

# Congress Provided Billions To Schools. Will Districts Spend It Creatively?

[Chad Aldeman](#) 02:42pm EDT

The word “unprecedented” has become a cliché, but state and school district leaders have truly never seen anything quite like the American Rescue Plan (ARP). Through ARP, Congress provided a one-time investment in public education that’s 2.5 times larger than anything that came before it, and the money comes with few strings attached.

Fans of local control may see that as a good thing, especially after some recent [high-profile reform failures](#). But historically, the federal government has been an important funder of new ideas that need to be tested, evaluated, or replicated. That’s [true in education](#), and it’s true in other fields [as well](#).

If there were ever a time for investments in improving the way we educate our children, 2021 would have been it. As the Covid-19 pandemic exposed, our educational system was brittle and vulnerable to disruptions. Even pre-Covid, achievement scores were flat or declining, [especially for lower-performing students](#). And as the pandemic played out, too many schools lacked the ability to respond, or did so with one-size-fits-all solutions that didn’t work well for all families. After more than a year of pandemic schooling, survey results suggest that [parents want “bold changes,”](#) not just a return to normal.



LAS VEGAS, NEVADA - AUGUST 24: Dana Dyer teaches an online seventh grade algebra class from her ... [+]

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But with ARP, Congress chose a hands-off approach, especially compared with prior federal relief efforts. The closest comparison is the 2009 [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act](#) (ARRA), but there are big differences in the amount of money at stake and how the dollars flow. The 2009 bill sent \$10 billion through the existing Title I formula and allocated another \$48.6 billion for early learning, K-12, and higher education, with state governors responsible for applying for and then deciding how to divide the money. This year, by contrast, Congress allocated \$122 billion through the Title I formula, and 90% of the money must flow directly to school districts.

The differences don't end there.

The first sentence on the [U.S. Department of Education's landing page](#) for the 2009 bill outlined multiple goals. Yes, the money was meant to "save

hundreds of thousands of jobs," but it also aimed to "advance reforms and improvements that will create long-lasting results for our students."

In addition to the main funds for states and districts, Congress created separate pots of money to accomplish specific goals. Some readers might remember the \$4.35 billion in Race to the Top grants, but there was also \$650 million for innovation (aka the "[i3 fund](#)"), plus \$650 million for [new assessments](#), a \$200 million infusion to reform [teacher evaluation and compensation systems](#), \$3 billion for [School Improvement Grants](#), and \$250 million for [state data systems](#).

Compare that approach with what we got in 2021, starting with the (lack of) aspirations: This time, the [highest goal](#) for the money seems to be to "get students back in the classroom quickly and safely." Congress specified that 20% of district funds be spent to "address learning loss through the implementation of evidence-based interventions," but the language is so vague that [almost anything could qualify](#). For the remainder of the money, districts are allowed to spend it toward any allowable use under any other federal education law. In fact, there's almost no educational expenditure a district *couldn't* spend its money on.

The U.S. Department of Education is now in a mad dash to collect [information from states](#) about what they intend to do with their share, but there's no official rubric to evaluate the plans, and, because Congress wrote such a broad list of allowable activities, it would be hard for the feds to impose any limitations even if they wanted to. And, unlike last time, the Secretary of Education has no grant money to reward the most promising ideas that come out of the planning process.

It's possible that state and local leaders will rise to fill the void, but there's not much evidence of that so far. My colleagues at the Edunomics Lab found

that the submitted state plans read mainly as narrative explanations of priorities, and they [rarely provide dollar amounts](#) or explain how the state will spend its full allotment of money. When [our team reviewed district](#) budgets, we didn't see much in the way of creative thinking there either.

Congressional leaders are betting that if they give enough money, state and local leaders can identify their own problems and implement their own solutions. Is that a good bet? Time will tell if school leaders are ready to pick up the slack and make the dollars count.