

NEW JERSEY

Approved State ARP Plan Analysis

Nicholas Munyan-Penney, Senior Policy Analyst
Charles Barone, Vice President of K-12 Policy







NEW JERSEY

In early January, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) approved the final set of state applications for funds under the American Rescue Plan (ARP). This means that every state has received its final tranche of funding and it is now up to states to execute their plans. **We believe there is an important leadership role for states to play in ensuring that funding is directed efficiently, effectively, and equitably.**

Our analysis¹ is based on [guidance](#) co-released by Education Reform Now and nine other education and civil rights organizations and focuses on key sections of the application that have important implications for educational equity:

¹ This analysis is based on our reading of long, complex state plans which may or may not fully capture how states are using or planning to use ARP funds. In many cases, we made subjective calls about whether states met our specific analytic criteria. Given that these are living documents and that others may interpret state plans differently, we welcome—and in fact are encouraging it through our recommendations—continued discussions about how states are using ARP funds to equitably address the needs of students.

- using data to understand the impact of the pandemic, especially for students from historically disadvantaged groups,
- stakeholder and community engagement,
- investing in evidence-based academic interventions,
- supporting local education agencies (LEAs) in the creation and implementation of local plans,
- distributing funds equitably among and within LEAs, and
- publicly reporting uses of funds.

Overall Equity Rating: 				
Commitment to Data and Transparency 	State-Level Stakeholder Engagement 	Targeted, Evidence-Based Statewide Investments 	Funding Equity Protections 	Guardrails and Supports for Strong District Plans 

New Jersey's plan is strong on providing supports and guidance for LEAs' recovery efforts. The plan has room for improvement or requires more clarity, however, on stakeholder engagement, providing a strong framework for LEAs' plans, a clear plan for evaluating statewide investments, making evidence-based investments of state set-aside funds, and monitoring and oversight of LEAs' plans.



PLAN HIGHLIGHTS



Using Data to Understand the Impact of the Pandemic

- ◆ New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) added learning environment fields to its state data collection and is providing LEAs with access to a new school climate assessment tool.



State Support of LEAs

- ◆ NJDOE is requiring all LEAs to complete a needs assessment as a part of their ARP applications, and is providing guidance and technical assistance to support LEAs in this process.
- ◆ NJDOE is providing training for SEA staff to help them better support LEAs and plans to invest in MTSS staff grants to LEAs to help support mental health services.



AREAS OF CONCERN



SEA (State Education Agencies) Stakeholder Engagement

- ◆ While NJDOE provides a list of key takeaways from stakeholder engagement as well as specific examples of where this engagement influenced changes to its ARP plan, NJDOE provides little indication it did much engagement beyond presenting its plan to stakeholder groups and soliciting immediate feedback.



Addressing Academic Impact of Loss Instructional Time

- ◆ NJDOE plans to use a modified version of its weighted enrollment formula to distribute LEA grants, but this plan fails to take pandemic specific data into account.
- ◆ The state doesn't cite any evidence to support its plan to create professional development grants, nor provide a plan to evaluate the impact of those investments.



District Plan Requirements and Oversight

- ◆ While NJDOE states that LEAs will need to complete needs assessments as a part of their ARP application, its district plan requirements don't extend beyond the minimum federal






requirements, suggesting a lack of commitment to ensuring strong LEA plans.

- ◆ In addition to having weak district plan requirements, there's a concern that NJ doesn't have the internal capacity or political will to ensure district plans are high-quality, equitable, and implemented with fidelity.

Fiscal Equity

- ◆ While NJ includes vague language about guidance and technical assistance around how ARP can be used to advance equity, the state has no specific requirements around the distribution of funds within LEAs as a part of its local plan template.

KEY INVESTMENTS

-  Devoting its entire learning loss set aside to create an "Acceleration Coach and Educator Support" formula grants that LEAs can use to implement professional development, an investment unlikely to result in dramatic gains in student achievement.
-  Providing LEAs with grants to hire staff to help address the social emotional and mental health needs of students and staff.
-  Partnering with UNC-Chapel Hill to help build their capacity to support LEAs in their needs assessments and implementation of interventions.
-  Funding diagnostic assessments including the Strong Start and Kindergarten Readiness Assessment.
-  Improving the state's learning management system, with the goal of integrating more interim and formative assessments.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE ADVOCATES AND POLICYMAKERS

#1 Work with state department of education officials to make revisions to their ARP state plan. While the state’s plan is already approved by ED, the plan is intended to be—and given the limited information it contains, must be—a living document. Advocates should offer recommended changes to the plan based on the best practices and evidence-based interventions, such as those suggested [here](#).

#2 Advocate for changes to aspects of state plans that undermine educational equity, while highlighting exemplars. We encourage advocates to voice their concerns for these aspects of the state plan—both through direct communication with state officials and via the media to increase pressure to center equity in the state’s investment and support strategy. Advocates should also put pressure on state officials to carefully review district plans and hold LEAs accountable for faithfully implementing evidence-based interventions—a process that isn’t detailed in the state’s plan.

#3 Engage community networks to influence the continued development and implementation of school district ARP plans. Though our review only covers state plans, every LEA receiving ARP funds was also required to create its own plan for spending the latest round of federal relief funds. Given that school districts have wide discretion to spend at least 90% of ARP funds, advocates who effectively engage and mobilize community members and organizations in support of evidence-based interventions for students could have an outsized influence on which policies and programs ultimately get enacted and provide services for students. While district plans have already been submitted to NJDOE, these plans are living documents and many investment decisions have yet to be made or finalized.

#4 Pursue increased transparency and stakeholder engagement around state and local spending plans and resulting outcomes. The public, advocates, and policymakers cannot push for needed changes to state

and district ARP plans and interventions if data on plans, implementation, and outcomes are not regularly publicly reported. Therefore, as a part of all advocacy efforts, stakeholders should continually push for additional transparency around both plans and processes for enacting those plans.

#5 Encourage continued and improved data collection, reporting, and data-driven decision making. New Jersey has made a commitment to use academic and opportunity-to-learn data to inform policy, but advocates must ensure there is a coherent, systemic plan to use data statewide in service of educational equity. Improvement in state data systems could contribute to better decision making both in the short and (post-pandemic) long term.

