

American Rescue Plan Funds Can Transform Education for Young Adults

State policymakers can tap federal stimulus funds to accelerate learning and support young adults' transitions from high school to postsecondary and careers.

Introduction

The recently passed American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) provides states with an unprecedented opportunity to use federal stimulus funds to create innovative educational programs to support students who have fallen behind—including the millions of high school students who have disappeared from schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. And states must strive to do more than use ARPA funds to return their educational systems to the pre-pandemic status quo. Our educational systems were not producing equitable outcomes even before the pandemic. With billions of dollars in new funding at their disposal, states must aim for far-reaching and long-lasting systemic changes that help accelerate students toward postsecondary opportunities and careers.

The number of young people who are not connected to school or work is estimated to have more [than doubled](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic. And many students who have remained connected to their high schools have fallen behind academically and are less likely to be [completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#) (FAFSA) or considering college. This is disproportionately true for students who are members of underrepresented populations and those living in high-poverty communities.

This crisis demands a response that is focused not just on catching students up academically, but also on reengaging them with learning—especially those who have disappeared from education entirely. And it presents an opportunity to fundamentally rethink the connections

among high school, college and work. States, school districts and other stakeholders can help build new and improved education systems that make clearer connections to labor market needs, reduce the time it takes students to earn postsecondary credentials, provide students with opportunities to build social capital, and effectively teach them to “learn how to learn” so they succeed in an ever-changing world.

Equitably allocating and effectively spending funds for education provided through the ARPA is no small feat for states and localities. Therefore, JFF and the National Governors Association have compiled the following list of funding strategies that states can adopt to effectively support the students who are most in need.

Options for Spending American Rescue Plan Funds

States and local education agencies (LEA) will have flexibility in the way they spend the funds they will receive under the ARPA.

The amount of ARPA money LEAs will receive will depend on the share of funds they receive under Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. They will be able to use ARPA funds to cover educational expenses that are allowed under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), and the Individuals with Disabilities Act.

LEAs will be required to use at least 20 percent of their stimulus funds to accelerate learning and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on underrepresented student groups. They will be able to allocate the remaining 80 percent based on local needs and priorities, including the need to rebuild their educator pipelines.

For more information, visit the U.S. Department of Education’s [fact sheet](#) on the ARPA’s Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund.

Recommended Strategies for Utilizing ARPA Education Funds for Accelerated Learning

Reconnection Strategies to Reengage Students With Learning and Work

Why

Millions of high school students have [disappeared from schooling](#)—they’re either not logging on to remote lessons or they’re participating only sporadically. Emerging data suggests that the population of young people not connected to school or work has likely [more than doubled](#). Partnerships between school districts and community-based organizations (CBO) can help reengage young people and get them back on track to a high school credential and postsecondary readiness.

How

LEAs can use ARPA funds to reengage students in learning and work by partnering with local organizations—including CBOs, employers, community colleges, alternative high schools, and training organizations—to provide pathways and supports that connect disconnected youth to education and employment opportunities. With the support of local partners, LEAs can connect with students who have become disengaged and support them in building college- and career-readiness skills, perhaps through transition counseling focused on college knowledge and success strategies, employment readiness, and personalized career guidance. This can include allocating additional resources for FAFSA completion initiatives, support for students taking standardized tests—including stipends to defray the cost of fees—and assistance with college applications.

Examples

- [College Bridge for All](#): Launched in 2016 in collaboration with the New York City Department of Education, College Bridge for All works to increase college enrollment by hiring and training college students to advise graduating high school seniors through the process of choosing and applying to colleges, applying for financial aid, and transitioning to postsecondary education.
- [Colorado Youth for a Change \(CYC\)](#): CYC’s mission is to curb high school dropout rates. Each year, the organization’s engagement team reaches out to more than 3,000 young

people who have left school early without a diploma. CYC is partnering with school districts across Colorado to connect with students who have recently become disengaged from school.

- [Back on Track](#): Deployed in multiple locations across the country, JFF's Back on Track model has shown remarkable results. For example, schools and programs in [Texas](#) have created Back on Track pathways for students who have fallen off track or disengaged from school. The model provides clear strategies for reengaging young people and transitioning them to postsecondary education and career opportunities.

Resources

- [National Service: A Lifeline for Disconnected Young People](#): A JFF blog calling for the creation of a national service corps of 18-to-26-year-olds.
- [Back on Track](#): JFF's proven model for improving the lives of low-income young people who are not in school or fully employed.

