

CARES Act Alignment

Taking the Distance Out of Distance Learning



CARES Act Alignment: Taking the Distance Out of Distance Learning

"By extending additional funding flexibility to schools, we are helping to ensure student learning continues and supporting teachers as they transition to virtual classrooms. Local leaders have asked for the ability to steer more resources to local needs, and these new tools will help them do just that."

~ U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos

As a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, one of the most significant challenges faced by families today is ensuring that children continue to learn and grow with support from their teachers, parents, and peers—regardless of where their classroom may be.

The \$2.3 trillion **Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES ACT) Act**, passed this year, offers time-sensitive, one-time funding to provide immediate support for Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and the communities they serve.

To ensure the strategic initiation of equity opportunities for our nation's children, their academic and emotional needs must be met, while bringing learning communities together and bridging the distance-learning gap.

What follows is an examination of the impact of COVID-19 on learning communities; how CARES Act dollars can help address distance learning challenges; and which products and services are best aligned to those dollars to support students, now and in the future.

CARES Act Alignment: Taking the Distance Out of Distance Learning

School bells, first-day nerves, old friends reunited, new friends met, seating charts, recess, homework, library time, lunch lines, chalk dust... all part of a ritual performed every autumn for generations of American children, their families, teachers, administrators, and support specialists coming together as a learning community— until now.

In early 2020, an unprecedented set of unique challenges gripped the world due to COVID-19. The crisis affected the spring and fall 2020 school semesters, delaying school openings and disrupting the school year, with no clear end in sight. Forced to pivot to distance learning models (either full-time, hybrid, or an ongoing rotation of the two), schools have had to embrace distance learning, which is likely to endure as a major component of instruction for the foreseeable future.

Academic, Social, and Emotional Challenges

Social distancing and remote learning have added to the challenges of connecting with students emotionally, socially, cognitively, and academically.

As of late October 2020, most students are attending school either remotely or on a hybrid model (with some days in classrooms and some days at home) and even these new routines are still in flux. This disruption has led educators to evaluate priorities in learning plans and determine the best delivery practices and tools required for student engagement.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) recently developed standards for supporting students' Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) during the pandemic. It points out that "Schools can help students meet the challenges of pandemic schooling by taking care of their social needs as much as possible... Schools also need to be thoughtful about how they manage transitions, like the shift from hybrid to fully remote learning, because those transitions risk upsetting kids' sense of predictability and making them feel alienated from school."

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For educators, the experience can be profoundly discouraging. An article published in October 2020 by The New Yorker cites Ryan Hooper, a teacher at Joseph C. Briscoe Academy, who expressed the frustrations and challenges many teachers have faced when "often, no one showed up" for remote learning sessions at the middle and high school for high-needs kids. That experience has been all too common.

"All the gratifying, purpose-driven reward benefits of being a teacher were stripped," Hooper said. At first, he and his colleagues called to check on the students who weren't logging on, but the calls only further overwhelmed their parents and guardians, roughly half of whom were foster parents. Some districts in Massachusetts felt a "loss of purpose," he said.

Ryan's experiences and those of so many other educators nationwide speak to the breadth and depth of the crisis faced by educators, risking our nation's developmental health, social growth, and academic achievement. But help is on the way in the form of federal funding and digital solutions that can support students in the classroom or at home.

Investing in Solutions: the CARES Act

By taking advantage of available funding, districts and schools can invest in the solutions they need to keep students engaged and foster interactive learning experiences. They can build a bridge to a future where distance learning is one component in a holistic approach to education that can occur anywhere, any time.

Understanding the CARES Act and focusing on the best tools available for both teachers and parents to foster student engagement and support connectivity will be essential.

The CARES Act and Education by the Numbers

The CARES Act provides time-sensitive, one-time funding and flexibility for states to respond to the COVID-19 emergency in K-12 schools. CARES Act funds can help address immediate needs, while encouraging strategic planning to overcome further disruptions to traditional on-site schooling.

The CARES Act provides:

- \$30 billion Education Stabilization Fund for K-12 and higher education programs
- More than \$4 billion for early childhood education
- Supports such as forgivable loans to nonprofits, including many providers of after-school or summer programs
- Much more

SEAs must award funds within one year of receiving funds from the U.S. Department of Education. The initial award period goes through June 30, 2021, and LEAs have until September 30, 2022 to expend funds.

Funding Flexibility

LEAs have significant flexibility in their use of CARES Act funds, including which schools and students are supported, and how funds are used, providing schools resources for addressing this unique set of challenges. It's vital to explore resources that are best aligned with the legislation's goals and its allowable funding to help effectively bridge the gap between students and their LEAs.

