participation in financing and tithing and offerings, etc, then we really could provide all of our kids with free or low-cost religious education. Government funding becomes a bit of a crutch.

At the same time, other Adventist church leaders, such as Daniel Honore, president of the Northeastern Conference, believe there are times when government funding is warranted. As his conference considered whether to pursue PPP funds, Honore delivered a PowerPoint presentation titled “A Study from the Spirit of Prophecy on Receiving External Assistance.”

Honore told the story of land that was donated to the Adventist church by the British South African Company in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, in the 1890s, for a university and hospital.

“A knowledge of this gift created considerable concern among certain leading brethren at Battle Creek, who feared that to accept it would be a violation of the principles of the separation of church and state,” according to the information provided by Honore.

As the matter was discussed at the General Conference Session of 1895, action was taken, “That we ought not as a denomination either to seek or to accept from any civil government, chief, ruler, or royal chartered company, supreme, local, or otherwise, any gift, or donation, concession, grant, either of land, money, credit, special

privilege, or other thing of value, to which we are not in common with all others justly entitled as men without any reference to our religious profession or religious work.”

However, Ellen White, the denomination’s prophetess and most prominent co-founder, had a different perspective, which led to the General Conference action not being implemented, according to Honore. In the PowerPoint, Honore listed several quotes from White in favor of accepting government assistance in some instances, including one from *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (203).

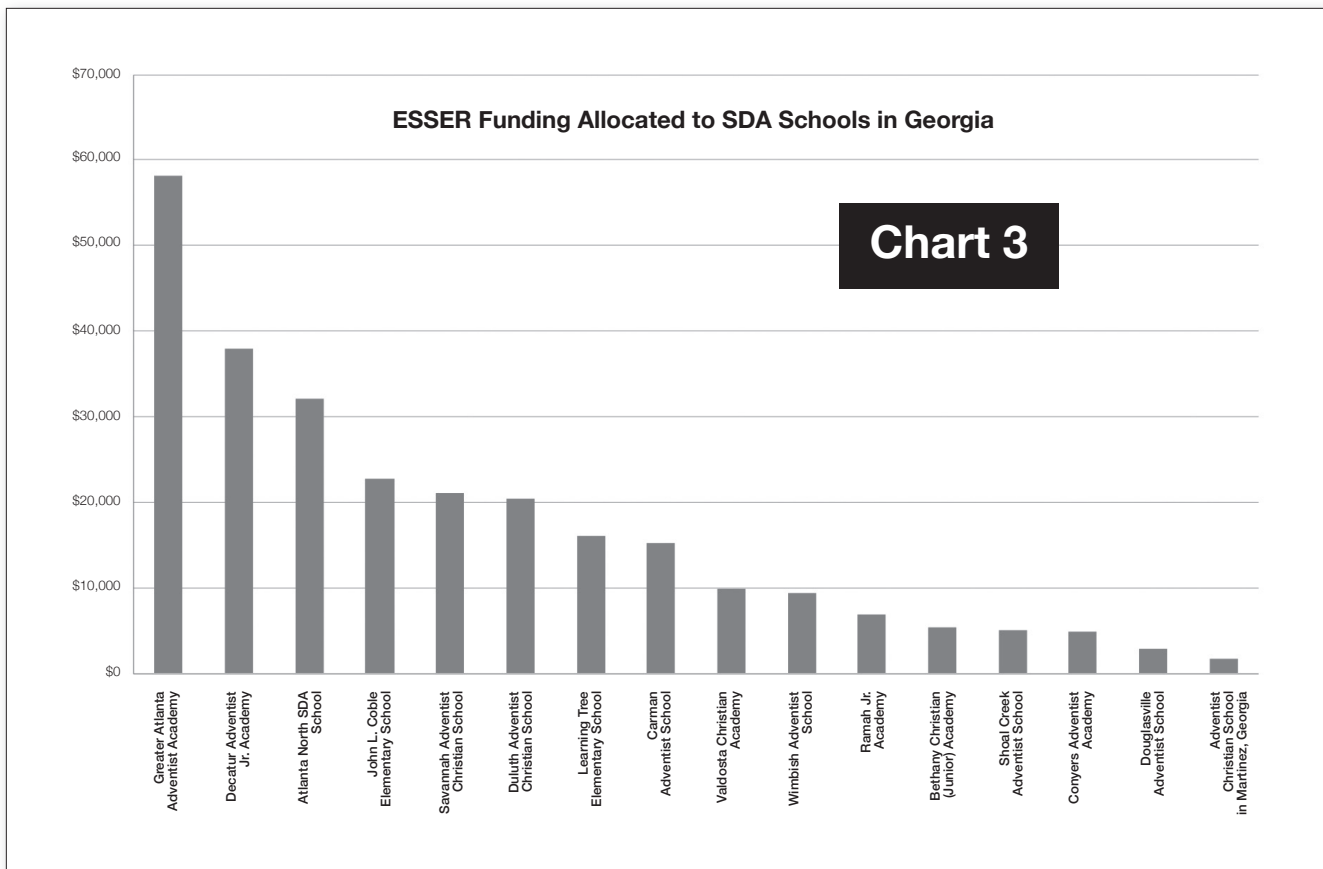
The Lord God of Israel has placed His goods in the hands of unbelievers, but they are to be used in favor of doing the works that must be done for a fallen world. The agents through whom these gifts come may open up avenues through which the truth may go. They may have no sympathy with the work, and no faith in Christ, and no practice in His words; but their gifts are not to be refused on that account.

