

POWER OF THE QUESTION

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? Seven Questions to Ask about Leveraging American Rescue Plan Funds

By Paolo DeMaria

One year ago, Congress passed and the U.S. Department of Education released the first tranche of the \$122 billion in relief funding for education as part the American Rescue Plan (ARP). By January 18, the U.S. Department of Education had approved each state plan. While this marked an important milestone, it is not the last. Leveraging their power to convene and to question, state boards of education can play a key role in taking stock as their state plans unfold.

Even the best-laid plans do not always play out as expected. Given that the summer months and the 2022–23 school year are just ahead, the timing is right to examine whether plans need revision or approaches should be modified. In that spirit, these seven questions can help frame ongoing conversations in states to discern the impact of this unprecedented outlay of funds.

1 HOW DOES THE VISION OF SUCCESS IN ARP ALIGN WITH THE STATE STRATEGIC PLAN?

Exemplary state board leadership focuses the state education system on a clear, compelling set of long-term priorities that steer the board's agenda and work. State board strategic plans communicate shared goals and strategies that reflect the priorities of educators, families, the business community, and students. Yet savvy state boards also recognize that such plans must adapt to unanticipated circumstances.

One year into the implementation of ARP's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding, state boards have a unique moment and responsibility to review their state's goals and strategies and whether state and district investments are adequately aligned to them (see box). State boards can take the time to reflect on the pandemic's lessons learned, how state priorities may have shifted, and guide investments toward long-term success and the benefit of students.

For example, the **Nebraska State Board of Education** laid out legislative priorities for 2021–22 that were aligned to their 10-year strategic

plan, focusing on investments in behavioral and mental health supports, including social and emotional support for youth who felt the impact of isolation or other pandemic-related traumas, and early childhood education.¹ The **Oregon** Department of Education set guiding principles in spring 2020 for pandemic response that they updated a year later. The principles focused on safety and wellness, health and well-being, connection and relationship, equity, and innovation, all of which provide context to state actions supporting pandemic recovery.² **Louisiana** designed a crosswalk to help school systems match allowable uses of ESSER funds to strategic plan priorities and high-impact investments.³ Early in 2020, **Tennessee** released its strategic plan, which named three priorities: (1) Academics: All students will have access to a high-quality education, no matter where they live, (2) Whole Child: Tennessee public schools will be equipped to serve the academic and nonacademic needs of all kids, and (3) Educators: Tennessee will be the top state to become and remain a teacher.⁴

As states align the implementation of COVID-19 relief investments with their strategies, state boards should focus on a few priorities to pursue relentlessly over the next few years. Ideally, these priorities intersect with existing areas of focus outlined in the state's post-pandemic vision for education and where the key condition for change already exists—a coalition of constituents, experts, and state and local leaders who can effectively and iteratively collaborate on ensuring success. While ARP is an unprecedented injection of federal funds, it was not designed to solve all education challenges. In fact, without a cohesive strategic plan, states risk investing too thinly in too many initiatives and losing out on the opportunity to transform education.

2 HOW CAN THE NEAR-TERM PLAN FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME FOSTER STUDENT ENGAGEMENT OVER THE LONG TERM?

The deleterious effect of the pandemic on students' social, emotional, and academic learning will not be resolved in one school year, even with everyone's best efforts. State boards are best positioned to strengthen the education system when they employ an "all hands on deck" approach that engages afterschool, summer learning, and community partners to meet students' immediate needs and catalyze a transformation in where and how learning takes place.

As the pandemic challenged the view of school as one place, families and community partners grew closer to teaching and learning than perhaps ever before.⁵ In a recent report based on its survey research, nonprofit Learning Heroes revealed insights about how parents and teachers perceive the role of out-of-school-time (OST) learning in meeting students' social, emotional, and academic development needs. Seventy-four percent of all parents and 77 percent of

ARP ESSER FUNDING STREAMS

- 90 percent to local education agencies
- 10 percent state set-aside
- 5 percent for the implementation of evidence-based interventions aimed specifically at addressing learning loss, such as summer learning or summer enrichment, extended day, comprehensive afterschool programs, or extended school year programs
- 1 percent for evidence-based summer enrichment programs
- 1 percent for evidence-based comprehensive afterschool programs
- A state may use up to ½ of 1 percent of its total ARP ESSER allocation for administrative costs and emergency needs as determined by the state to address issues related to COVID-19.
- The ARP ESSER fund also requires the U.S. Department of Education to reserve \$800 million to support efforts to identify homeless children and youth and provide them with comprehensive, wraparound services.

