



LEVERAGING FEDERAL STIMULUS FUNDS

Tennessee Leads the Way

November 2021

INTRODUCTION

Through the American Rescue Plan (ARP), states received an unprecedented amount of federal funds to address the educational needs of students during and after the pandemic.¹ The funding is one-time only, and nearly all of it flows to districts and with few restrictions. This creates both opportunities and challenges for state educational agencies (SEAs). This brief, part of a series, highlights how the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) has used several strategies to ensure these funds have a positive impact, including helping districts invest in evidence-based strategies to produce significant and sustainable results for students.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES & ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES FOR STATES

ExcelinEd identified three guiding principles for how states should deploy federal relief funds to ensure positive impact on students. First, SEAs can use funds to start bold initiatives that might not be possible without the extra stimulus. Second, SEAs can incentivize districts to use federal stimulus funds in a way that aligns with state priorities. Third, states can prioritize communicating with and empowering parents, who know best what their children need.

ExcelinEd also identified two essential strategies.

First, states can address the most urgent issues now.

With federal stimulus funding, states can immediately address the most devastating impacts of the pandemic by creating one-time initiatives that prioritize assessing and recovering learning loss for every student, with an emphasis on students who have experienced the greatest disruptions in learning.

Second, states can make non-recurring investments that have long-term impact. This very large, one-

time infusion of funds is a tremendous opportunity for states and districts to invest in systems and programs that would have been unaffordable before the pandemic. The opportunity comes with a risk: If districts create initiatives that require ongoing financial support, they may not have the means to continue them when stimulus funds are spent. States can consider emphasizing the importance of non-recurring investments to districts and model this essential strategy in their own spending.²

“Tennessee is a model for spending its federal stimulus funds on bold, strategic and evidence-based initiatives and encouraging districts to invest similarly.”

-Patricia Levesque, CEO, ExcelinEd

KEY STRATEGIES USED IN TENNESSEE

Strategic Focus

Tennessee chose not to fund new programs or spread its funding thinly but instead to focus on critical strategies the state had already identified in its [strategic plan](#). “Our strategic vision for achieving the Best for All drives everything we do, and Tennessee has the resources, spirit of collaboration and positive momentum needed to take bold steps,

¹ See ExcelinEd, [American Rescue Plan](#) (2021). In addition to the ARP, states also received federal funds through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES) and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA).

² See ExcelinEd, [American Rescue Plan](#) (2021).



deeply invest in our students and significantly improve academic outcomes,” said Tennessee Commissioner Penny Schwinn.³

TDOE also coordinated all decisions with the Governor’s Office and the General Assembly. This ensured that the federal funding was considered as an integral part of the entirety of financial resources available for schools in Tennessee. It also created a unified bully pulpit to urge districts to make the best use of their federal stimulus funding so that they can show improved student achievement and make the case for the state to make future investments that can sustain the services.⁴

Matching Grants

ARP funding for Tennessee is nearly \$2.5 billion. TDOE received about 10 percent, with districts receiving the remaining 90 percent. Tennessee leveraged its portion of the funding through district matching grants. A prime example is the state’s new tutoring initiative.

The initiative responds to the pandemic’s disruption of instruction across the state, resulting in achievement declines in math and in early reading, particularly for low-income students, students with disabilities and English learners. To address this problem, the state identified tutoring as an evidence-based strategy, launching the Tennessee Accelerating Literacy and Learning Corps (TN ALL Corps). For every student tutored, TDOE is providing \$700 to each district, which must contribute \$800. Districts have significant flexibility, but the tutoring must be “high dosage” and “low-ratio.” The overall investment is \$200 million, with nearly 150,000 students expected to be served over three years, which is 15 percent of students. As of September 30, more than half of Tennessee’s school districts expressed their intent to participate.⁵

Tennessee also used federal stimulus funds to provide matching grants to districts to purchase devices and high-speed internet and to locate, engage and reconnect students who became disconnected from school during the pandemic.⁶

“Our strategic vision for achieving the Best for All drives everything we do, and Tennessee has the resources, spirit of collaboration and positive momentum needed to take bold steps, deeply invest in our students and significantly improve academic outcomes.”

-Penny Schwinn, Tennessee Education Commissioner

Public-Private Partnerships

A priority for Tennessee is expanding access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses by eliminating financial barriers and supporting student enrollment in AP courses not currently offered at their home high school. To achieve this, TDOE established a partnership with the [Niswonger Foundation](#), a Tennessee-based charitable organization. TDOE provided \$10 million in federal stimulus funds, and Niswonger is recruiting and training teachers and offering platforms for virtual students. As a result, more than 81 percent of school districts have already joined the initiative, including 79 percent of districts in counties classified as at-risk or distressed and 75 percent of the state’s rural districts.

³ Interview with Dr. Penny Schwinn, Tennessee Commissioner of Education (Nov. 14, 2021).

⁴ Interview with Charlie Bufalino, Jay Klein & Jack Powers, Tennessee Department of Education (Sep. 8, 2021).

⁵ See Tennessee Department of Education, [Tutoring with TN ALL Corps](#) (2021); interview with Jay Klein, Tennessee Department of Education (Oct. 25, 2021). Tutor ratios cannot exceed 1:3 for elementary school students, and tutoring sessions must last at least 30-45 minutes and occur no less than 2-3 times per week.

⁶ Memo to ExcelinEd from Dr. Penny Schwinn, Tennessee Commissioner of Education (June 7, 2021).



Students can now choose from 14 different AP courses taught by certified and trained Tennessee teachers.⁷

Another important partnership TDOE forged was with T-Mobile to provide free Wi-fi for families. As a result, more than 200,000 students were able to connect their devices to classroom instruction during the pandemic.⁸

Additional Strategies

While this brief highlights only a few strategies, Tennessee used numerous others from which states can learn. As a part of an early literacy initiative, the state is developing micro-grants for parents to purchase individualized services for their children. It is also purchasing high-quality instructional materials that districts can use.⁹ Overall, Tennessee is investing over \$125 million in Reading 360, in support of recent legislation to drive early reading across the state.

TDOE awarded 21 school districts with \$30 million in grants to support new Innovative High School Models, intended to foster local community partnerships that boost student readiness and prepare high schoolers for jobs and careers in their local communities.

Finally, Tennessee is supporting 65 partnerships between educator preparation providers (EPPs) and local school districts to create innovative pathways to becoming a teacher in Tennessee for free. This investment will initially fund over 650 new educators, providing funds to entirely cover tuition, textbooks and fees.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Even though states directly control only a small portion of federal relief funds, the amount is substantial, and states like Tennessee are spending their funds wisely on strategic priorities and evidence-based initiatives, using matching grants to encourage districts to invest similarly and creating partnerships that can enable sustainability after the funds are fully spent.

⁷ See Tennessee Department of Education, [1000+ Tennessee High Schoolers from 100+ School Districts Begin Free Online AP Courses Through AP Access for ALL](#) (Sep. 9, 2021); [Tennessee AP Access for All](#); interview with Jay Klein, Tennessee Department of Education (Oct. 25, 2021).

⁸ Memo to ExcelinEd from Dr. Penny Schwinn, Tennessee Commissioner of Education (June 7, 2021).

⁹ Memo to ExcelinEd from Dr. Penny Schwinn, Tennessee Commissioner of Education (June 7, 2021).

¹⁰ Interview with Jay Klein, Tennessee Department of Education (Nov. 14, 2021).