Kevin Kossick is vice president for education in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference (GCC). He said administrators there followed the NAD’s recommendation not to accept PPP funding, and only one school applied and was approved for a forgivable loan through the US Small Business Administration. However, several GCC schools applied for and accepted funds through the ESSER program for cleaning supplies and other COVID-19 related resources with the conference’s blessing.



Kevin Kossick

I personally believe that this is a time for adherence to our historic feelings about separation of church and state. But I’m okay with them taking money for cleaning supplies and [those kinds of things]. Because, if you look at any educational legal standards, there’s something called the “child benefit theory.” And it has always been understood that private



or parochial schools can take funding from the government if it benefits the child.

At the time of the interview, Kossick said he did not know the amount of money individual GCC schools received through the ESSER program. However, public records obtained from the Georgia Department of Education revealed that the schools are (see Chart 3):

- Wimbish Adventist School - \$9,331.99
- Savannah Adventist Christian School - \$20,991.86
- Shoal Creek Adventist School - \$4,951.21
- Learning Tree Elementary School - \$16,097.19
- Atlanta North SDA School- \$32,125.39
- Decatur Adventist Jr. Academy - \$37,874.15
- Douglasville Adventist School - \$2,816.61
- Adventist Christian School in Martinez, Georgia - \$1,768.63
- Duluth Adventist Christian School - \$20,457.77
- Carman Adventist School - \$15,165.95
- Conyers Adventist Academy - \$4,876.34
- John L. Coble Elementary School - \$22,725.74

- Greater Atlanta Adventist Academy - \$58,143.67
- Valdosta Christian Academy - \$9,911.32
- Bethany Christian (Junior) Academy - \$5,402.73
- Ramah Jr. Academy - \$6,808

Greater Atlanta Adventist Academy, Decatur Adventist Junior Academy, Bethany Christian Academy, and Ramah Jr. Academy are all in the South Atlantic Conference. All the other Georgia schools listed are in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference.

Collegedale Academy, a K–12 school in Tennessee, also located in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference, received an allocation of about \$146,274, according to an article in the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*.

In the early stages of the application process, the conference shared a video with educators, which featured Rebekah Helbley, the former principal at Carman Adventist School, explaining the benefits and pitfalls associated with the government funding. In the video, Helbley said she had been



Rebekah Helbley



working with the city of Marietta to secure funding for sanitization and school supplies.

“It could be used for technology. It could be used for cleaning supplies. It could be used for training your janitor how to clean,” said Helbley. “It could be used for signage in your school for social distancing.”

Though the possibilities seemed endless, Helbley warned of a caveat regarding technology, which, she said, would remain the property of the local school districts.

“And, therefore, if you try and utilize those in a private school, especially in a religious setting, it would be inappropriate or hard to keep track of,” she warned. “However, on the flip side, if you were to use those funds for sanitizing equipment such as wipes, things that don’t have to be kept track of, then you’re good to go.”

