



Questions to Ask Districts About How They Will Use New Federal Funding to Support Students

The [American Rescue Plan](#) (ARP) Act provides almost \$125 billion for education, including at least \$109 billion that goes directly to local school districts. The amount of funding each state and school district [receives](#) is based on the share of that state or district's Title I funding, and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) [has already begun sending](#) these resources out. In April, ED released a [state application](#) for the remaining funds. States must submit this application describing how the state will use ARP funds no later than June 7, 2021. School districts must develop high-quality plans, with engagement and input from stakeholders, for how they will use the ARP education funding — and they must publicly share these plans.

This unprecedented investment in education provides states and school districts with a chance to close opportunity gaps that existed prior to COVID-19, especially for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, students with disabilities, and students experiencing homelessness. For perspective, the total investment in K-12 schools through the three federal packages signed into law — ARP, the [Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security](#) (CARES) Act in April 2020, and the [Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act](#) in December 2020 — is nearly twice the \$100 billion that was invested in schools through the [2009 American Reinvestment and Recovery Act](#) to address the impacts of the Great Recession. Unlike those 2009 resources, the vast majority of funding provided over the last year will be directly awarded to school districts.

District leaders must target these new resources to the students who need it most, and leverage this federal investment to drive significant change in our education system. Local stakeholders, including students, families, community members, advocates, and educators, must remain vigilant to ensure these funds are not used to just do more of the same that would lead us back to a world of “pre-COVID” inequity. Now is the time to get engaged.

TO ENSURE FEDERAL STIMULUS FUNDS ARE USED EQUITABLY, HERE'S WHAT ADVOCATES AND FAMILIES SHOULD ASK DISTRICT LEADERS:




How is the district meaningfully engaging a diverse and representative set of stakeholders – including students, [families](#), educators, and the broader community – in developing a plan to use these funds and implementing that plan?

It is critical that district leaders listen to those who have a deep understanding of and are most affected by the district's education system — including students, families, educators, school leaders, community members, and advocates. ED's [ARP application](#) explicitly requires states and districts to develop coherent and public plans — based on broad stakeholder engagement and input — about how they will use these funds. Stakeholders' needs, perspectives and experiences are critical if districts are going to apply an equity lens to the allocation of ARP funds to ensure that these new dollars are used to build more inclusive and equitable systems than those that existed before COVID-19.



District leaders should:

- Create and sustain a regular feedback loop with students, families, educators, and community members, including advocates at the local level, to ensure that their priorities are reflected in district decisions. These efforts can be institutionalized by creating commissions, working groups, and/or convenings and giving a diverse set of stakeholders, who reflect the full student population, a seat at the table.
- Engage and document input and support from a diverse and representative set of stakeholders in developing local plans to use additional federal and state funding. This includes implementing strategies to accelerate student learning that draw on successes and innovations from the community and are evidence-based, culturally affirming, and designed to ensure equity and meet the needs of all learners, including English learners and students with disabilities.
- Provide training and financial support to schools to create or sustain meaningful student, family, and community engagement.
- Reach out to community-based organizations that serve high-need communities to draw on their expertise and share needed resources. Together, you can educate and inform families and advocates about new resources available, including opportunities to accelerate student learning and meet students' social, emotional and academic needs.

	<p>What data will the district use to identify student needs — including needs that were unmet prior to the pandemic — and monitor how students are progressing?</p>
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While COVID-19 has affected nearly every student, it has exacerbated inequities for America's most underserved students. Districts must take an equity-centered approach to identify students' social, emotional, and academic needs using the data they have on hand or collecting new data when necessary.

District leaders should:

- Use data to identify the current state of resource equity within the school district so the district can disrupt patterns of inequity. Districts can refer to the Alliance for Resource Equity's [District Resource Equity Diagnostic](#) to ensure they are taking a comprehensive approach.
- Conduct a racial equity audit to identify how different groups of students were impacted during the pandemic and where resources should be allocated to meet students' needs and expand opportunity for all students.



- Provide timely, accessible, transparent, and ongoing data for each school, grade, and student group on student achievement and a broad array of other opportunity-to-learn data, including data on instructional model (e.g., remote, hybrid, in-person) and instructional time; student and teacher access to technology; chronic absenteeism; use of exclusionary discipline; results from student, staff, and family surveys of school climate; access to advanced coursework; and access to strong and diverse educators.
- Identify short- and long-term goals based on data to assess district and school progress and to determine whether the district's plan is addressing student needs and improving equity in your district. Publicly report on progress to these goals at least annually.
- Report transparent and easily accessible information on the local uses of funds, including data on which groups of students are served by programs supported by these funds.

	<p>How will the district ensure funding is targeted to the students who need it the most?</p>
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Equitable and adequate funding plays a key role in helping schools serve, support, and educate students from vulnerable and systematically neglected populations. Funding disparities mean differential access to the opportunities and resources students need to thrive — well-qualified and supported educators; curricular resources that are affirming of individual identities; culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy; social, emotional, mental, and physical health services; up-to-date technology, materials, and supplies; and adequate facilities, including sufficient broadband access.

