Distance Learning & CARES Funding:
What You Need to Know

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended traditional teaching and learning in K-12 schools and higher education institutions throughout the nation. At least 50 million K-12 students and nearly 20 million college students were impacted as school buildings and campuses abruptly closed this spring, prompting an unprecedented shift to online learning that will likely have a long-term impact on instruction even after the current crisis subsides.

This shift has come at a cost, exposing deep divides in students' access to devices and internet, as well as gaps in the technology infrastructure schools and campuses require to deliver online education at scale.

Some 15 percent of all households with school-age children lack access to a high-speed internet connection at home, and nearly one in five can't always finish homework because of access issues.[1] Another more recent study suggests that students in at least 7.15 million U.S. households are unable to attend online courses because they lack broadband internet access at home.[2] Higher education institutions face additional campus closures, which have already impacted half a million students in the past decade and

could accelerate as the pandemic impacts enrollment and student retention.[3] Funds for Learning estimates $7.5 billion is needed to close this gap alone.[4]

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, passed by Congress in late March, includes nearly $31 billion to support educational institutions during this crisis. The legislation emphasizes the need to support the rapid shift to distance learning in K-12 and higher education.

"The essence of the CARES Act is to make sure more schools and families are connected and accessing online curricula," says Dr. Kecia Ray, a consultant who has worked with the Tennessee Commissioner of Education and states and school districts across the nation.

This paper outlines funding opportunities in the CARES Act and offers strategies for districts and institutions to leverage them in comprehensive ways.

THE CARES ACT

The $30.75 billion Education Stabilization Fund included in the CARES Act includes three funding components specifically earmarked to address the needs of students and schools:

☑ **THE $13 BILLION ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATION RELIEF FUND (ESSER)** is for immediate needs in K-12 education, such as obtaining tools and resources for distance education, ensuring student health and safety, and developing and implementing plans for the next school year. State education agencies (SEAs) have until July 1 to apply for the funds, 90 percent of which must be allocated to local districts and public charter schools using a formula based on how federal Title I funding is apportioned.[5]

While state education agencies will receive the funds from the U.S. Department of Education, local districts must follow the procedures developed by their SEAs to apply for and receive funding, the timing and content of which vary from state to state.

☑ **THE $14.25 BILLION HIGHER EDUCATION EMERGENCY RELIEF FUND (HEERF)** will be distributed through a grant process administered by the federal Department of Education. At least half of the funding must be used to provide emergency financial aid grants to students for expenses related to the disruption of campus operations due to COVID-19, which does not include reimbursements to colleges and universities for any refunds issued to students.

The remaining half of the funding, over $7 billion, can be used to address the costs of shifting to online instruction, including providing devices and internet access to students who need them.[6]

☑ **AS ITS NAME SUGGESTS, THE $3 BILLION GOVERNOR'S EMERGENCY EDUCATION RELIEF FUND (GEERF)** will be divided among the 50 states based on a formula accounting for the number of residents between the ages of 5 and 24. It can be used for a range of K-12 and higher education needs identified by each state's governor.[7]

Each state's governor has the latitude to pursue different priorities with this largely discretionary fund, and those priorities will likely vary from state to state, according to Ray. Districts and institutions should monitor the plans and priorities for this funding released by their state's governors and identify opportunities that are aligned with those plans.

STRATEGIES TO FOLLOW

Consider the CARES stimulus as part of a broader range of funding opportunities. Districts should "think about what their overall plan of action is going to be and how they can maximize all their funds — capital, operational, carryover, federal title funding and the stimulus monies," says Ray. "Think holistically about all your pots of money and about when those monies expire and arrange your plans accordingly."

E-rate funding has been relaxed to make it easier to use to support out-of-school student access in cases of demonstrated need. Additionally, families receiving other forms of public support may be eligible for discounted internet access from commercial providers — something schools can communicate to parents.

Gather input from stakeholders to identify technology needs. Federal funding often requires input from a range of stakeholders, including local businesses, parents, educators and administrators. Districts must also coordinate closely with their state departments of education and consider how stimulus funding aligns with other outside funders, including foundations and philanthropy.

Move quickly. While districts and institutions face considerable budgetary uncertainty, the CARES Act and other stimulus are intended to provide immediate support to address needs surfaced by the rapid transition to online learning. The U.S. Department of Education has repeatedly communicated its intent to streamline the process for CARES stimulus funding to respond to institutional needs as quickly as possible. While the deadline for ESSER funding is July 1, for example, many states are moving much more quickly. Districts need to communicate closely with their SEAs and watch for the guidance they issue in the coming weeks.

Do not overlook cybersecurity. Education technology organizations caution that the rapid transition to online learning has increased cybersecurity threats, particularly since students are now accessing material beyond on-campus school networks, where existing cybersecurity measures offer protection.[8] Accordingly, cybersecurity and professional services can be paid for using CARES Act stimulus funds.

KEYS TO CARES:
- ☑ **Consider funding holistically.**
- ☑ **Gather stakeholder input to identify technology needs.**
- ☑ **Move quickly.**
- ☑ **Do not overlook cybersecurity.**
- ☑ **Monitor additional funding opportunities.**
- ☑ **Focus on the long term.**

Monitor additional funding opportunities. Congress is considering additional stimulus measures in the weeks and months to come. The nationwide statistics previously mentioned are staggering, but districts and institutions should consider communicating the specific needs of their student populations to lawmakers and policymakers as deliberations continue.

Focus on the long term. One overarching purpose of the stimulus is to improve schools' and colleges' ability to deliver instruction remotely even after the current pandemic subsides. The goal, says Ray, is to "maximize all the funding resources to implement online and blended learning in the coming years."

Education institutions should consider the funding as a down payment to develop long-term plans to explore new modes of hybrid education in regular times and to respond quickly in future times of crisis.

"Now is the time to make this shift," Ray says. "No matter what the contingency, instruction can remain consistent, at the same level and rigor."

This piece was developed and written by the Center for Digital Education Content Studio, with information and input from Verizon.

1. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/26/nearly-one-in-five-teens-cant-always-finish-their-homework-because-of-the-digital-divide/
2. https://www.fundsforlearning.com/docs/2020/04/COVID-19%20E-rate%20White%20Paper.pdf
3. https://s3.amazonaws.com/newamericadotorg/documents/NGA_NewAmerica_CollegeClosurePrimer_FINAL.pdf
4. https://www.fundsforlearning.com/docs/2020/04/COVID-19%20E-rate%20White%20Paper.pdf
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