



How Schools Should Use Funding from the American Rescue Plan to Support Students

MARCH 2021

Overview

The American Rescue Plan provides nearly \$123 billion in emergency Covid relief aid for K-12 schools. This represents the greatest amount of emergency funding for education ever approved by the federal government. As systems prepare to receive their share of the funds, Chiefs for Change developed this memo for states and districts. Information is based on relevant research as well as insights and practices from our members' systems. The memo outlines the areas systems should prioritize in order to best support students during the pandemic and set them up to thrive in the years to come. Priority areas are: reopening schools; accelerating learning; creating strong postsecondary pathways; redesigning assessments and accountability systems; and closing the digital divide.

To avoid fiscal cliffs, we urge systems to be thoughtful about where to use federal dollars in lieu of state and local money. Systems should not pursue strategies in isolation, but should instead develop comprehensive and long-range plans that will help students recover from the current crisis and ensure a better and more equitable education for future generations. When implementing any approach, systems should consider the findings of rigorous research, adopt evidence-based practices, and partner with credible providers that have direct expertise.



Allocation of Funds

- Funds will be provided as formula grants to states, with the allocation based on each state's share of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title I funds received in the most recent fiscal year.
- States will then subgrant funds to local education agencies (LEAs). At least 90 percent of funds must be used for these subgrants.
- Subgrants from the states to LEAs will be based on each LEA's share of Title I funds received in the most recent fiscal year.
- To the extent practicable, states are required to make allocations to LEAs not later than 60 days after receiving the funds.

Requirements

- At the state level:
 - Not less than 5 percent of the states' grants must be used to carry out, directly or through grants and contracts, activities to address learning loss through evidence-based interventions.
 - Not less than 1 percent of the funds must be used to carry out, directly or through grants or contracts, the implementation of evidence-based summer enrichment activities designed to respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs and to address the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on subgroups of students described in ESEA.
 - Not less than 1 percent of the funds must be used to carry out, directly or through grants or contracts, the implementation of evidence-based, comprehensive after-school programs designed to address the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on subgroups of students described in ESEA.
 - Half of 1 percent can be used for administrative costs.
- LEAs receiving subgrants from the state must reserve not less than 20 percent of their grant amount to address learning loss with a similar focus as the 5 percent allocation described above. Outside of this reservation for learning loss, LEAs have wide discretion on the use of funds, including the authority to fund activities authorized under ESEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, and the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act.
- LEAs receiving emergency funds are required to develop and make publicly available a plan for "safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services." LEAs must seek public comment on the plan, and previously developed plans that meet the bill's requirements are deemed as meeting the requirements of the bill.
- States are required to return funds to the U.S. Department of Education that are not obligated directly or suballocated to LEAs within one year of receiving such funds. Returned funds will be reallocated to remaining states.

Total Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Funding:

\$123 billion

Reservation for Homeless Education:

\$800 million

Total ESSER Grants to States:

\$122 billion

(across all states)

10% for state-level activities:

\$12 billion

(across all states)

5% for learning loss (SEA level):

\$6 billion

(across all states)

1% for summer enrichment:

\$1 billion

(across all states)

1% for comprehensive after-school programs:

\$1 billion

(across all states)

.5% for administration:

\$610 million

(across all states)

90% for LEA allocations:

\$110 billion

(across all LEAs)

20% for learning loss (LEA level):

\$22 billion

(across all LEAs)

The information about the Covid relief package is based on a review of the measure by our partners at Penn Hill Group.

Priority Areas

REOPENING SCHOOLS AND KEEPING THEM OPEN

Since the start of the pandemic, America has seen the devastating effects that disrupted learning, unsafe homes, and social isolation have on children. Millions of students still have not returned to the classroom. Disconnected from the critical in-person supports that schools provide, children are experiencing trauma, stress, and tremendous learning loss. And the untold financial consequences of school closures are harming families, communities, and the national economy. Until we fully reopen our schools, our country cannot begin to recover.

