

Fund a Range of Delivery Models to Meet Student Needs

In addition to the \$67 billion in previous relief appropriations, the American Rescue Plan's (ARP) \$123 billion to the country's K-12 schools represents an unprecedented contribution to the country's public education apparatus. All told, this \$190 billion offers policymakers, families, and students a choice.

One option is to return to the pre-pandemic state of America's schools where only one in five African American fourth graders (and only 35% of all fourth graders) tested proficient or above on the reading portion of the NAEP.¹ This is not a good option. While the pandemic wanes in regions of the country, what it exposed about our education systems has not gone away or changed. Learning loss may be the latest term for persistent gaps in student performance, but that "loss" is in addition to gaps that have existed for decades — not instead of them.

Instead, state and local policymakers should embrace a more diversified approach that gives families greater control while meeting the challenge of troubling learning gaps that widened as the pandemic dragged on.

Below are several principles and recommendations that can help state and local policymakers ensure that ARP dollars are used to create a more equitable system of education that meets every child where they are while involving community groups and an array of providers in solving the pandemic's educational challenges.

Key Principles

- For good² and ill, **the habits and expectations of families have changed**, as have the when, where, and what of learning and student engagement.³ Policymakers should approach recovery with the same degree of flexibility.
- When families have found solutions that work for them, wherever they may be, state and local policymakers should **do no harm** and broaden access to these initiatives for more families.
- State and local policymakers should embrace an open source approach. It will take participation from the **public, private, civic, and philanthropic sectors**⁴ to meet this challenge.
- State and local policymakers should **respect parent-driven decision making** and place at the center of ARP funding decisions the free movement of families between different types of schools and programs.
- Policymakers should **create transparency** and public processes, plans, and feedback opportunities to ensure funds are spent according to community context and parental

¹ "National Achievement-Level Results: Grade 4," The Nation's Report Card, National Assessment of Educational Progress, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement?grade=4>.

² Some students have thrived during the era of distance learning. See Joanna Schroeder, "What if Some Kids Are Better Off at Home?" *New York Times*, Aug. 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/10/opinion/coronavirus-school-closures.html>.

³ Outschool, <https://outschool.com/>.

⁴ VELA Education Fund, <https://velaedfund.org/>.

demand;⁵ all proposed expenditures should be publicly available for review before they are finalized.

Recommendations

No one system can solve the broad educational challenges of the pandemic or address preexisting gaps that have only grown since 2020. A modernized approach to education funding that allows for a diverse universe of providers and empowers families with a range of options is essential.

Modernize Education Funding Arrangements

ARP funds provide a once-in-a-lifetime chance for states to modernize how education is funded. This includes reforming school funding formulas while holding many schools and districts harmless. States have the opportunity to make dollars truly follow students while ending disparities in funding based on where a child lives, local property wealth, or whether a child attends a district or charter school, a private school, is homeschooled, or chooses another option. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, states can unwind school finance from the noxious legacy of housing discrimination and residential school assignment that defined much of the 20th century.⁶

In parallel to reforming school funding formulas, however, SEAs and LEAs can and should also use a wide range of funding vehicles *outside* funding formulas to give families greater control as they assemble the learning of their children during the recovery and into the future. There are numerous mechanisms for doing so.

State and local policymakers can:

- Add funding for educational expenses to programs through which families are already receiving state or federal supports. For example, New York is one of many states that awarded funds directly to families so they could purchase food due to COVID school closures through a Pandemic EBT.⁷
- Set a per-child limit and reimburse families directly for educational activities, as Idaho has done with its “Strong Families, Strong Students” program,⁸ and Oklahoma did with its “Bridge the Gap” digital wallet.⁹
- States should consider the creation of Lifelong Learning Accounts — Baby Bonds¹⁰ for education — where ARP funds can be deposited for families. Unused funds can be used for

⁵ “U.S. Education Department Releases State Plan Template for the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund,” U.S. Department of Education, April 21, 2021, <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-education-department-releases-state-plan-template-american-rescue-plan-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund>.

⁶ Dorothy A. Brown, “Your Home’s Value Is Based on Racism,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/20/opinion/home-value-race-taxes.html>.

⁷ “Pandemic-EBT: Food Benefits for Families,” Hunger Solutions New York, <https://hungersolutionsny.org/covid-19/pebt/>.

⁸ “Strong Families, Strong Students Website Is Live,” Idaho State Board of Education, October 21, 2020, <https://boardofed.idaho.gov/resources/strong-families-strong-students-website-is-live/>.

⁹ “Gov. Stitt Announces ‘Bridge the Gap’ Funds to Aid Families with School Materials,” Griffin Communications, <http://www.khits.com/story/5f3490be4c1f2b0c0c932641/gov-stitt-announces-bridge-the-gap-funds-to-aid-families-with-school-materials>.

¹⁰ Landergan, Katherine, “Booker reintroduces ‘baby bonds’ bill to give all newborns a \$1K savings account,” *Politico*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/states/new-jersey/story/2021/02/04/booker-reintroduces-baby-bonds-bill-to-give-all-newborns-a-1k-savings-account-9425345>.

future educational expenditures like college tuition¹¹ and future training and certificate programs¹² to fill the skills gap.

- Incentivize tutoring and enrichment providers to recruit children directly and then draw down ARP funds for services rendered.
- Expand eligibility and increase funding in states that already have Education Savings Accounts, scholarship tax credits, or voucher programs in place.

