



EDUCATION STABILIZATION FUNDS

Rethinking K-12 Education Models

May 2020

BACKGROUND

As governors across the country decide how to spend their Emergency Educational Relief (GEER funds), some are also applying to the US Department of Education's (USDE) [Rethink K-12 Education Discretionary Grant Program](#). At \$180 million, this program is comparatively small compared to the other funding streams available under the federal government's Education Stabilization Fund (part of the CARES Act). Still, it has the potential to impact millions of students, especially in states where the coronavirus pandemic has revealed stark educational inequities. The Department estimates that the average discretionary grant will be \$15 million.

PROGRAM PURPOSE AND PRIORITIES

USDE is accepting applications from states seeking to address “specific educational needs of students, their parents, and teachers in public and non-public elementary and secondary schools.” Proposals must outline how such needs will be met in the context of remote learning.

Any state can apply, although those with the highest “coronavirus burden” receive preference. The following four measures were used by USDE to calculate each state's burden:

- Percent of population without broadband access
- Percent of students ages 5-7 in poverty
- Percent share of confirmed COVID-19 cases per capita
- Percent of students in rural local educational agencies

States can choose to apply under one of three “priorities”:

- Funding for remote learning through microgrants to parents and students;
- The development or expansion of a high-quality course access program or a statewide virtual school; or
- Another strategy related to remote learning that meets a state-specific need.

States proposing microgrants would target funding to parents who could use the money to access “high-quality remote learning options from a list of education and related services, expenses, and providers.” The idea is for states to provide parents with multiple options from multiple providers, both private and public, allowing them to tailor the educational experience to each child's needs.

For example, parents could use a microgrant to pay for computer hardware and software, testing and tutoring fees, fees associated with dual enrollment, or therapies and services for students with special educational needs. So long as a state proposes a process for securely distributing funds and reaching out to the most disadvantaged students, it could propose a range of eligible services related to remote learning.

States may also propose to establish or expand a statewide virtual learning or course access program. Under this priority, the Department is looking for states to make “a broad range” of online courses “available and free” to all students. Virtual schools, whether implemented for the first time or expanded, should offer both a full-time, and supplemental education program available to all students in the state.

While the first two application priorities outline specific program features, the third and final type of application USDE will accept allows states more flexibility to propose their own program relevant to helping students access high-quality remote learning. Under this priority, the Department will consider proposals designed to “create, develop, implement, replicate, or take to scale field-initiated projects for remote learning.” This priority allows states to flex some creative muscle or build upon remote learning efforts already underway.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATES

Understand your burden.

USDE's application evaluation process is weighted toward states with the highest coronavirus burden. Your application should reflect an understanding of the gaps that your state wants to close in the context of the Department's definition of burden, which includes measures of poverty, rurality, broadband access, and COVID-19 cases in your state.

Know your digital divide and how to close it.

Under the discretionary grant, each priority is focused on remote learning and tools to close the digital divide. States that demonstrate a clear understanding of the nature and impact of their digital divide as well as a cogent and realistic plan to bridge it, will build a strong case for the grant. Once you clearly understand the nature and impact of your digital divide, assess what it will take to give more students access to remote learning. Does your state have an existing infrastructure for high-quality virtual learning on which it could expand? If not, what human and technological capacity do you have, or will you need to build a program for course access or statewide virtual learning? If you prefer to give parents more choice and flexibility through microgrants, what opportunities would you hope to provide and for which populations of students?

Consider potential impacts.

Carefully consider the kind of programming and/or opportunities you might offer under each priority and its potential to reach and positively impact students and families. Could more students have high-quality remote experiences tailored to their needs if parents were able to choose educational experiences with microgrants? Would providing students access to high-quality online courses through virtual schooling deliver more high-quality content to more students? How long would it take your state to design and provide those courses to students who need them now? An average grant award of \$15 million dollars will give most states a head start in designing remote learning, but any program built with that initial grant should consider how to maximize impact in minimal time. Programs should also be designed with scalability in mind.

Think deeply about quality.

Grants will be awarded to states that demonstrate an understanding of and capacity to deliver high-quality remote learning experiences to students. USDE defines quality as a project that "consider(s) available research . . . and collects and disseminates information about the results of the project, such as student outcomes, student participation, and parental satisfaction." No matter which priority you choose, how will you build a quality system and hold stakeholders accountable for quality once the system is implemented? How do you expect this program to impact student outcomes and how will you demonstrate that impact?

Leverage existing and new investments.

The *Rethink K-12 Education Models* grant provides an opportunity for states to do something different in these unprecedented times; it also provides states the opportunity to expand new or existing initiatives. States could offer applications that expand offerings created with other CARES funding, such as programs or initiatives established with GEERS funds. States could also invest in remote learning opportunities currently in a pilot phase. Using all available data on student needs, state leaders should think boldly and consider how to positively impact as many students as possible with this discretionary grant. Initiatives that complement and/or expand upon programs initiated with GEERS funding stand to impact more students and families.