low-income parents rated the potential for OST programs to provide new experiences, ideas, and perspectives beyond everyday home and school lives as very motivating in decisions to enroll their students.⁶

State boards can intentionally engage and empower exceptional, project-based OST programs to reengage youth in learning. **Indiana**, for example, is awarding competitive grants that encourage K-12 leaders to partner with local community organizations and employers to design career pathways programs that extend beyond the classroom and rethink the traditional school day to incorporate meaningful OST learning opportunities and work-based learning.⁷

Georgia is leveraging \$27 million of its ARP funding to partner with the Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network for grants to community and statewide organizations to expand access to and improve the quality of afterschool and summer learning. With prioritization for students most affected by the pandemic, grantees will provide programming over the summer months, afterschool during the academic year, or year round. Further, Georgia will evaluate the program on an ongoing basis to ensure lessons learned and promising practices inform future state work.⁸ **Massachusetts'** Afterschool and Out-of-School-Time Rebound grants support access to enrichment opportunities, wraparound supports, and programs that support pandemic recovery. Massachusetts also invested in development of high-quality, comprehensive summer learning programs to address the academic and social-emotional impact of the pandemic.⁹

Vermont is building on the early success of its Summer Matters initiative to create a long-term plan for summer learning. A new \$4.8 million grant program for summer 2022 and 2023 and the 2022–23 school year aims to continue reducing gaps in its summer and afterschool system by fostering affordability, availability, long-lasting partnerships to promote sustainability, and innovative pilots.¹⁰

State boards can ask how OST programs help meet the needs of students who the pandemic affected the most. “What are the challenges faced in broad implementation, and what’s our plan to mitigate those challenges?” is another question board members can raise to guide wise investments in OST. State boards can also elevate successful programs and highlight effective partnerships with K-12 education systems by inviting both district and OST partners to share insights and lessons learned at state board meetings.

3 HOW WILL ENGAGEMENT DRIVE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT OF THE INITIAL PLAN? WHOM DO WE NEED TO HEAR FROM TO AFFIRM OUR WORK OR COURSE CORRECT?

State boards have an obligation to build relationships with the full range of education constituencies and ensure their voices shape education policies, including ARP investments. While consistent, meaningful engagement is an ARP federal requirement, building relationships with diverse constituents is central to state boards’ role as the citizens’ voice in education. By intentionally engaging diverse, divergent perspectives, state boards can facilitate an open, honest conversation on whether ARP investments are achieving their intended outcomes, especially as the pandemic recovery evolves and plans are revised to match the needs.

State boards are accustomed to engaging constituents through multiple modes to get their feedback: public comment periods, panel presentations, online surveys, community forums, focus groups, roundtables, constituent meetings, open office hours, site visits, and listening tours. Many go a step further, with targeted outreach to community groups, travel across the state to meet in person with constituents, and a commitment to accessibility for differently abled people and English learners.

These simple tools are powerful levers state boards can use to champion consistent, substantive engagement and to hear the unique challenges facing their constituents and regions, locally driven solutions, and potential best practices to elevate at their formal meetings. For example, during the pandemic, the **District of Columbia** board leveraged its constituents’ increased access to virtual platforms by hosting webinars on well-rounded education and conducting online surveys with targeted stakeholder groups, including one with more than 1,000 educators from 185 schools to inform the board’s Educator Practice Committee and the decisions of the Taskforce on School Reopening amid COVID-19.¹¹

Eliminating barriers to engagement is also vital to ensuring state board members are well informed on how policies are being implemented and swiftly identifying any unintended outcomes. While many groups are readily able to advocate at the state level, state board members should remember to ask, “Who is not at the table, and how can we get them here?” State boards can ask how communities have been engaged in district ARP investment, the frequency of engagement, and how voices representing marginalized youth influenced—and continue to influence—investments and implementation.

State boards can also continue to prioritize hearing directly and regularly from students, supporting the idea that “an equitable education system does not exist without authentic student engagement.”¹² State boards can regularly check in with students on ARP plan implementation and with working groups of state-level and district staff who consult students.