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According to a report this spring from the Wallace Foundation regarding oversight of different CARES Act funding sources, it is crucial for stakeholders to develop fluid plans to use CARES Act funds. The Act is designed to provide LEAs with flexibility, so they can adapt as conditions and needs change. That said, the Wallace Foundation also advises that LEAs ensure consistency, so that investments in new technologies or resources are part of a consistent approach to spending, congruent with required reporting duties relating to Title I and IEP and ELL one-to-one and intervention/differentiation statutes and compliance measures.

Because CARES Act funds are supplemental to existing budgets, and flexible in their applications, these dollars can be combined with other funding sources (including under ESSA plans) to facilitate a holistic, integrated approach. Given the widely variable nature of the pandemic's various impacts, it will be necessary that invested parties engage in ongoing conversations about the best tools, resources, and delivery systems available, with a sense of both urgency and patience.

Helping At-Risk Populations

How these funds can close equity gaps in remote learning is the Act's primary focus. School, district, and state leaders should, to the best of their ability, evaluate the likely impact of the crisis on children's social-emotional and academic development, and on the education system as a whole, and make plans to utilize these dollars in targeted ways, with special emphasis on students most at risk, including economically disadvantaged and special needs students.

Critically, these dollars have been allocated to provide immediate support so LEAs can act quickly, and are meant to be available over time as the result of careful and considered planning.

Three Funding Sources

The CARES Act offers funds and grants related to elementary education:

- 1. The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER Fund)**, better known today as ESSA, the Every Student Succeeds Act, sets aside \$13.2 billion to be awarded to State educational agencies (SEAs) for the purpose of providing local educational agencies (LEAs), including charter schools that are LEAs, with emergency relief funds to address the impact that COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, on elementary and secondary schools across the nation:
 - States will receive this funding based on the number of students in poverty in the same manner as funding is provided under Title I, Part A.
 - States must allocate 90 percent of that funding to districts, including charter schools, based on Title I, Part A.
 - Districts have flexibility on how to target the funds they receive, including how and which schools are funded.
 - States have flexibility on how to target the 10 percent of funding they retain. One way to think about this funding is that it equates to about 80 percent of the most recent year's Title I, Part A, funding.
- 2. Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER Fund)**. This fund provides \$3 billion for grants to states based on a formula stipulated in the legislation:
 - (1) 60% on the basis of the State's relative population of individuals aged 5 through 24.
 - (2) 40% on the basis of the State's relative number of children counted under section 1124(c) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA):
 - States will receive funds based on a combination of both school-age population and rates of poverty.
 - Governors have wide discretion over use of these funds to support K-12 or higher education.
- 3. The Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K12 Education Models Grants** (housed within the Education Stabilization Fund Discretionary Grant) provides support to State educational agencies (SEAs) in states with the highest coronavirus burden to address specific educational needs of students, their parents, and teachers in public and non-public elementary and secondary schools in accordance with section 18001(a)(3) of the CARES Act.

Other Options: Funding Flexibility

Schools can also repurpose existing funds to meet unexpected needs resulting from COVID-19:

- Request a waiver on the 15% carryover limitation for Title I, Part A.
- Obtain an extension on availability for the prior fiscal year's funds.
- Receive a waiver of the needs assessment, content-specific spending requirements, and spending restrictions on technology infrastructure under Title IV, Part A.
- Request a waiver of the definition of "professional development" in order to prevent limitations on the ability to quickly train school leaders and teachers on topics like effective distance learning techniques.

Local districts receive additional flexibility on certain ESEA provisions. The bill allows districts to request waivers to carry over more than 15% of their Title I allotment beyond the current fiscal year and to allow any school receiving Title I funds to operate under a school-wide program.

Under the school-wide approach, Title I dollars can be consolidated with state and local dollars to upgrade a school's entire education program. The CARES Act also authorizes waivers that allow local districts increased flexibility on the use of Title IV-A funds, including lifting the limit that no more than 15% of Title IV-A funds can be used to purchase technology infrastructure.

While ESSER (ESSA) allocations are calculated using the Title I formula, these funds may be used for any allowable activities under ESSER and are not subject to Title I requirements. In general, LEAs can use ESSER funds for activities authorized by ESEA, IDEA, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, the Perkins CTE Act, or the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

Examples of allowable activities under this formula include:

- coordination with public health
- purchasing educational technology
- planning for long-term closures
- training and supplies for sanitation
- mental health support
- summer school and after school programs
- funds for principals to address local needs
- other activities to continue school operations/
employment of existing staff

More Options, Greater Flexibility

Additional types of regulatory flexibility that the CARES Act may grant to states:

- Permission to retain all remaining Title I funds from this year for the next year (2020 – 2021) and the removal of any caps on the amount of funds that can be carried over
- Conducting specific needs assessment requirements tied to ESSA Title I funding
- Loosening other ESSA state plan requirements
- Removing any limits or caps on the use of ESSA Title IV, Part A block grant funds on education technology (currently, there is a cap on the amount that can be used for education technology, compared to other purposes, such as a well-rounded education and/or safe and healthy schools)

CARES Act Funding Scenarios: Guidance on Usage of Funds

The CARES Act lists 12 allowable uses of the \$13.2 billion in the package's K-12 relief fund. The specific language within the Act that defines those scenarios is shown below. The highlighted scenarios below are directly related to the use of digital curriculum resources to meet student needs, including those from Learning A-Z.