Provide Students With Learning Opportunities That Are Clearly Aligned With Careers, Such as Work-Based Learning

Why

Students need more than credentials to advance in the economy; they need to gain work experience, develop meaningful relationships with working professionals, and build up their social capital. Increasing high-quality work-based learning opportunities, including virtual opportunities and real-world work experiences connected to labor market demands, can better prepare students for success in postsecondary education and careers. They can also reengage students and young people who have fallen off track or have become disconnected by helping them connect what they are learning in the classroom to the world of work, especially through apprenticeship pathways. Additionally, students can earn money in high-quality work-based learning programs, an especially important consideration for low-income and disconnected youth, who often need to support themselves and their families while pursuing their educations.

How

LEAs can use ARPA funds to provide students with a continuum of work-based learning opportunities, including career exposure activities (for example, company tours or job

shadowing programs), career engagement programs (such as internships or pre-apprenticeships that provide students with extended opportunities to increase their knowledge of fields in which they've expressed interest), and career experience programs (such as apprenticeships in which students have opportunities to earn money as they develop in-demand skills). LEAs can also use their ARPA funds to purchase educational technologies that support remote-work-based learning opportunities.

Examples

- Delaware: The state's departments of education and labor, Delaware Technical Community College, the United Way of Delaware, the Rodell Foundation and the Delaware Workforce Development Board work together through the [Delaware Office of Work-Based Learning](#) to pool their resources to provide young people with high-quality work-based learning experiences connected to the state's key industries.
- Hawai'i: Officials have used federal [CARES Act funds](#) to provide new internships and certification programs in Maui and Oahu counties. The state also used CARES Act money to develop a competitive grant from the University of Hawai'i Community College system to underwrite new apprenticeship programs in IT, health care, clean energy, and the skilled trades.
- Pennsylvania: A Philadelphia-based member of The Corps Network, [PowerCorpsPHL](#), provides high-quality work-based learning opportunities to opportunity youth: young adults ages 16 to 24 who do not have connections to school or employment. Among other things, the organization prioritizes participant voices when designing activities, collaborates with employers to establish performance metrics, maps classroom learning with on-the-job activities, and provides participants with stipends and wraparound supports to ensure that they stay engaged.
- Nationwide: With support of the U.S. Department of Labor's Apprenticeship Expansion and Modernization Fund, JFF is working in [multiple locations across the country](#) to increase access to Registered Apprenticeship programs for opportunity youth. JFF provides intensive, hands-on support to help build the capacity of youth-serving organizations, workforce development boards, municipal agencies and employers. It is also supporting the expansion of pre-apprenticeships that lead to Registered Apprenticeships.

Resources

- [Expanding High-Quality Work-Based Learning](#): A report by JFF and the Education Commission of the States.
- [College and Career Pathways: A Strategy for State Economic Success](#): A JFF brief with recommendations for ways state policymakers can jump-start college and career pathways initiatives.
- [Planning Tool for Building Equitable Pathways](#): A JFF planning tool to help organizations become more effective intermediaries.
- [Making Apprenticeship Work for Opportunity Youth](#): A JFF report with guidelines for helping young people who are out of school and unemployed succeed in work-based learning programs.
- [State Strategies to Scale Work-Based Learning](#): A report from the National Governors Association.
- [Creating a Responsive and Sustainable Statewide Work-Based Learning Structure](#): A reference guide from the National Governors Association.

Reduce the Time It Takes Students to Earn Postsecondary Credentials Through College in High School Programs and Other Initiatives

Why

College in high school models, including dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and early college, are proven mechanisms for improving both student access to postsecondary education and success in college, particularly for low-income youth and members of underrepresented populations. These programs expose secondary school students to college coursework, providing a reengagement vehicle that can benefit students who are at risk of not continuing to postsecondary education. Because these types of programs have proved to successfully accelerate academic progress, they are also a means of addressing learning loss for students who would respond positively to the college learning environment.

How

LEAs can use ARPA funds to develop, implement, or expand college in high school models, such as dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, early college high schools and postsecondary transition programs that focus on career and technical education. They can also use funds to eliminate out-of-pocket expenses for students participating in these programs, provide wraparound supports to participants, and develop best practices and structures for online college in high school offerings.

Examples

- Alaska and Montana: The Governor's offices of [Alaska](#) and [Montana](#) used discretionary funds provided in the CARES Act under the Governor's Emergency Education Relief fund to support dual enrollment programs. For example, the University of Alaska dedicated some of its CARES funding to expand its online dual enrollment programs to give students from all districts access to college-level courses. And in Montana, the state university system received \$6.5 million to offer free dual enrollment courses to high school students, fund technology upgrades, and provide workforce training.