Helbley is now the principal at John L. Coble Elementary School in Calhoun, Georgia, which received an ESS-ER financial allocation of \$22,000 for health and sanitization supplies, according to public records. She said the school did not receive funding in cash; all supplies were purchased by the public school system.

“We have the supplies with no strings attached, and we’ve had excellent, excellent interaction with our local community school system in that process,” she said last week in an interview with *Spectrum*. “I feel like we were super, super, super blessed, and a lot of it comes down to the relationships that you have between the local public-school system and the private school.”

Helbley said the funding ultimately benefits students.

They will benefit from maintaining a clean, healthy, and safe space. And, in this instance, the purchasing power of the public-school district is far, far, far greater than the purchasing power of our local schools, because we’re just small independent schools.

However, the recent rulings by the federal judges could impact funding that was not processed before September 17, she said. On that day, Matt Cardoza, director of external affairs for the Georgia Department of Education, sent an email to superintendents notifying them that the funding is on hold.

“As you’ve likely seen, several courts have recently ruled against the US Department of Education’s interpre-

tation . . . of the Equitable Services calculation method for CARES Act funds,” he wrote in the email now posted on the GDOE website.<sup>2</sup>

We do not yet have any guidance from the USED [US Education Department] on any proposed changes as a result of these court rulings. We also do not know if USED will appeal the court decisions.

In light of these circumstances, we are asking that all CARES Act expenditures from all CARES Act grants . . . be halted until Wednesday, September 30, or until we get further communication from USED from which we are able to finalize our own guidance for LEAs [Local Education Agencies] and private schools. We will also be communicating this same message to private schools that met the Equitable Services eligibility under USED’s original interpretation . . . of Equitable Services for CARES Act.

## Schools Across the United States That Received PPP Loans

### \$350,000–\$1 Million

Forest Lake Academy  
Forest Lake Education Center  
Glendale Adventist Academy  
Greater Miami Adventist Academy  
North Dallas Adventist Academy  
North Tampa Christian Academy  
San Gabriel Academy  
Spring Valley Academy

### \$150,000–\$350,000

Dakota Adventist Academy  
Greater New York Academy  
Highland Academy  
Highland View Academy  
Madison Academy  
Milo Adventist Academy  
Newbury Park Adventist Academy  
South Bay Junior Academy  
South Texas Christian Academy  
Sunnydale Adventist Academy

Yet, Helbley does not regret accessing the financial resources.

“I know there’s pushback; I know there’s tons of politics,” she said. “However, at the local level—you know, down here at the bottom—I haven’t had any pushback. I haven’t had any problems; I haven’t had any concerns.”

Karen Senecal, treasurer for the New Jersey Conference, said none of the Adventist schools in that territory applied for PPP funds. Instead, the conference applied for and received \$1.48 million, which allowed administrators to forgive a portion of the amounts the schools owed to the conference.



Karen Senecal

Some New Jersey Adventist schools did, however, receive ESSER allocations, Senecal confirmed. Those on the state list obtained by *Spectrum* through a public records request are:

- Tranquility SDA School - \$1,028
- Lake Nelson Adventist Academy - \$18,229
- Meadow View Junior Academy - \$789
- Waldwick SDA School - \$5,370
- Vine Haven Adventist School - \$14,401
- Wilbert Mays SDA School - \$2,253

Tranquility, Lake Nelson, Meadow View, Waldwick, and Vine Haven are in the New Jersey Conference. Wilbert Mays is in the Allegheny East Conference.

Senecal said the New Jersey Conference has had the highest percentage decrease in tithe money out of all fifty-seven conferences in the NAD, due to the pandemic, and the schools would have been in a financial bind without the stimulus money. The funds helped the conference avoid layoffs and implement health-and-safety measures for the five schools in its territory.

She said the conference received criticism from some church members when they learned that the organization had received PPP funds. Regarding the debate about whether Adventist institutions should accept government money, Senecal said Adventist institutions had been doing so long before COVID.

We are so happy to contact our state tax department and get a nice little tax exemption

when we go to Walmart or Home Depot. We are so happy when we are working with a contractor to make sure that they understand that we’re tax exempt. This is a big part of our lives as Seventh-day Adventist entities.