Student engagement and voices drove key decisions in states such as **Kentucky** and **Washington**. Surveys organized and implemented by students revealed specific ways states could support the digital learning experience. Student survey data provided a clarion call to address the mental health needs of students.¹³ **Connecticut** went a step further, empowering students to propose and vote on how \$1.5 million of the ARP ESSER state set-aside will be used to reimagine schools. A first-of-its-kind campaign, Voice4Change encompasses 43 districts, representing 77 high schools and more than 55,000 students.¹⁴

As citizen leaders, state boards can share what they learn from stakeholders with other public officials, including in the governor’s office, state and federal legislative offices, their state education agencies, NASBE, and the U.S. Department of Education. Long after ARP funds are obligated and spent, state leaders can highlight school and district successes, build the case for scaling up promising practices, and lay the groundwork and political will for sustained commitment to approaches that have amassed evidence of positive outcomes.

4 HOW ARE WE DEFINING, MEASURING, AND MANAGING ARP INVESTMENTS SO THEY PRODUCE LONG-TERM STUDENT SUCCESS?

To improve student outcomes, state boards must ensure that decisions on state plans for ARP are evidence based, centered on clearly defined metrics of success, and transparent. Doing so sets up state boards and other policymakers to extend and expand approaches that are working or change course when a review reveals strategies that are not.

Research has pointed to effective strategies for improving student outcomes: high-dosage tutoring, diversifying the educator workforce, high-quality curriculum, community and family engagement, access to rigorous high school courses, and early childhood education, to name a few.¹⁵ To equip their states to invest in the big bets in education, state boards can ask, “What evidence do we have that this will be successful? How do we know this will work in our context? Do we have a clear plan for the necessary change management support?” Relying on evidence not only helps states focus on proven ways to improve student outcomes but also avoids the pitfalls of previous failed implementation strategies. During a moment when states have faced intense pressure to act quickly, delving into lessons learned takes time. But going slow at the start will build capacity to go fast and be successful later.

State boards are defining and tracking measures to gauge success by 2024, when the clock runs out on obligating ARP investments. They will use baseline data from the previous and current school year, which reflects the lost learning opportunities and gaps in opportunity and outcomes between groups of students.

Measurement is key to management. In creating their roadmap for 2020–23, the **Illinois State Board of Education** added a section on strategies and related success measures for each of the plan’s three goals. These sections attach action items, such as developing an internal equity impact tool or providing tiered state-level support for comprehensive-support schools, to the deadlines and measures. A color-coded tool on their website shows whether each strategy is on track, at risk, or off track.¹⁶ Other strategic plans, including the **Washington** state board’s, have similar web-based, metric-tracking tools that indicate whether an initiative is completed, in progress, or not yet started. Georgia’s ESSER funding dashboard provides transparent, publicly accessible information about investments to improve student learning, address lost learning opportunities, and support students’ mental health and well-being.¹⁷ Coupled with this commitment to data transparency, **Georgia** has invested in ongoing evaluation to unpack and better understand the impact of these investments on student outcomes. **Connecticut** launched a research collaborative of public and private universities to evaluate ESSER-funded projects and inform investments on issues that emerge throughout the ongoing pandemic response and recovery.¹⁸

Utah has long been recognized as a leader in technology adoption.¹⁹ Yet recent data revealed there were students not yet connected at home, with significant connectivity needs in remote areas. Utah’s consistent attention moved the needle in home internet access, including for students living on the Navajo Nation in the San Juan school district.²⁰ Project investments built more than 100 radio towers to reach students in areas where wireless hotspots could not support the streaming speeds necessary for online learning. This infrastructure investment will make a lasting difference in closing the homework gap for students. **Texas** is strategically investing funds in evidence-based, accelerated learning programs to improve outcomes for students most in need, including pairing the student with a highly effective teacher or providing the student with at least 30 hours of accelerated learning in the subjects in which they are struggling.²¹

Capturing stories of how ARP investments sparked meaningful change in student opportunity and outcomes starts now, by scaling promising practices, piloting bold ideas, and continuously evaluating investments in collaboration with educators, families, and students. “What actions have been taken using ARP funds, and how do we know they have worked?” is a question to start planning how to answer now. States that by 2024 have amassed evidence of the return on these investments can make the case to state legislatures and others about effective long-run strategies that deserve due state consideration.

