



ATTENTION!

HOW TO USE AMERICAN RESCUE ACT FUNDS TO HELP STUDENTS

The American Rescue Act is the third federal package to deliver additional funds to public schools, including charter schools, to address the immediate and lasting effects of the pandemic on students. See frequently asked questions below and how school districts can use these funds to help PA's students.

How Much Money Did Our School District Receive?

You can find out how much your school district received from the two CARES Act packages and American Rescue Act here: <http://www.pccy.org/DistrictFunding>.

In addition, brick and mortar charter schools received \$955 million. And cyber schools received a boon of \$212 million. More details can be found here: <http://www.pccy.org/CharterFunding>.

How Can These Funds Be Used?

The U.S. Congress intended the Rescue Act funds to be spent on the immediate costs associated with educating students during the pandemic and the costs of ensuring students recover any COVID-related lost learning; skill development and/or school readiness so they can succeed in the years ahead. These funds must be spent by September 2024.

Eight principles should guide how school districts, charters, and cyber charters use these funds:

1. Be Transparent and Clear That the Funds Are Temporary
2. Focus on Student Learning and Social-Emotional Skills Needs First
3. Front Load the Spending on Students
4. Address School Building Repairs
5. Solve for Equity Gap
6. Be Ready for the Virus to Continue by Planning for Maximum In-Person Instruction
7. Integrate Technology into All Learning
8. Fill Budget Gaps Caused by Unexpected COVID Expenditures or Reduction in Expected Revenues



1. Engagement and Transparency

Every public school district, charter, and cyber school should be transparent and show the taxpayers in a simple chart how much they received and how they are spending the funds. Districts should be specific about what they are investing in, what parents can expect to see happening with and for children, and how the time-limited nature of the funds is being considered.

The state has very clear requirements that ensure public school districts hold public hearings and release before such hearings their proposed and final budgets for each school year. These hearings are held from March through June. Districts should be making an extra effort to make sure local taxpayers understand their proposed approach to using these funds and asking for input. Ideally, teachers, counselors, principals, and parents are asked for their suggestions for the best use of these funds. Further, everyone in the community has a right to know how the funds will be spent.

What can you do? You can ask your school district to include a special presentation on how the federal funds are expected to be spent and you can make comments about these funds at any school board meeting, in accordance with your school board's public comment policies. Important suggestions for your district include spending a majority of the money on the urgent learning and social-emotional needs of children. To assess those needs, encourage your district to actively gather input from all key stakeholders so they can make well-informed decisions for this critically needed federal relief.

You can evaluate your school district's plan by considering how it aligns with the following principles.

2. Focus on Student Learning and Social-Emotional Skills First

American Rescue Act funds are intended to be spent ON TOP OF WHAT THE DISTRICT EXPECTED TO SPEND to boost student learning and help students redevelop the social skills needed for school success over the next 3.5 years. In addition, the Act recognizes that many students experienced severe hardship during the pandemic including the loss of lives among family members, parental or care-giver job loss, eviction, hunger, and family turmoil. The combination of remote and interrupted in-class learning and the harsh realities of COVID requires schools to consider counseling and additional social-emotional supports so that students can readily restart their in-person learning and for the learning to "stick."

For this to happen, school districts must spend at least 20% of their Rescue Act funds for evidence-based strategies to increase direct instructional and support services to students. Given the urgent needs of students, we urge districts to spend at least 60% of the funds for investments like:

- Summer Learning and Enrichment Programs for Every Student Who Wants It
- Summer and After School Programs for Socialization
- High-Dosage Tutoring for Every Student Who Needs It
- Extra Teachers or Teacher's Aides to Reduce Class Size or Support Students In Class Who Are Struggling
- Accelerated Assessment for Students Who Need IEPs
- Intensive Assistance to Families and Students with Limited English Proficiency
- Providing Social Work Services In School

Because the funds are temporary, districts should design time-limited contracts for all professionals they bring on staff to meet the urgent needs of students.



3. Front Load the Spending on Students

Although the spending can be stretched over 3.5 years, districts should spend at least 50% by the end of the 2021-22 school year. The needs of our students are urgent. These resources make it possible for districts to rapidly help students overcome learning loss and make even more progress. We owe it to our students to deliver on the promise of Build Back Better by doing all we can now with these extraordinary resources to recover lost learning and more so they benefit from the promise of this historic investment in public education.

An essential element of early spending should be support for parents to determine if they think their child is ready to be promoted. Parents need to be able to talk with professionals to help them make the best decision for their child. Every school district should understand that a “COVID social promotion policy” could mean a high rate of student failure in the years ahead.

4. Address School Building Repairs

Far too many school districts could not return to in-person instruction because their schools suffered from decades of under-investment and as a result were in disrepair. These time-limited funds should be deployed immediately to repair facilities and Build Back Better. Not only should ventilation be improved to enable COVID safe instruction, but also where lead, asbestos, and mold problems make it impossible to re-open our schools in a COVID safe manner, funds can be used to remediate these health hazards. These resources can add air conditioning to older schools and repair heating systems that long ago stopped working properly. Where school districts have had the funds needed to keep their schools up to par, these funds can meet planning expansions and renovations and help the community avoid having to pay for these costs in the years ahead.