District leaders should:

- Equitably distribute additional federal funds to schools. Per-pupil allocations of federal stabilization funds should be greater in schools serving high concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, English learners, students experiencing homelessness, and students in foster care.
- Shield the highest-need schools from cuts in resources, including funding and staff and salaries — as required under the maintenance of equity provisions in ARP — and programming.
- Ensure federal funding is used to support vulnerable and systematically neglected populations. While the ARP provides some specific funding to support the needs of [students experiencing homelessness](#) and [students with disabilities](#), much of the funding is flexible. That means district leaders have an opportunity and responsibility to direct funding toward uses that will specifically meet the needs of underserved students. It is also important to ensure ARP funds are used for maximum, equitable impact by strategically coordinating the use of these funds with other federal programs, including Title I, Title III, IDEA, McKinney-Vento, etc.



How will the district target additional resources, including federal stimulus funding, to create safe and equitable learning environments and provide whole child supports, particularly for vulnerable and systematically neglected students?


All students deserve to learn in an environment where they feel they belong, where they have their [identity affirmed](#), where they are engaged and have agency in their learning, and where they receive the social, emotional, mental, and physical supports they need to learn, develop, and thrive. Students from vulnerable and systematically neglected populations have faced and will continue to experience additional challenges that impede their learning due to the pandemic.

District leaders should:

- Prepare schools to provide safe, in-person instruction, including through adequate testing and contact tracing; building upgrades to replace ventilation systems; supplies and support needed to implement basic public health protocols such as masking, distancing, and hand washing; and by prioritizing underserved communities for COVID-19 vaccination. ARP funds can be used for these purposes.
- Protect — and where possible, expand — district funding for whole child supports, including social, emotional, mental, and physical health and development. This must include additional funding for school counselors, psychologists, and other mental health providers, especially in high-need schools. It must also include training and ongoing support to teachers, leaders, and other school-based personnel regarding culturally responsive, anti-bias instructional practices.
- Provide guidance and support, including high quality professional development, to educators and school leaders to support students' academic, social, and emotional recovery from the pandemic. This should include guidance on fostering the strengths and assets students have built over the past year, while also providing the supports students need given the challenges they face (e.g., wraparound services, culturally sustaining and justice-focused curricula, and positive discipline practices).
- Invest in a coordinated districtwide effort — including working with community-based organizations — to identify and proactively re-engage students who are offline, hard to find, or have left school altogether because of school closure.
- Prohibit the use of suspensions and expulsions for minor offenses; use ARP funding to move away from policing in schools and to support restorative practices; and, in the [19 states](#) where it is still allowed, ban the use of corporal punishment.



- Prohibit the use of exclusionary discipline practices in virtual learning settings, such as blocking students from virtual learning platforms or suspending their school email accounts, for minor offenses (e.g., dress code violations).
- Use federal stimulus funds, as well as state funds, to invest in proven strategies for recruiting and retaining a well-prepared, diverse workforce, given the research that teachers of color make a difference for all students, [especially students of color](#).
- Promote and provide targeted digital literacy training for [parents and families](#) of vulnerable students, including families who do not speak English, families with disabilities who may need adaptive technology, and families who are housing-insecure.

	<p>How will the district implement evidence-based strategies to address unfinished instruction, accelerate learning, and respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs?</p>
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The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unfinished instruction that will affect most students, but will have a [disproportionate impact](#) on students from historically marginalized populations. In recognition of this gap, the ARP requires that districts spend at least 20% of the funding they receive to address unfinished instruction, particularly for the most underserved students impacted by COVID-19. Because these inequities did not begin a year ago, districts and schools should prepare to accelerate student learning for many months, and possibly even years, to come. These [briefs from Ed Trust and MDRC](#) can help district and school leaders make critical decisions on how to implement evidence-based strategies to accelerate learning, including [targeted intensive tutoring](#) and [expanded learning time](#). The briefs also highlight research-based interventions to [build and maintain strong relationships](#). Without strong relationships and connections between students and school staff, educators cannot help students catch up.

District leaders should:

- Engage a diverse and representative set of stakeholders to develop an equity-centered plan to use additional federal and state funding to implement evidence-based strategies to accelerate student learning and meet students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Such strategies may include targeted intensive tutoring and expanded learning time. Updated plans must recognize and address the deep and lasting impacts of interrupted and unfinished instruction.
- Use data on student outcomes and other measures of student well-being to inform decisions about which schools or groups of students will be prioritized for accelerated learning interventions.



- Provide training and ongoing support to school leaders to implement accelerated learning strategies in ways that will positively impact students, such as using data to identify areas of unfinished learning; training and supervising tutors and/or teachers; selecting curriculum and instructional materials that are aligned to high standards, appropriately challenging for students' grade level, and culturally sustaining; organizing the core part and any additional time in the school day to maximize learning; and fostering positive relationships between students and adults in the school.
- Provide sample schedules to help schools identify ways to maximize and target instructional time for the students who need it the most.
- Regularly evaluate and adjust plans to ensure students are equitably and effectively getting the supports they need to succeed.
- Partner with community-based organizations who work with students to ensure all students, particularly students of color, students living in poverty, students with disabilities, English learners, students experiencing homelessness, students in the foster care system, students who are incarcerated, undocumented students, and students who identify as LGBTQ, have access to high-quality opportunities to learn and grow after school and over the summer.
- Re-engage high school students who have fallen off-track to graduate and who need additional support to navigate the transition to college and career. This could include investing in dual enrollment programs and CTE programs that are tailored to local needs and careers of the future, and expanding college and career counseling and financial aid support.