As such, we encourage districts to use additional emergency Covid relief funds to implement measures that protect health and ensure schools can safely reopen as soon as possible—and can remain open—for critical in-person teaching and learning. These measures include personal protective equipment; routine Covid testing for students and staff; vaccinations for employees; and ventilation upgrades. Our [Schools and Covid-19 website](#) provides [resources](#) that districts of any size can use to support safe reopenings.

ACCELERATING STUDENT LEARNING

During the pandemic, systems have struggled to provide rigorous, grade-level learning. And with two disrupted school years, students have fallen behind—many, substantially so. To address learning loss and accelerate student progress, we urge districts to implement strategies outlined in [this report](#) published in partnership with the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy. The report draws on scientific studies, lessons from international systems, and the insights of education leaders on the ground. It highlights recommendations we believe will have the greatest impact on student achievement and wellbeing during this unprecedented period in our nation's history. The recommendations include:

- Transitioning to a longer and more flexible academic year.
- Implementing staffing models that ensure students are taught by teachers with deep subject-matter and instructional expertise, while other educators provide one-on-one academic and social-emotional support.
- Focusing on students' social and emotional wellbeing and skills, including by providing opportunities for children to practice self-regulation, perseverance, and ownership of their learning.
- Adopting high-quality instructional materials with robust teacher supports that are aligned to formative and summative assessments.

In addition, we encourage systems to prioritize early literacy initiatives that are grounded in the science of reading.

CREATING STRONG POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS

High school seniors are facing an uncertain future dominated by the widespread economic fallout of Covid-19. The crisis has serious ramifications for individual students, their families, and our society overall. Freshmen enrollment [declined](#) 13.1 percent last fall as compared to the previous year.

The majority of jobs in the United States require some postsecondary education or training and, even before the pandemic, there were persistent concerns about the cost of attending a college or university. It is more important than ever for K–12 systems to support students in their postsecondary planning and to ensure they have affordable pathways to college and good jobs in high-growth, high-demand fields. We urge systems to seize this opportunity and implement the recommendations outlined in our [Blueprint for Postsecondary Success](#). These include:

- Investing in systems to track postsecondary outcomes data such as data on college enrollment, persistence, and completion; enlistment in the military; and employment and earnings. Data should be disaggregated by key demographics and tied to individual secondary schools, school districts, and institutions of higher education.
- Working with community colleges, employers, and training providers to create new and better career pathways for all students.
- Eliminating approaches to career and technical education that are not aligned with industry demands and replacing them with programming that effectively prepares students for a job where they can earn a competitive wage.
- Creating low- or no-debt options and competency based pathways to associate's and bachelor's degrees.
- Adopting other approaches that combine online flexibility with accountability, in-person advisory supports, and ongoing opportunities to earn industry recognized certifications.

CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Covid-19 has made clear to the public what those in education have long known: America needs universal broadband. Nearly 17 million students across the nation do not have access to high-speed internet. The problem disproportionately affects children of color, those from low-income families, and students who were already behind in their learning. We urge systems to use federal emergency relief aid to implement solutions that will ensure all students have the devices and connectivity they need to learn and thrive in today's modern world. A number of promising local initiatives are outlined in [this brief](#) we published last fall.

REDESIGNING ASSESSMENTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

The challenges of the pandemic and subsequent recovery period provide an opportunity to reimagine accountability systems and assessments in ways that incentivize educators to ensure students build the deep knowledge and critical-thinking skills they need to become productive and engaged members of society.

Measures of math and reading proficiency and growth remain essential. They do not, however, give a full picture of whether a child is on track to thrive as an adult. The pandemic has heightened the need for assessments that are student-centered and seamlessly aligned with innovative models of teaching and learning. Assessments must not be limited to a few content areas, but must seek to measure a broader set of skills that more clearly signal college and career readiness and that provide valid, varied, and richer data on outcomes for educators, policymakers, and the public.

We urge states to allocate a portion of their relief aid to piloting new assessment and accountability systems that can provide insights into what is possible for understanding—and improving—student learning now and in the years to come.