5. Solve for Equity Gaps

Given the extraordinary toll that the pandemic took on communities of color, school districts can and should use these funds to make real progress closing the racial achievement gap.

First among these uses of funds should be training for all school personnel on the impact of pandemic on children, and especially children of color. Staff should be trained on how to speak to this issue and support students who lost loved ones over the last year and to recognize that the toll was heaviest in Black and Hispanic communities. Likewise, the virus has scared children deeply and those levels of fear are more pronounced among children of color. Children will learn best when they can articulate their fears and build coping skills in their school community to put the pandemic behind them and support each other emotionally.

Specifically, these funds can be spent to ensure students of color are recruited and assessed for their readiness to enroll in Honors and AP courses. To the extent that schools need to expand Honors and AP classes, temporarily, these funds can make that possible. Similarly, where students of color are showing that coursework is too difficult, these funds can be used temporarily to pay for extra help via in-class, afterschool, and summer remediation services. Where schools have disproportionately high rates of



students of color experiencing suspension and expulsion, districts can allocate funds to schools to temporarily add social workers and therapists to put proven extra supports where they are needed to reduce school discipline infractions and improve school climate. Schools can use these funds to get trained on proven strategies for making schools safe like restorative practices and implicit and explicit bias trainings. Further, the funds can be used to tap experts to support the critical conversations with administrators, faculty, parents, and students that identify social and behavioral norms in the district to increase the safety, affiliation, and engagement of students of color in the academic and social life of the school.

Given the widespread anticipated shortages of teachers, districts can also use these funds to improve their new teacher recruitment efforts focused on increasing the diversity of their faculty by using funds to recruit from colleges that are preparing diverse students to become teachers. Districts could also engage these higher education institutions and other experts to provide training to incumbent faculty on instructional methods that compensate for and address implicit bias in order to boost the outcomes of Black and Hispanic students from grades pre-K to 12.

6. Integrate Technology into All Learning

Every teacher and every student got a crash course in using technology to augment the powerful instructional skills of teachers. Part of Build Back Better must be a complete commitment by every school district and principal to continue to creatively add the tools of technology into the way teachers teach with regularity when schools re-open. Districts should immediately engage teachers in creating the frameworks, tools, and expectations for how teachers and students will deploy technology to accelerate and deepen learning.

Furthermore, districts must proactively reach out to parents who have children enrolled in free and reduced-price lunch programs to explain how they can get signed up for a reduction of \$50 a month for Internet services. Families may receive up to six months of this benefit. Families have to sign up for the benefit themselves. Enterprising districts might hold a family sign up day to help low-income families tap this important benefit so that every student can augment their learning with online tools.

7. Be Ready for the Virus to Continue by Planning for Maximum In-Person Instruction

While we all hope and expect that schools will be open for five days of in-person instruction this September, districts should have a backup plan. With these resources, every student can and should still attend school in-person every day. Districts can scan their community to find space that can be rented if their school buildings are not large enough to meet Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) safety guidelines and use Rescue Act funds to pay for needed leases and retrofits. In addition, districts are likely to need to hire extra staff to make daily in person attendance possible, which means they need a Plan B staffing plan in place, and a portion of these Rescue Act funds can cover the costs.



8. Fill Budget Gaps Caused by Unexpected COVID Expenditures or Reduction in Expected Revenues

Some school districts have suffered a reduction in expected revenue for this school year. And, every school district has had to absorb unexpected costs for remote instruction, COVID safety protocols, and, in many cases, skyrocketing cyber and charter tuition payments.

School districts should be explicit about the amount of these costs and how much of these costs can be offset in anticipated revenue growth including funds from rising real estate values, EIT collections, and the first two COVID relief packages. To the greatest extent possible, funds from the Rescue Act should be spent for additive services and costs rather than filling budget holes.

Some school districts will want to preserve some Rescue Act funding to protect their budgets in the case that the economy slows down over the next 3.5 years. We know our students are suffering now, thus school districts should spend the funds now responsibly.

Will These Funds Be Enough for My School to Offer a Quality Education to My Children?

The Pennsylvania Senate Republicans have directed school districts to use the federal funds to meet critical budget gaps caused by the crisis including lower than expected tax collections, unanticipated costs for COVID-safe instruction, and to address the myriad learning needs of students interrupted by the pandemic. They emphasize that these funds are “temporary in nature and will not be included in future recurring federal appropriations...Accordingly school districts should not use one-time federal funding to increase ongoing, baseline spending.”

However, they didn't say that they would support any increases in state funds for districts' unavoidable increases in spending due to state-required payments for public school employee pensions and charter schools. Across the 500 school districts, just these two costs rose by more than \$600 million this year and next year they could increase by another \$500 million. We support the state lawmakers' caution that school districts must use the new funds on time-limited/one-time expenditures. That means the state can and should increase the amount of funding it allocates to school districts to meet the recurring state required expenses.



What Can You Do? Call your state lawmakers and urge them to support the \$1.5 billion increase in recurring funds for schools as proposed by Governor Wolf.

Find more information here: <http://www.pccy.org/gamechangingaction>