5 HOW CAN STATE BOARDS FOSTER INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL?

The pandemic crisis incubated startling innovations, including in delivery of digital learning and school meals. State boards can now reflect on how these intense, crisis-induced collaborations gave local leaders the runway to imagine and implement bold, out-of-the-box solutions to meet student needs. State boards can ask how their state

can create the context for such innovations and exploration to prosper in a post-pandemic context.

States are using their ARP set-asides to provide support, guidance, and matching grants for local education agencies (LEAs). For example, the **Kansas** State Department of Education will address the social-emotional needs of students by funding a grow-your-own counselor model that encourages districts to identify candidates and employ them as student services coordinators while they develop their skills in an approved school counseling graduate program. **Tennessee** will provide high-dosage tutor training and certification, materials, and a directory of reviewed providers under its TN ALL Corps. The state is encouraging LEAs to use ARP funds and apply to the state for matching grants.²²

Utah is investing in early learning coaches for rural Utah districts to support their preK-3 teachers. **Colorado** invested \$27 million for a second round of Response, Innovation, and Student Equity (RISE) grants to support cooperative programs between school districts, charter schools, and higher education institutions to help students who were more likely to suffer long-term impacts from learning disruption caused by the pandemic. Recipients include the rural Park County school district, which will expand an outdoor science school and provide mobile early intervention services for families in remote areas.²³

States can also share and elevate local leaders' innovations. As state leaders review district plans and speak with district leaders, local experience over the past school year will undoubtedly inform their priorities. In these conversations, state boards can keep a lookout for local innovations that could be promoted to other localities or even brought to scale with ESSER funds. Were there good ideas that had to be put aside for lack of resources that are now appearing in the plans? Were districts granted waivers from state policy in the past that point to policies the state can strategically abandon because they proved ineffective or outlived their usefulness?

6 HOW ARE INVESTMENTS BALANCING SHORT-TERM CRISIS RESPONSE AND LONG-TERM GOALS FOR STUDENT OUTCOMES?

Boards that mull investing ARP funds with sustainability in mind will ask, "Are ARP funds being invested in evidence-based policies or programs with large start-up costs but low ongoing maintenance costs?" For example, investing in effective learning management systems that engage students and families and support instruction and robust curriculum may have been cost-prohibitive before the pandemic for some districts. Applying ARP funds to initiatives with large up-front costs that can produce net long-run benefits is a sound strategy for sustainability.

Early in the pandemic, **Alaska** partnered with the Florida Virtual School to create the Alaska Statewide Virtual System, which provides near-immediate access to virtual courses in tandem with professional development for educators.²⁴

Investments in human capital, while deeply needed by many school systems, should be considered carefully from a sustainability

perspective. Knowing whether and how positions and resources will be sustained after 2024 will help avoid the pitfalls of human capital investments under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.²⁵ State boards can and should raise questions about how investments build capacity in a sustainable way. Board members can ask, "Is a ramp-up in new positions needed for the short-term crisis recovery or over the long term? How can state and local funding sources be braided with ARP dollars to amplify the impact and sustainability of human capital investments?"

Several states have proposed investing in much-needed counselors and mental health practitioners to meet students' immediate needs. State boards should consider coupling short-term human capital investments with long-term capacity building for the educator workforce. For example, pairing short-term positions with long-term evidence-based professional learning on social, emotional, and academic learning along with trauma-informed teaching may build the capacity of the educator workforce to meet student needs after federal dollars run out. Efforts aimed at expanding the pipeline of diverse educators and retaining educators by building supportive working environments all have long-term positive benefits.

7 HOW ARE WE TRANSFORMING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS?

The last question is the crux of all questions that will be asked about the success of ARP investments. Incremental or marginal change is not enough to demonstrate that states have effectively wielded unprecedented funding to address the unprecedented pandemic. State leaders are bound by the implicit promise that this sizable investment will transform education systems so they are better than they were pre-pandemic. During this opportune moment, state boards can galvanize the will and resources to make excellence and equity a reality in the education for each child. By finding common ground with governors, legislators, families, and educators to vigorously pursue a focused set of priorities, continuously measuring and managing, and grounding decisions in the best available evidence, state boards can capitalize on the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform education.

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