1. Any activity authorized by the ESEA of 1965, including: the Native Hawaiian Education Act; the Alaska Native Educational Equity, Support, and Assistance Act; the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act; the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006; or subtitle B of title VII of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act
2. Coordination of preparedness and response efforts of local educational agencies with State, local, Tribal, and territorial public health departments, and other relevant agencies, to improve coordinated responses among such entities to prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus
3. Providing principals and other school leaders with the resources necessary to address the needs of their individual schools
4. Activities to address outreach, service delivery, and the unique needs of: low-income children or students; children with disabilities; English language learners; racial and ethnic minorities; students experiencing homelessness; and foster care youth
5. Developing and implementing procedures and systems to improve the preparedness and response efforts of local educational agencies
6. Training and professional development for staff of the local educational agency on sanitation and minimizing the spread of infectious diseases
7. Purchasing supplies to sanitize and clean LEA facilities and buildings
8. Planning for and coordinating during long-term closures, including: how to provide meals to eligible students; how to provide technology for online learning to all students; how to provide guidance for carrying out requirements under IDEA; and how to ensure other educational services can continue to be provided consistent with all Federal, State, and local requirements
9. Purchasing educational technology (including hardware, software, and connectivity) for students who are served by the local educational agency that aids in regular and substantive educational interaction between students and their classroom instructors, including low-income students and students with disabilities, which may include assistive technology or adaptive equipment
10. Providing mental health services and supports
11. Planning and implementing activities related to summer learning and supplemental after-school programs, including providing classroom instruction or online learning during the summer months and addressing the needs of low-income students, students with disabilities, English language learners, migrant students, students experiencing homelessness, and children in foster care
12. Other activities that are necessary to maintain the operation of and continuity of services in local educational agencies and continuing to employ existing staff of the local educational agency

To make the most of CARES Act dollars, LEAs must identify and invest in literacy-focused resources, thoughtfully designed in accordance with research-based best practices, and leveled to meet the needs of all students.

Focus on Distance Learning and Literacy: Things to Consider

To make the most of CARES Act dollars, LEAs must identify and invest in literacy-focused resources, thoughtfully designed in accordance with research-based best-practices, and leveled to meet the needs of all students.

Here are some factors to consider when evaluating such resources:

1. Educators should look for and evaluate **research-based solutions** that:
 - Are proven to be effective for personalizing instruction, strengthening literacy skills, and boosting test scores,
 - Help make teaching more effective and instill the skills students need to succeed
 - Rely on research-based best practices, along with input from active and former teachers to ensure quality and effectiveness
 - Help create an engaging learning environment that fosters creativity and student growth; expanding literacy beyond reading and writing to include the modern-day skills students require to become college- and career-ready.
 - Are consistently award-winning and recognized by third-party education organizations and educators as effective
2. Educators should prioritize solutions that offer **digital deliverability** for remote and classroom use and include:
 - An extensive collection of multilevel literacy-focused resources that can be delivered entirely online or within a classroom environment, in a way that makes it easy for teachers to find exactly what they need quickly
 - Access to a deep catalog of differentiated books and lessons, and corresponding supporting materials such as worksheets, and lesson plans, assessments
3. Educators should prioritize **meaningful practice** opportunities and resources that can support remote and classroom learning, including:
 - Access to various resources and tools in multiple formats that allow students to practice and refine a broad range of skills anytime, anywhere
 - A blend of traditional instruction with contemporary philosophies and technology-enhanced resources to ensure students receive the meaningful practice they require to strengthen their literacy and learning skills every day

Our goal has been to assist you in meeting the needs of our nation's children by highlighting new funding opportunities, with guidance on solutions that can support students in any environment and maximize the impact of investments in resources that support current and ongoing needs.

Putting CARES Act Funds Into Action: Next Steps

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To stay informed about legislative changes and funding guidance, [visit our CARES Act resource center](#) and also get access to:

- Details on funding and guidance
- Timely, topical webinars and whitepapers
- Information about powerful, CARES Act-aligned digital solutions
- Free product trials and downloads

To find out more about our award-winning K-6 blended learning resources, visit us anytime at www.learninga-z.com.