Wherever possible, SEAs and LEAs should partner with existing organizations and efforts. This includes directing funds to existing recovery and enrichment efforts instead of attempting to replicate or supplant them. For example, a district could use ARP funds to expand the reach of a preexisting philanthropic effort, such as the Haslam Foundation's Tennessee Tutoring Corps.¹³ In addition, SEAs and LEAs should partner with organizations that already have a history of facilitating the educational decision making of parents and families, such as Scholarship Granting Organizations (SGOs) like the Children's Scholarship Fund, Step Up for Students, and Empower Illinois.

Deploying Modern Education Funding Arrangements to Meet Student Needs

If SEAs and LEAs are able to modernize their funding systems to place more decision-making power in the hands of families, they also need to support the cultivation of options that can meet the needs of families. The post-pandemic preferences of families in communities across the country are sure to be varied. SEAs and LEAs will need to consider how more flexible funding systems can support the range of options, including:

- *Summer Programming:* The fall is too late to engage children who have had disparate experiences with distance learning. Academic remediation and acceleration, cultural and social enrichment, SEL interventions, outdoor recreation, camps, and reconnection with their communities during the summer months all provide excellent opportunities to partner with a wide range of public, private, and community providers — in addition to school districts — to catch kids up and make them whole.
- *An In-Person Option:* While some families desire a virtual option and are wary of a return to face-to-face schooling, others are desperate for just such an option. An in-person option for every family that desires one should be foundational. Funds should flow across attendance zones, municipal boundaries, and school sectors (public, private, charter, micro, pod) to enable such an option. State and local policymakers should use federal relief dollars, including Emergency Assistance for Non-Public School Funds, to support this option.¹⁴
- *A Permanent Virtual Option:* A yearlong experiment in virtual learning gave states, schools, and providers of all types the opportunity to build out full programs of instruction for online delivery. We should make these options available in perpetuity for students who need to be caught up and for students who are positioned to have their learning accelerated.¹⁵ This option should be available without regard to the location of the provider or the student.

¹¹ Osborne, David, "The progressive way to ease student debt burdens," *The Hill*, February 18, 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/education/539342-the-progressive-way-to-ease-student-debt-burdens>.

¹² Suffren, Quinten and Dr. Danielle Mezera, "Putting Career and Technical Education to Work for Students: A Playbook for State Policymakers," November 2017, https://excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ExcelinEd.PuttingCTEtoWorkforStudents.APlaybookforStatePolicymakers.November2017.FINAL_.pdf.

¹³ Tennessee Tutoring Corps, <https://tntutoringcorps.org/>.

¹⁴ "Emergency Assistance for Non-Public School Funds," Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education, <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/emergency-assistance-non-public-schools/>.

¹⁵ Florida Virtual School, <https://www.flvs.net/>.

- *A Permanent Tutoring Option:* Tutoring is a support historically reserved for the rich.¹⁶ It should no longer be. Efforts to provide tutoring in the summer and the fall should have an eye toward creating a permanent system of state or locally funded tutoring that allows parents to choose the tutor that best works for them. Community and philanthropic efforts,¹⁷ as well as the extensive private and online tutoring universe currently in place,¹⁸ should be widely used as a part of this effort as states like Rhode Island have already done.¹⁹
- *Support for Homeschoolers:* School districts would be overwhelmed if they were the sole entity tasked with educating America's children after many months of disrupted schooling. We should leverage the first educator — parents — by supporting homeschooling families with direct aid. Hybrid arrangements that support districts with head count in return for direct aid or services to homeschooling families should also be considered.²⁰
- *Pods and Microschools:* While many learned of pods — a catch-all term for small-group in-person instruction — as they proliferated in response to the pandemic, they predate it, with their roots in small private schools,²¹ small tutoring programs, and early learning and community childcare initiatives.²² “Pods” have allowed educators and community leaders to develop highly local learning opportunities for families.²³ They should be a mainstay of the future education landscape.

As students have spent the year gaining knowledge and skills outside of the classroom, and many will continue to do so, it is also essential that state and local policymakers respect this learning as if it happened in school. This requires giving students options to demonstrate learning regardless of seat time and the ability to earn credit toward graduation through apprenticeships and other means outside of the classroom.²⁴

Conclusion

ARP dollars can be used for more of the same or for more of something that is better for all families, students, and communities. And the results will matter. As Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) asserted recently, “Take the money, use it well, and show us the good job you did so we will be empowered to make the argument that money made a difference.” The country's families and communities deserve nothing less.

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¹⁶ The Princeton Review, “Full-service Private Tutoring,” <https://www.princetonreview.com/offer/test-prep-tutors>.

¹⁷ Tennessee Tutoring Corps, <https://tntutoringcorps.org/>.

¹⁸ Schoolhouse.world, <https://schoolhouse.world/>.

¹⁹ “Free Online Tutoring Platform Launched for Rhode Island Students Through RIDE Partnership with Khan Academy Founder,” Rhode Island Department of Education, <https://www.ride.ri.gov/InsideRIDE/AdditionalInformation/News/ViewArticle/tabid/408/ArticleId/724/Free-Online-Tutoring-Platform-Launched-for-Rhode-Island-Students-Through-RIDE-Partnership-with-Khan.aspx>.

²⁰ My Tech High, <https://www.mytechhigh.com/>.

²¹ Acton Academy, <https://www.actonacademy.org/>.

²² Squire, Juliet and Alex Spurrier, “5 Recommendations to Make ‘Learning Pods’ More Equitable,” Ahead of the Heard, Bellwether Education Partners, <https://aheadoftheheard.org/5-recommendations-to-make-learning-pods-more-equitable/>.

²³ Prenda, <https://prendaschool.com/>.

²⁴ “Learn Everywhere,” yes. every kid., <https://yeseverykid.com/ideas/learn-everywhere/>.