

Advocating for a fair and effective use of historic K-12 funding

We know that every parent, guardian and community member can be a powerful force in promoting an equal opportunity to learn in Arkansas, and we have an incredible opportunity to shape a huge investment in our K-12 education system here in the coming months.

Through the American Rescue Plan (ARP), Arkansas is receiving \$1.2 billion in new funding for K-12 education. School districts have a lot of flexibility on how they spend this federal money. In Arkansas's approved plan, the Arkansas Board of Education outlined their top two priorities for spending as being “supporting students with mental and emotional health needs” and “addressing the loss of instructional time.”

The Arkansas Department of Education created an online dashboard that you can view here. This tool allows you to see how much money your school district is receiving and how much they have already spent. The level of funding depends on the size of the school district. For example, a smaller school district like Spring Hill is receiving \$554,659.81, while Little Rock is receiving \$64,303,054.11. School districts have until September 30, 2024 to spend these funds.



HOW SCHOOL DISTRICTS CAN USE ARP FUNDS

The state outlined in this memo how school districts can spend this incoming funding, and a few examples are highlighted below:

- Meeting the nutritional needs of underserved students
- Supporting student mental health needs and implementing evidence-based practices that maximize students' social, emotional, and academic benefits; this can include the hiring of counselors
- Locating absent students and reengaging disconnected youth
- Making school facility repairs and improvements to enable operation of schools to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission; this can include big projects like improving the indoor air quality or smaller needs like supply purchases for cleaning and sanitizing
- Providing in-school acceleration, tutoring programs, and digital literacy training for families
- Providing summer and out-of-school time learning and enrichment
- Purchasing technology that supports learning and enables students to learn anywhere and for teachers to teach essential standards
- Recruiting and retaining a diverse and qualified educator workforce

REQUIREMENTS TO BE AWARE OF

The ARP instructs states and local school districts to focus on the needs of the most vulnerable students. It also requires local school districts to spend at least 20 percent of the funding on addressing learning loss among students impacted by the pandemic, and that they include a process for monitoring implementation in their plans.

Another federal guideline requires school districts to meet at least every six months to review and revise their plan to maintain a healthy and safe in-person learning environment. They must describe in detail what policies and practices they have implemented to protect students, educators, and other staff. This can include things like wearing masks, social distancing, handwashing, cleaning and maintaining health facilities, contract tracing, screening tests, vaccinations, appropriate accommodations for children with disabilities.

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR ADVOCACY

This huge investment in education will provide Arkansas school districts with a chance to close funding gaps that existed prior to COVID-19, especially for students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, students of color, English learners, and students experiencing homelessness.

While Arkansas's state plan has already been approved by the U.S. Department of Education, there is still more we can do to ensure our state is using these funds in a smart and equitable way.

States and school districts are required to conduct "meaningful stakeholder engagement." Meaning that throughout this process they must show that they are consulting with students and their families, teachers, principals, school staff, civil rights groups, and stakeholders representing the interests of underserved student groups. One major way this is taking place is through online forms that are posted on school districts' websites.

Arkansas school districts submitted their plans for spending ARP funds to the state by August 15. The state requires these plans to be posted on the school district's website, so you should be able to view your school district's plan online. You can find an example of one of these plans [here](#).



WAYS YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

Get in touch with your local school district by speaking at your local school board meeting or writing petitions or op-eds. This is perhaps the best way to make your voice heard as a parent throughout this process.

Get a copy of your district's spending plan and share it with other parents and advocates. If there are places where the plan is very vague or general, you can ask detailed questions about how, specifically, the funds will be spent.

Here are a few examples of questions you can raise with your local school district leaders:

- How is the district engaging with a diverse set of stakeholders to develop and implement a plan for these funds?
- What data will the district use to identify student needs and monitor how students are progressing?
- How will the district ensure funding is targeted to the students who need it the most?
- How will the district implement evidence-based strategies to address unfinished instruction, accelerate learning, and respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs?

Additionally, you may consider organizing with other parents, contacting your local PTA, or reaching out to local advocacy organizations like Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families, the Rural Community Alliance, and the Arkansas Public Policy Panel, who can provide you with additional resources.



SPENDING RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are a few recommendations, based on research, that we hope to see in school districts' plans to spend these funds:

- Expanding out of school and summer school learning programs which support academic and emotional development, keep kids safe, improve their long-term outcomes as adults, and provide parents with peace mind
- Improving teacher pay so that our schools can afford to recruit and retain a qualified and diverse workforce
- Ensuring that the nutritional needs of every student are met
- Providing integrated student support, or wrap around services, that can encompass a student's mental health, social-emotional development, and academic learning. This kind of coordinated and comprehensive approach, often called Community Schools, has been proven to lead to better academic and social-emotional outcomes

Our state leaders must aim these new resources at the students who need it most and use this federal investment to make a significant change in our education system. All of us, including families, community members, educators, and advocates, should remain vigilant to ensure these funds are not used to keep us stuck in a world of "pre-COVID" inequity.

RESOURCES

- [Arkansas ARP state plan](#)
- [Arkansas Department of Education memo and webinar](#) outlining the ARP application process for school districts
- [Ways ARP funds can be spent](#)
- [Arkansas Board of Education transparency dashboard](#)
- [Federal guidance](#) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families

If you have any questions or would like additional resources, please contact

Olivia Gardner
Education Policy Director
Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families
ogardner@aradvocates.org.

