

Using CARES Act funds to support distance learning

Five considerations for leveraging coronavirus-related government funding opportunities

By: Kecia Ray and Susan Gentz | May 19, 2020



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When we consider the situation that our education system is in today and how drastically different it is from the start of the 2019-20 school year, the contrasts are remarkable.

Many districts across the nation have transitioned from an in-classroom instruction model to one that revolves around a remote learning environment. Not all districts or all schools have been able to make this move, but a vast majority of them have done well, all things considered.



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The recently signed Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act designates billions of dollars in stimulus funds for educational purposes, including money that can be allocated to both education technology and student mental health services. States can also apply for flexibility when using parts of existing Title funds to enhance distance learning capabilities.

These new guidelines ensure districts have the freedom to apply for federal funds to address their most urgent needs and were discussed in a recent USDE Funding Guidelines webinar hosted by student safety platform provider Gaggle.

Here are five things all districts should know about using CARES Act funds.

1. Understand your options

The CARES Act allocates \$13.5 billion for K-12 education, and there are no restrictions on how districts can use this money to address their most pressing issues. The \$3 billion Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund requires districts to allocate funds to major COVID-19 impacts, while the \$180 million in School Models Microgrants provides states with funding they need to ensure that families have access to the technology and educational services they require to advance learning. Lastly, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration supports student mental health initiatives.

Regardless of which funding opportunity you pursue, be strategic. There is a lot of funding available and many different ways that districts can use that money.

2. The ESSER application is simple and streamlined

The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund application simply requires a completed cover sheet that includes the signature of the chief state school officer or authorized representative, as well as programmatic, fiscal and reporting assurances. It also requires information on the uses of ESSER funds, which includes a wide range of uses depending on the specific district's situation. The application and the initiative itself are flexible and meant to get money into districts' hands as quickly as possible.

3. If you are in a highly affected area, apply for a microgrant

Ranging from \$5 million to \$20 million, these microgrants average \$15 million each. These grants are discretionary funds based on Title I funds and are highly competitive (only 13-15 will be approved and distributed). To apply, you'll have to fill out a more extensive application than the ESSER, and 40% of the decision will be based on how hard your district was hit by COVID-19. States can apply to distribute the funds to districts, which, in turn, can break down the grant for specific families or teachers who have been affected.

4. Take advantage of waivers

Section 1127(b) of Title I, Part A of the ESEA waives the 15% carryover limitation for Title I, Part A funds. The carryover being lifted means funds can carry over into next year, which can help as a stopgap for shortfalls. In most cases, districts only get 15% of their leftover funds at the end of the year (and the rest goes to the state), but now they can keep it all. Other waivers include Section 4106(d) of Title IV, Part A of the ESEA to waive needs assessment to justify the use of funds; Section 4106(e)(2)(C), (D), and (E) of Title IV, Part A of the ESEA to waive content-specific spending requirements; Section 4109(b) of Title IV, Part A of the ESEA to waive spending restrictions on technology infrastructure; and Section 8101(42) of the ESEA to waive the definition of "professional development."

5. Think about sustaining remote learning for the future

Many educators and district leaders have invested a lot of time in remote learning; sustaining it long term may be prudent because you never know what is going to happen. We could benefit from the practices we are designing right now to mitigate future issues, such as natural disasters. We need to apply what we've learned to the future and be ready pivot.

During these uncertain times, states and districts should know what emergency funding options are available. If you were heavily impacted by COVID-19, you may even qualify for a microgrant.

Regardless of which funding opportunity you pursue, be strategic. There is a lot of funding available and many different ways that districts can use that money. Rethink the way content and curriculum delivery is designed in your district, and understand that remote learning may be the best way to take advantage of these new funds.

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