

MAY 2020

11 Ways Governors Can Use Their Federal Stimulus Funds to Prioritize Education Equity



[The CARES Act \(S.3548\)](#) allocates nearly \$31 billion to P-12 and higher education as part of an education stabilization fund. Of that fund, almost 10% — 3 billion dollars — is allocated to governors through the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEERF) to use for P-12 or higher education programs or projects at their discretion. These funds can be used to support significantly impacted local educational agencies (LEAs), institutions of higher education (IHEs), or education-related entities to support the continuation of educational services, the provision of childcare and early childhood education, social and emotional support, and the protection of education-related jobs.

Given that the pool of funds available is limited, governors should be targeting funding to support students’ and families’ immediate, one-time needs rather than standing up new programs that may face implementation delays, lack the infrastructure needed for broad outreach, or create unsustainable programs or practices that school districts and institutions cannot support in the future. Funding must be targeted at the highest need families, schools, and institutions that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, and governors should work with their chief education leader(s) to ensure funds are used in coordination with the additional \$28 billion provided by the CARES Act Education Stabilization Fund.

Defining Impact and Promoting Public Engagement

Governors can use the GEERF to support LEAs, IHEs, and educational entities the state deems as being “significantly impacted” by the coronavirus. The Department of Education’s (ED) [application for governor’s funds](#) requires governors to submit a report within 45 days that describes the governor’s process for awarding funds, including: (1) the criteria for determining the entities that are most “significantly impacted” by the coronavirus, and (2) a description of the process and deliberations involved in formulating those criteria. On the first, we know that this crisis will exacerbate existing inequities; therefore, we strongly encourage governors to design criteria that consider the impact of pre-existing inequities (including inequitable local funding), COVID-19’s disproportionate health and economic impacts on communities of color and people from low-income backgrounds, and the disparate impact of school closures on student learning, so they can ensure funds are directed to the entities with the greatest needs. In designing these criteria to consider a wide range of factors, governors should allow for a robust public engagement process that allows for input from a diverse set of stakeholders that are being directly impacted, including community advocates, families, students, teachers, school leaders, and public health experts.

Transparency and Fiscal Stewardship

The federal application for funding notes that states may be required to report on which entities receive funds, as well as how funds are used, including to support addressing the digital divide and related issues in distance learning. To that end, governors should be publicly reporting this information and prepared to share it with the ED. This transparency is critical to provide the state and other stakeholders, including community members, with information on how funds are being spent in response to this pandemic.

Using Funds to Fill Equity Gaps

Due to the far-reaching and devastating impact that the coronavirus has had on educational opportunity for students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, governors should use these funds to fill important equity gaps for our most vulnerable students by investing dollars in:

P-12 Education

- Invest in supports needed to lessen the digital divide — including providing internet subsidies, Wi-Fi hot spots, and devices to students, families, and educators, as well as ongoing support to use those devices. To ensure this investment is utilized, prohibit phone, cable, and internet providers in their state from barring families who owe a balance from obtaining free internet and data services subsidized by this investment.
- Provide professional learning and development to ensure digital resources can be used to support all students, including historically underserved groups.
- Provide students with continuous learning via summer programming, summer school, or extended learning opportunities (such as summer bridge programs), particularly for students from under-resourced communities and backgrounds, English learners, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, Native students, students involved in the juvenile justice system, and students who are academically behind.
- Ensure that families have basic needs met, including access to healthcare and food. Lack of [access to food might be particularly challenging](#) for parents of young children (ages zero to five), who might not benefit from existing K-12 meal services. States should opt-in to [Pandemic EBT](#) to provide access to food so that all eligible families seamlessly receive financial support to purchase food without additional application or verification requirements as well as support for safe food delivery options for students and families.
- Allocate funds to ensure students have access to social-emotional and academic supports, including social and emotional learning, school counselors, and mental health supports.

Higher Education

Governors can help relieve the burden of the coronavirus on college students by investing in the following areas:

- Funds to ensure students have access to social-emotional and academic supports, including mental health supports.
- Funds to facilitate campus partnerships and shared resources for online learning and other student support strategies.
- Prioritize need-based aid to support students from low-income backgrounds, as these programs are often reduced with state budgets, while merit and free college programs are maintained.

Governors can help relieve the burden of the coronavirus on college students by taking the following actions via legislative, regulatory, or executive order:

- Streamline access to emergency aid and economic security programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and affordable housing and child care programs, and coordinate outreach efforts between state agencies and IHEs.
- Suspend state student loan payments, interest free, and halt wage garnishment and other forms of involuntary collection, for at least six months. If a state has income-based repayment plans or other initiatives that allow for eventual forgiveness after a set amount of payments, this period of suspension should count as payments made for those purposes.
- Institute state student debt cancellation for those who are the most vulnerable during this time: low-income borrowers (those making 250% of the federal poverty line or less) and those with debt but no degree.