We also make sure that we jump through any and all hoops and red tape that is put in our way to make sure our properties are exempt from property taxes. And, from state to state around the United States, keeping that tax-exempt status is hard or easy.

Jeremy Garlock is superintendent of schools for the Pennsylvania Conference. He said when COVID hit, conference administrators grappled over whether to accept CARES Act funds, and PPP dollars specifically. Garlock said he was not a part of the discussion,



Jeremy Garlock

but the conference decided to pursue the funds, keeping all the teachers and support staff employed as a result. In one case only did a school not renew some contracts for the 2020–21 school year

As a whole, our conference is doing pretty well when we compare our enrollment this year to last year, conference wide. We have only dipped in enrollment by thirty-seven students. We’ve had a few schools that have actually had a boom, and one that has a waiting list and we’re trying to hire a teacher.

Educators considered ESSER funding for clean-up and mitigation, Garlock explained, and some schools took advantage of the opportunity. However, the conference and schools shied away from any funding with strings that might infringe on or minimize the school’s ability to practice Christian values, he said.

Bralley said he sympathizes with schools that struggled financially because of the pandemic, and he understands why many opted to accept the stimulus money despite the NAD’s recommendation.

My gut tells me they were in pain and trying

to figure out how to meet their financial responsibilities, and that overrode any of these theoretical concerns. At the time, that's what they were—you know, the "what ifs?"

From my office, and the education office as a whole, we have to recognize that when it comes to this type of situation, we're advisory. We're not the ones paying their bills. We're not the ones that hold the titles to the deeds, and the banks aren't knocking on our doors. They ultimately have to figure out how to be financially stable.

For the North Pacific Union, deciding whether to pass the NAD recommendation onto its conferences was not an easy decision, according to Jay Wintermeyer, the union's communication director.

"It was something that was definitely deliberated over because a lot of organizations, a lot of churches, a lot of schools are hurting," Wintermeyer said. "When you have an opportunity for free money that apparently doesn't have any strings attached—at least on the surface—it's hard to say no to that."

Ultimately, the union decided to stick with the NAD recommendation, citing religious liberty concerns.

"We just feel more comfortable leaning on our historical stance of there being a clear separation between government and religion," Wintermeyer said. "We don't know what the future holds, what changes would be made to legislation that if we took this money now, what could possibly happen. We would prefer to err on the side of caution."

Although a union does not have the authority to direct a conference to do or not do something, all of the union's six conferences have withheld from applying for or receiving any government relief funds under the CARES Act, said Wintermeyer in a June interview. However, *Spectrum* did find one of the conference's Oregon schools—Milo Adventist Academy—listed in the US Treasury database. The school received an allocation of between \$150,000 and \$350,000, according to the information.

Several representatives from the union's conferences made it clear that they agree with Wintermeyer's reasoning and are adamant about not accepting or applying for any government funds.

Kevin Miller, superintendent of the Alaska Confer-

ence, said that although the pandemic has caused some financial distress at the schools, the impact has not been alarming.

"We're not at this time recommending anything from the government," he said at the time. "We would rather not be entangled with them if it's not necessary."

Even if conditions were to worsen due to a second wave of COVID-19 cases, Miller said, the conference would not consider applying for any government relief funds.

"I think we're pretty set on that," he said. "We would work for alternative means to help a school out if they needed help."

*M. D. Shuey, a data scientist with DataKind, a volunteer organization that helps journalists and other clients with data analyses, also contributed to this story.*

## Endnotes

1. <https://spectrummagazine.org/news/2020/adventist-organizations-receive-millions-federal-paycheck-protection-loans-despite>.
2. <http://bit.ly/shealy>.



ALVA JAMES-JOHNSON is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Southern Adventist University and an award-winning journalist who has worked for several newspapers across the country. She is a life-long Seventh-day Adventist, active in church ministries, along with her husband and two young-adult children.



JOEL GUERRA is a public relations and business administration major at Southern Adventist University. The Chicago native currently works in freelance journalism and social media management.



PAOLA MORA is an international student from Costa Rica. She is working towards her broadcast journalism degree from Southern Adventist University and is set to graduate in May of 2021. Paola is the editor-in-chief of her school's newspaper, the *Southern Accent*, and, after graduation, plans to work at a local newspaper or at a church magazine.