

Advocates for Literacy

May 14, 2021

Acting Assistant Secretary Ian Rosenblum
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Acting Assistant Secretary Rosenblum:

The undersigned organizations, as members of Advocates for Literacy, a coalition of over 60 organizations that understand the imperative role of literacy—reading and writing—in creating a globally competent workforce, urge the importance of leveraging funds from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act to address the ongoing literacy crisis. Together, we represent thousands of students, families, and educators across the nation and offer our expertise and recommendations as leaders in literacy.

Advocates for Literacy recommends the U.S. Department of Education (ED) issue guidance to state and local education agencies on the use of ARP funds to invest in comprehensive literacy instruction and evidence-based reading and writing interventions for students. Outlined below are examples of effective uses of federal funding that support the need for such guidance and address the critical opportunity ED has to include literacy as a major area of focus for ARP funds.

Promoting Comprehensive Literacy Instruction Through the LEARN Program

The Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation or “LEARN” program—Title II, Part B under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965—builds on the success of the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Program where states implementing comprehensive literacy instruction plans have seen significant improvements in English language arts (ELA) achievement in districts and schools serving disadvantaged students. The definition of “comprehensive literacy instruction” in ESEA means instruction that includes developmentally appropriate, contextually explicit, and systematic instruction; and frequent practice in reading and writing across content areas and in phonological awareness, phonic decoding, vocabulary, language structure, reading fluency, and reading comprehension.

Thirteen states (Alaska, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio, Rhode Island, and South Dakota) received grants in 2019 under the now-named [Comprehensive Literacy State Development \(CLSD\) program](#). With these grants, states are able to support high-quality professional development for teachers, principals, and specialized instructional support personnel to improve literacy instruction for students struggling to read and write, including English-language learners and students with disabilities. Districts may also use funding to hire literacy coaches, connect out-of-school learning opportunities to in-school learning, train families to support literacy instruction, and provide a multi-tiered system of supports for literacy services.

Massachusetts will use its CLSD grant to implement [Growing Literacy Equity Across Massachusetts](#) (GLEAM), which will support deep and lasting improvements to schools' multi-tiered systems of support for literacy, enabling schools to better serve all students, especially historically underserved students, ensuring all students can reach their literacy potential. GLEAM grants to districts will support schools to implement components of a multi-tiered system of support for ELA/literacy in grades K–12, which have been shown to promote equity of access and achievement for diverse students. Grants will help districts support adoption of high-quality core curricular materials and intervention materials for ELA/literacy; adoption of a valid and reliable early literacy screening assessment; and professional development and support for teachers, principals, and literacy coaches to support skillful and culturally responsive tiered instruction.

State Examples: Investing in Literacy

Since COVID-19 relief funding has made its way to states, we have seen examples of states making essential investments in improving literacy. To help support literacy development, Tennessee announced in January that it will leverage approximately \$60 million in one-time federal COVID-19 funding and \$40 million in federal grant funding to launch [Reading 360](#) and invest in optional reading resources and supports at no cost to the state or districts. Through optional grants to districts, students and families will have access to tutoring and online supports to help develop foundational skills in literacy. Tennessee educators will have access to a free two-week summer learning training and professional development, phonics kits and materials to use in their classrooms, and stipends for training. Districts will have access to a suite of tools and resources to support their teachers and schools in implementing strong reading instruction for all students.

The District of Columbia's Office of the State Superintendent of Education will work with community stakeholders to conduct a needs assessment and build a comprehensive state literacy plan to identify gaps and establish guiding principles for literacy instruction that are rooted in evidence-based strategies. A statewide literacy coaching program will lead to approximately 75 literacy coaches trained to support educators in deepening knowledge on foundational literacy—phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, and language. In addition, pre-service literacy coursework and licensure standards will be enhanced to increase the number of educator candidates entering the teaching field prepared to implement evidence-based literacy strategies, instructions, and interventions for children living in poverty, English-language learners, and children with disabilities.

The Opportunity to Improve Literacy

School building closures in 2020–21 related to the COVID-19 pandemic required our nation's school leaders and educators to take on the unprecedented task of quickly implementing remote learning options for 55.1 million children with few resources and very little training. The transition was not seamless for some school districts, and educators learned quickly that home internet connections were a challenge for many of their students. The future economic impact and trauma caused by the pandemic will also negatively impact student learning. [McKinsey & Company](#) found that students taking formative assessments in 2020 learned only 87% of the reading that grade-level peers would typically have learned by the fall. Students lost the equivalent of one-and-a-half months of learning in reading on average, but in schools that predominantly serve students of color, the interruption in learning was especially acute.

Advocates for Literacy sees this extraordinary infusion of federal funding as an excellent opportunity for states and districts to develop a comprehensive plan to improve literacy instruction for students in preK–12 who have been most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including English-language learners and students with disabilities. We recommend ED include development of comprehensive literacy plans as one impactful way local districts can use ARP funds to reach all children and youth. Under ARP, districts are expected to reserve not less than 20% of funding “to address learning loss through the implementation of evidence-based interventions,” including summer learning programs, comprehensive afterschool programs, extended school year programs, and interventions that address the academic and social-emotional needs of students. Districts also have flexibility to use funds for any activities authorized under ESEA, including LEARN.

As ED continues to issue guidance and set expectations for how states and districts will spend their COVID-19 funds, it is essential to include literacy as a major area of focus for states and districts to respond to the needs of various communities. We encourage you to develop guidance and best practices for how districts and states can use their ARP funds to implement comprehensive literacy instruction and evidence-based reading and writing interventions for students, which will ensure they have the foundational literacy skills to be successful across all subject areas.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact Amanda Karhuse, chair of Advocates for Literacy, at karhusea@nassp.org or 703-627-6421.

Sincerely,

The Advocacy Institute
Alliance for Excellent Education
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents
Council of Administrators of Special Education
Council for Exceptional Children
Center for Collaborative Classroom
EDGE Consulting
Education Northwest
Easterseals
Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters
International Literacy Association
Learning Disabilities Association of America
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of ESEA State Program Administrators
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Center for Families Learning
National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform
National Rural Education Association

National Summer Learning Association
National Writing Project
Parents as Teachers
Reading Partners
Reading Recovery Council of North America
TASH
Teach Plus