



American Rescue Plan Funding: State and Local Spending Recommendations for College and Career Pathways

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The \$122 billion appropriated for schools under the American Rescue Plan (ARP) represents the largest single federal outlay for K–12 education in the country’s history. ARP funding is designed to address the needs of students who have lost learning during COVID-19–related school closures. In fact, 20% of ARP funding that districts receive and 5% of funding that states receive must be spent on evidence-based activities to address learning loss and respond to students’ academic, social, and emotional needs, particularly for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, English learners, students experiencing homelessness, and children and youth in foster care.

State and local policymakers welcome the additional support, and they are focusing on the most beneficial use of the unique opportunities created by a one-time, unprecedented infusion of resources. How can they best direct the funding on programs that will be the most effective for the students who most need help?

Drawing from the NewDEAL Forum Education Policy Group [report](#), *Policy Proposals for Aligning the Future of Education with Workforce Opportunities*, here are five ways states and localities can use ARP funds—including those reserved to address learning loss—to build high-quality college and career pathways for all students.

1. **Expand access to programs that give students a head start on postsecondary learning.**

[Most good jobs](#)—80% of jobs that pay \$35,000 or more—require postsecondary education and 56% require a bachelor’s degree. One good use of ARP funding is to make opportunities for postsecondary learning available to more high school students.

Dual enrollment programs are partnerships between local educational agencies and institutions of higher education that allow students to enroll in college courses and earn transferable college credits while they are still in high school. ARP funds are particularly well-suited for investments to strengthen the infrastructure of a dual enrollment program, such as getting more educators certified to teach college-level courses and improving credit-transfer agreements among area institutions of higher education.

Georgia has a robust, statewide system of [dual enrollment](#). Students may enroll in any institution, public or private, to complete courses in one of two areas:

- Core academic subjects: English, math, science, social sciences, and world languages, which are the same categories used in the high school HOPE (Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally) Scholarship calculation for academic eligibility
- CTAE (Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education) courses that align with one of the career clusters and pathways identified by the Georgia Department of Education

Georgia’s dual enrollment program also pays for tuition and books for every student, with the students’ only financial responsibilities being course-related fees and transportation.

There are other ways to ensure that students can earn college credit while they are in high school. Programs like Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and Cambridge International give students college-level learning. However, these programs should ensure that all students have access to challenging courses and that barriers such as exam fees are removed for students from low- and moderate-income backgrounds.

2. Strengthen career pathways.

Preparing students for high-demand, high-opportunity jobs is a multiyear effort that often extends beyond high school. States and districts can use ARP funds to identify and expand career pathways, such as integrated programs and services intended to develop students’ core academic, technical, and employability skills; provide them with continuous education and training; and place them in high-demand, high-opportunity jobs. Like in the case of dual enrollment, ARP funds provide a unique opportunity to fund startup costs for starting or growing pathways programs, such as by identifying high-demand industries and establishing relationships with employers and higher education to provide hands-on learning experiences to pathways students.

Delaware offers a [portfolio of career pathways](#)—from agriscience to transportation, distribution, and logistics—that align classroom instruction with work-based learning experiences in high-demand professional fields. Students enroll concurrently in career-related high school courses and at an institution of higher education to earn certifications recognized by employers, while they are earning credits toward a college degree.

Through a partnership with the schools, community colleges, and labor unions, the city of **Oakland, California**, created career academies that prepare all students for high-skill jobs. Students in Oakland’s Linked Learning Health Pathways are [20 percentage points](#) more likely to enroll in college than traditional high school students.

3. Engage employers.

There is no point in preparing students for jobs that do not exist. At the same time, the skills required in the workplace may change faster than schools can adapt. Building a strong partnership with employers is one way to manage that.

However, before the pandemic, education systems did not do a good job providing high-quality work-based experiences to students, particularly those historically underserved. ARP funding can be used to close these gaps.

For example, ARP funding can be used to provide stipends for students who cannot otherwise afford an unpaid internship and assist with transportation or childcare. To supplement ARP funds, states and localities can provide tax credits to employers to expand the number of internship opportunities available. **West Sacramento, California**, offers high school students paid internships in a relevant industry sector or job type if they are enrolled in an integrated college and career pathway and making satisfactory progress in school.

4. Promote FAFSA completion.

Completing the [Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#) is a critical first step for students from low- and middle-income backgrounds who want to enroll in postsecondary education. [Research](#) shows that 90% of high school seniors who complete the FAFSA immediately enroll in postsecondary education programs, compared to 50% of those who do not complete the FAFSA. This year, however, as schools were closed and students did not have access to their counselors, [FAFSA applications](#) fell. As of May 14, 2021, FAFSA completion was down 9.4% among students in schools with high percentages of students of color compared to last year. College enrollment also [declined](#), particularly among first-generation college students. One way to improve these numbers is by using ARP funding to promote FAFSA completion. Community partners, including nonprofit organizations like College Possible and the College Advising Corps, can help.

In **Broward County, Florida**, each high school has a BRACE (Broward County Advisor for Continuing Education) advisor in addition to regular high school counselors. They support all students but particularly those from low-income backgrounds or first-generation college students. Advisors help with college applications, financial aid including the FAFSA, scholarships, and military enrollment. Advisors also recruit BRACE cadets, high school students who mentor their peers as they navigate the process of preparing for college and a career after high school.

5. Strengthen college access and success.

[Research](#) shows that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to attend college or more often choose a college that is less selective than their academic credentials would allow. To support these students in finding a college that is a good fit, ARP funds can be used to help high schools adopt [enhanced college advising](#), which includes a set of strategies to help students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation college students (1) overcome logistical difficulties throughout the college application process, (2) reduce financial hurdles, and (3) raise their expectations regarding college choice. In addition, school districts can partner with higher education institutions to develop [summer bridge programs](#), which equip students with academic skills and social resources for postsecondary success.

Washington state’s Vancouver Public Schools (VPS) developed a training and data-sharing program so that all high school counselors and administrators have real-time data on [FAFSA completion](#). The program is managed by the Washington Student Achievement Council, the state’s higher education coordinating board. It also highlights students who may have missing data or errors on their FAFSA, and those who have started but not completed the form. This state-local partnership makes it easy to focus on the students who need assistance with completing the FAFSA or applying for state financial aid.

Creative policymakers at the state and local levels also are developing low- or no-cost ways to focus on college and career pathways. The state of **Michigan** offers incentives to school districts that achieve targets in [FAFSA completion](#) (including the governor speaking at their high school graduation).

The stakes could not be higher. While it is critical for ARP’s funds to be used in sustainable programs, the resources now available to schools are, in the words of Nebraska Commissioner of Education Matthew L. Blomstedt, “trajectory-changing.” They give state and local policymakers the opportunity to affect and improve education for an entire generation of students.

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