Resources

- [Dual Enrollment for Students From Special Populations](#): A JFF report detailing strategies for improving college transitions for English learners, students with disabilities, foster youth, and young people experiencing homelessness.
- [Unlocking Potential: A State Policy Roadmap for Equity and Quality of College in High School Programs](#): A report from the College in High School Alliance.
- [Postsecondary Bridging Strategies for Low-Income Youth Who Are Not in School or Fully Employed](#): The postsecondary bridging phase of JFF's Back on Track model provides young people who have a diploma but are not in school or work with a strong start on college and career success.
- [Education Topic Papers: A Governor's Dual Enrollment Framework for Success](#): A report from the National Governors Association focused on the role Governors play in advancing policies related to dual enrollment programs.
- [Inequities in Advanced Coursework: What's Driving Them and What Leaders Can Do](#): A report from the Education Trust.

Strengthen and Diversify the High School to College Educator Workforce

Why

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the already acute shortage of qualified instructors, threatening to derail college in high school programs, which are effective and popular college transition strategies. Financial incentives have helped some school districts increase the number of high school teachers who are credentialed to teach college-level courses, but such efforts have led to only incremental progress thus far.

How

LEAs can use their ARPA funds to build up their workforces by preparing, training and recruiting high-quality teachers, principals and other school leaders as needed. States and LEAs can prioritize the use of funds to support teachers' efforts to develop the skills and earn the credentials they will need to serve as instructors in dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and early college programs, and thereby expand the opportunities students have to earn college credits in high school.

Examples

- Kentucky: In an effort to find more effective approaches to developing a diverse and culturally competent education workforce, the state created a competitive [grant program](#) to encourage school districts and postsecondary institutions to form partnerships focused on building homegrown pipelines of teaching talent. The initiative was established through commitments from the Kentucky Department of Education, the Kentucky Board of Education, the Education and Workforce Development Cabinet, and the Council on Postsecondary Education.
- Texas: The Texas Education Agency has set up a competitive [grant program](#) to expand the number of high school teachers eligible to serve as instructors for dual-credit courses. Through the program, teachers can receive reimbursements for costs associated with earning a master's degree in the subject in which they specialize.

Resources

- [Addressing a Major Barrier to Dual Enrollment: Strategies to Staff Up and Scale Up](#): A JFF report examining ways to create a long-term pipeline of instructors who can teach college courses in high school.

Transformative and Systemic Opportunities

In addition to adopting the strategies discussed above, states should look for ways to use ARPA education funds to make even bigger and more enduring changes. The act's significant investments in our nation's schools make it possible to create conditions that encourage flexible and innovative uses of shared funding and resources and adopt adjusted accountability measures across various systems and stakeholders (K-12, postsecondary, workforce and CBOs, for example), with the ultimate goal of transforming systems to smooth and accelerate students' transitions from high school to college and careers. Initiatives like those are taking hold in Colorado and Delaware.

Colorado took a step toward making transformative statewide changes to improve student outcomes and transitions to postsecondary education through the creation of a program called [Accelerating Students Through Concurrent Enrollment](#) (ASCENT). A fifth-year, or "grade 13," high school initiative, ASCENT allows students to participate in concurrent enrollment programs the year after grade 12. The goal is to expand students' access to postsecondary opportunities. During the 2018-19 school year, 41 percent of students who participated in ASCENT were Hispanic, and more than 95 percent were enrolled in credential programs.

For its part, Delaware established a program called [Delaware Pathways](#) in 2014 to provide young people with opportunities to develop the competencies needed for middle-skill jobs and to give employers ways to recruit and train a steady supply of qualified workers. The Governor at the time, Jack Markell, kicked off the initiative by calling together leaders from K-12, higher education, businesses, and community organizations to develop a plan that included 1) building a comprehensive career preparation system that aligns with the

needs of employers in the state and regional economies, 2) scaling and sustaining meaningful work-based learning experiences for students in grades 7-14, 3) integrating education and workforce development efforts, 4) engaging employers, educators and service providers to support the new program. In 2016, Markell formalized the group's efforts by signing an executive order that defines Delaware Pathways as a collaborative workforce development partnership that will strengthen relationships across sectors to ensure that pathways to college and good jobs are accessible to all students in Delaware.

Support

Policy and program experts are available at JFF and NGA to help state policymakers and practitioners learn more about the American Rescue Plan Act and the key funding elements and strategies it includes. For more information, contact Erica Cuevas, an associate director at JFF (ecuevas@jff.org), or Amanda Winters, program director for postsecondary education at NGA (awinters@nga.org).