

April 28, 2021

Acting Assistant Secretary Ian Rosenblum
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202

RE: Opportunities for the U.S. Department of Education Regarding Unfinished Instruction, Accelerated Learning, and Tutoring

Dear Acting Assistant Secretary Rosenblum:

We write to express our collective expertise and recommendations regarding the distribution of American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP) funds for unfinished instruction due to the COVID-19 crisis. We use the term “unfinished learning” as opposed to “learning loss” or “learning gaps,” to describe material that should have been presented to students, but has not yet been mastered. With this phrasing, our goal is to redirect any focus on “fixing students” toward a focus on systemic changes to truly meet the needs of students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education for all students, and exacerbated inequities for Black, Latino, and Native students; students from low-income backgrounds; students with disabilities; English learners; and students experiencing homelessness. There is now more evidence that the amount of unfinished learning due to the pandemic will be substantial, particularly for underserved students and those in the elementary grades. These effects are likely to be long-lasting and detrimental to students’ long-term academic success unless they are confronted as early as possible with the most effective and targeted strategies possible.

In recognition of the urgent need to address these gaps, Congress provided federal resources at the state and local level to accelerate student learning. Its most recent relief effort — the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 — requires that states and school districts set aside a portion of these funds to “address learning loss through the implementation of evidence-based interventions.” **Given this new and necessary funding to address unfinished learning, we urge the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) to support states and districts in implementing evidence-based interventions that are effective and most likely to accelerate learning for our nation’s underserved students.** Evidence is clear that, when implemented under the right conditions, one of the most effective strategies for catching students up is targeted, intensive tutoring.

The Department must continue to make clear — as demonstrated in the ARP application — that states have a role in guiding local policies to ensure that high-impact tutoring programs are evidence-based so that they, in turn, effectively address unfinished learning for those students most in need of additional support. States should set rigorous standards for high-impact tutoring programs that are in line with research evidence, utilize state set-asides to support the adoption and implementation of such

programs, target programs to students most impacted by the pandemic, and devise metrics that gauge learning gains for participating students. States should also provide technical assistance to local educational agencies to help them design and implement evidence-based tutoring programs that meet the needs of their students, especially those that have been historically underserved.

Below, we outline additional considerations for the Department as it looks to support states and school districts in implementing targeted, intensive tutoring to address unfinished instruction and accelerate students' learning.

Immediate Considerations for the Department as Funds are Allocated for Summer 2021

Summer is just around the corner, and states and districts must begin planning immediately for how to use the summer months to re-engage students with opportunities for enrichment through the arts, STEM, and other rigorous and engaging learning activities; to accelerate students' learning; and to address a range of social and emotional needs so students are ready to learn. Districts should seek to provide consistent, intensive tutoring as soon as possible to as many students as available staffing allows. Leaders should prioritize students who have experienced the most unfinished learning and students in grades K-5 who, according to research, may benefit most from tutoring. Additional guidance from the Department will be critical to help state and district leaders use federal and state funds to quickly assess students' unfinished learning and target high-quality tutoring to the students most in need.

Long-Term Considerations (Beyond Summer 2021)

Given the significant amount of unfinished learning that many students have experienced, and the significant amount of funding provided to high-poverty districts, supporting thoughtful implementation of targeted, intensive tutoring for students should extend well beyond summer 2021. The Department can play a critical role in helping states and school districts understand, invest in, and implement targeted, intensive tutoring in ways that not only help students make up for unfinished learning, but also accelerate their learning. Without additional guidance, states and districts may use federal funds to implement strategies, activities, or interventions that are ineffective and unlikely to address the gaps exacerbated by COVID-19, particularly for underserved students. We urge the Department, at a minimum, to require disaggregated reporting on which strategies schools implement and how well they are implemented, to issue guidance, and to provide technical assistance that supports states and districts in making the following decisions:

Student-Tutor Ratio

Research shows that two students per tutor is the most efficient and effective way to accelerate students' learning. When there are more students who need individualized tutoring than there are tutors, some schools have placed three or four students with a single tutor; however, without specialized training, it can be more challenging for tutors to effectively and positively manage behavior.

Therefore, it is even more important to ensure that tutors with larger groups have high-quality, positive classroom management training.

Scheduling and Location

Research shows that tutoring is most effective when offered during the regular school day and school year. Attendance, especially for older students, may be challenging, if tutoring sessions are offered only after school or during the summer (and thus voluntary). Additionally, tutoring offered during the regular school day and year allows for much greater coordination with the school's regular curriculum, teachers, and parents. While summer school or after-school programs can be used to provide space and time for targeted, intensive tutoring, they will not be effective unless schools also use traditional school time well to deliver high-quality curriculum and instruction.

Through strategic scheduling, schools can create additional time during the school day to offer intensive, targeted tutoring. For example, double blocking — where students get an extra period a day in a specific subject — can be used to provide students with additional support. Here, the first block is used for tutoring and the second for the core curriculum. This is the approach used by Saga Education, a [highly effective](#) program where two students meet with one tutor during a one-hour daily tutoring session that is part of their regular class schedule. These tutoring sessions occur during the typical school day and replace either a second period of math or an elective course. The time is split evenly between reviewing foundational skills based on a student's unfinished learning and working through the content of a student's current math class.

For tutoring to be effective, it must be high-frequency. Students must receive targeted tutoring for at least 2.5 hours a week (e.g., 30 minutes a day in elementary school or three periods a week in secondary) for at least 16 weeks.

Tutoring should be provided in-person whenever safe and possible. In-person tutoring is far preferable because it fosters strong relationships between tutors and students. Research shows that strong relationships with teachers and school staff can dramatically enhance students' motivation levels and therefore promote learning. However, for students who cannot attend school in-person, online tutoring can be used. We encourage the Department to share the limited evidence for online tutoring to be of assistance to schools and districts who may pursue that option.

Tutors

Certified teachers, paraprofessionals, AmeriCorps members, college students, and other volunteers who receive high-quality training can be effective tutors. And investment in high-quality pre-service and on-going training that includes observations is essential to ensuring positive impacts for students. All tutors should receive pre-service training to ensure they build positive relationships with students, by structuring activities around students' interests and goals and setting high expectations early on. Tutors should be trained to appropriately adjust the lesson to match a student's level of understanding and to use materials in culturally sustaining ways. Tutors who are less familiar with teaching and who have less

training can benefit from a highly structured curriculum, which can help them effectively present material. These tutors also should be supported by more experienced educators.

Tutoring should be made a permanent part of the public school landscape.

Instead of approaching tutoring as a temporary, ancillary intervention for remediating student learning in the short-term, we should seize the moment presented by the pandemic to establish a national, federally funded tutoring infrastructure that can accelerate student learning, especially for our most vulnerable and systematically underserved students, beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

Tutoring should become a routine part of educational practice. While targeted, intensive tutoring can be supported with ARP funds, it is also an ideal expenditure of Title 1 funds, and of other local, state, and federal funding designed to improve schools and diminish opportunity gaps. As tutoring takes on a permanent role in ensuring success for every student, the Department should support research that creates and evaluates new programs to make tutoring even more effective and cost-efficient, especially for secondary students.

Please do not hesitate to reach out with questions or request follow up information. Our organizations are listed below.

Sincerely,

The Education Trust

Education Reform Now

FutureEd

Center for American Progress

Robert E. Slavin; Director, Center for Research and Reform in Education (Johns Hopkins University);

Chairman, Board of Directors (Success for All Foundation)

(Our dear friend Bob Slavin passed away this month. We are grateful for his contribution to this letter and to his lifelong commitment and dedication to using evidence-based research to improve education.)